



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# THE BATTLE OF YORK

THE GREAT HEATHEN ARMY TAKES THE KINGDOM OF  
NORTHUMBRIA'S CAPITAL - 867

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# The Battle of York - 867

## Introduction

The ancient Roman Legionary fortress of Eboracum had been occupied by the Northumbrian Angles following the departure of the Roman military. The great walls were still standing and from the 6th century onwards, it developed into Northumbria's capital city.

### The Angles called the city Eoforwic

The Angles called the city Eoforwic (pronounced Ethelwich) and it gradually developed into the most important city in the North. Northumbria developed into a strong military and economic power with its borders stretching from the river Forth in the north to the river Mersey in the south. Edinburgh was an Anglian fortress, meaning Edin's burh.

There were seven Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms by the 7<sup>th</sup> century, namely, Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Wessex, Sussex and Kent. Collectively they are referred to as the Heptarchy.

These Kingdoms were initially pagan but as they gradually converted to Christianity a realisation formulated that, despite the endemic warfare that had taken place between them, that they were becoming one people and that, in principle, the ruler of the current most powerful of the seven Kingdoms, was able to claim the title of Bretwalda, an overlord, whilst the rulers of the other Kingdoms became vassal Kings. The title Bretwalda meant 'Wide Ruler', (ruler of Britain) though in reality it was more of an aspiration than a reality.

Wales, Cornwall, Strathclyde and Pictavia (Pictland) were occupied by Celtic peoples and the Scots from Ireland would form the Kingdom of Dál Riata in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### The coming of the Vikings

The coming of the Vikings in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century would fundamentally change the whole of the British Isles and over the course of the next 3 centuries, the incessant warfare would see Kingdoms fall and rise and would give rise to the emergence of the British Nations that we recognise today.

Whilst the initial Viking attacks had been opportunist raids for slaves and wealth, they became increasingly more frequent and devastating. Isolated monasteries were easy prey for the Scandinavian sea-wolves. The real issues for all the peoples of the British Isles, was, that they could not or would not put aside their differences in order to meet this external threat and the Vikings were quick to exploit the parochial problems that existed between the various Kingdoms.

The issues were, of course, more complex than simply the above statement can convey, but fundamentally, Viking successes were due to the division that existed between the races of the British Isles.

When the Great Heathen Army (*mycel hæþen here*); came to England in 865 and overwintered in East Anglia, the dynamics changed. Now the Vikings were intent on seizing land for themselves. They had now come with the intent to conquer and occupy.

### The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of the Heptarchy

The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of the Heptarchy had always vied to be the most powerful state amongst themselves since their formations and their status changed throughout the centuries. The list of rulers below, show which state held primacy at a given time.

The list of Bretwalda's (wide rulers) in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles and the writings of Bede show that Aelle of the South Saxons was the first King to hold the title in about 477 AD.

He was followed by the below named.

- Ceawlin of Wessex 560-592
- Aethelberht of Kent 590-616
- Raedwald of East Anglia 600 -624
- Edwin of Deira 616-633 (Eastern Northumbria)
- Oswald of Northumbria 633-642
- Oswiu of Northumbria 642-670
- Penda of Mercia 628-655
- Wulfhere of Mercia 658-675
- Aethelred of Mercia 716-796
- Offa of Mercia 793-796
- Coenwulf of Mercia 796-821.

Others who could claim to be the Bretwalda were,

- Ecgbert of Wessex 802-839
- Alfred of Wessex 871-899.

Though neither held sway beyond their own Kingdoms.

## Ecgbert

Ecgbert has successfully defended the independence of Wessex from, its then more powerful Kingdom of Mercia and in 825 he defeated the Mercian King Beornwulf at the battle of Ellandun, thus ending Mercian supremacy. He then took Mercian territory in Southern England. The status quo did not last for long. The new Mercian King tried to take back the lost territories but was defeated by Ecgbert who then became ruler of Mercia and Wessex. Within a year a resurgent Wiglaf drove Ecgbert out of Mercia. He also recovered the counties of Essex and Berkshire for Mercia.

*þy gearu geeode Ecgbriht cing Myrcna rice 7 eall þæt be suþan Humbre wæs, 7 he wæs eahtapa cing se ðe Bretenanwealda wæs.*

And the same year King Egbert conquered the kingdom of Mercia, and all that was south of the Humber, and he was the eighth king who was 'Wide-ruler' or Bretwalda)

## Endless conflicts

The constant and seemingly endless conflicts between the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms is clearly demonstrated by the above-mentioned wars between Mercia and Wessex, but all the Kingdoms were often in conflict with each other whilst in the North, Northumbria had fought against the Picts, Scots and the Britons of Strathclyde. Two famous battles were, Nectansmere in 685, a Pictish victory and 'The battle between the 'two rivers' in 671, a Northumbrian victory.

Little detail is known about either battle but what is known is that at Nectansmere, the Northumbrians deployed heavy cavalry which, however, failed to break the Pictish battle lines.

So much for the belief that the Anglo-Saxons did not use cavalry.

### **The Britons of Strathclyde**

The Britons of Strathclyde also used heavy cavalry in the manner of the late Roman armies and they too, fought against both the Picts and the Northumbrians. There were many battles including a Strathclyde victory over the Picts at the battle of Mugdock in 750 AD.

Northumbria had reached its zenith as the most powerful Kingdom in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. The Kingdom also incorporated two sub- Kingdoms, namely Deira and Benicia who were often involved in violent civil wars against each other and the failure of the Northumbrian rulers to bring them to heel allowed Mercia to become the dominant Kingdom in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

As can be seen, these peoples could not resolve their issues and into the melting pot, came the Vikings. The arrival of the Great Heathen army ought to have been the catalyst for the people of Britain to unite and destroy the invaders, especially true of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, their subsequent failure to have done so would result in centuries of warfare.

### **The Great Heathen army**

The Great Heathen army (*Store Hedenske Hær*) in old Danish, had landed in East Anglia, with the intent of conquering Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria, who were the primary powers in England by 865 AD. The leaders of this great army consisted of three of the sons of the legendary Ragnar Lodbrok as well as other significant warlords. The Great army would be active in England for 14 years. Ubba, Halfdan and Ivar the Boneless were Lodbrok's sons and most of the Great Heathen army consisted of Danes. Guthrum the old and Bagsecg were the other leaders.

King Edmund of East Anglia appears not to have resisted the Danes. It appears that he gave them horses and food and let them turn north to invade Northumbria.

Legend has it that Ragnar Lodbrok had been killed by King Aelle of Northumbria and that his sons were intent on revenge. To complicate the situation, as the Danes moved northwards, Northumbria was involved in a vicious civil war between the forces of King Aella of Bamborough and King Osberht of Northumbria. They appeared to put up little resistance to the approaching Danes.

The Great Heathen army occupied York ( Eoforwic) without facing any resistance. This act, finally brought about peace between Aella and Osberht and they combined their armies and on the 21st of March 867, the army of Northumbria launched an attack on the city.

Little detail is known other than the Anglo Saxons managed to storm the walls and that they managed to enter the city. It is known that both Aella and Osberht died in the battle and that after fierce fighting the Saxon attack was beaten back.

### **A Norse tradition**

A Norse tradition states that the sons of Ragnar Lodbrok had captured King Aella and that he was 'blood eagled'. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle just states that he died in battle.

It is not known as to how many people died in the battle but it is thought to have been considerable. Northumbrian power was broken and the Vikings now held a strategic and defensible city with access to the North sea and their homelands. Eoforwic would now become Jorvik.

The Vikings placed an Anglo-Saxon 'puppet' ruler on the throne. Ecgbeht became King but in 872, the Northumbrian population rebelled and Ecgbeht was forced to flee into exile in Mercia. Halfdan Ragnarsson and an army returned to York and took control of the city. He also occupied Deira (south east Northumbria) and this led to the foundation of the Viking Kingdom of Jorvik. The Vikings remained in control of York until 910 AD. The Great army would later return to East Anglia where, this time, King Edmund did resist them, but he was eventually captured and executed.

The Great Heathen army, consisted predominately of Danes but there were Norwegians and Swedes in the army too. The Great army would venture into Mercia forcing the Mercian King, Burgred, to flee overseas. The army then moved into Wessex, the last independent Anglo-Saxon Kingdom where after initial successes, they were finally defeated by Alfred the Great at Edington 878.

This victory did not bring either peace or security but it was the start of the long slow process of Alfred's successors quest to finally defeat the Vikings and form a united England. The story would go on.