



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE BLOOD EAGLE

FACT OR MYTH?

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The Blood Eagle – Fact or Myth?

Introduction

A question that I am often asked is 'Did the Vikings really kill prisoners by inflicting upon them, a method of execution called the 'Blood Eagle'?

It's a hard question to answer because evidence is rare and unreliable but there are sources which do refer to it, so I will highlight some of known and recorded information in order that you can make your own mind up.

What was the blood eagle and who were it's victims?

Skaldic poetry relates that the Blood Eagle was a ritual method of execution used by the Vikings to kill high status individuals.

The Orkneyinga saga, states that anyone put to death by being blood eagled, was a sacrifice to Odin.

The sagas only refer to this method of execution on two occasions with both the victims being put to death for the murder of a father.

The two named victims were a Northumbrian King called Aella and a Viking prince called Halfdan Long leg, who was said to have been the son of King Harold Finehair of Norway.

In the case of Halfdan, he was ritually killed by one Torf Einarr.

The Orkneyinga saga

The Orkneyinga saga states...

'Einarr made them carve an eagle on his back with a sword, and cut the ribs all from the backbone, and draw the lungs there out, and gave him to Odin to mark his victory'.

The Heimskringla saga

Another saga, the Heimskringla states that Einarr performed the ritual himself.

'Afterwards, Earl Einarr went up to Halfdan and cut the blood eagle on his back, and in this fashion he thrust his sword into his chest by the backbone and severed all the ribs down to the loins, and then pulled out the lungs, and that was Halfdan's death.

Einarr was the Earl of Orkney and had a reputation as a great fighter. His father Rognavalld was killed by Halfdan following a dispute over territory so Einarr and his followers eventually defeated Halfdan and sacrificed him as revenge for his father's death.

Einarr also defeated a pair of notorious Danish pirates called Kalf the scurvy and Thorir Treebeard amongst his many enemies. If he killed them, we have no records of how he did so.

Sons of Ragnar

The other recorded case involves the sons of the legendary Viking, Ragnar Lobbok. Ragnar was allegedly killed by the Northumbrian King Aella, by being thrown into a pit full of vipers. Ragnar is alleged to have told King Aella, before he was thrown into the snake pit, "The piggies will grunt when they hear about the death of the old boar".

The piggies were his sons, Bjorn Ironsides, Ivar the Boneless, Ubba and Sigurd snake eye and whatever the truth of the matter is, Ivar and Snake eye were historically, two of the worst horrors of the Viking age.

Ragnar, if he really existed, went to his death uttering the words “Laughing shall I die”.

The sons of Ragnar came calling in the late 860's and Aella was defeated and captured. The blood eagle awaited him.

A Skaldic poem in Norse states this 'ok Ellu bak at,let, Hinns sat, Ivar, ara, Jorvik skorit.

'Ivar who resided at York, had Aella's back cut with an eagle'.

Ivar was known to have been a cruel and vicious warlord and is believed to have ritually killed three Kings.

Edmund of East Anglia

King Edmund of East Anglia was ritually killed by the Vikings in 869. Ivar and Ubba are believed to have been responsible. Edmund would later be known as Saint Edmund but he wasn't subjected to the blood eagle.

Abbo of Fleury wrote a detailed account of Edmund's death at Cerne Abbey in Dorset. He stated that Edmund was tied to a stake as if to be put to the torture of the rack, while his ribs were laid bare as if by many gashes, and then shot with javelins until they looked like the bristles of a hedgehog. Edmund's head was then cut off and thrown into the brambles where it was guarded by a grey wolf. Allegedly the head then called out to those who came searching for it.

It's like something out of a fairy tale and Edmund was more likely killed in battle.

Irish records

Irish records, however, do record similar ritual killings, stating that Ivar starved the garrison out after laying siege to Dumbarton rock, and that one Maelguala, son of Dungaile, King of Caisel, was taken to a 'Thor's Stone' upon which he then had his back ritually broken.

This is corroborated in Norse records and appears to have been the frequent fate of many enemies.

The Vikings were cruel, even by the standards of the day and this cruelty was encouraged by their religion and the need to sacrifice to Odin, the All father.

Ivar the boneless was feared and loathed by his enemies and he wasn't the first or last warlord to use that fear as a weapon. He and others were certainly capable of using the blood eagle as a method of execution, but whether they did is a matter for discussion and your own beliefs.