



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

THE FIVE BOROUGHES OF THE DANELAW

AND THE ANGLO-SAXON RECONQUEST

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The Five Boroughs of the Danelaw

Introduction

After years of fighting, Alfred the Great was able to bring the Vikings or Danes to the negotiating table, following his decisive victory at the battle of Edington in 878 AD.

Troubled Relationship



Please note that the word 'Danelaw' was first used in the 11th century to describe the areas which were under 'Viking' control and subject to their own laws. I have used the word in this article to simplify the Danish and Norse ruled areas, such as the Kingdom of York, East Anglia and the Five Boroughs as these were settled by the peoples who had originally been part of the Great Heathen

Army ('mycel hæþen here') who invaded East Anglia in 865.

After years of fighting, Alfred the Great was able to bring the Vikings or Danes to the negotiating table, following his decisive victory at the battle of Edington in 878 AD.



The likely site of the battle of Edington.

The Danish leader, Guthrum accepted that years of attritional warfare were unsustainable and that the defeat at Edington was a tipping point in the so called 'Viking Wars'. Alfred and the Kingdom of Wessex's star was rising and the Anglo-Saxons were now in the ascendancy.

Guthrum had no option but to agree to a treaty and whilst it can be argued that Alfred was somewhat magnanimous towards Guthrum, there is little doubt that the English King was 'calling the shots' and that he had devised a plan that would allow the Anglo-Saxons time to recover from the recent wars and to ensure that their defensive strategies were fully implemented and that their armies were provided with the means to deploy rapidly and that they were equipped to defeat the Danes.

The Treaty of Wedmore

The treaty of Wedmore forced Guthrum to convert to Christianity and to accept defined boundaries between the two peoples. Guthrum also had to accept Alfred as his God-Father, a move that installed kinship between them. We can't know what Guthrum's personal feelings were but given the he had been a leader of the 'Great Heathen Army' renowned for its savagery and ruthlessness. His conversion to Christianity must have divided his followers and caused friction and in many cases disbelief and incredulity. Guthrum also adopted the Anglo-Saxon name, Athelstan. Alfred acknowledged Guthrum as the King of East Anglia and he ruled there until his death and he did not break any of the conditions set by the Wedmore treaty.

Anglo-Saxon controlled areas

A map of the Anglo-Saxon controlled areas in Britain would have shown English Northumbria stretching from Edinburgh to river Tees, north to south, and from the North Sea coast to the eastern border with Welsh Strathclyde.



Wessex and its Dependencies

Wessex and its dependencies along with English Mercia stretched from Cornwall to Dover in the south and north to the river Ribble. Oxfordshire, Worcestershire and part of Hertfordshire were also part of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom. The western border followed much the same line as the current Welsh border.

The five Boroughs of the Danelaw or Danish Mercia were based on territories, which were under the control of five Danish armies, all of which had originally formed the 'Great Heathen Army' of 865. The survivors of the 'Great Summer Army' of 871, many of whom had died at Edington, including their leader, Bagsecg, may have also distributed themselves within the five Boroughs.



THE DANELAW 912 AD

Danelagh;(Old English)

Danelagen. (Old Danish)

The Five Boroughs

So, what were the Five Boroughs.? They were each based around five towns, within Danish Mercia. The towns were namely, Nottingham, Derby, Stamford, Lincoln and Leicester. Fifteen Shires were contained within the Danelaw, Part of Hartford together with Lincoln, Leicester, Northampton, York, Essex, Derby, Bedford, Middlesex, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Cambridge, Suffolk, Nottingham and Buckingham.

All these lands initially obeyed Danish law and practiced Danish customs.

Each area was ruled by a Danish Jarl but all were accountable to their Viking overlords who ruled from the Viking Kingdom of York.

The word 'Borough' had originated from the Anglo-Saxon word for a fortified defensive position, namely Burh.

Nottingham had originally been seized by the Danes in 868 by an army led by Ivar the Boneless and Danish settlers began to occupy the town in 877, but in 918, Edward the Elder attacked Nottingham and captured it. The Danish settlers were not expelled, but Edward built a 'Burh' which covered some 40 acres within the town, in order to discourage further Danish settlement. This became part of 'English' Nottingham, set within the Danelaw.

917 AD

In 917, Aethelflaed, of Mercia and the sister of Edward the Elder, stormed Derby and brought the town under the control of Mercia.

Leicester would fall to Aethelflaed the following year. Edward and Aethelflaed launched a major assault in three stages whilst a Mercian army ravaged the countryside. The Town formally surrendered to Aethelflaed.

Stamford fell to Edward in 918.

Lincoln was the last of the five Borough Towns to yield. It was relatively isolated due to its geographical position and became increasingly so as the other Boroughs fell. The Danes of Lincoln realised that resistance would end in a military onslaught and they started to yield areas of their territories on their border to both Wessex and Mercia.

The Danelaw was now being incorporated into English ruled land.

920 AD

By 920, Edward the Elder had been accepted as Lord by the King of the Scots, acknowledged as overlord by Strathclyde and accepted as King by all the Norwegians, Danes and English who lived in Northumbria and the Viking Kingdom of York.

The peoples of the what is now England were beginning to merge, though there would be challenges ahead and the Viking interest in England was still there in Scandinavia.

937 AD

In 937, the English King, Athelstan, defeated a coalition of Hiberno-Norse, Scots and the Welsh of Strathclyde at the battle of Brunanburh. The English King would have seen the Scots and the Kingdom of Strathclyde as rebellious traitors. By October 939, Athelstan was dead and the leader of the coalition who had fought at Brunanburh, Anlaf, a Norse leader from Dublin seized York and the five boroughs. It took Athelstan's successor, Edmund, until 942 to restore order and recover the Danelaw to English control.

The Capture of the Five Boroughs

A translation in English of the Anglo-Saxon poem, the Capture of the Five Boroughs.

King Edmund
lord of the English
protector of kinsmen,
overcame Mercia,
doer of necessary deeds
as far as Dore
and Whitwell Gap
to the wide Humber's
rapid sea-stream,
seizing back
the five boroughs—
Leicester,
Lincoln,
Nottingham,
Stamford,
and Derby, too —
those dwelling there
bowed by need
under the Norsemen's
heathen yoke, until,
to his honour, the brave
Edmund, Edward's son
broke the oppressor's
brutish chains
and freed from their foes
God-fearing Danes.

Viking incursions

Viking incursion would still occur and they still had designs on English land. It wasn't until 954, when the last Viking King of York, Eric Bloodaxe, was killed in battle at Stainmore that it can be claimed that the first Viking Age had ended.



The Rey Cross – Stainmore.

Reputedly the grave marker of Harold Bloodaxe. Excavations revealed nothing. The cross has now been removed from its original site to a nearby layby.

990 AD

By 990, the Vikings began to raid and bring armies to England again. The second Viking age had begun. By 1013, England would be ruled by a Viking King, Sweyn Forkbeard and he would be followed by three further Viking Kings whilst England had become part of a Scandinavian Empire. It would not be until 1042 that the Anglo-Saxon House of Wessex was restored to the Throne.