



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE VIKINGS IN WALES

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The Vikings in Wales

Introduction

The Viking's initial incursions into Wales were raids to capture booty and slaves.

Viking Raids

The vast majority of these raids and their outcomes are highly unlikely to have been recorded. Wales during this period consisted of a number of tribal Kingdoms whose inhabitants were able to use the terrain to their advantage by exploiting their skill at guerrilla warfare by launching ambushes on invading enemies and then retreating into their mountain fastnesses. Full on pitched battles were rare.

The Irish Link

Once the Norse had control of bases in Ireland, such as Dublin, their raids on the Welsh coast became evermore frequent. The procurement of slaves was the driving force behind these raids. Dublin was by far the most important and economically important slave market in the British Isles and slaves from there would be sold to traders from as far afield as Moorish Spain and North Africa.

Viking raids on small isolated Welsh communities could prove to be a relatively risk free and lucrative enterprise if they could be carried out without alerting the Welsh tribal levies.

We know that some of the slaving raids were conducted on a large scale.

Maredudd ad Owain

The ruler of Dyfed, Maredudd ad Owain paid Norse slavers a silver penny per head to return Welsh captives in 989.

987 - Guthroth Haraldsson

In 987, Guthroth Haraldsson captured 2000 slaves during a raid on Mon. (Anglesey).

The first known contact between the Welsh and the Vikings appears to have occurred in or around 852 in which a Welsh leader called Cyngen was killed. In the 850's another Welsh Warlord, Rhodri Mawr defeated and drove off a Viking raiding party in Gwynedd. Rhodri would later confront the Vikings in a full -scale battle on Anglesey in 877, which he lost and was forced to flee into exile to Ireland.

Ubba

Ubba, a legendary son of Ragnar Lodbrok and a leader of the Great Army which had invaded England in 865, overwintered in Dyfed in 878. He had 23 ships with him and it is recorded that he caused great slaughter and distress to the people of the region.

Two major Norse Viking incursions took place in Gwynedd in 892 and 893 respectively and again there was great slaughter and much grief brought down upon the populace.

983 - Hastein

In 983, a Danish Viking army under Hastein was defeated on the banks of the River Severn, at Buttington, just outside of present-day Welshpool. An Anglo-Saxon army attacked the Danes whilst a Welsh army watched from the Western bank. Some sources suggest that the Welsh took part in the battle as allies of the English but this is disputed.

Hastein managed to escape and fled to East Anglia but a year later he tried to take Chester but an English force destroyed his army's food source and he was forced westwards into Gwynedd where he seized large quantities of booty. He was eventually driven out of the area by a Welsh warlord called Anarawd ap Rhodri. There were serious Viking raids in 896 when such places as Gwynllwg, Brycheiniog and Gwent were ravaged with the loss of much life and property.

902 - Clydog ap Cadell

In 902, Clydog ap Cadell defeated the Norse Viking leader Ingimund at Maes Ros Meilon on Anglesey. Ingimund and his followers had been expelled from Dublin by the Irish. After the defeat on Anglesey, they fled to the Wirral where they were granted permission to settle.

(See related articles 'Ingimund's attack on Chester and the battle of Buttington)

904 - Merfyn ap Rhodri,

In 904, Merfyn ap Rhodri, a Welsh leader, was killed by Vikings in Gwynedd and in 914, a Viking fleet from Brittany under the command of two leaders, Hroald and Ottar ravaged South Wales. They sailed up the river Wyre and captured the Welsh Bishop of Eryng. The Vikings attacked the English cities of Hereford and Gloucester but were repulsed. They retreated to a place called Steep Holm, a small island in the Bristol channel off present day Weston-Super-Mare, where many of them starved to death. The fleet and its survivors eventually sailed off to Ireland.

918 - Rhys ap Tewdwr

In 918, there was another Viking attack on Anglesey but the records do not give any viable details. Some Welsh leaders actually employed Viking mercenaries and one Rhys ap Tewdwr actually paid his Vikings in slaves.

Back in 914, another Bishop of Eryng, one Cyfeiliog was released by the Vikings after a ransom of 40 pounds of silver were paid by the Welsh.

937 - Brunanburh

After 937, following the Norse defeat at Brunanburh, Viking raids became much scarcer in Wales and there appears to have been a period of some respite, however, by the mid-10th century the raids resumed. The marauders mostly came from the Isle of Man, the Hebrides and Ireland. Their targets were mostly churches around the Welsh coast and there were raids on Caergybi in 961, Penmon in 978, Tywyn in 963, seven attacks on St. David's between 967 and 1091. St Dogmaels, Llanbadarn Fawr, Llanilltud Fawr and Llancarfan were all attacked in 998.

Compared to the events that had taken place in England and Scotland, there were far less full-scale battles fought in Wales however, the scale of the raiding was devastating for the people of the Welsh coast, especially amongst the isolated villages and churches. Living alongside navigable rivers also meant that villages and ecclesiastic centres were at serious risk of attack.

There is little evidence of large-scale Viking settlement in Wales. Norse and Danish influence on Welsh culture and language is also minimal when compared to England

It is known that the Welsh entered into alliance with the Vikings on occasion too, in order to fight against the Anglo Saxons or more often in disputes with their Welsh enemies.

1055 - Gruffudd ap Llywelyn

Examples are the combined Welsh and Viking attack on Hereford in 1055 led by Gruffudd ap Llywelyn who had 18 Viking ships and their crews as allies. Gruffudd also allied with one Magnus Haraldsson of Limerick in 1058, when he raided throughout Herefordshire.

Maredudd ab Owain had the support of a Hiberno-Norse fleet when he fought against Gruffudd ap Llywelyn on the river Tywi in 1044.

There are too many examples to list within this article but it is clearly demonstrated that Welsh and Viking relationships were complex. Often enemies, sometimes allies against the other peoples of the British Isles. There were Welshmen at the battle of Clontarf in 1014 too when the Irish under their King, Brian Boru, defeated the Vikings and their Irish allies in a great battle, that really was the watershed of two centuries of hatred, rivalries and division between the Norse and the Irish, and which cost up to 10000 men their lives. After 1066 the Welsh and the Vikings had a new enemy to contend with, namely the Normans and that period too, is also very complex.

(See the article 'The battle of Anglesey Sound').