



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

VARANGIAN GUARD

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Varangian Guard

Introduction

The Eastern Roman Empire's Elite mercenary fighting force of Vikings and Anglo Saxons

Varangian Guard

I will refer to the Eastern Roman Empire rather than the Byzantine Empire because the inhabitants of the Empire deemed themselves to be Romans right up until its fall in 1453.

The Varangian Guard is believed to have been formed in AD 988 and we know that these elite warriors fought their last great battle on the walls of Constantinople when it fell to the Turks on the 29th of May 1453.

The Greek speaking Eastern Roman Empire began to employ Rus warriors in the 10th century. These Rus were Swedish Vikings who had conquered much of what is now western Russia and who had formed their own city states such as Kiev and Novgorod. These Vikings became known as the Rus and as their states developed they found that there was great profit to be made in trading with the Eastern Romans and this in turn opened up the markets of the southern Mediterranean and the Near East, but not before war with the Eastern Roman Empire.

The city of Constantinople ruled the most advanced, richest and best organised state in Europe. It had been under pressure from the Sassanians, Arabs and Turks for centuries but by the 11th century, a resurgence had led to the Empire extending its rule from Armenia in the east to southern Italy in the west.

In 860 the Empire was attacked by the Rus who plundered the suburbs of Constantinople itself. By 874 a peace treaty had been agreed, part of which required the Rus to supply men for service in the Empire's military.

By 902 the Rus were engaged in naval operations against the Muslims of Crete.

In 907 the Rus broke the treaty and attacked Constantinople for the second time. They were defeated and another treaty was agreed, and again the Rus were required to supply 'Viking' warriors for Imperial service.

The following centuries would see the Rus fighting for the Empire throughout the Balkans, the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Near East.

The Varangian Guard were raised in 988 as the personal bodyguard to the Emperor, Basil the second. It is believed that its full complement was 6000 men.

By the 11th century, Vikings from Norway and Denmark were enlisting in the Varangian guard and in 1034, one Harold Sigurdson enrolled and served for 10 years. He rose to command the guard.

We now refer to him as Harold Hardrada, the Norwegian Viking King who went down to defeat at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066.

In 1018, the Varangian guard had fought a battle at Cannae, on the same field where Hannibal had slaughtered 50,000 Romans in 216 BC. The enemy this time was a confederation of Italian rebels and Norman mercenary's. The Empire was victorious and it was the Varangians who defeated the Lombards and Normans.

After the defeat of Harold Godwinson at Hastings in 1066, many Anglo Saxon warriors left England and joined the Varangian guard and 15 years after the battle of Hastings, these English huscarls faced a Norman army again at the battle of Dyrrachium on October the 18th 1081.

(From about 1070, the guard predominately consisted of Anglo Saxons and Danes and there is evidence that Welshmen (Vlachs) were also serving.)

The Empire fielded an army of some 50,000 men whilst the Norman army is believed to have been about 20000 strong. The Varangian guard were in the vanguard and initially drove through the Norman army forcing them back towards the sea. The Anglo Saxon axemen are said to have cut down hundreds of Normans, however the attack was not supported and the Varangians were surrounded and attacked from the flanks. Surrounded and bound by a strict code of loyalty they refused to surrender and died virtually to a man.

The Varangian guard would rise again to fight in the Empire's future wars and the guard would face opponents such as Turks, Bulgarians and even Western Crusaders when Constantinople was sacked in 1204

The latter was one of the turning points in the history of the medieval world as it caused centuries of rivalry between the Roman Catholic Church and that of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

By the late 13th century the guard was referred to as the *Englinovarangoi* (*English Varangians*) even though many Scots were now also joining them.

They were a formidable fighting force who acquired a legendary status and who existed for 465 years. This short history is by no means comprehensive and cannot deliver the credit the guard deserves, so we hope that if this is of interest, that you will indulge in your own studies of this remarkable fighting unit.

Harold Sigurdson 'Hardrada' (Hard ruler).

On the 26th of September 1066, Harold Hardrada , King of Norway died on the battlefield of Stamford Bridge, along with most of his army, just 6 miles to the east of York. This was the last significant battle fought in England between the Anglo Saxons and the Vikings.

Hardrada had served in the Varangian guard for 10 years. His life was one of high adventure and his story cannot be compressed into a few short paragraphs.

He is said to have fought in 18 battles for the Eastern Roman Empire, to have fought across the western world from Scandinavia to the holy land, amassed a huge personal fortune, defiled a Eastern Roman noble woman, been imprisoned in Constantinople, escaped, and then eventually became King of Norway. A true Viking if ever there was one.