

The River Humber

The Viking fleet struggled against the surging tide of the estuary after having turned into the Humber from the wild northern sea. Another time they may well have simply waited for the tide to turn to make their journey easier but they had no wish to remain away from shelter with the winds out to sea still strong and the threat of another storm just beyond the horizon behind them. The crews bent to their task of rowing the ships to aid what momentum they could get from the wind that had changed to a north-easterly.

King Harald Hardrada stood in the prow of his drekkar, the dragon ship known as The Long Serpent. He would have preferred to have been out in front at the head of the fleet, leading as always, but his vessel was indeed long, some ninety feet in total, and carried eighty Viking warriors at the benches. Although impressive in size it was not as manoeuvrable as the smaller vessels and as they sailed upon a river that none of his men knew well he did not want to run any unnecessary risks. Tidal estuaries were dangerous places for the unwary.

Before him sailed twenty or so snekke, in many ways similar to the Long Serpent but smaller, the biggest being a little over fifty feet in length. Over two hundred similar vessels followed in their wake, including many more drekkar. The snekke were not as impressive as the larger fighting ships but they were far more practical on an unknown river. Today they scouted the way ahead, looking for both an easy passage and possible obstacles to their progress; the Humber would have shifting sandbars that could trap their vessels. They excelled as watermen, however, riding their element with both confidence and joy. Nevertheless, Hardrada would not be without his Long Serpent no matter how impractical it might be for close sailing on foreign rivers; what better way to impress upon both friend and foe alike the power at his disposal than this magnificent vessel?

They had turned round the curious 'Hook of Holderness' that formed the north bank of the River Humber at its mouth and were now heading west. The river was over a league wide at this point and the air carried the smell of salt. Rowing would do the men no harm, it would keep their muscles toned and fit for the fighting to come. Long arms burnt by the sun, hardened by use with both the oar and the axe. Standing in the prow of the Long Serpent the wily Viking judged their destination to be at least two leagues away, not so great a distance for a man on horseback but travel on the waterway was always slow in these conditions.

"We come at last to England," Jarl Siward commented as he approached the king, "this place be new to the both of us."

“It’s too flat,” Hardrada growled.” We can be seen for miles. There’s no advantage to be gained by this route.”

The country was even and green on both sides of the wide estuary although there was some higher land in the distance both to the north and to the south. This made the river look even wider than it really was. Salt marshes lined the banks, home to wading birds that preyed on small fish, crabs and shrimps. Further up stream there were mud flats and where the river water ran fresh rather than salty the otter replaced the seals and dolphins as the main predator. Today, however, the men from Norway were the hunters to be feared most.

“Jorvik lies inland, this is the only way to reach it and keep the fleet at hand,” Siward stated the facts as simply as he understood them.

“I know, I know,” the king muttered. He rode the movement of the ship expertly, never losing his balance, not even being forced to change his footing or to reach out a steadying hand. He was like the captain of old once more, the man who had led them so far over the blue seas of the world in similar fleets to this one, not mayhap as large but always in search of treasure and adventure.

“It’s good to be abroad again, bringing our swords to a worthy enemy and taking their gold,” Siward laughed, the king forced a smile. “This is the way we should live.”

“This is not the same kind of adventure,” Hardrada stated, “back then we were happy to raid and plunder, to use the treasure to fund the war against Sweyn and his Danes when we returned home.”

“That man has proved as elusive as an eel, still he sits upon his throne though now he lacks the spirit for war.”

“Like us his force is spent.”

Siward looked closely at the king, momentarily alarmed by this out of character utterance. He could not help but note the lines around the king’s eyes, the furrows in his brow, the grey strands in his hair and beard. Involuntarily a proverb jumped into his head.

Silver hairs are the first blossoms of death!

“Nay, My Lord, we are as strong as ever!” he declared with a vigorous tone, wanting to rid himself of the images that the unlooked for adage had imposed into his mind.

“Are we?” Hardrada looked him straight in the eye. “Since when have we had to ally ourselves with foreigners to win a war?”

It was a good question and Siward had to think hard for an answer and it took him some moments to do it.

“We were mercenaries once ourselves, in Byzantium. You were the Captain of the Varangian Guard,” he offered up hopefully.

“What we did then we did for the pay of others, it is not the same. Things have not gone the way I had planned. It seems to me that my enemies escape my sword now rather than die

under it, and my own people curse my back. I have heard it whispered that they call me now the 'Old Hound' instead of the 'War Wolf'. You know that I have placed everything on this adventure Siward?"

"You are still the King of Norway," Siward insisted. He wanted to say more but his friend continued speaking.

"What is a king without a treasury? If we fail here then there will be a cold homecoming awaiting us in Norway. Sweyn of Denmark will be following our moves and he will be aware of what our success will mean for him. Fifteen years we spent fighting that man and not once achieved a decisive victory over him. Through his very stubbornness to fall before me Sweyn has forced me to make peace, to sign a pact that guarantees that peace for the rest of our joint lifetimes. Things may change, however. Things do change. England is the richest country this side of the Byzantine Empire and with all that money in my grasp Denmark will fall to me. We must be resolved to win this war Siward. I must lead you to foreign places again and you must do much killing. I will be the 'War Wolf' once more."

Hardrada spoke in a more expansive manner towards the end of his speech, as if finding some encouragement for himself within his own words.

"I have seen half the world following in your footsteps My Lord, seen things that were undreamt of. We sailed the Greek seas and put out the eyes of an emperor. I have put more treasure into the holds of our ships than I thought existed. We have lived as Vikings should, wild and free and feared. What matters this voyage to England now?" Siward spoke effusively in his turn but only demonstrated that he had missed the anxiety in the heart of his monarch and his friend. He had followed in the footsteps of his hero for so long that there were things about the man that time had hidden from his eyes.

Some men are born to follow.

Hardrada was glad that Siward's mind was at ease. He was not the most intelligent of men mayhap but he was a natural soldier, a good leader of warriors on the battlefield and a man to be trusted in himself. He had no vision, however, no understanding of the politics of court. For Siward there was no problem that a sharp spear and a brave heart could not find an answer for. Educated men knew that Hardrada's claim to the English throne was weaker than a spring frost. That King Harthacnut, the then Viking ruler of England, and King Magnus of Denmark had made a pledge that each would inherit the throne of whosoever died first was doubtful in itself. Probably no more than a folktale at best.

That the English Witan would respect such a claim was not even to be considered. No, it was circumstance that had lent Hardrada's claim any real substance, circumstance and the coming of Tostig Godwinson. He had promised to turn powerful Saxon lords who were not necessarily supporters of his brother Harold of Wessex to the cause of the Norwegian King. In truth, with Guillaume of Normandy looking to take the crown as well, Hardrada knew that

he needed more than just a Viking army at his command, even one as large as this, he needed to win the popular support of those Saxon lords who could be swayed by Tostig, only then could he make the throne of England his own.

The king watched the surf ripple past the ship's hull and it reminded him of the days slipping by and his own hold on the throne of Norway growing weaker due in no small part to the Danish resistance. He needed to believe that this design would work.

"Aye, though Guillaume may have run to the pope in Rome for a blessing have we not made our own pilgrimage to the Holy Land?" Hardrada broke the comfortable silence.

"Aye, My Lord."

"Then let the Christian God smile on our venture if pilgrimages mean aught to him," Hardrada sounded lighter of heart. "Look!"

He pointed to the north bank. They had passed the mouth of a river, a tributary to the great Humber, that flowed down from the northern hills. They could just see the roofs of a Saxon settlement sitting in what seemed like lush grazing land. In between the Vikings and the Saxon houses there were dotted the white fleeces of a large flock of sheep, grazing lazily over a rich, green pasture.

"This country is richer than it has a right to be. No matter how many times our people have plundered it the Saxons continue to remain fat with mutton, warm in their woollen cloaks and bedecked in gold. Where does all this wealth come from?"

"I care not, My Lord," Siward admitted, "I care only where it goes; into our possession."

Hardrada laughed along with his trusted captain. He had always enjoyed Siward's uncomplicated nature. They had spent many nights under the canopy of stars that seemed to bedeck foreign skies, on some adventure and surrounded only by honest fighting men. Life was simple then. All knew what they wanted and all knew what was expected of them. Death, if it came, was glorious if you had a sword in your hand and a companion by your side. It was something to look for.

Now the trappings of the kingship that he had so long sought seemed to weave around him like a net. He had a kingdom at his command and yet he had failed to bring about the defeat of his enemies. He had achieved so much more with far less in the simpler days of his youth. He found himself yearning for those days now and it caused him some disquiet to realise that so many years had passed him by since he first set out to make a name for himself, to become the subject of his own saga. Fifty one years since he had come into this world and it found him now forcing himself to laugh along with a good friend.

"All the same, if we can see them then they can see us," he declared when Siward's mirth had passed. "I think that we should moor at the first suitable landing place we come upon and then prepare for battle immediately. The Saxons will know we are no longer in the east and

will change their plans for defence. I do not want to be caught with half our men on the ships and the other half still unloading on the shore.”

“They would never be so bold.”

“These are strange times my friend,” Hardrada replied. “The great moving star appeared in the skies during springtime, the one that comes every five and seventy years, or so the learned tell us. Who knows what things undreamt of might yet occur before winter closes its hoary grasp upon the land?”

“Edward was king at the beginning of the year, then Harold took the crown, you will be the third and final king, one who sits on the throne of both Norway and England.”

“And maybe even Denmark?” He grunted to himself with satisfaction at that idea. “There are those who see a power in threes and three thrones would see me a powerful king eh?”

“One to rival the Emperor of Byzantium,” Siward agreed, “the greatest Viking king of them all.”

Hardrada did smile at that comment. To be remembered down the ages was always the desire of the Viking lords.

What point was there in pursuing these long voyages away from home if not to win glory for one's name?

How many men had walked this earth, lived their lives and died their deaths unknown and unremembered?

Only the weak of mind and body left such a legacy. They would sing sagas of Harald Hardrada, the third of that name to be King of Norway. All the gold and silver that he had amassed during his life time, from Norway to Africa and all the lands in between, had been spent in making his name one to be feared and one to be remembered.

He was the War Wolf!

He would not admit it openly to anyone else but doubt had plagued him over this expedition. Sweyn of Denmark posed no threat to Norway in the absence of its king; that was not the problem. His son Prince Magnus occupied the throne as regent in Hardrada's absence and the boy was more than able to deter any Danish transgressions. Rather he was aware that there was a touch of desperation in this action that they now undertook. He needed money and he needed allies; that was not a position of strength. Travelling to Orkney he had swelled the ranks of his depleted Norwegians with men not just from Orkney itself but also from other Viking settlements as diverse as the Isle of Mann, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Irish Norse, Scotland and Cumberland, and even men from the Faeroe Islands. There were Danes too, against whom he had fought for so long, still eager for battle and plunder no matter whom led them. It was a large number of swords at his command but they were of disparate origin. At least these men had the tie of Viking blood if not the same country of origin, unlike Lord Tostig's army of adventurers.

Nevertheless, Hardrada would have preferred an army of true Norwegians. He had seen during his time as a captain of the Varangian Guard in Byzantium both the strengths and weaknesses of a mercenary force. An army of one mind and one spirit was always more courageous than a collection of diverse warriors. At the heart of his army he had a large number of hardened veterans who were steeled in the fight and had a hunger for the spoils he promised them.

If the battle went not their way easily would they all stand by my banner?

What would be the outcome when their allegiance was truly tested?

“The sun begins to sink in the west,” Siward commented, breaking the king's train of thought.

“We will row through the night,” Hardrada commanded. “No doubt the Saxons of Holderness will be sending messengers to Jorvik; we cannot afford to stay long on the river.”

It would be several hours in this late September before the light faded beyond use for navigation and they should have long since turned into the River Ouse before then. Making their way up that watercourse in the dark would be difficult but not beyond their skill as watermen. With luck they would come upon a good landing point not far from Jorvik in the early morning and then they could finally test their mettle against the northern Saxons and begin the task of taking the English crown.