

Wednesday 20th September 1066

The Village of Riccall

Riccall was somewhat larger than Skaroaborg. There were many more buildings to begin with, some much bigger than any that they had seen in the fishing village. A street ran down through the village to the riverbank from the furthest limit of the settlement. It was surrounded by arable land of good quality, the fields in their turn bordered by forest. Closer to the river small fishing boats lay high on the bank. Trading vessels called in at Riccall, plying their wares the full length of the Ouse and down into the great estuary of the Humber. There were many shops, indeed it was a thriving town with a small wooden church and all the signs of prosperity.

From within the shadows of the treeline Siward and a hundred or so Vikings warriors stared out at the village as the occupants rose to greet the new day. They had left the fleet before dawn and headed north for two miles to reach Riccall. Lord Tostig had a man with them who claimed to know the area well and he had warned them that the River Ouse made a prodigious 'U' turn at the village and that this would make further progress difficult. The same man had led the party of Vikings overland to Riccall and his words had proven true.

“The Saxons awake,” Siward commented.

“They look well to do for peasants,” a warrior at his side observed.

“We are here to capture the village first,” Siward told him, raising his voice so that his words carried to as many as possible without also alarming the villagers. “The king wants this place for a safe mooring for the fleet, why waste time pillaging a village when we are going to capture a city today?”

“A sail!” The alert came from behind Siward, brought by a man who had run from the river itself. It was both a warning that the advance ships of the fleet were approaching and the signal to begin the attack.

“Remember, secure the village. Let the people run if they have a mind to.” Siward drew his sword.

“What if some stand and fight?”

“Then kill them.”

The Vikings moved out from the trees and began to trot across the open fields. Riccall had no palisade so that the people who they could see moving around the village could also see them, but no one reacted. When the alarm was initially raised it was by a lone woman who

pointed at the advancing warriors and called out to someone nearby. Suddenly the screaming started.

Almost across the fields now the Norsemen increased their pace and began to utter their war cries

Within moments the Vikings were inside the village itself and had met no organised defence whatsoever. The Saxons ran in panic and with no clear idea of where they wished to go, only away from their enemies. Some headed across the fields and to the presumed safety of the forest beyond. Others headed for the river and their boats. Many more attempted to shutter their homes but they found that their doors were no barricade whatsoever against the hard steel of Norwegian war-axes.

The first ships reached Riccall and quickly disembarked more warriors to make safe the village but by then Jarl Siward's men had effectively cleared it of all but the old and the infirm, Saxons too weak to do anything more than sit and watch the Viking army arrive and claim their village.

Siward stood in the centre of the road, his helmet removed to allow the sweat on his brow to be kissed by the morning air. Already the men were searching the village for anything that could be of use to the army, horses, food, drink, weapons even. He watched as more and more shipse arrived, the smaller snekke first and the larger drekkar following. Ships were tied alongside each other so that the warriors had to climb from one vessel to another to make it to dry land.

The crews were not sorry to give up rowing, however. It had taken them two days to reach this spot from the open sea and most of it had required the use of the ships' oars. Morale was high because they had finally reached their destination to undertake the task that they had set out to complete and the men were in good physical condition.

Tostig Godwinson took possession of a horse, mounted it and began to put his troops in order. Like the Vikings they were in good spirits and reasonably well equipped. It did not take them long to don their byrnies, shirts of mail that reached down to their thighs for some. The majority of adventurers, however, could not afford such armour. Their byrnies were the common alternative made from toughened leather and given additional protection by the sewing of metal rings or plates of iron to crucial areas. Some wore beneath this the woollen jackets if they owned them. Most had helmets, again usually light in metal with additional protection provided by toughened leather covering. All of the warriors carried large round wooden shields painted in a wide variety of designs from plain colours to intricate pieces of artwork with a large metal boss at the centre. They gripped several throwing spears along with the shield in their left hand; in their right they held a fighting spear. Some of the more

seasoned mercenaries carried swords or axes as well, but few if any of these approached the quality possessed by the Viking nobility.

The Jarls of Orkney made a show of presenting to King Hardrada a large black stallion that their men had found. It was not in the best of condition but it still looked an impressive beast, even more so with the giant King of Norway sat on its back.

“Olaf!” The king shouted, his booming voice carrying over the noise of the war preparations.

“Father!” The young prince appeared on foot, already armed and armoured, with his retainers in tow, young men of his generation and of suitable rank. His face was flushed with excitement and for a moment it touched the old king that he would have to disappoint a son who did not need to be commanded to do that which was expected of a true Viking.

“Olaf my boy, you will guard the fleet,” he spoke with his usual brusque voice but he hid a different emotion behind the words.

“Father no!” The Prince looked indignant. “I have not travelled to Orkney and Scotland at thy side to do a watchman’s duty in England!”

“Tis my command boy,” the king’s voice rose.

“You use my youth against me?” Olaf protested still.

His own anger was reinforced by the knowledge that his peers were standing behind him, not least the Jarls of Orkney who would be leading their own men into this battle, and that they were watching an altercation that might have been better carried out in private.

“No, my better judgement,” the king indulged him like he would no other, certainly there were no men now living who had dared to raise their voices against Harald Hardrada in such a fashion.

“And you were much younger than I when you first fought on a battlefield!”

“Aye, fought and lost and then hunted like an animal. I’ll not risk that for my son.”

“You fear to lose?”

“No warrior goes into battle believing that he cannot be defeated. Though there is much in our favour the Saxon is not a weakling and their ways are cunning. You would make a good prize for them and if I should fall Norway would have no king.”

“There is Magnus who sits now guarding your thrown in Norway. You will not rob me of this glory!”

“Siward! Siward!”

“My lord.” The Norse jarl walked over to where the royal family argued. His manner was neither hurried nor concerned as if he had witnessed scenes like this played out before and already knew what the outcome would be.

“Tell the Prince why I could not take him into battle; you have his ear more than I,” the king commanded.

“But I would say take him,” his friend responded. He looked at the king directly.

“WHAT?!”

“My Lord, the Saxons are caught unprepared. Harold has his army in the south fearing a threat from Guillaume the Bastard and our men are as keen as their spear points. I see no danger in Prince Olaf witnessing the fight.”

“Damn you to hell Siward, would you ever take the prince’s side against me?” Inside Hardrada rejoiced in the opportunity to change his mind without a loss of face. Siward was a good friend, a close friend; closer than a brother. He was also right of course, they had the upper-hand and it behoved the royal blood of Norway to learn the ways of war. He cursed the inner voice that had counselled caution on this day; that was not his normal disposition. “Very well Olaf, you come with us, but I make you Siward’s ward and my wrath will fall heavy with you if he comes to any harm.”

“That will not be,” Siward assured the king. He turned to the prince and flashed a quick grin. “Get yourself a horse My Prince, for such as we do not suffer the dirt of England on our heels when we go to war against her own.”

“Thank you Siward, for a moment there I thought the old hound would have you keep me here after all.”

“Son or no son, don’t let him hear you using that name,” Siward warned. “Now get thee prepared and let’s spill some Saxon blood.”