

Fulford Gate

“They are braver than what I took them for,” Hardrada grunted. He turned to Tostig. “Only boys you said.”

“That they are,” the Saxon nobleman replied with some scorn. “No doubt they look to impress brother Harold with their valour.”

“Whoever chose this ground did well; I do not like it,” The Norwegian King declared. He looked along the Saxon shield-wall, noting the river bank to the west. “And a river before them too.”

“’Tis shallow,” Tostig asserted, “it will be no obstacle.”

“To a man in armour charging a shield-wall under a rain of throwing spears it may well prove to be an obstacle,” the Viking asserted. He knew that Tostig had experience of battle but he wondered if the man’s lust for revenge was clouding his judgement. In battle even a row of bushes could become an obstacle. He had seen men trip and fall and break their own shield-wall for losing their footing on a root or a stone. It was usually men like Tostig who failed to consider such things and men such as that who lost battles. “Lord Tostig, form your men on my right.”

“Aye, My Lord.” Tostig moved his horse away and called his captains to him, pointing out where he wanted his men to form up.

“He has some fine men,” Prince Olaf commented as he pushed his horse up alongside his father’s in the space made by Tostig’s absence.

“Think you so?” Hardrada shot a hard glance at his son. “What say you Siward?”

“Some Scotsmen. Some Franks. Some Northumbrians too, mostly mercenaries. Experienced but not Viking; not to be relied upon.” Jarl Siward spoke in a matter of fact tone, not even bothering to look at the men under discussion.

“My thoughts too,” Hardrada agreed. “They will do for the task in hand though. My Jarls of Orkney take your valiant men to the centre and let Jarl Siward here give you positions of glory!”

Paul Thorfinnsson raised his battle-axe in salute and followed the king’s friend towards what would be, if Hardrada’s quickly forming plan succeeded, the hub of their battle line.

They had a reputation for ferocious wildness in battle but when it came to forming as a body in preparation for the fight the Vikings displayed a surprising amount of discipline. They began to line themselves up along the south bank of the beck but not within a spear’s throw of their enemy. The jeering started quickly, punctuated with the odd thrown stone.

Most fell short or clattered harmlessly off the large round shields that both sides carried, but occasionally one would hit a helmet and reverberate with a clang, an event that would be greeted by a louder jeer from whichever side had thrown the stone.

“Why do you send Tostig to the right?” Prince Olaf asked. “Is it not a position of honour, to fight on the king’s right hand?”

Hardrada grunted in reply and then dismounted.

“Follow me,” he commanded.

Just behind the forming Viking line there was a patch of higher ground that allowed them to look over the heads of the warriors and even beyond the Saxon lines to the north.

“The ground here where I make our line is firmer,” Hardrada told his son. “My eye tells me that on the right flank it is soft and wet, disguised mayhap by trees like the alder, but I can smell the marshes from here; not good for attacking troops. I can only rely on Tostig’s men to hold a short while if the Saxon’s attack but that would be enough.”

“Why would the Saxon’s attack, they have an excellent defensive position?”

“You can see that eh?” Hardrada allowed himself a brief smile at his son’s perceptiveness. “Do you also see that the Saxon army is commanded by at least two eoldermen?”

He pointed across the beck. Amongst the Saxon ranks many banners flew, mostly one coloured and simple, but there were some standards that were larger and more intricate. One was a large black square with a yellow dragon rearing on its hind legs, not far from it there was also a blue rectangle with yellow diagonal lines that crossed in the centre.

“The Pagan and Christian flags of Mercia,” Hardrada explained, “and there!” The king’s arm swung further to the right and pointed out a banner of eight alternate stripes of red and gold. “The flag of Northumbria.” He grinned as if this were some just discovered advantage. “Lord Tostig told me to look for those banners to know the positions of the eorls; allies have some uses you see.”

“I mark their place of stand but to what advantage is it to us?”

“Edwin and Morcar are kin now to Godwinson but not necessarily friends of his. If this were not so they would have remained behind the walls of Jorvik and awaited relief from the king’s army. No, they come to the field to meet us and win glory. The Saxons will attack, and that meets well with my plan.”

“To overwhelm them?”

“To destroy them. If we break these in front of us that guard the riverbank while the Saxons to our right push Tostig back the line of the battle will change-”

“They will have their backs to the Dam Lands!” Prince Olaf realised excitedly.

“And, if my plan works, our warriors will face them on three sides,” The Viking king smiled grimly.

“And if they stand firm?”

“If they stand then we will lose more warriors than is my want. The outcome of a battle is only ever certain where one chieftain is a fool and the other possessed of craft. Someone has chosen this land and chosen well, we will see if it is the eorls and if they have the strength to match their ambition.” Hardrada glanced back over his shoulder. The Viking army was still making its way up to the front, captains directing the men to each flank according to their lord. It would be at least an hour before the bulk of their forces had arrived and deployed.

The King of Norway had brought seven thousand men with him, a strong force by anyone's reckoning. A further three thousand under the command of the reliable Eystein Orre had been left at Riccall to both guard the fleet and their line of retreat if it were needed. Looking back north over the Germany Beck he calculated that the Saxons could not match that number. The front line looked impressive, armour and helmets glinting in the sun. Huscarls, warriors that should not be underestimated when it came to battle. His keen eye told him that a significant number of the men behind the front line were poor quality soldiers, however.

“If I were the Saxon commander I would attack now whilst we're still forming our line,” Hardrada muttered.