

Fulford Gate

King Harald Hardrada looked around the battlefield and saw what he sought most. He levelled his sword and pointed at a group of armoured Saxons who were making a disciplined withdrawal using a tight defensive formation.

“There,” he said with certainty.

“We have won,” Prince Olaf declared. His face was flushed with excitement and exertion. “The Saxons flee before us. It was just as you said it would be father. We have victory.”

“But the eorls escape us,” Hardrada growled.

The King of Norway wanted to make examples of the Saxon noblemen so as to suppress any further resistance from the people of Northumbria and he knew what they meant to Tostig Godwinson as well. He had seen the Saxon banner of the lord who commanded the force by the riverbank disappear, but so had the lord himself; to safety he feared. He remembered now the disciplined group of Saxon warriors who had headed north from the riverbank in an orderly fashion and how he had let them go in his haste to win the battle. It occurred to him that one of the eorls must have been in their midst and that he had allowed him to slip through his fingers. The presence of the huscarls should have told him as much. In the frenzy of the battle he had lost sight of his greater strategic objectives. It was a slip of his judgement that might endanger the entire expedition, not that he would admit such a fact openly to anyone; not even to his son.

Observing this other group of huscarls moving slowly in good order suggested that the second lord was amongst their number, certainly it was one who was highly valued; the Eorl Morcar the king hoped. There had been at least two senior eorls upon the field this morning, the capture of just one of them could yet make this battle decisive.

“Come!” Hardrada barked.

With his loyal Viking warriors Hardrada advanced on the Saxon formation. The Norse weapons were bloodstained and their resolve tempered by a victor's disdain for the conquered. They trampled the once green grass beneath their heels, weighing it down with the blood of their enemy so that it did not spring back upright in the wake of their passing so readily.

Coenred saw the situation and realised the intent of the Vikings immediately. His band of men moved quickly over the battle ground in loose order like wolves closing in on a hunted deer, only this was not a hunt; it was a chase for survival. The huscarls to the south moved slower because of their protective formation. They were heading for the northwards track that

led safely over the marsh of Fulford Ings to York. It was a narrow point where the Saxon warriors could fend off a Viking attack, but Hereric's men were losing the race. Norse warriors were closing in on them from three sides now, drawing close like a pack of hounds on a wounded bear. It would not be long before the Vikings furthest to the north were able to prevent the Saxons from reaching York and denying them any safety that the city might offer.

“Come.”

Coenred set off at a fast trot, ignoring the weight of his harness and weapons. He pushed through his own tiredness. The pain from the several violent encounters that had left bruises and cuts on his body was suppressed by the force of his will. That was the difference between the huscarl and the frydman; they had the discipline to overcome their own fear of pain and death. They had the strength of will to do that which was necessary no matter what the cost was to themselves. Their death-oath was no grand gesture, it was more than words; it was the foundation upon which their honour was built.

His men followed him and they were all of a like mind. They ran along the northern edge of the grassland towards the point where the huscarls under Hereric's command were heading. The Vikings following the raven banner of the Norwegian King were just to the south of them, slightly behind but ahead of Hereric's men. They were spreading out as they came on, determined to halt the northwards movement of the Saxon formation.

What had been the centre of the Viking line, now commanded by the Jarls of Orkney since Siward had fallen, formed the main pressing force advancing from the west of the field. They were being joined by Tostig's warriors from the south who had now slaughtered the Saxons in and around the marshlands. Morcar's fate was truly hanging in the balance.

Coenred reached the beginning of the track where the ground was firm and turned to face both the approaching Saxons and the Vikings. His men formed around him, maintaining their loose order, awaiting his orders. They all took deep breaths of the warm September air and it gave them a little respite. Those who had not yet drained their flasks of warm weak beer took the opportunity to do so now.

Hereric and his huscarls were so close to Coenred's group that the latter could see the individual designs upon their comrades' shields. Their brother warriors were painfully near to safety and yet a bloody doom was breathing down their necks. The Norse army pressed hardest from the West, separated by barely three spear lengths so that they could see the blood smeared clothes of the enemy. Yet these Vikings hung back. Although vastly outnumbered this troop of determined Saxons still posed a dangerous threat. Their spears protruded from behind their shields and their faces were dark and glowering. The men in the second and third rows hefted swords and large double-handed axes. There was no weakness in this formation that could be exploited by taunts or threats alone. When the final encounter came it would be paid for in blood. So it seemed that the Viking host were waiting for their fellows under

Tostig's command to catch them up whilst Hardrada's men advanced quickly to close off the escape route to the north.

It pained Coenred to know that he had too few warriors at his command to influence the outcome. They could advance and engage some of the Vikings but it would be a short, sharp fight that would not aid Hereric and Morcar. If the worst were to happen all that Coenred's men could hope for was to recover the eorl's body or die trying. They knew that the latter would be the most likely outcome unless something unexpected occurred.

"You must go now," Hereric commanded. He had one hand on the eorl's arm as if the young nobleman was incapable of being left to his own mind.

"Go. Go where?" Morcar asked in a plaintive voice.

They stood at the very centre of the formation, shuffling in step with the other tightly compacted bodies. For his part Morcar was not quite tall enough to see over the shoulders of the men who ringed him.

"Go north My Lord, go to the city," Hereric explained. "Coenred awaits you."

"We are too far," Morcar observed. He stood up on tiptoes and could see the small group of Saxons waiting to receive them but they seemed so distant and the enemy too close. "We cannot cover the distance. This armour is too heavy, the sun too hot. I am too tired. We cannot run that far with the enemy so close."

"You must run," Hereric returned. "Drop your shield and run to Coenred."

"...too far." Complained the nobleman again.

"If you do not go now everything will have been in vain. Good Saxon men will have died for nothing. What we are about to do will be for nothing and no one will remember it." Hereric gripped him by the shoulders and started to push him towards the safety of Coenred's huscarls. The men moved to open a passage through their formation for him. Hereric flexed his muscles. "Go now."

Morcar staggered forward under the impetus of Hereric's fierce shove. He stumbled two, three, four paces and then stopped as if the effort had been too great for him. Like a confused child he looked around him, seemingly unaware of the danger that he was in. An arrow suddenly hit his shield with a solid thud and it seemed to sting him awake. He dropped the large circular piece of wood as if it had been a poisonous serpent rather than a missile. The shield fell face down, snapping the arrow that was imbedded in it and miring the painted abstract design that he had once liked so much. He let fall his fighting spear and began to move as fast as his weary legs could take him towards the only route to safety left open to him now.

Coenred swore under his breath once more. He could see what the eorl could not and instantly understood the nature of the action that was about to be undertaken. Hereric and his warriors had stopped retreating before their enemy and having shot Morcar from them like a

stone from a sling they now advanced on the prowling Vikings. Their demeanour had changed. They spread a little further apart to give themselves room to use their weapons. A battle chant broke out into the midday air, a simple rhythmic mantra to focus their minds on their enemies and away from their fate. Spears shafts and axe handles beat against metal rimmed shields in time to their growing song; a sorrow song through which they prepared themselves for leaving this world; this middle-earth.

“Easy lads. Ready lads,” Hereric spoke to them in a calm but firm voice, “there’s a lot of scum blood there for us to spill yet my lads.”

The sun had reached its zenith and the day was at its hottest for the warriors. Hereric was tempted to loosen his helmet and feel the kiss of the air on his head but he knew that that would only invite death all the sooner. Death was coming anyway. He thought about sweet Eadgyd and his heart ached for her.

I should have taken her to wife, stupid man!

She had given him two strong, healthy boys and he had been afraid to handfast with a woman as fine as she was. Well he would make her proud of him this day if nothing else. He would stand unafraid before the enemy with his sword in his hand and he would die a hero on the battlefield. If Morcar was not quite the man of quality to honour such an action then he at least knew that Coenred was. He would not let the eorls forget this moment.

“Aldfrid! Hengist!”

Coenred spoke only their names but the two youngest of his retinue pounced at once like hunting dogs. Comrades took their heavy shields and long fighting spears so that they could move all the faster. As they sprinted forward several Vikings from the group furthest north who had seen Morcar separate from the huscarl formation realised that he must be the lord that their king wanted so badly and began to trot after him also.

They were wary of coming between the two enemy formations, however, and not as fast as the two young Saxons who reached the stumbling and terrified eorl before the Vikings could come within yards of him. Aldfrid and Hengist stopped only to hurl the last of their throwing spears at the nearest of their enemies, then they unceremoniously grabbed the nobleman by his arms and ran back to where Coenred waited, literally dragging Morcar with them.

Hereric turned away from Coenred and Eorl Morcar and looked back at his hated enemy. His fingers opened and closed on the hilt of his sword. His senses now seemed so finely tuned that he was experiencing everything in the minutest detail. He could feel the sweat that soaked his hair and the quilted jacket beneath his mail byrnie. The leather that bound his sword’s grip was smooth to the touch. His muscles were sore and tired and yet still full of vitality so that the weight of his arms and armour seemed as if nothing to him. His sword was

so light within his grasp that he might doubt its ability to deliver a killing stroke. There was the distinct chink of metal against metal, the rasp of ash spear shafts over the iron rim of painted shields, the heavy breathing of the men; his men. As their final moment came it was if they all lived that very instance to the full.

It would be sweet and short.

“Now!” Hereric ordered.

From within the five hundred Saxons a warrior blew a battle-horn as if with his final breath. It cracked the air with a voice of doom. More horns within the formation joined it. The huscarls howled their derision upon their enemies, clashing spear and sword against shields with abandon now. They turned at bay with a terrible fury.

Hereric pushed his way to the front rank and screamed his hatred at the waiting Vikings. Without fear and as one body the Saxons lurched forward and slammed their spears into the Norsemen. Battle was joined once again as the Vikings responded in kind and fell on their greatly outnumbered foe.

Coenred watched from their place of safety. His eyes were dark and brooding underneath his helmet and his hand gripped the shaft of his spear tightly. Hereric had led his men into the heart of the advancing Vikings and in doing so sealed his own and his men’s fate whilst probably securing Morcar’s safety. The Vikings fell on the huscarls’ formation. They came from all sides so that they quickly enveloped it, their spears stabbing, their axes chopping, their swords hacking.

“Coenred.”

Morcar gasped for breath, bent over with his hands placed just above his knees, facing away from the field of battle.

“Look.”

The warrior pointed with his spear at the mass of bodies before them. Like the men around him he could, if he so wished, make sense of the chaos that they were witnessing and visualize the demise, stroke by stroke, of their brother warriors. They would kill as many of their hated enemy as they could before the last of them fell, he knew this in his heart, but the enemy were too many. The strong links of the huscarl’s mail would be sundered. The linden wood of their shields would be split. Hammer falls would dent the once bright steel of their helmets. The spear shafts would be broken. Blood would soak their quilted jackets and the life would go out of their once bright and eager eyes. One by one the five hundred would fall beneath blows too numerous to counter. And brave Hereric would be the last of them, but all of them, huscarls to the end. They died a warrior’s death.

He glanced at Morcar and saw that the eorl was still facing north, still looking towards the city.

“Turn and pay witness.”

In a cold voice the servant commanded his lord. There was no deference in his tone whatsoever, anger mayhap, one held tight in a steel hard grip forged in a warrior’s training. It gave metal to his words. Morcar responded hesitantly, as if turning to gaze upon a vision that he already knew would haunt him for the rest of his days.

In truth little could be seen but for the blurred figures of the Norsemen swarming around the five hundred. The Saxons were totally obscured by their enemy now.

“Why?” Morcar asked.

“For your life. They are huscarls. They swore an oath to protect your life with theirs. We are huscarls. We do not break our oaths. But you will not leave this place without acknowledging those men who die for you. HAIL HERERIC!”

Coenred raised his spear into the air, holding it horizontally over his head.

“HAIL HERERIC!”

One hundred voices cried out in unison, a salute to the fallen. Morcar may or may not have joined with his own.

“Now we go so that their deaths may mean something.”

Coenred signalled the withdrawal. The two young warriors renewed their grip on their charge and hastened him down the track towards the walls of York showing little respect for his rank. Coenred and the others brought up the rear in a loose formation so that they could move more quickly but with alert eyes on the scene behind them. For now it seemed that the Vikings had forgotten their original purpose. Nevertheless the Saxons withdrew in good order, prepared to meet any foe who came after them. None followed.