

The Vicinity of Stamford Bridge

The warrior was young, fifteen, barely more than a boy, but he was also fast and as sly as a fox. Harold waited patiently as the young man recovered his breath. A huscarl began to demand answers but the king silenced him with a stern glance.

“Let him take his breath, he has run a league or two and not been seen, eh lad?”

The youngster shook his head in confirmation, his hair held in place with a yellow braid.

“My Lord, the Norsemen saw nothing of me,” he declared, pulling himself up to his full height. His ribs still moved noticeably under his tunic as he continued to breathe heavily, but he spoke without difficulty now.

“Where are they?” The king demanded.

“They have arrived at the bridge that crosses the Derwent yonder. I could not count their number but ‘tis maybe match for ours or even less.”

A muttering arose from the assembled chieftains.

“How were they arrayed?” Harold asked loudly, more to silence the men around him than to frighten the youth.

“’Tis something to marvel at my lord, most wear no armour,” the young man beamed, knowing that this news at least would be well received.

“No armour? The boy lies!” Again the assembled huscarls and theigns broke out in noisy agitation.

“Do you boy?” Harold cast an angry look at the warrior who had called the youth's account into question.

“I am my lord’s man. If he says go here and do that I do it. My lord said go and see where the Vikings are and what they do; I have done it.”

The young warrior stood proudly, almost provocatively. He knew that he had the king's side in this, even if he did not understand why Harold placed such trust in him. It did not matter. He gripped his spear in one hand and looked challengingly around the circle of armoured huscarls, theigns, and Royal Companions who were all so far above his station as a free peasant. He wore no armour himself at that moment as such war-gear made moving quickly and unseen difficult, but he would recover his leather byrnie and shield from his fellows when he returned to the ranks.

“This is not the news we expected,” a voice called out from their ranks.

"Nay, but it is the news I looked for," Harold responded quickly. "Hardrada believes himself unchallenged with the northern eorls defeated. We will prick his arrogance before the day is out. What were the Norse doing when last you looked upon them?"

"Resting mostly. Some carried slight wounds and lay themselves down on the sward. Some cast off their clothes and went to swim in the river. Some opened meal bags and set to eat."

"But they were without armour?"

"Most of them, My Lord, by far and large the greater number wore little more than shirts. There were some, mayhap the King's Companions or veterans, who know better than to trust to wyrd in a foreign land; they wore their armour complete, but they were by far the lesser number of the enemy host."

The warriors murmured amongst themselves but their tone was more positive now. They could see how wyrd had given them the advantages of both surprise and better preparation over their hated enemies.

"You hear the report and we have no reason to doubt it, now hear my plan. We will march quietly to the Derwent, to Stamford Bridge, and take the foe unawares. Once the land can hide our approach no longer we will make the noise of battle. Theign Hestog, you will lead a forward party and take the bridge. Kill all that you come upon."

A great cheer went up at the king's words, accompanied by the rattle of spears on shields.

"Keep your men in good order," Gyrth commanded. "Let none break the line being so foolhardy as to believe this battle won. The huscarls will show how to keep the shield-wall. The fyrd will stay behind it until commanded forward. Give no advantage to the enemy or you will spurn the gift of victory that God now offers us."

"Hestog, go you before us," Harold nodded to his Royal Theign.

Hestog gripped his spear and nodded his obedience back to Harold.

"Men to me," the theign commanded.

He began to walk down the road towards Stamford Bridge and as he marched he was joined by his fyrdmen, their cloaks flapping around them as they jogged to fall in behind their leader, exposing burnished leather byrnies beneath. Brightly coloured shields hung on their left arms and each carried a fighting spear and at least three

throwing spears, the points of which glinted brightly in the morning sunlight. They moved off at a rapid pace.

"And so it begins," Harold said quietly.

He watched the small advance party move away. He wanted to give them time to get into position before he brought the main body of the army to Stamford Bridge. Hestog's band could sneak close to the Viking position but it would be impossible to hide the larger body of the army in the countryside once they neared the village.

"The men are as ready as they ever will be," Gyrth commented quietly to his brother.

"No talk of failure?"

"Truth to tell the speed of our movement has not left time to ponder upon such things. King Alfred's name is mentioned frequently amongst the fyrd alongside yours, I take that as a good sign."

"I have such faith in the sinews of the Saxon arm, the strength of the Saxon spear, and the love of God."

"There was always something about you Harold, something that made men want to follow you. Father gave it to you knowing he lacked the birth to command a kingdom. King Edward saw it in you and grew afraid."

"You see animals in smoke trails."

"Aye, I did, as a boy. That is my skill, to see what others miss in the twisting times we live in. You have always believed that you could be king, Harold. You have always worked to become king."

"If not I then it would be a foreigner sat upon England's throne."

"I think that there is a feeling within this land that our time has come, that we will shake off the scourge of the Vikings and become our own land, our own people. Edward was too weak to harbour such ambitions, but you are not. You have gone with a sword where Edward would have gone with the bitter coin of appeasement. Be now the king you have promised us you would become. Lead these men to battle because they believe that with you at their head then this Saxon army will overcome any enemy!"

"Aye brother. Aye."

Harold swung himself up onto his horse. He glanced around the green countryside of the Vale of York with its undulating hills. Ahead of him the small band that followed Thegn Hestog to the bridge was but a dark blur. To either side the army

fanned out somewhat. Huscarls and theigns mounted on horses, their mail glinting in the sun. Gold decorated swords sheathed at their sides and shields hanging on their backs. More armoured theigns on foot, leaning on tall spears, their cloaks moving slowly in the gentle breeze. Grim faces hidden in the shadow of their helms. Behind them, several more thousand fyrdmen in tunics of heavy weave, or byrnies of toughened leather, all armed with long fighting spears. The army trailed back in the direction of York seemingly countless in number and its' strength moved the king.

He saw the power of these men. He felt their belief in himself as their warlord. There was no better time than this.

"Saxons!" Harold roared the word like a battle cry. They roared back to him. "Saxons, over there," Harold drew his sword and pointed towards Stamford Bridge, "our enemy await. They come to claim that which is not theirs. Your fields, your homes, your womenfolk, your servitude. Will you give them what they ask no leave to take, or will you give them slaughter?!"

"SLAUGHTER!" The word rolled over the countryside like a peal of thunder. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Then follow me."

Harold swung the sword once more towards Stamford Bridge and spurred his horse forward into an easy trot. He wanted to be at the head of the army so that all could see him but he wanted to keep them from surging forward too fast, too eagerly. Their blood was up but he wanted to save the strength in their arms and the breath in their lungs for the moment when they would strike the enemy.

"He makes a pretty speech," Sigbert commented as they followed the advancing column.

"Was it worth leaving Hilda to hear it?" Coenred enquired.

"No. Thee talks like a husband today huscarl," he retorted. Coenred shifted uneasily in his saddle and Sigbert laughed. "She's got under your skin hasn't she?"

"Enough!" Coenred insisted with some colour in his face. Sigbert only laughed again.

Behind them Edwin smiled to himself. He felt warm inside his harness. Coenred had given him a padded jacket many layers thick, something that he said he would thank him for later although right now it only seemed to make him too uncomfortable and that was whilst he rode the horse never mind doing any actual fighting. Over the

jacket he wore a leather byrnie studded with protective metal plates, this too was quite heavy. Fortunately Edwin had been born on a landholding and had been raised to hard manual work. His shoulders were broad, his arms heavy set with muscles, and he found that he could move relatively freely in the harness.

At his side hung a langseax, the one that Coenred had given him on the day of the Battle of Fulford. Although it looked ordinary enough it had a steel edge welded to the iron body and that made it an even more dangerous weapon. He had carefully oiled the blade since receiving it and, in truth, to be seen carrying it filled him with a boyish kind of pride. He had not told Coenred that he had actually had cause to draw the blade in anger, Mildryth had sworn him to silence on that matter. It was clear to even his young eyes that the lady and his master would be together as soon as these times would allow. That would give her authority over him as the mistress of his lord if he continued in Coenred's service. He had no intention of betraying her trust with the prospect of her union to his master lying before them. In fact it seemed to him that his situation was improving with every passing day.

Edwin's helmet was an iron hoop onto which four cross-members were welded, meeting at the top to form a dome. Beneath these a single piece of toughened leather had been formed and attached. Metal plates were fixed to the leather to offer further protection. Edwin happily noted that whilst he lacked the fine equipment of war that the theigns, huscarls, and eorlдерmen wore, he was much better equipped than many of the experienced fyrдmen. His shield hung from the saddle-horn, the painted design very similar to Coenred's being a representation of the golden dragon of Mercia but not as well executed as the huscarl's. Wulfhere the mercenary had not spent too much money on his necessary war-gear.

The youth had had barely four days of training to his name, but they had been intense nonetheless. He had enjoyed every minute of it and regretted not a single drop of blood extracted from him, or an inch of skin bruised by his new comrades' instruction.

He looked up and could see the king riding at the head of the column and he marvelled at his turn in fortunes. Not so long ago he had been a homeless waif, thrown out onto the streets with no one to turn to. He had come very close to offering himself as a bondsman, little better than a slave, to the first theign that he encountered just so as to be able to eat and sleep somewhere safe. Now he had a captain of huscarls for his master and rode with the King of England himself.

What more could a man ask for in this life?

It was of some comfort to Berctuald that he did not actually mind being in the rear of the army as it marched. Ahead of him walked a body fyrdmen and although he felt a kinship with them he was minded that he was also now no longer one of them. Apart from the scamseax he carried no weapon, not even a stave. King Harold was marching relatively light and quickly so there were not many camp followers, a few ruffians who reckoned that they were good in a fight but more than likely they were come hoping to search the fallen for valuables.

He had seen one body of men that had surprised him however. They were fyrdmen, certainly enough, but they carried bows instead of shields and spears, and they marched as a group with a theign leading them. It was as if they were separate from the bulk of the fyrdmen by virtue of their allegiance to the bow and their theign. Berctuald had seen Royal Companions stop to speak with him and they showed every respect to his person. This intrigued Berctuald as he had never seen anything quite like this body of men before in a Saxon army. Archers were not unknown of course; it was just that they normally walked amongst the ranks and not in such a disciplined formation under the command of a single man.

The rest of the army was very familiar to him however, as was the sound and smell of the horses, the thud of many thousands of feet on the packed earthen road, the voices of the men, some jocular, some worried, some serious. Then there was the scrape of wood on leather, and the gentle chink of mail. The unforgettable sounds of warriors on the march. When he had been a weapons-man he had loved this life, even volunteered to be one of his village's fyrdmen and served them constantly until things had suddenly changed for him; the day when he had heard the call from God. Now he loved the reminiscences that came from just being in the company of the fyrd. He looked up into the beautiful blue sky and felt that he was indeed where God wanted him to be today.

"What think you of this battle to come?" Sigbert asked.

Coenred thought for a moment before replying, he could not forget Mildryth's face and the look of concern that had shadowed it when he had told her about him following the king's banner this day.

"I think that King Harold seeks glory but unlike our eorls he will consider before he acts," he finally responded

"All aethelings crave glory," Sigbert agreed, "but will we be better prepared for this fight than we were at Fulford."

"The king has fought before and against harder enemies than Edwin or Morcar had known before they met with the War Wolf. He also has more to lose. I think that he will have a well worked plan and that he will stick to it."

"I hope that we go on the attack and not merely stand our ground; that does not suit me."

"As at Fulford you mean?"

"No, that is not what I mean and you know full well," Sigbert insisted. "At Fulford we were not made up to go on the attack. By the Holy Christ we were not made up to go on the defence either. But here today, we have a goodly number of huscarls and theigns, good men in good battle gear. Even the fyrd look ready for the fight. I tell thee that this is an attacking army if ever I saw one."

"In that we agree and one thing we know, without their armour the Vikings will not be best made up to hold a defensive position."

"Then all the signs are that we'll attack first, it is how I prefer to fight, what say you Thrydwulf?"

"Aye, we fight on the front foot," the huscarl grinned from beneath his heavy steel helmet. "There'll be no Saxons running from the field this day."