

"Let it begin," King Harold said.

He dismounted from his horse and had it sent to the rear of the army. Drawing his sword he took his place in the shield wall alongside his Royal Companions.

The Saxon battle horns roared into the English air once again, a strident echo of those who had blown their challenge at Fulford Gate only five days before. The warriors waited patiently as peal after peal was thrown at their enemy and then, as the horns dropped in volume, they began the rhythmic banging of weapons onto wooden shields.

To this beat the Saxon army began to move up the hill with banners unfurled. The Golden Wyvern of Wessex on a red background. The Fighting Man of King Harold himself, lifted by the forward movement of the army if not by the warm September air itself. All along the line the banners of different regions of the kingdom flew; those of the men of Kent, of East Anglia, of the Southern Saxons, of the East Saxons, banners of individual eorlermen and, close to the king, the banners of Northumbria and Mercia flew together once more. As they moved through the air they were spread out for all to see. They inspired the army as much as such emblems could.

The Saxons came on as always, at a measured step, their shields overlapping to form a solid defence. To Edwin son of Octa, retainer to Coenred the huscarl, this was all new, however. He joined in with the marching beat but found it more difficult than he expected to bang a spear shaft against his shield in time with everyone else whilst marching in step with the warriors around him. The Vikings began to hurl rocks and other debris, and to fire the occasional missiles at the advancing Saxons, along with their customary taunts, all of which seemed to no effect. The missiles bounced harmlessly off their shields and armour. Edwin felt a stone hit his helmet, heard the clang of rock on metal, but it caused no hurt. A fyrdman on his right shoulder commented that he must be lucky to have so thick a head that stones could do it no harm. Edwin could not think of a retort quickly enough and so just laughed. He was gripped by nervous excitement.

Harold let his men advance until they were almost within throwing spear range of the Norsemen. Behind him the captain of the archers raised his sword. The Saxons halted and the Vikings hefted their own shields in order to receive the expected volley of throwing spears. There was another blast of Saxon war-horns.

"Follow my angle."

The captain of the archers instructed his men and they drew back their arrows and raised their bows so that they copied his stance, their arrowheads pointing almost directly up like his sword. The sword fell and four hundred arrows pierced the September sky.

King Harold glanced upwards and saw what looked like a flock of long thin birds flying up towards heaven. Edwin, in his place amongst the fyrd, heard the thrum of the bowstrings too and thought to look to see what this might portend but he was so closely hemmed in that he could barely move. Besides, he had before him, seen through the gaps between the huscarls' helmets, the grim vision of an enemy whose name had been spoken to him as a child to terrify him into obedience. King Harold, was surrounded by a bodyguard of Royal Companions who ensured that he had space to move more freely than others, watched with satisfaction as, unlike the Viking's arrows that came down the hill in ones or twos, the Saxon arrows formed a single mass. They acted almost like a flock of birds, which they so closely resembled to the casual eye, in the way that when they reached the top of their arc, they hung suspended for a moment, and then turned and dived to earth.

"Now!" King Harold commanded and his banner dipped.

All along the Saxon lines a volley of throwing spears was hurled into the shields of the enemy. The dull thud of metal piercing wood reverberated around the battlefield, accompanied by the odd scream of human pain. Quickly the Vikings lowered their shields and attempted to remove the burdensome javelins before another volley could be hurled at them. As they did so the arrows fell with unerring accuracy into the main body of their ranks. So few of the warriors wore any armour that their only defence was their helmets and shields, but they had been looking towards the Saxons below and the arrows came down on them from above. This was a new tactic, one that they had not experienced previously. Bowmen were rarely, if ever, used with such co-ordination. It wrecked a bloody ruin amongst the tightly formed Vikings.

The fall of the arrows was the signal. Harold Godwinson screamed his war cry, echoed by the peals of the war-horns, and the Saxon army dashed forward. There was a tremendous collision of steel and wood and flesh. Edwin screamed his anger with the rest of them and was carried forward with the seething mass of the army. Through the bodies of those in front of him he felt the reverberation of the collision of fighting

men. He was initially crushed when their sudden dash forward came to an equally sudden halt.

The Viking line held.

Immediately the Saxon second line stabbed their fighting spears over-arm, into the ranks of the Vikings. Under normal circumstances they would repeat this act many times before claiming a victim but today their enemy lacked the usual protection afforded to fighting men. Today their flesh was easier to reach and their blood was spilt more quickly. Spears with backwards pointing barbs bit deeply into flesh, dragged warriors out of their line by imbedding into their necks, shoulders, heads or faces. Where a Viking stumbled forward a spear, or an axe, or a sword struck him down. The green summer grass became slippery with the blood of the dead and the dying.

More volleys of arrows followed, but this time the angle of release was not too sharp so that the deadly arrowheads fell further beyond the Saxons but still amongst the Vikings. Some of the Norsemen had started to look for the volleys and to raise their shields in order to receive this frightful rain but that also meant that they could not defend themselves against the throwing spears that still came over the top of the front ranks of the shield-wall and which also proved just as deadly.

The huscarls, the theigns, and the fyrdmen fought with fury, crashing their spears, their swords, their axes into the painted wooden shields of their enemy. In the first encounters those shields held firm but repeated attacks began to weaken them. Wood splintered and then so did bone. The Viking line began to shake and, like hounds scenting their quarry, the Saxons pushed harder and harder, spurred on by the scent of victory. The Vikings were offering a stern defence but it was clear that in this encounter it was the Saxons themselves who were the more ferocious, the more dangerous, and the more determined. Desperation began to motivate the efforts of the Norsemen as they were forced back from the lip of the hill step by step. Every warrior that fell weakened their lines of resistance. Every foot lost saw the advantage of the position held by the Vikings weaken also.

King Harald Hardrada II of Norway had stood towards the rear of his men trying to see how the battle was developing. He could not bring himself to admit that the appearance of the Saxon army had taken him totally by surprise. He had been out-maneuvred by an enemy for the first time in his long career as a war-chief. Worse still, he had not been able to find an answer for the predicament that they now found

themselves in. It galled him that Tostig the Saxon had been right on several counts. The Saxons weight of arms was too great, they should have fallen back closer to Riccall and summoned the reserves to them there. Leaving the heavy armour behind had been a mistake also. His men were fighting but they were almost totally unprotected. Whereas the Viking spear-points hit byrnies of mail, helms of steel, and shields of thick linden wood, the Saxons seemed to be unerring in finding flesh to cut. It did not take a great ability as a leader of men to see that the nerve of his warriors was breaking. And this new idea of firing arrows up into the sky instead of directly at a target did not help either; the men knew not where to look to find where their danger was coming from next.

Hardrada glanced at his bodyguard around him, some already injured by those cursed arrow volleys, and grunted his order to advance. There was a time when a leader of men had indeed to be a leader in the true sense of the word. His scarlet raven banner moved forward as the king stalked towards the heaving lines of fighting men. He let out a roar and raised his axe in two hands. Standing head and shoulders above most men he made a formidable sight. The rear ranks made way for him as he and his trusted companions, the only sizeable body of Vikings wearing armour, pushed their way forward.

When the King of the Vikings struck the front line of the Saxons it was with terrible power. He purposefully overreached his first downward stroke so that his axe sailed beyond the rim of the huscarl's shield who stood before him and split the man's helmet in two instead. The warrior crumpled, dead before his body reached the ground. With a surge Hardrada and his men pushed forward into the small breach that he had made so quickly.

Spears hit his mail byrnies and glanced off it or were shattered by the swing of his axe. For this moment Harald Hardrada was alive with an intensity that he had not felt since his youth. He was killing men with his own hand. He was in the thick of the battle were a true Viking belonged. He was King Harald Hardrada and he screamed his defiance at his enemy who fell before him like wheat before a sickle.

Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex and King of England, stood in the third row of the Saxon line with his banners behind him, each held by a huscarl of renown. He wore the best armour that money could buy, his helmet decorated with silver and

gold. His sword was equally resplendent and shone like lightening in the morning sun when he moved it, but it was not yet stained with the blood of his enemies.

It was not meet that the King of England should place himself within reach of the Viking spear-points. Inside Harold chafed at this restriction on his royal person; he was a warrior. He had fought many times before, at the command of his father, Eorl Godwin, at the command of his king; Edward. He had fought as the Eorl of Wessex to protect his people. Today he was not expected to fight but to lead.

There had been times since the death of King Edward in January when he had doubted the reasoning behind his family's quest for the crown. That life as a monarch left him with very little freedom was no surprise, it was much the same as an eorl derman, only the area of his governance, like his authority, was that much greater, but the demands were greater as well. The single most important demand upon him today was that he did not die.

Harold consoled himself with trying to see how the battle progressed but this was difficult because the high ground was before them. His bodyguard ensured that he had enough space in which to move within the immediate area where he stood but there was no opportunity to go beyond that limited location. As it seemed that he could no longer influence the battle itself he wished to step forward, to take his rightful place as an eorl derman in the front row, and spite the weapons of the Norse. This he could not do. He was an aetheling now, one of the royal family; the head of the House of Wessex. The King of England was reduced to the role of spectator as brave men all around him hazarded their life's blood for his cause; for his crown.

If Harold could see the King of Norway cleaving the front ranks of the Saxon shied-wall with his keen Dane-axe then he might have abandoned the wisdom of his age and sought out that giant king to settle the argument man to man, but even as a spectator the King of England could not see everything. To excise his frustration Harold exhorted the men around him to greater efforts. He called out their names to encourage them and he seemed to know everyone who stood before him. He praised them for a telling stroke, warned them if an audacious Viking threatened them with a long reaching spear; he promised them the earth. In the end all he could do was trust them. His success depended upon the strength in their arms, the reach of their spears, and the stalwart stubbornness of the Saxon before his hated enemy.

"Break ranks." The captain of the archers ordered.

The lines of Saxons and Vikings were now too close together to make the placed firing of arrows by their formation effective; they were in danger of hitting their own men in the front ranks. It was time to resort to the old method. The archers lowered their bows and trotted forward. They would look now for individual targets at a closer range and rely upon their own marksmanship to carry an arrow home. Because the Vikings were still at the top of the higher ground and the Saxons pressing to crest the ridge the archers had plenty of targets to aim at over the heads of their comrades, and some targets were bigger than others.

"HAROLD THE USURPER!"

Hardrada roared his challenge again and again in rage as his great axe cleaved the air around him. Despite the press of the armoured Viking bodyguard, and the great damage that the king's axe had done, the Saxons would not give ground. A wall of bodies had formed before them and the furious King could not get past it. Blood ran down his arms and face where wounds had been inflicted but he fought on regardless underneath his infamous banner, Land Ravager.

"FIGHT ME HAROLD!" the King of Norway demanded, looking for the banner of the English King amongst the confusion and struggle going on around him. He saw the fabled fighting man banner off to his left and knew that that was where he would find the King of the Saxons. He turned to shout his challenge in that direction "HARO-"

Hardrada's roar was stopped even as the veins became distended in this powerful neck in anticipation of the bellow just started, his face already having turned a deep red from the exertion. What neither spear nor sword nor Saxon axe had yet been able to do a single arrow accomplished with a barely discernible thud as it slipped under his bearded chin. The arrowhead had flown up the hill from the rear of the Saxon army, over the heads of the fighting warriors, and pierced the king's windpipe and severed the vertebrae in his neck. The giant's legs gave way and he fell backwards onto his own bodyguard behind him. If it had not been for the barrier formed by the bodies of the Viking King's victims the Saxon warriors who had recoiled before him would now have charged forward and trampled over his body. Not knowing whether their king was yet alive and only wounded his bodyguard roughly pulled him away whilst others took up his place and repaired the breach in the shield-wall.

Harald Hardrada was manhandled unceremoniously away from the front ranks but the faces of the bodyguards betrayed the certainty of their conviction; their king was dead. The truth was whispered from one warrior to the next and with dismal speed it was quickly known by both armies. The Vikings fell back a pace or two but the Saxons did not advance. By a strange unspoken agreement the fighting ceased.

A king was dead!

"We have won!" Osfrid exulted and he was not alone in this belief.

"Not yet," King Harold corrected him.

An unexpected calm had descended upon the battlefield now and Harold decided to use the moment to confirm the resolve of their enemies. He cupped a leather gauntlet covered hand to his mouth and shouted to the Vikings.

"Norsemen, your king lies dead. You have done what courage and loyalty demands of a warrior. Surrender the field. Take your king, your dead, your wounded and return to Norway. Harold Godwinson, King of England, offers you an honourable peace. What say you?"

Murmurings arose amongst the Vikings and it seemed that their resolve had indeed been broken but then a single voice spoke clearly for them all to hear.

"A king and a warrior as mighty as Harald Hardrada cannot have defeat to a Saxon army as his final legacy." Enthusiastic but not convincing shouts of support followed these words from the Viking ranks. "He was a hero greater than any before him and long will his saga be sung!"

The Vikings became noisier in their support to this vocal defiance.

"Tostig!" King Harold spat. "Listen, brave Norsemen. This offer will be made only once. Take your dead king home and bury him according to your ways. Make no more widows on this field today. This battle has turned against you."

"I WILL NOT YIELD!" Tostig answered with a bellow.

As he spoke the King of Norway's banner, the great red triangle of cloth with the black raven, was raised once more. Tostig held it himself, gripping the pine pole in his left hand and his sword in his right. Norse warriors looked upon him in his battle harness, his grim visage, his unflinching stance, and they were moved by one that previously many had seen only as an outsider and derided accordingly.

"It comes to something when a Saxon shows me how to be a Viking," a Norseman grunted.

As if to illustrate his point he walked over to where Tostig Godwinson stood with the dead king's banner and turned to face his enemy. He raised both his shield and his axe into the air.

"I WILL NOT YIELD!"

It became a liturgy taken up by all the men that had once been commanded by Harald Hardrada II of Norway and who now acknowledged Tostig Godwinson, the exiled brother of the King of the Saxons, as their new leader.

"Why do they wish to fight further?" Edwin asked.

"Because that is their way," Sigbert answered simply.

"More than that I think," Coenred added. "Tostig came back from exile to wreck his revenge on King Harold, he has nothing to return to should he leave these shores in defeat. He will die a stranger abroad like their elder brother Sweyn and as little loved."

"So many men will die for that?" Edwin puzzled.

"So many men have died for less," Coenred told him.

"Usually men like us as well," Sigbert observed.

Berctuald took the opportunity of the break in the fighting to glance over the battlefield once again. He was still stationed on the north bank where he had organised a group of boys and young men to act as helpers, retrieving wounded men from where they lay amongst the Saxon ranks. He had been tending them as best as he could with prayers and herbal remedies, sewing up wounds with animal gut and a bone needle, staunching blood flow with wads of clean cloth as a compress. He could see now that he was needed more urgently on the south bank where the number of fallen was too great for the boys to carry across the wooden bridge. That construction inspired no confidence in him as to its' ability to transport him safely over to the other side, but he felt that he must make the journey to be where the greatest number of fallen lay.

Quickly he gave instructions to one of the brighter lads, telling him to administer only sips of weak beer or water, tying off the wounds to limbs, and pressing bandages

onto those wounds with free flowing blood. Most importantly he wanted none of the warriors to die alone; someone must be with them always.

With instructions given Berctuald set off across the bridge and started wandering through the disturbing number of casualties that had already fallen out of the Saxon ranks; they numbered several hundred of such and they were only those that still lived, many more were already dead.

"They mean to fight then," Osfrid commented unnecessarily.

"I would avoid it. We cannot afford to lose too many more good men," King Harold told him, "and more men will die before their stubborn resistance and for what? For the twisted pride of my soured brother. It comes to this that the lives of so many mean far less to him than the settlement of his bitter feud with me alone, and a false feud at that. I would have called him back from exile when I was made king, if only he had waited. He calls me rash but it is his own impetuosity that has condemned so many to die."

"Then we must do what must be done and better it is that we don't waste our fighting breath on discussing what may or may not have been. This battle is all that there is and the sooner we win it the sooner good Saxons will be spared the edge of a Dane-axe," Osfrid urged his king.

"You're no philosopher my friend, but you are a great killer of men," Harold replied. He cupped his hand to his mouth again and shouted against the loud vocal disdain of the Vikings.

"SO BE IT. NO QUARTER ASKED, NO QUARTER GIVEN!"