

The City of York

Ealdred, Archbishop of York, stood next to High-Theign Aethelwine on top of a cart that had been placed as a kind of dais just before the entrance to the great mead hall. A cloth had been spread over the bare boards to make the platform look less makeshift. People were gathered around it, all of them eager to see the king and any other of the notable personages that now inhabited their city.

“He comes hither,” Aethelwine declared gruffly.

They watched as the horsemen approached. The king’s banners had been unfurled as a signal of his victory and the townsfolk closer to his passing were cheering. Some ran behind the front ranks of the crowd that lined the street, trying to keep up with the royal procession. After several days of subjugation and fear the City of York was now full of smiling laughter, happiness, and joyous activity.

From his horse Harold Godwinson could see the small reception party but he never once failed to pay attention to the crowd around him. His marriage to Ealdgyth of Mercia had not, mayhap, delivered the return he had hoped for through the friendship of Edwin and Morcar, but this success in battle may yet prove just as useful. He still needed the eorls but it would not hurt for them to know that the people of Northumbria were grateful to the King of all the Saxons for their rescue from the Norwegians. A feat that Edwin and Morcar had singularly failed to accomplish.

“My Lord Archbishop, what do you in York, I last heard of you in Durham?” Harold called out when he had neared the great hall.

“My Lord King, I came expecting to see the Vikings holding this fair city, hoping to win some relief for the people as a man of God, but my efforts were not needed. I arrived too late to bless you before you went to meet old Hardrada at Stamford Bridge, so I waited to bless you upon your return,” Ealdred answered, having to raise his voice over the noise of the crowd.

“My Lord, the city is ready to receive you,” Aethelwine added. “You have won a great victory this day.”

“Say not ‘I’ but ‘we’,” Harold urged them with a smile. He brought his horse alongside the cart and dismounted onto the platform. He bowed courteously to Ealdred who blessed him with the sign of the cross. He raised his voice again and turned to the crowd. “For this is not my victory but all of ours.”

The people cheered and surged forward towards the three men. Members of the Royal Companions worked hard to force a passage from the cart to the doors of the hall.

“People of York, you were defeated by Hardrada of Norway, but not conquered by him; your spirit would not allow for that. He now lies dead on the ground; his legend ends here in the Vale of York. What is left of his power sails away, never to touch these shores again.” A great cheer met these words of victory. “We will hold a great feast in the days to come to commemorate the deeds of brave Saxon warriors on the field of battle that I witnessed today, it will be at my expense and you are all welcome as guests to join us.”

Predictably this brought an even greater cheer from the crowd. Even Aethelwine managed a grin, but then that might in part have been in response to Harold’s declaration that he would fund the feast himself and not claim on his theign’s hospitality.

Harold waved again to the crowd and then jumped down from the cart with an easy agility. Aethelwine followed his example. Ealdred was too old for such acts, and too mindful of his office as an archbishop. He stepped carefully onto an up ended barrel and steadied himself with the proffered hand of one of his priests as he descended to the ground.

Inside the hall had been transformed. Aethelwine’s people had scrubbed and cleaned the place to rid it of any vestige of its’ recent inhabitants. There was no sign of the blood that had been spilt in ridding the hall of the Norsemen. Fresh straw had been scattered over the floorboards, the fire burnt brightly in the hearth and all the lamps were lit, making it a much more welcoming place. Royal Companions manned the door to keep out the more enthusiastically curious of the townsfolk. From this moment onwards the hall would be the court of the King of England.

“I would talk with you, My Lord Archbishop,” Harold said as he moved into the hall. When he stopped walking a number of his household servants appeared and began to remove his armour. Harold continued to speak as if nothing untoward was happening. “Have you seen anything of Edwin and Morcar?”

“I have, My Lord,” Ealdred admitted. “I met them on the road to Durham as I came south in response to the news that they had sent me.”

“These words saddens me,” Harold replied with a serious expression. “It seems that all my designs come to naught in that direction.”

“Indeed. In their defence I will only claim their youth; they still have much to learn about the world.”

“If their insufferable pride will allow it of them,” Harold countered a little angrily. “All they had to do was hold the city; there was no need for them to take the field against Hardrada.”

“I think that you will find many people are in agreement with you there, My Lord, but what is done is done. You have won a great victory.”

“At a dear price.” His armour removed Harold took up a flagon of weak beer and quenched his thirst. “Too many of our countrymen lay still upon the field of Stamford Bridge. The resistance of the Vikings was formidable and the stubbornness of my brother Tostig even more so. We need time now for the wounded to heal and our numbers to grow again.”

“You have more men in London.”

“I left London with barely a sufficient guard, the harvest demanded that the fyrd be disbanded or else there would not be enough food to see the people through winter. If Guillaume were to cross now there would be nothing to hinder him.”

“But the weather.”

“The weather, like everything else in this world, changes. I would rather have not fought this battle today; we have lost too many good men.”

“That alone is saddening,” Ealdred admitted, “I think, however, that your achievements may yet outshine your doubts.”

“If Guillaume gets news of today it will not deter him from crossing the whale-road to bring fire and steel to our shores. Like Hardrada he is a gambler.”

“I was thinking rather with your own countrymen. The Saxons like a war-chief who is victorious and you are, mayhap, the most victorious since the time of King Alfred. Spread the news of your battle and many more will come to your standard. You may yet prove capable of fielding a power strong enough to cast this Norman duke back into the sea, even as he steps off the boards of his ship.”

Harold grinned as he took in the clergyman’s words.

“I will get Half-foot to write it out several times and have it spread throughout the country,” he enthused, “but time for such matters later. I am wearied, hungry, and thirsty; time now for more simple pleasures eh?”

“As you command, My Lord, although I have duties of a more spiritual nature to tend to. The people need the church this day in consideration of all the harm that has been visited upon them. I have my office to tend to.”

“But you will come to the feast to remember both the fallen and the victorious?” Harold asked with a genuine interest in the priest’s answer.

“Of course, My Lord, it will be an opportunity not just for the eorl dermen to come together but to be seen by the people to be together. It is also meet that we celebrate this deliverance that God has brought us through your quick thinking, and to remember the brave dead who have now left our hall.”

“You speak truly friend.”