

The Danish Capture of York

“Anno DCCCLXVII. Her for se here of East-Englum ofer Humbre mupan to Eoforwicceastre on Norphymbre and þær was micel ungeþuærnes þære þeode betweox him selfum, and hie hæfdun hiera cyning aworpenne Osbryht and ungecyndne cyning underfengen Ællan. And hie late on genre to þam gecirdon, þæt hie wiþ þone here winnende wærun; and þeah micle fired gegadrodon and þone here sohton æt Eoforwicceastre and on þa ceastre bræcon and hie sume inne wurdon. And þær wæs ungemetlic wæl geslægen Norþanhymbra, sume binnan, sume butan, and þa cyningas begen ofslægene, and sio laf wiþ þone here friþ nam.”

“In this year went this (Danish) army from East Anglia across Humber mouth to York-caster in Northumbria, and there was great strife in that people between themselves, and they had thrown out their king Osbryht and had taken a low-born king, Ælla. And it was late in the year that they (the two kings) agreed on this, that they should fight back against the (Danish) army, and nevertheless they gathered a great army led sought out the (Danish) army at York-caster and attacked the city and some of them got inside. And there was untold slaughter done upon the Northumbrians there, some inside, some outside, and the kings were both slain, and the remnant made peace with the (Danish) army.”

So the fall of York to the Danes in 866 (Annal for 867) and the abortive English attempt to recapture it are narrated in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

The fact that the chroniclers say nothing of the resistance to a Viking assault one might have expected from the Anglian citizens of York does not necessarily mean that the invaders received a warm welcome. The Danes were feared as barbarians and loathed as heathens by the English. Their invasion of England, heralded by the horrifying sack of the holy island of Lindisfarne in 793, was seen by some as a punishment ordained by God upon the sins of the English. Alcuin, in a letter of 793 to Ethelred king of Northumbria, recalls an ominous portent: in Lent, from a clear sky, a shower of blood had been seen to fall from the north side of the roof of York minister. ‘Can it not be expected that from out of the north

there will come upon our nation a retribution of blood, which can be seen to have started with this attack?' He catalogues the sins of the kings and the people - fornication, adultery, incest, avarice, robbery, violent judgments, luxurious living. The rich lack compassion, charity and brotherly love, and exult in wealth like Dives, whilst Lazarus dies of hunger at the gate. 'For sins of this kind kings have lost kingdoms had people their country' he warns. And in a letter to Eardwulf - who had succeeded to the expelled king Osbald who had succeeded to the murdered king Ethelred - Alcuin, three years after the sack of Lindisfarne, links the Danish gains with Northumbrian political instability. *'Never would so much blood if nobles aid rulers be shed in this nation, and never void heathen thus devastate the holy places nor so much injustice and arrogance prevail amongst the people, if the manifest vengeance of God did not threaten the inhabitants of this land.'*

But for all his warnings, the struggles for power, the murder and expulsion of kings, continue to mar the pages of the Chronicles for generations ahead.

The strife of Osbryht and the low-born Ælla, the inability of the leaders to fend off the Danish assault or to recapture the city once lost, these were only the latest of Northumbria's chronic internal political upheavals.

York was then the capital city of Deira (which, together with Bernicia further north, formed the kingdom of Northumbria), so whilst its fall was a disaster to the English, for the Danish Vikings its conquest was a triumph. A period of Danish colonisation of the North began which was to make an ineradicable impression upon the English way of life, the English language, the English landscape itself.

Small wonder the event was remembered in legend as well as in history, and by Scandinavian as well as English writers. From all the sources an account of the Danish capture of York can be assembled which is far more curious and dramatic than the terse chronicle entry. In it, though, fancy is well mixed with fact in a way typical of the age when written records were few and memories of this kind were handed down orally, valued as much for entertainment as for history, and certainly not subject to those standards of

scientific accuracy which modern historians require.

In 845, perhaps, begins the strange chain of events which, according to tradition, led up to the fall of York. That year Paris has besieged by one of the many Viking bands roaming Western Europe. The emperor Charles the Bald did as other kings had already done, and as deny were to do again over the next century and a half - he paid them treasure to go away. Continental records mention the name of the Danish leader making his only certain historical appearance at this time. It was Ragnar. Legend too tells of a Danish Viking called Ragnar, a king in Denmark and son of the Swedish king Sigurd Ring. This legendary Ragnar, whom scholars identify with Ragnar of history, is mentioned in the *Gesta Danorum* (Deeds of the Danes) written in Latin in the early acts century by the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus; and his adventures - and those of his remarkable brood of sons - are told in the medieval *Icelandic Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok and His Sons*. Ragnar took has nickname Lothbrok ('Hairy-breeches') from a special suit he had made from a shaggy material, boiled in pitch and roiled in sand, as protection against a dragon he had to face.

So renowned did his sons become as they grew to manhood that Ragnar felt himself obliged to undertake one final splendid exploit to assure his fame. In the absence of his sons, and against the good advice of his wife, he resolved to build two huge ships and sail to England to make war and take rich plunder. His wife, taking a prophetically sad farewell, gave him a charmed suit to wear. Off England, both ships were wrecked by storms; but Ragnar and his army managed to land, and set out upon their devastating career.

There was a king in England called Ælla - whom the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* names as the lovelorn usurper king of Northumbria in York - and he resolved to meet Ragnar in battle. He ordered his men to seek out this notorious Dane and take him alive, for Ælla was curious to see him. Conspicuous in the fighting was a man wearing no armour and yet remaining uninjured. Him Ælla's men at last entrapped between shields and brought before Ælla. When he refused to say who he was, Ælla had him put into a pit full of snakes in the hope of terrifying his name out of him. But the snakes did not seem to worry him and still he would not speak. Then Ælla, learning of the man's imperviousness to weapons, ordered

the clothes to be stripped from him. Even as the snakes slithered over him and bit him Ragnar would not reveal his identity, but with his dying breath he made the cryptic prophecy which boded ill for Northumbria and for York: *'If they knew what the boar suffered, the porkers would grunt!'*

Ælla, convinced too late that he had captured - and killed - the great king Ragnar Lothbrok, sent messengers to inform Ragnar's sons - the porkers - of their father's death. All the sons took the news hard, but it was Ivar, called 'the toneless Boneless' because he was born with gristle instead of bones, who proved the most devious and relentless in revenge. When his brothers had tried force of arms and failed, Ivar negotiated with Ælla for compensation, and was granted as much English land as he could get in the space of an oxhide. He cut a hide into a thread and enclosed so much land he was able to build the city of London within it. Then he wooed the people away from Ælla and when the time was ripe he invited his brothers to come over with their armies. At last Ælla was defeated and captured. Ivar advised that he should be put to death, and in a way matching the cruelty he had shown their father. So they took Ælla and carved the blood-eagle in his back: that is, they cut his ribs from his spine and pulled them outwards, finally tearing out the lungs. Ivar was thereafter king in Ælla's stead.

The legend gives no firm dates for these events, but the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in 865 'a great heathen army' came into England, passed the winter in East Anglia, where Danes already settled supplied them with horses, and in the autumn of the following year crossed the Humber to York. The medieval historians Simeon of Durham (12th c.) and Roger of Wendover (13th c.) say it was on All Saints' Day 866 that York fell to the Danes, and on March 21 or Palm Sunday (March 23) that the opal English made their disastrous attempt to retake the city. (The year changed in March at that time, hence the chroniclers' statement that it was late in the same year as the fall that the English kings agreed to try the recapture). One text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* names one of the leaders of this great army as Ingware; and the 10th century Anglo-Saxon monk Æthelweard, in his *Chronicle*, names the leader of the York attack as Igwar. Most likely this Igwar or Ingware is to be identified with Ivar of the legend, son of Ragnar Lothbrok. If so, then the great heathen

army may well in reality have come upon that terrible mission of revenge predicted by the dying Ragnar, who himself may well in reality have met his end at the hands of the historical king Ælla in York.

The grunting of the porkers - if that is indeed what this great invasion was - certainly proved for the English an appalling experience. It was this same army which, after an abortive attempt to seize the kingdom of Mercia, returned into East Anglia and brutally murdered the king, Edmund who was subsequently canonised. Thereafter they overran the entire kingdom, says the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and destroyed all the monasteries to which they came. From there they rode into lesser and built a fort by Reading from which they harried the kingdom, then ruled by Æthelred, elder brother of Alfred. Not until Alfred became king did England find a leader capable of containing the Danes, and then only after the English kingdoms had been brought to their knees and - at the lowest ebb of their fortunes when Alfred was forced to retreat into the Somerset marshes in the winter of 878/9 - brought to the very edge of total extinction. In the North, though the royal house of Wessex retained a nominal overlordship, the Danes held power after the fall of York. At first they installed an English puppet-king but after ten years the Danes themselves, fed by halfway, a brother of Ivar, shared out the lands of Northumbria and set about ploughing and making their livelihood out of farming there. So began the colonisation and the direct Scandinavian rule of York and Northumbria which lasted until the expulsion from the city of the last Scandinavian king, the Norwegian Erik Bloodaxe, in 954.

The popular Danish historian Palle Lauring tells in his book *A History of the Kingdom of Denmark* (Copenhagen 1960) of a Danish farmer back from a trip to England who said: 'They've pinched all our old village names - they just don't know how to pronounce them!' - a striking comment on the density of the Danish settlement. More than 2,000 English place names, he remarks, are of Scandinavian - mostly Danish - origin. Such names are especially familiar in Yorkshire where the agricultural landscape owes much to the Scandinavian settlers and in the city of York itself where the very street names recall the Scandinavian presence. Documentary records of the Danish conquest and occupation of York are nevertheless scanty, and the history of the city and of Deira during this period remains

among the most obscure areas of Anglo-Saxon history. Archaeology offers the best hope of further enlightenment, as recent excavations have begun to show.

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