**Tore Skeie. *The Battle of the North***

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**[pp. 55–56] The Immense Raving Army**

The long-expected Danish army was organized in several large fleets, each sailing alone. They followed the coast westward from Denmark, approaching England from the south. The first group of ships slid cautiously past the beaches and rocks of Kent, past the strait where Æthelred’s fleet had lain at anchor, to the small island of Thanet, which lay just outside of Sandwich. There they disembarked.

This island was the Danish army’s rendezvous. It was close enough to land that it was possible to keep watch on the mainland with the naked eye, without having to fear ambushes or surprise attacks. The inhabitants of the island were few, and most of them lived in a small village next to an old monastery. Perhaps they’d already fled. In any case, the first Danish warriors met no resistance when they anchored their ships, disembarked and built a provisional camp.

The other groups of ships followed. The fleets were composed of different kinds of vessels. Some of them were short and broad, fifteen or twenty metres in length, with a crew of only about twenty rowing warriors. There were also much larger, narrower, faster longships, propelled by around 60 men or more who rowed in tandem. The largest ones had their own smaller boats in tow or flipped over on top of the cargo. In addition, there were larger, broader transport ships with a smaller crew. The different parts of the fleet gathered, just as Æthelred’s fleet had done on the other side of the strait a few days or weeks previous. Together, it was larger than any Danish army that had landed in England in over 100 years. Anglo-Saxon chroniclers gave them many different names: “a new, immense Danish army,” “the immense plundering army,” “the immense horde.”

At the beginning of August 1009, the Danes departed from their camp on Thanet and rowed over the narrow strait separating them from the mainland. The large ships were anchored in the bay. The smaller, lighter vessels were pulled right onto the undefended sandy shore. Thousands of men with long spears and large, round shields painted in vibrant colours waded ashore, group by group, until something like 10,000 soldiers crowded the shore and the small town, whose inhabitants had to have fled at this point. Banners, weapons, tents, tools and other equipment were carried on shore. Having no horses or wagons, the Danes had to haul the equipment on their backs and over their shoulders.

The soldiers were gathered into units by their commanders together with men from the same ship. Scouts were sent further inland to keep watch for the enemy. This was a strictly ordered and highly effective combat force, ready to lead a disciplined battle, build camps, distribute food to its soldiers and move as a unit across land and over the water, with a speed that stymied its adversaries.

**[pp. 67–69, 70–71] The Warrior Culture and the Meaning of Silver**

Who was this young king, whose formative years were spent among warriors on long sea voyages to distant shores?

Olaf was a Norse king in a society where a king’s duty was, above all else, to lead his men to victory with sword in hand and divide up the spoils of war. For a king and his troops, war was not an exceptional situation, but more like a state of nature, a completely normal part of the world and human life, something that came and went much like the weather and the seasons of the year.

Frankish and Anglo-Saxon princes also waged plunder and systematically enriched themselves on their neighbour’s wealth, but never on the same scale as the raiders from the Nordic countries. In the previous 200 years, the successful Viking commanders who’d returned home had had far-reaching impacts on the structures of power in the North. A Viking king was not dependent on the structures of the old agrarian society for his dominance, for his power derived from the portable riches obtained through plunder and tribute. He used silver and gold to reward a continually expanding group of loyal warriors. This dynamic of violence led to the growth of a political system in which waging war—either in foreign lands or within Scandinavia—was not only lucrative, but also imperative to establishing and maintaining power and influence. The number of men with war as their vocation was far greater than before the Viking Age. The honour, fame and riches gained from a successful campaign of plunder caused them to flock around those commanders who led the best battle and paid the best wages. A successful leader could count on recruiting ever more men who could help in even more honourable and gainful raids. The honour belonged to everyone, from the king on down to the lowliest foot soldier. It provided social capital, renown and connections with others. Kings and earls were measured according to their abilities on the battlefield and their ability to reap the fruits of battle. For them, what mattered was ensuring their warriors’ fight was directed outward to the enemy rather than within the ranks—either way, they were bound to fight.

Around Olaf, as around every king, there was a *hird* of sworn men—a retinue of grandees and advisors, kinsmen and friends, whose names are forgotten to history. All of them had their own network of kinsmen and friends. Their success and progress hinged upon that of Olaf, the outward face and representative of a group with branches in the north, south, east and west. There was no nuclear family, no nation; belonging and community existed within the collectives around lords, in which household warriors, serfs and servants were considered almost the children of that lord.

The retinue around Norse kings took the form of closely interconnected brotherhoods and small, insular communities, and were based on simple, but strong mutual ties between the lord and his men. The men swore by the sword to fight and die if necessary for the lord, and to avenge him if he was killed. In return the lord gave them “gifts”, that is, he distributed plundered goods in the form of money, art objects, valuable clothes, weapons, horses, ships, slaves, domestic animals and gold and silver rings. Viking leaders are often called “ring-givers” in the skaldic tradition.

The warriors did not refer to themselves as Vikings, a Norse word of uncertain origin, which in Olaf’s day seems to have been used primarily to mean opponents or enemies, whether Norse, Frankish, English or otherwise. They used other words, such as *liðsmenn* (soldiers) or *skiparar* (sailors). Young men who went to war under the same lord were designated with their own word, *drengir*. The inner circle of fanatically loyal selected *hird* warriors around the lord—many of them likely his kinsmen who’d grown up together with him—were called *húskarlar*, men who slept under the same roof as their lord. On some *bauta* stones raised for Vikings who’d returned home in Sweden, the men who travelled to war in the same boat are referred to by a word that looks more familiar to us: *bróðir*.

Among them there must have been people who had responsibility for rations, provisions and cooking, musicians who played lyre harps and flutes, specialists who could manoeuvre the ships in the open sea, veterans from previous raids who knew how long it took to sail here and move across the land there, people who could speak foreign tongues, and advisors who knew when it was wise to stand and fight and when it was best to retreat to fight another day.

The ties of loyalty could be extremely strong. The men lived together in the ships’ cramped and intimate quarters for months, even years, eating together, sleeping together, like big families. The sense of community was celebrated and reinforced with lavish consumption and wild feasts on the lord’s expense. A complex set of rules governed the fair division of the spoils. Betrayal of the group led to a merciless collective punishment.

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Norse kings were well-known for their peculiar banners, which they called “ravens,” presumably because the banners were painted or embroidered with motifs of ravens, or possibly because the banners themselves were shaped as ravens. The raven, the eagle, and the wolf were the three mystical beasts of war. The three also turn up in Anglo-Saxon battle poetry, but as grim reminders of the horrors of war, existing mainly to conjure up horrible images of battlegrounds littered with corpses and carrion birds. In Norse lore, on the other hand, the animals were used to glorify and celebrate the conquering warrior, who satisfies the wolf’s thirst for blood and satiates raven’s and the eagle’s appetite for carrion. About Olaf, the skalds sang that he ensured “the eagle got his fill of blood, and the she-wolf her repast from the corpses” and that “he who aims for honour, coloured the she-wolf’s teeth red with blood”.

Since time immemorial, soldiers have evaded responsibility by dehumanizing the enemy and comparing him to an animal. The Norse warrior culture is among few known examples of the opposite, of cultures that have dehumanized themselves, given themselves over to their beastly nature by becoming carnivorous beasts and likening their enemies to prey.

There are also traces of Norse warriors who went even further in their search for inspiration from the world of animals. From Norse sources and contemporary accounts from Byzantine eyewitnesses, we get a picture of the Viking warriors that is reminiscent of the descriptions European settlers in the Americas would give of the Cheyennes' dog soldiers and the Aztecs’ Jaguar and Eagle warriors. The later Berserkers, who would give rise to so many myths, and whose name loosely translates as “shirt only”, were likely specially designated warriors who imitated animals by fighting without armour. “*Úlfhéðnar*” were men who fought with ecstatic energy in wolf-skin coats.

The cultivation of warrior abilities went hand in hand with a strong admiration for athletic and intellectual skills. “I master eight abilities”, goes a skaldic song that sums up the classic virtues of the old Norse world: “I can forge words in rhyme; I ride swiftly on a horse’s back; many times have I swam in races; I can glide nimbly on skis; I know how to shoot and row; I value the skilled harpist and poet.” It was also a vain culture. Bodily purity was held in high regard and you flouted your wealth with ostentatious clothes, capes sewn with exclusive materials and resplendent silver jewellery. One generation before the birth of Olaf, an Arab visitor to Hedeby, south of Jutland, reported that both men and women painted their faces around the eyes.

**[pp. 79–81] Conditions in Europe around the Year 1000**

The age of Olaf is today considered a major turning point in European history. Around the year 1000, growth and development were dawning after centuries of stagnation in Western civilisation. The Vikings in the north were about to be converted to Christianity. The expanding Moors in the south no longer went marauding through the Pyrenees. The Magyars, nomadic Hungarian tribes who had caused such chaos in Eastern Europe, had settled to become farmers.

Freed from the foreign invasions that had disrupted and reversed social development since late antiquity, Europe’s population would expand in the centuries to come, generation by generation. Cities would blossom and flourish. With the exception of some interruptions and setbacks, this growth would last, and it would make Europe into the world’s richest continent, home to the world’s leading powers, the centre of the world.

For those who lived in Olaf’s time, however, the signs of change were almost impossible to detect. At the start of the 1000’s, large parts of the European continent were covered by forests and wilderness. Europe’s population was barely more than a tenth what it is now, and much smaller than it had been a thousand years previous.

Compared with Byzantium or Cordova, the Western Christianity that Olaf and his people exploited so ruthlessly appears poor, rustic and fairly primitive. This was a world of wealthy monasteries and poor farmers, scrawny women and men who shovelled and hoed, lifted and carried, of oxen that pulled heavy yokes up twisting paths, wandering shepherds with their flocks of sheep. Here and there a settlement, a church or a stone fortress, around it plots of land, small gardens and thorn hedges, a few dozen huts that housed weavers, smiths, slaves and craftsmen.

The remains of the gone-but-never-forgotten Roman Empire were visible in stone structures that had been converted into churches and fortresses, a smithy in an old archway here, a shepherd’s haunts under the remains of a bridge there. The Empire’s old lines of power could still be glimpsed in the overgrown remains of stone paths that connected the cities to one another, and its infrastructure lived on in Europe’s most wide-ranging and sophisticated organisation: the Roman Catholic Church’s network of dioceses that linked Western Christianity together by means of its Latin scholars and its religious ceremonies. The ruins of the extravagant Roman constructions confirmed the church’s doctrine that the golden age of history was past, and creation was nearing its end.

Almost everyone was a farmer, and they toiled in an existence that, from our vantage point, seems oppressive and hopeless. Ploughs were primitive wooden constructions pulled by scrawny oxen. They could only scrape shallow furrows in the earth’s hard surface, and no one, when they sowed a grain of wheat, could expect more than two or three new ears of grain, a tiny fraction of what seed grain yields today. The fields often had to lie fallow for two, three, four years or more, so that the soil could regain its fertility the natural way.

Crop failure was a constant threat for medieval man, and brought with it a deadly wave of hunger that felled young and old alike “like wheat before the sickle.” Almost all of the chroniclers at that time described such instances of famine, and not without a certain macabre sense of satisfaction. “The people pursued one another to eat one another, cutting throats and satiating themselves on the bodies, just like the wolves.” The Anglo-Saxon monk and history writer of the 600s, the Venerable Bede, wrote about Anglo-Saxon farmers that entered into suicide pacts in order to avoid dying of starvation: “Forty or fifty poor, starving people went to a rock and jumped in order to die from the fall or from drowning.”

Even though many years usually passed between outbreaks of famine of the type that occurred in the year 1005, the threat of starvation was never far away. To have enough food to last an entire year was a rare privilege, reserved only for the wealthy few. In a relatively good year, the agricultural year’s food production lasted until around Easter. After that, most people had to subsist on less: herbs, roots, what sustenance could be gathered from the forest floor or riverbank. Anglo-Saxon and continental accounts depict farmers who milled bark and cones when flour became scarce, and others who ate the grass as they carried out the hard work of the summer on half-empty stomachs; sapped of energy, they awaited the grain harvest.

In England, the grain was ready to be harvested around the end of July and beginning of August. At this point large swaths of the population—men, women and children all over the realm—were intensely occupied with cutting the grain with a sickle, binding it into sheathes, and transporting it in carts and wagons to the country’s thousands of water mills, where it was ground into flour and used to bake and fry hard, round, flat bread. On the first of August each year, the Anglo-Saxons celebrated *hlafmesse* (Lammas Day, or “loaf mass”) to celebrate the long-awaited coming of the grain.

It was no coincidence that this was exactly when Torkel’s army arrived in England. As the Anglo-Saxon chronicler emphasises, the “enormous enemy horde came to Sandwich just after Lammas Day.”

**[pp. 91-93] The Battle of Ringmere: The Bloody Realities of Medieval Combat**

The heroic skaldic songs never reveal the at-times unbearable nervous anticipation during battle preparations, but it comes through in the more down-to-earth Anglo-Saxon sources. In this oppressive mood, the men’s angst could find expression in aggressive, obscene shouts. Wild battle cries and primitive howls could be heard over the plain while men on both sides shook their quivers full of arrows and lifted their spears to the skies. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle tells of an ealdorman who, before an earlier battle against the Danes, was so anxious that he threw up in front of his men. They then refused to fight and the army dissolved.

The battle was initiated with horn signals. It was Torkel’s army that attacked. The Danes likely began the attack in columns, their usual mode, in what the Norse skalds and later composers of the sagas called *svinefylking*, “swine formation”. These columns were easier to keep together while the men walked forward. The best warriors were placed in front, with more in the ranks behind, so that they could penetrate the enemy’s ranks and break up their formations. This was a formation they’d learned from Odin himself, according to the later Danish historian Saxo, but it was not unique to Norse warriors. Almost 1000 years previous, “swine snout” was soldier slang among Roman legionnaires to describe a column on the march.

The Danes’ formations moved slowly toward the enemy before them. As the distance lessened, arrows began flying in both directions. At about thirty metres’ distance, both sides began hurling spears toward one another, simple, inexpensive projectiles without adornments. The men held their shields, which were made of wood, in front of their faces and chests in order to protect themselves, well away from the body, as the spears could pierce right though them. While the Danes’ forward motion continued, the men in front were pressed toward the enemy by the ones behind. They did not run, but walked calmly in order to keep the formation together. And in this way, as controlled as possible, the two sides collided.

Archaeological investigations from other medieval battlefields have revealed mass graves in which the skulls have strange damages to the teeth that occurred just before death. It is assumed that this was caused when the men clenched their teeth in the moments leading up to the collision.

The killing was done face to face. The spears, whose blades could be up to a half metre long, were from both sides stuck in between the enemy’s shields, into unprotected faces, arms, feet, hands, shoulders, bellies, thighs, throats. Men who fell were trampled upon. Norse warriors used the simple, light axes many of them bore on their belts, swinging them above and below the shields. There are also descriptions of warriors who stepped out of formation with large axes, which they then swung round in wide circles with both hands. The leaders on both sides, and the elite warriors who surrounded them, swung and jabbed their precious swords. These most prestigious of weapons were just under a metre long, and were forged with so-called “blood grooves”, which gave the blades flexibility and made the blood gush out of the wound when pulled out of human flesh.

The skalds revel in images of almost pornographic violence in order to describe the fantastic, bloody theatre of war. Rows of shields move like living walls across the battlefield. Banners bulge and swell in the wind above the men’s heads, like birds of prey awaiting the blood that will soon be spilled below them. Their gilded poles shine and glimmer in the sun. As the banners and poles quiver and shake above the men’s heads, they are sprayed with blood. Below them, the swords are singing with their cold tongues, piercing holes in shields, chopping cracks into helmets. The helmets’ grey iron is coloured red with the blood of the men they were meant to protect.

In the dark shriek of battle, panic seized some of the Anglo-Saxon peasant soldiers. A weak point along the English line of battle burst after a powerful collision with the Danes’ lines. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle relates that the peasant soldiers who were summoned from East Anglia turned their backs to the enemy and began to run, even as the men from Cambridgeshire, who fought by their side, held their ground. From this point, the Battle of Ringmere descended into a military catastrophe for the Anglo-Saxons. Their collapse appears to follow the same logic as when a field army fell apart in pre-modern times. The panic was contagious, spreading quickly from line to line. More and more soldiers fled. The enemy flowed past and came up behind those who remained. What had begun as a battle of equals was transformed in a matter of moments into a massacre. The army formation collapsed, and many of those who’d turned their back to the enemy were surrounded and struck down from behind.

In the panic and chaos that unfolded, a large number of Anglo-Saxon grandees were slaughtered. Among the dead, according to the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, were a number of Æthelred’s own family members. “There fell Æthelstan, the king’s son-in-law, and Oswy, his son, and his son, and Wulfric and Eadwig, and many a good thane and an untold number of common people.” When the battle was over, the dead lay heaped upon the battlefield.