

## HISTORICAL PREFACE

Although overshadowed in history by the Battle of Hastings, fought on 14 October 1066, another clash that took place just nineteen days earlier in the north of England was crucial to Normandy's subsequent conquest of the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom: the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

In 1066, the most immediate threat to Harold Godwinson, the newly crowned—albeit disputed—King of England, was not from Duke William (the Bastard) of Normandy but another equally ruthless rival for the throne, King Harald Hardrada of Norway. In an often bloody challenge to his southern neighbor, Hardrada also claimed that he, not King Svein II, was the rightful ruler of Denmark. And as Denmark had long claimed sovereignty over much of England, Hardrada held that he was the true successor to the recently deceased King Edward the Confessor. Another combatant for the English crown, Tostig Godwinson—Harold's recently exiled younger brother whom had been stripped of his lofty, and lucrative, position as Earl of Northumbria, seeking revenge, gained an audience with Hardrada in Nitharos, Norway, and urged him to press his claim by force.

While hardly naïve of Tostig's intent to seize the crown for himself, Hardrada needed no prodding and quickly assembled an invasion fleet of 300 ships; with his vast treasure loaded aboard his kingship, the *Great Dragon*, he then set sail across the North Sea with 8,000 men in September 1066. Recruiting more men to his cause during brief stops at Shetland and Orkney, Hardrada then rendezvoused with Tostig's waiting fleet of twelve ships in Scotland and, with an army swelled to nearly 12,000 warriors, began marauding along England's east coast. Adopting

Tostig's suggested invasion plan, the Norsemen entered the Humber estuary and rowed their longships up the River Ouse toward the wealthy Northumbrian city of York. Forced to moor his fleet near the village of Riccall where the river narrowed such to make them vulnerable to an ambush, Hardrada—anxious to seize what he believed to be rightfully his—ordered his trusted marshal Stykrar to prepare his warriors for battle.

On 20 September, with their boar-head helmets and chainmail byrnies glistening in the sun, the heavily armed Norsemen began marching northward along the banks of the Ouse. Near the deserted village of Fulford, they easily shattered a shield-wall of Saxon thanes and fyrdmen sent out by the teenaged brother-earls Edwin and Morcar in their foolhardy attempt to slow the invader's advance upon York. Hardrada wanted to sack the city and strip it of its riches but was convinced by Tostig—who was secretly guarding his future wealth—that it made no sense to start laying waste to his soon-to-be new kingdom of England. It was unnatural to Hardrada and his men not to plunder after a victory but, quashing his barbarian urges, he agreed with Tostig and, instead, sent a third of his warriors back to help guard the ships at Riccall.

Still, Hardrada did not trust that Edwin and Morcar fully appreciated his uncharacteristic restraint and so demanded that they deliver 500 hostages to him to ensure there would be no skullduggery. The time and place of the hand-over were agreed upon. And, on 25 September 1066, after a long, hot march, the great warrior-king of Norway and 8,000 of his best men arrived at the place where the roads from all the four corners of Yorkshire met at the crossing of the River Derwent: Stamford Bridge. Expecting no fight this day, the lightly armed warriors were surprised by Harold Godwinson's hard-riding Saxons as they rested beside the river; by nightfall dead and dying Norsemen laid scattered over the field. A blood-dripping Stykrar—Hardrada's fearless front-center sword—was among them. Alive.