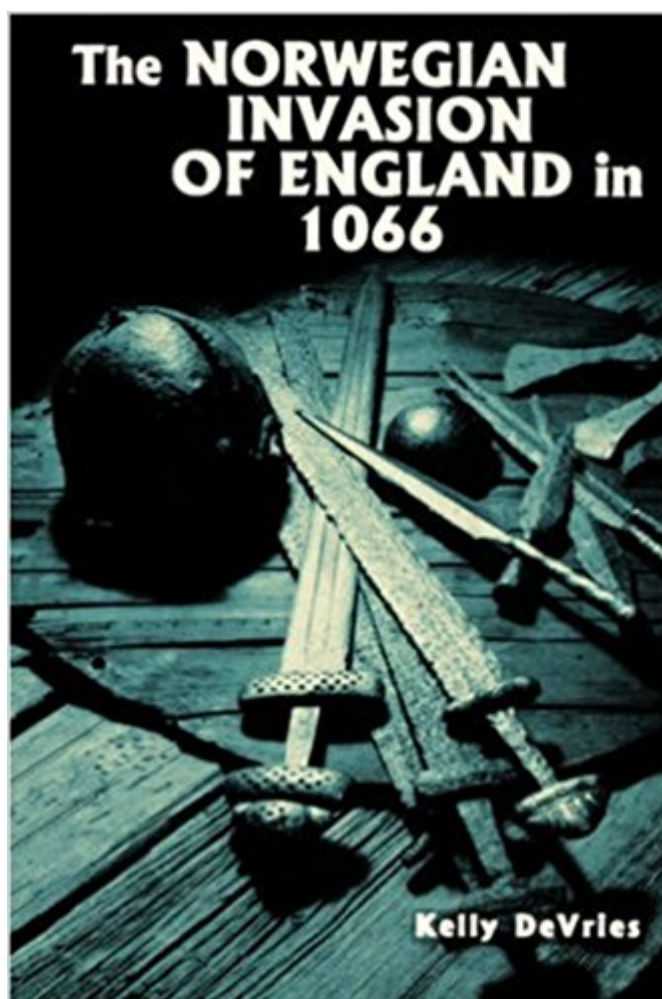


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The Norwegian Invasion Of England In 1066 (Warfare In History Volume 8 ISSN 1358-779X)



Synopsis

William the Conqueror's invasion in 1066 was not the only attack on England that year. On September 25, 1066, less than three weeks before William defeated King Harold II Godwinson at the battle of Hastings, that same Harold had been victorious over his other opponent of 1066, King Haraldr Hardr  di of Norway at the battle of Stamford Bridge. It was an impressive victory, driving an invading army of Norwegians from the earldom of Northumbria; but it was to cost Harold dear. In telling the story of this neglected battle, Kelly DeVries traces the rise and fall of a family of English warlords, the Godwins, as well as that of the equally impressive Norwegian warlord Haraldr  di.

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Customer Reviews

One of the greatest victories won by an English host over a Viking army ... In his account of the battle and the events leading up to it, Professor DeVries tells this exciting and absorbing story. --Speculum This very accessible narrative...tells the story of 'the first two important battles of 1066', Fulford Gate and Stamford Bridge, and of the leaders of the opposing English and Norwegian factions. --Choice The evidence of later 12th- and 13th-century Norse sagas, Snorri Sturlusson's Heimskringla, and the less well known Norwegian Kings Sagas ... present far more detail about the invasion and its battles than the more widely accepted sources could possibly allow ... He places the invasion in a broad context. He outlines the Anglo-Scandinavian nature of the English kingdom in the eleventh century, traces the careers of the major leaders, and devotes a chapter each to the English and Norwegian military systems. --Journal of Military History

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This volume is probably the best account of the role of the Norwegian Vikings in the events of 1066. The author has examined the Norse sources in great depth. One is left with the sense that the work was done by a professional historian. Yet I would like to raise a few points. The first is that, when all is said and done, there is an awful lot we do not know about the events of 1066. One estimate in the book has the Norse army at about 11,000-12,000 men (this is the smallest figure). Harald left some of his men behind to guard his ships. How many is unknown. As the armies formed for battle the Vikings formed a circular shield-wall. Given an estimate of 6-8,000 Norsemen on the field, the Saxons must have had considerably more. How many? we do not know. How many were Huscarls? Should we label the Saxon army with sharp distinctions, or were there less to choose from between Fyrd and their better-armed brethern? How many archers did the Saxons field? More important, the sagas tell of the Saxons fighting on horseback in the battle of Stamford Bridge. Did they? The author gives us the accounts available. But the author refrains from hypothetical analysis. So he does not really attempt to get to the bottom of this question. In my mind, a book about the Norse invasion of 1066 should attempt to make some educated guesswork. There is no study of the march distance from the Viking camp to the battlefield. No estimate of how long it might have taken to cover the distance. No guess as to how many men might have fit into the battlefield. We do not really know where the battlefield lies to make such guesses, though. There are no photos of the ground in the book. 1,000 years can do much to change topography though. There are no battlefield remains to help us either. So, after reading the book, I am more confused by the battle than ever. It seems clear that the Viking lack of armour was probably the key to their defeat. If the Norsemen had been able to hold longer, then their fellows coming up from the ships might well have turned the tide. Ah well, the fall of the Land-Ravnger in battle was a fitting end to a true-life Conan the Destroyer.

The Norwegian invasion of England by Harald Hadrada in 1066 did not use to get half the coverage that the Norman one attracts, largely because the former attempt failed whereas the later was successful. As the author makes clear, however, the two invasions were largely linked and the Norwegian one, by drawing Harold and his army to the North and by weakening it, considerably helped and ensured that the last Anglo-Saxon King did not face the Norman invaders under the best conditions. Despite the considerable interest that the topic covered should arise, the book's

contents, its targeted audience and the author's methods, the style and the tone are rather problematic. The contents are such that the book's title almost seems to be a misnomer at times, with, for instance, a large section of over fifty pages on the Godwinsons, preceding another 44 plus pages on Harold himself. Rather than being about the Norwegian invasion, about two-thirds of the book is in fact a summarized history of the Anglo-Saxon and then Anglo-Dane kingdom during the first sixty years or so of the 11th century. A related, and somewhat annoying, feature that you will come across when reading this book is the amount of repetitions, as the author makes or comes back to the same points again and again in various chapters. Finally, and since this book was first published in 1999, a number of other, much more focused, titles have appeared and cover the same events. I struggled somewhat with the author's methods and intentions. It seems that this was intended as a scholarly book directed at a general audience. However, the accumulation of quotations and footnotes, with the latter sometimes making the better part of each page, is somewhat problematic. Sometimes I got the impression that the author was writing a commentary of the various theses presented by his predecessors rather than telling the story to the reader. In other instances, the quotations in both translations and the original versions (Old Norse, Old English, Latin) took up entire pages, were not necessary to make the point, and gave the somewhat unpleasant impression that the author felt the need to prove something through this kind of display. I also got the impression that, with one or two exceptions, there was very little in this book that was really original. For instance, the sections on the Norwegian and the Anglo-Saxon armies and their respective equipment and tactics were rather bland. At times, the book even felt like a compilation. One of these exceptions is the discussion about the presence of cavalry and the use of cavalry charges by the Anglo-Saxons at the battle of Stamford Bridge, with Kelly DeVries being among those who believe that this happened. The wider and more general issue lurking behind this very specific item is the amount of credit that historians should give to later Scandinavian Sagas of the 12th and 13th centuries especially since they seem to be the only sources to mention these cavalry charges. All historians which deal with the "Viking area" have to tackle this issue somehow and the approaches range from accepting these sources at face value to rejecting them entirely as anachronistic, and anything in between. Rather than taking sides, it would have been preferable for the author to acknowledge that we simply do not know. A couple of points are however very well made. One was to show that the Norwegians were caught by surprise, and therefore both outnumbered and without their armour at Stamford Bridge, with both elements playing a key role in the victory. The second point which the author shows is the speed and record time with which Harold and his army marched up to York and down again to Hastings. He could probably have

emphasized this point further. It is much more important in demonstrating that the Anglo-Saxon (more accurately Anglo-Scandinavian) army was a superb, well-organized, highly disciplined fighting force (at least its huscarl component) than whether Anglo-Saxons used cavalry charges or not.

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