

# What happened at stamford bridge

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Battle of Stamford Bridge by ArboPeter Nicolai Arbo (Public Domain)

Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex, was made king on 6 January 1066 CE following the death of his brother-in-law King Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-1066 CE), who died childless. Harold had acquired the crown in unclear circumstances, although Edward, on his deathbed, had personally nominated Harold as his successor. Harold was the foremost military leader in the kingdom and had built his reputation on his successful campaigns in Wales in 1063-4 CE.

Another take on events, presented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, states that Harold only visited William's court to secure the release of a number of captured compatriots. To add another layer of interpretation on these murky happenings, the pro-Anglo-Saxon camp suggested that even if Harold did make a pledge of loyalty to William then, being at the time a captive, it was done under duress and so invalid.

Harald Hardrada would only play a cameo role in the Norman Conquest but many consider his decision to invade England at exactly the same time as William as the crucial factor in the ultimate demise of the Anglo-Saxons. Hardrada had an impressive military CV having spent years fighting as a mercenary for the Kievan Rus and, before that, in the elite Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Empire, famously helping capture from the Arabs both Messina and Syracuse on Sicily in 1038 CE.

Harald Hardrada, Kirkwall CathedralColin Smith (CC BY-SA)

Hardrada amassed a fleet of perhaps around 300 ships, although some estimates go as high as 500. Each Viking ship could, theoretically, have transported around 80 men including the rowers but an army as large as 24,000 would have been unlikely. Less than half that figure seems a much more probable number. The fleet sailed from Trondheim to Orkney and then moved south to land off the north-east coast of England near the mouth of the River Tyne on 8 September. There Hardrada was joined by a small fleet of perhaps 12 ships commanded by Tostig. From there the two fleets sailed south, stopping off to plunder Cleveland and then continuing down the coast to the mouth of the Humber River, up the River Ouse, and land at Ricall, just 16 km (10 miles) from the key city of York.

An Anglo-Saxon force of unknown size led by Eadwine, earl of Mercia, and Morcar, the earl of Northumbria, met the invaders at Fulford Gate, an uncertain location near York on 20 September. There are no contemporary historical records of the events of the battle, although it is mentioned in the Scandinavian sagas (epic poems) written two centuries later which are, like Snorri Sturluson's King Harald's Saga (part of the c. 1230 CE Heimskringla), unfortunately, packed with demonstrable inaccuracies, at least regarding the English

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history therein.

Harald Hardrada, Battle of Fulford GateMathew Paris (Public Domain)

When Harold, then in London, had received news of Hardrada's raids along the north-east coast around mid-September, he had immediately mustered his army, including his elite force of up to 3,000 housecarls (professional armoured troops) and then marched north, but he could not prevent Hardrada taking York in the meantime, the city capitulating without resistance on 24 September.

Harold Godwinson, Bayeux TapestryUnknown Artist (CC BY-SA)

More certain is the fighting was over within a day and both Hardrada and Tostig were killed. The battle was a complete victory for Harold with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recording that there were only enough survivors from the invading army to fill 24 ships, which sailed back home under the command of Hardrada's son, Olaf. The 13th-century CE chronicle The Life of King Edward notes that the fighting had been fierce and that the rivers were so full of corpses they "dyed the ocean waves for miles around with Viking gore" (Morris, 165). Tostig, despite his treachery, was buried with honour at York but the rest of the fallen were left to rot in the fields of Stamford Bridge, their bones still visible, according to some accounts, 50 years later.

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