

Where the Hell Are All The Vikings?

by Brian D Thomas

THEN:

William Duke of Normandy was having a very bad day. He was wet, sandy and probably about to lose his army. His ships had crossed the stormy channel and finally landed at Pevensey, but instead of finding an empty Sussex beach he and his men faced a waiting Saxon army. The filthy English had even had time to build a sturdy wooden castle at a nearby village called Hastings. King Harold of England had an entire army of Saxon thegns, huscarls, heavy horse and levies of spear and archers just sitting on the beach waiting for William's Normans to land. "They were all supposed to be up in the north," railed William. "Hardrada and his bloody Vikings should have hit the northern coast days ago. Our spies saw their invasion ships assembled in Norway. That bloody handed Viking has been gathering troops and supplies for months!" William's tirade was cut off as the first volley of Saxon arrows began raining death upon the English beach and the Norman soldiers. "This army shouldn't even be here", cried William! "They should be in York getting slaughtered by Hardrada and Tostig! So where the Hell are all the Vikings?"

BEFORE THEN:

Harald Hardrada waited on the shores of the fjord like a little boy waiting for Christmas day. All his plans, all his schemes and all his dreams were now on the balance scales waiting for the weights to be dropped. For the hundredth time today and the millionth time in his life his eyes rose up and locked on the glimmering circle of light in the sky. His eyes were not the first to try and see through those shimmering mysteries. His grandfathers had called them the "Gates Of the Rainbow Bridge" and believed the hovering circles of light to be the gates to the halls of Odin. In Egypt they were called the "Eyes of the Gods". The silk traders called them Celestial Gates, and the Slavs called them "The Sky Mouths". Men from every land were fascinated with the mysterious circles of light that hovered just out of reach over the rivers and shores on every continent of the world.

Harald had been fixated with those circles of light from the time he was a boy-from the day he had been hunting with his uncles and seen an entire flock of geese fly through one of the "Rainbow Gates" on their way south for winter. His uncle's huntsmen swore that

in the spring the flock would return through the same gate, and vowed to bring the boy back so he could shoot "...the ones Odin didn't eat". The boy who would eventually become King of Norway would never forget the sight of the geese returning in the spring, or the taste of their flesh at the spring feast. They didn't taste any different than any other goose. They did not taste divine. So where did they fly to every fall when they flew through the rainbow gates?

Harald Hardrada fought hard to make his dreams of a Viking kingdom come true. But Harald was more than just a dreamer and a war leader. He was an educated man, and had studied in the great city of Constantinople...when he wasn't killing the enemies of the Byzantine court. He'd read for himself the histories of Rome and the story of how Emperor Nero had fled an angry mob by flying up into the sky in a boat that sailed the clouds, disappearing through one of the Rainbow Gates. Harald also found buried in those ancient scrolls beneath the golden city of the Byzantines the secrets of Nero's Roman cloud boat.

When King Harald had emptied his vaults to buy blood coal his sometime-ally Tostig the Saxon had called him mad! After beating his ally into bruised silence Harald had shown him what he'd learned from those old roman scrolls. Smiths used blood coal when they forged certain metals but Harald showed his battered Saxon friend what happened when you submerged the lumpy red rocks in vinegar. He showed him an old wineskin puffed up like a fishing bladder attached to a child's toy wooden boat, and watched the Saxon's eyes widen as it floated up to the ceiling of his great hall. King Harald of Norway, greatest King of the Vikings showed his conspirator in conquest how he planned to make a fleet of longships that would sail both the ocean and the sky. Sitting and waiting on the fjord Harald mused that he was probably now the poorest King that Norway ever had. He had hired hunters from Frisia to Iceland to bring him skins. Seals, otters and even whales went under the knives of Harald, and the great wooden sewing halls he'd built buzzed with the voices of hundreds of busy women. He'd stripped the land just feed this horde and the 300 specially built longships were crewed by the best warriors his dwindling money could buy. Now everything waited on the single ship he'd sent up through the Rainbow Gate to scout the way. He'd bullied and shamed Tostig into leading twenty of Harald's bravest warriors on a journey that made most men faint with fright. If his bravest didn't return the others would fade away into the night taking both Harald's boats and his gold. Harald's heart stopped as he saw the dark shape emerge from the gate. It slammed back into beat when his eyes made out the shape of the dragon prow and the tiny figure waving down at him. Harald shoved his

way through the cheering crowd to reach the slowly descending skyboat. The huge bladder that lifted the boat threw a dark shadow over the waiting crowd and some muttered charms against the ominous shadow. Harald had no fear as he spied his pet Saxon's stupid grin. Tostig leapt the last few feet to the ground and the waiting warriors made space for the two lords to meet. Harald had one hundred questions but his pride willed his mouth shut as he waited for his scout to report. Tostig the Saxon, never loosing that stupid grin simply held out his hands. Gripped in his left he held a freshly cut pine branch, a pinecone still attached. In his right he held a freshly killed goose.

THEN:

One after another the three hundred dragon ships glided through the Rainbow Gate. Harald still held the pine branch his brother had given him. Tostig had said that it seemed no time had passed when they sailed through the gate. One moment they were over the coast of Norway and the next they were over a new coastline. Harald looked down on the new coastline the way a man looks down upon a new bride on his wedding night. Unconsciously Harald wiped his mouth on sleeve. From a view usually reserved for eagles he could see the wide murky river winding far to the west and the deep green coastline disappearing to both the north and south. This new land was vast! Like dark brooding swans the dragon boats dropped down into the river mouth, and immediately the crews began to pull for shore. Harald had planned this expedition for years and every detail was burned into heads of his commanders. Every man knew his task and every crew was hungry for conquest. Gone was the fear of falling or intruding on some dark god's domain. They had ripped out their fears and burned them on a warrior's fire. Harald brought skalds on the journey and they were shouting out new sagas praising the courage of Hardrada's sky lords even as the sky boats landed in the water. Harald also brought master map makers and he knew without looking that their hands were flying charcoal over skin as their trained eyes took in details only birds ever saw. Harald's thegns had also seen a village of some kind near the banks of the river, and his own skydragon drove like a thrusting spear towards the first Viking raid of this new dark green land. Harlad Hardra smiled as the wind whipped his beard and blew his cloak behind him like flapping raven's wings. This was not simply another Viking raid. The lands of his fathers were overcrowded, and his warriors were constantly spoiling for conquest and plunder. Harald brought his Vikings to this new land to stay.