


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Bernard Cornwell

THE LAST KINGDOM



With most of Britain conquered by the Danes, the fate of England—and the course of history—depended on one man: King Alfred the Great

The Last Kingdom

Bernard Cornwell

 HarperCollins e-books

The Last Kingdom

is for Judy, with love.

Wyrð bið ful āræd

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PLACE-NAMES

The spelling of place-names in Anglo-Saxon England was an uncertain business, with no consistency and no agreement even about the name itself. Thus London was variously rendered as Lundonia, Lundenberg, Lundenne, Lundene, Lundenwic, Lundenceaster, and Lundres. Doubtless some readers will prefer other versions of the names listed below, but I have usually employed whatever spelling is cited in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* for the years nearest or contained within Alfred's reign, A.D. 871–899, but even that solution is not foolproof. Hayling Island, in 956, was written as both Heilincigae and Hæglingaiggæ. Nor have I been consistent myself; I have preferred the modern England to Engaland and, instead of Northymbrialond, have used Northumbria to avoid the suggestion that the boundaries of the ancient kingdom coincide with those of the modern county. So this list, like the spellings themselves, is capricious.

Æbbanduna	Abingdon, Berkshire
Æsc's Hill	Ashdown, Berkshire
Baðum (pronounced Bathum)	Bath, Avon
Basengas	Basing, Hampshire
Beamfleot	Benfleet, Essex
Beardastopol	Barnstable, Devon
Bebbanburg	Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland
Berewic	Berwick on Tweed, Northumberland
Berrocscire	Berkshire
Blaland	North Africa
Cantucton	Cannington, Somerset
Cetreht	Catterick, Yorkshire
Cippanhamm	Chippenham, Wiltshire
Cirrenceastre	Cirencester, Gloucestershire
Cridianton	Crediton, Devon
Cynuit	Cynuit Hillfort, near Cannington, Somerset
Contwaraburg	Canterbury, Kent
Cornwalum	Cornwall
Dalriada	Western Scotland
Deoraby	Derby, Derbyshire
Defnascir	Devonshire
Dic	Diss, Norfolk
Dunholm	Durham, County Durham
Eoferwic	York (also the Danish Jorvic, pronounced Yorvik)
Exanceaster	Exeter, Devon
Fromtun	Frampton-upon-Severn, Gloucestershire

Gegnesburh	Gainsborough, Lincolnshire
The Gewæsc	The Wash
Gleawecestre	Gloucester, Gloucestershire
Grantaceaster	Cambridge, Cambridgeshire
Gyruum Jarrow,	County Durham
Hamanfunta	Havant, Hampshire
Hamptonscir	Hampshire
Hamtun	Southampton, Hampshire
Haithabu	Hedeby, trading town in southern Denmark
Heilincigae	Hayling Island, Hampshire
Hreapandune	Repton, Derbyshire
Kenet	River Kennet
Ledecestre	Leicester
Lindisfarena	Lindisfarne (Holy Island), Northumberland
Lundene	London
Mereton	Marten, Wiltshire
Meslach	Matlock, Derbyshire
Pedredan	River Parrett
The Poole	Poole Harbour, Dorset
Pictland	Eastern Scotland
Readingum	Reading, Berkshire
Sæfern	River Severn
Scireburnan	Sherborne, Dorset
Snotengaham	Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
Streonshall	Strensall, Yorkshire
Sumorsæte	Somerset
Suth Seaxa	Sussex (South Saxons)
Synningthwait	Swinithwaite, Yorkshire
Temes	River Thames
Thornsæta	Dorset
Tine	River Tine
Trente	River Trente
Tuede	River Tweed
Twyfyrde	Tiverton, Devon
Uisc	River Exe
Werham	Wareham, Dorset
With	Isle of Wight
Wiire	River Wear
Wiltun	Wilton, Wiltshire
Wiltunscir	Wiltshire

Winburnan

Wimborne Minster, Dorset

Wintanceaster

Winchester, Hampshire

Northumbria, A.D. 866–867

My name is Uhtred. I am the son of Uhtred, who was the son of Uhtred and his father was also called Uhtred. My father's clerk, a priest called Beocca, spelt it Utred. I do not know if that was how my father would have written it, for he could neither read nor write, but I can do both and sometimes I take the old parchments from their wooden chest and I see the name spelled Uhtred or Utred or Ughtred or Ootred. I look at those parchments, which are deeds saying that Uhtred, son of Uhtred, is the lawful and sole owner of the lands that are carefully marked by stones and by dykes, by oaks and by ash, by marsh and by sea, and I dream of those lands, wave-beaten and wild beneath the wind-driven sky. I dream, and know that one day I will take back the land from those who stole it from me.

I am an ealdorman, though I call myself Earl Uhtred, which is the same thing, and the fading parchments are proof of what I own. The law says I own that land, and the law, we are told, is what makes us men under God instead of beasts in the ditch. But the law does not help me take back my land. The law wants compromise. The law thinks money will compensate for loss. The law, above all, fears the blood feud. But I am Uhtred, son of Uhtred, and this is the tale of a blood feud. It is a tale of how I will take from my enemy what the law says is mine. And it is the tale of a woman and of her father, a king.

He was my king and all that I have I owe to him. The food that I eat, the hall where I live, and the swords of my men, all came from Alfred, my king, who hated me.

This story begins long before I met Alfred. It begins when I was ten years old and first saw the Danes. It was the year 866 and I was not called Uhtred then, but Osbert, for I was my father's second son and it was the eldest who took the name Uhtred. My brother was seventeen then, tall and well built, with our family's fair hair and my father's morose face.

The day I first saw the Danes we were riding along the seashore with hawks on our wrists. There was my father, my father's brother, my brother, myself, and a dozen retainers. It was autumn. The sea cliffs were thick with the last growth of summer, there were seals on the rocks, and a host of seabirds wheeling and shrieking, too many to let the hawks off their leashes. We rode till we came to the crisscrossing shallows that rippled between our land and Lindisfarena, the Holy Island, and I remember staring across the water at the broken walls of the abbey. The Danes had plundered it, but that had been many years before I was born, and though the monks were living there again the monastery had never regained its former glory.

I also remember that day as beautiful and perhaps it was. Perhaps it rained, but I do not think so. The sun shone, the seas were low, the breakers gentle, and the world happy. The hawk's claws gripped my wrist through the leather sleeve, her hooded head twitching because she could hear the cries of the white birds. We had left the fortress in the forenoon, riding north, and though we carried hawks we did not ride to hunt, but rather so my father could make up his mind.

We ruled this land. My father, Ealdorman Uhtred, was lord of everything south of the Tuede and north of the Tine, but we did have a king in Northumbria and his name, like mine, was Osbert. He lived to the south of us, rarely came north, and did not bother us, but now a man called Ælla wanted the throne and Ælla, who was an ealdorman from the hills west of Eoferwic, had raised an army to challenge Osbert and had sent gifts to my father to encourage his support. My father, I realize now, held the fate of the rebellion in his grip. I wanted him to support Osbert, for no other reason than the rightful king shared my name and foolishly, at ten years old, I believed any man called Osbert must be

noble, good, and brave. In truth Osbert was a dribbling fool, but he was the king, and my father was reluctant to abandon him. ~~But Osbert had sent no gifts and had shown no respect, while Ælla had, and~~ so my father worried. At a moment's notice we could lead a hundred and fifty men to war, all well armed, and given a month we could swell that force to over four hundred foemen, so whichever man we supported would be the king and grateful to us.

Or so we thought.

And then I saw them.

Three ships.

In my memory they slid from a bank of sea mist, and perhaps they did, but memory is a faulty thing and my other images of that day are of a clear, cloudless sky, so perhaps there was no mist, but seems to me that one moment the sea was empty and the next there were three ships coming from the south.

Beautiful things. They appeared to rest weightless on the ocean, and when their oars dug into the waves they skimmed the water. Their prows and sterns curled high and were tipped with gilded beasts, serpents, and dragons, and it seemed to me that on that faroff summer's day the three boats danced on the water, propelled by the rise and fall of the silver wings of their oar banks. The sun flashed off the wet blades, splinters of light, then the oars dipped, were tugged, and the beast-headed boats surged, and I stared entranced.

"The devil's turds," my father growled. He was not a very good Christian, but he was frightened enough at that moment to make the sign of the cross.

"And may the devil swallow them," my uncle said. His name was Ælfric and he was a slender man; sly, dark, and secretive.

The three boats had been rowing northward, their square sails furled on their long yards, but when we turned back south to canter homeward on the sand so that our horses' manes tossed like wind-blown spray and the hooded hawks mewed in alarm, the ships turned with us. Where the cliff had collapsed to leave a ramp of broken turf we rode inland, the horses heaving up the slope, and from there we galloped along the coastal path to our fortress.

To Bebbanburg. Bebba had been a queen in our land many years before, and she had given her name to my home, which is the dearest place in all the world. The fort stands on a high rock that curls out to sea. The waves beat on its eastern shore and break white on the rock's northern point, and a shallow sea lake ripples along the western side between the fortress and the land. To reach Bebbanburg you must take the causeway to the south, a low strip of rock and sand that is guarded by a great wooden tower, the Low Gate, which is built on top of an earthen wall. We thundered through the tower's arch, our horses white with sweat, and rode past the granaries, the smithy, the mews, and the stables, all wooden buildings well thatched with rye straw, and so up the inner path to the High Gate, which protected the peak of the rock that was surrounded by a wooden rampart encircling my father's hall. There we dismounted, letting slaves take our horses and hawks, and ran to the eastern rampart from where we gazed out to sea.

The three ships were now close to the islands where the puffins live and the seal-folk dance in winter. We watched them, and my stepmother, alarmed by the sound of hooves, came from the hall to join us on the rampart. "The devil has opened his bowels," my father greeted her.

"God and his saints preserve us," Gytha said, crossing herself. I had never known my real mother who had been my father's second wife and, like his first, had died in childbirth, so both my brother and I, who were really half brothers, had no mother, but I thought of Gytha as my mother and, on the whole, she was kind to me, kinder indeed than my father, who did not much like children. Gytha wanted me to be a priest, saying that my elder brother would inherit the land and become a warrior to protect it so I must find another life path. She had given my father two sons and a daughter, but none

had lived beyond a year.

~~The three ships were coming closer now. It seemed they had come to inspect Bebbanburg, which did not worry us for the fortress was reckoned impregnable, and so the Danes could stare all they wanted. The nearest ship had twin banks of twelve oars each and, as the ship coasted a hundred paces offshore, a man leaped from the ship's side and ran down the nearer bank of oars, stepping from one shaft to the next like a dancer, and he did it wearing a mail shirt and holding a sword. We all prayed he would fall, but of course he did not. He had long fair hair, very long, and when he had pranced the full length of the oar bank he turned and ran the shafts again.~~

"She was trading at the mouth of the Tine a week ago," Ælfric, my father's brother, said.

"You know that?"

"I saw her," Ælfric said, "I recognize that prow. See how there's a light-colored strake on the bend?" He spat. "She didn't have a dragon's head then."

"They take the beast heads off when they trade," my father said. "What were they buying?"

"Exchanging pelts for salt and dried fish. Said they were merchants from Haithabu."

"They're merchants looking for a fight now," my father said, and the Danes on the three ships were indeed challenging us by clashing their spears and swords against their painted shields, but there was little they could do against Bebbanburg and nothing we could do to hurt them, though my father ordered his wolf banner raised. The flag showed a snarling wolf's head and it was his standard in battle, but there was no wind and so the banner hung limp and its defiance was lost on the pagans who, after a while, became bored with taunting us, settled to their thwarts, and rowed off to the south.

"We must pray," my stepmother said. Gytha was much younger than my father. She was a small plump woman with a mass of fair hair and a great reverence for Saint Cuthbert whom she worshipped because he had worked miracles. In the church beside the hall she kept an ivory comb that was said to have been Cuthbert's beard comb, and perhaps it was.

"We must act," my father snarled. He turned away from the battlements. "You," he said to my elder brother, Uhtred. "Take a dozen men, ride south. Watch the pagans, but nothing more, you understand? If they land their ships on my ground I want to know where."

"Yes, Father."

"But don't fight them," my father ordered. "Just watch the bastards and be back here by nightfall."

Six other men were sent to rouse the country. Every free man owed military duty and so my father was assembling his army, and by the morrow's dusk he expected to have close to two hundred men, some armed with axes, spears, or reaping hooks, while his retainers, those men who lived with us in Bebbanburg, would be equipped with well-made swords and hefty shields. "If the Danes are outnumbered," my father told me that night, "they won't fight. They're like dogs, the Danes. Coward at heart, but they're given courage by being in a pack." It was dark and my brother had not returned, but no one was unduly anxious about that. Uhtred was capable, if sometimes reckless, and doubtless he would arrive in the small hours and so my father had ordered a beacon lit in the iron becket on top of the High Gate to guide him home.

We reckoned we were safe in Bebbanburg for it had never fallen to an enemy's assault, yet my father and uncle were still worried that the Danes had returned to Northumbria. "They're looking for food," my father said. "The hungry bastards want to land, steal some cattle, then sail away."

I remembered my uncle's words, how the ships had been at the mouth of the Tine trading furs for dried fish, so how could they be hungry? But I said nothing. I was ten years old and what did I know of Danes?

I did know that they were savages, pagans and terrible. I knew that for two generations before I was born their ships had raided our coasts. I knew that Father Beocca, my father's clerk and our mass

priest, prayed every Sunday to spare us from the fury of the Northmen, but that fury had passed me by. No Danes had come to our land since I had been born, but my father had fought them often enough and that night, as we waited for my brother to return, he spoke of his old enemy. They came, he said, from northern lands where ice and mist prevailed, they worshipped the old gods, the same ones we had worshipped before the light of Christ came to bless us, and when they had first come to Northumbria he told me, fiery dragons had whipped across the northern sky, great bolts of lightning had scarred the hills, and the sea had been churned by whirlwinds.

“They are sent by God,” Gytha said timidly, “to punish us.”

“Punish us for what?” my father demanded savagely.

“For our sins,” Gytha said, making the sign of the cross.

“Our sins be damned,” my father snarled. “They come here because they’re hungry.” He was irritated by my stepmother’s piety, and he refused to give up his wolf’s head banner that proclaimed our family’s descent from Woden, the ancient Saxon god of battles. The wolf, Ealdwulf the smith had told me, was one of Woden’s three favored beasts, the others being the eagle and the raven. My mother wanted our banner to show the cross, but my father was proud of his ancestors, though he rarely talked about Woden. Even at ten years old I understood that a good Christian should not boast of being spawned by a pagan god, but I also liked the idea of being a god’s descendant and Ealdwulf often told me tales of Woden, how he had rewarded our people by giving us the land we called England, and how he had once thrown a war spear clear around the moon, and how his shield could darken the midsummer sky, and how he could reap all the corn in the world with one stroke of his great sword. I liked those tales. They were better than my stepmother’s stories of Cuthbert’s miracles. Christians, it seemed to me, were forever weeping and I did not think Woden’s worshippers cried much.

We waited in the hall. It was, indeed it still is, a great wooden hall, strongly thatched and stout beamed, with a harp on a dais and a stone hearth in the center of the floor. It took a dozen slaves a day to keep that great fire going, dragging the wood along the causeway and up through the gates, and at summer’s end we would make a log pile bigger than the church just as a winter store. At the edges of the hall were timber platforms, filled with rammed earth and layered with woolen rugs, and it was on those platforms that we lived, up above the drafts. The hounds stayed on the bracken-strewn floor below, where lesser men could eat at the year’s four great feasts.

There was no feast that night, just bread and cheese and ale, and my father waited for my brother and wondered aloud if the Danes were restless again. “They usually come for food and plunder,” he told me, “but in some places they’ve stayed and taken land.”

“You think they want our land?” I asked.

“They’ll take any land,” he said irritably. He was always irritated by my questions, but that night he was worried and so he talked on. “Their own land is stone and ice, and they have giants threatening them.”

I wanted him to tell me more about the giants, but he brooded instead. “Our ancestors,” he went on after a while, “took this land. They took it and made it and held it. We do not give up what our ancestors gave us. They came across the sea and they fought here, and they built here and they’re buried here. This is our land, mixed with our blood, strengthened with our bone. Ours.” He was angry but he was often angry. He glowered at me, as if wondering whether I was strong enough to hold this land of Northumbria that our ancestors had won with sword and spear and blood and slaughter.

We slept after a while, or at least I slept. I think my father paced the ramparts, but by dawn he was back in the hall and it was then I was woken by the horn at the High Gate and I stumbled off the platform and out into the morning’s first light. There was dew on the grass, a sea eagle circling overhead, and my father’s hounds streaming from the hall door in answer to the horn’s call. I saw my

father running down to the Low Gate and I followed him until I could wriggle my way through the men who were crowding onto the earthen rampart to stare along the causeway.

Horsemen were coming from the south. There were a dozen of them, their horses' hooves sparkling with the dew. My brother's horse was in the lead. It was a brindled stallion, wild-eyed and with a curious gait. It threw its forelegs out as it cantered and no one could mistake that horse, but it was not Uhtred who rode it. The man astride the saddle had long, long hair the color of pale gold, hair that tossed like the horses' tails as he rode. He wore mail, had a flapping scabbard at his side and an axe slung across one shoulder, and I was certain he was the same man who had danced the oar shafts the previous day. His companions were in leather or wool and as they neared the fortress the long-haired man signaled that they should curb their horses as he rode ahead alone. He came within bowshot, though none of us on the rampart put an arrow on the string, then he pulled the horse to a stop and looked up at the gate. He stared all along the line of men, a mocking expression on his face, then he bowed, threw something on the path, and wheeled the horse away. He kicked his heels and the horse sped back and his ragged men joined him to gallop south.

What he had thrown onto the path was my brother's severed head. It was brought to my father who stared at it a long time, but betrayed no feelings. He did not cry, he did not grimace, he did not scowl, he just looked at his eldest son's head and then he looked at me. "From this day on," he said, "your name is Uhtred."

Which is how I was named.

Father Beocca insisted that I should be baptized again, or else heaven would not know who I was when I arrived with the name Uhtred. I protested, but Gytha wanted it and my father cared more for her contentment than for mine, and so a barrel was carried into the church and half filled with seawater and Father Beocca stood me in the barrel and ladled water over my hair. "Receive your servant Uhtred," he intoned, "into the holy company of the saints and into the ranks of the most bright angels." I hope the saints and angels are warmer than I was that day, and after the baptism was done Gytha wept for me, though why I did not know. She might have done better to weep for my brother.

We found out what had happened to him. The three Danish ships had put into the mouth of the river Alne where there was a small settlement of fishermen and their families. Those folk had prudently fled inland, though a handful stayed and watched the river mouth from woods on higher ground and they said my brother had come at nightfall and seen the Vikings torching the houses. They were called Vikings when they were raiders, but Danes or pagans when they were traders, and these men had been burning and plundering so were reckoned to be Vikings. There had seemed very few of them in the settlement, most were on their ships, and my brother decided to ride down to the cottages and kill those few, but of course it was a trap. The Danes had seen his horsemen coming and had hidden a ship's crew north of the village, and those forty men closed behind my brother's party and killed them all. My father claimed his eldest son's death must have been quick, which was a consolation to him, but of course it was not a quick death for he lived long enough for the Danes to discover who he was, or else why would they have brought his head back to Bebbanburg? The fishermen said they tried to warn my brother, but I doubt they did. Men say such things so that they are not blamed for disaster, but whether my brother was warned or not, he still died and the Danes took thirteen fine swords, thirteen good horses, a coat of mail, a helmet, and my old name.

But that was not the end of it. A fleeting visit by three ships was no great event, but a week after my brother's death we heard that a great Danish fleet had rowed up the rivers to capture Eoferwic. They had won that victory on All Saints Day, which made Gytha weep for it suggested God had

abandoned us, but there was also good news for it seemed that my old namesake, King Osbert, had made an alliance with his rival, the would-be King Ælla, and they had agreed to put aside their rivalry, join forces, and take Eoferwic back. That sounds simple, but of course it took time. Messengers rode, advisers confused, priests prayed, and it was not till Christmas that Osbert and Ælla sealed their peace with oaths, and then they summoned my father's men, but of course we could not march in winter. The Danes were in Eoferwic and we left them there until the early spring when news came that the Northumbrian army would gather outside the city and, to my joy, my father decreed that I would ride south with him.

"He's too young," Gytha protested.

"He is almost eleven," my father said, "and he must learn to fight."

"He would be better served by continuing his lessons," she said.

"A dead reader is no use to Bebbanburg," my father said, "and Uhtred is now the heir so he must learn to fight."

That night he made Beocca show me the parchments kept in the church, the parchments that said we owned the land. Beocca had been teaching me to read for two years, but I was a bad pupil and, to Beocca's despair, I could make neither head nor tail of the writings. Beocca sighed, then told me what was in them. "They describe the land," he said, "the land your father owns, and they say the land is his by God's law and by our own law." And one day, it seemed, the lands would be mine for that night my father dictated a new will in which he said that if he died then Bebbanburg would belong to his son Uhtred, and I would be ealdorman, and all the folk between the rivers Tuede and the Tine would swear allegiance to me. "We were kings here once," he told me, "and our land was called Bernicia." He pressed his seal into the red wax, leaving the impression of a wolf's head.

"We should be kings again," Ælfric, my uncle, said.

"It doesn't matter what they call us," my father said curtly, "so long as they obey us," and then he made Ælfric swear on the comb of Saint Cuthbert that he would respect the new will and acknowledge me as Uhtred of Bebbanburg. Ælfric did so swear. "But it won't happen," my father said. "We shall slaughter these Danes like sheep in a fold, and we shall ride back here with plunder and honor."

"Pray God," Ælfric said.

Ælfric and thirty men would stay at Bebbanburg to guard the fortress and protect the women. He gave me gifts that night; a leather coat that would protect against a sword cut and, best of all, a helmet around which Ealdwulf the smith had fashioned a band of gilt bronze. "So they will know you are a prince," Ælfric said.

"He's not a prince," my father said, "but an ealdorman's heir." Yet he was pleased with his brother's gifts to me and added two of his own, a short sword and a horse. The sword was an old blade cut down, with a leather scabbard lined with fleece. It had a chunky hilt, was clumsy, yet that night I slept with the blade under my blanket.

And next morning, as my stepmother wept on the ramparts of the High Gate, and under a blue, clean sky, we rode to war. Two hundred and fifty men went south, following our banner of the wolf's head.

That was in the year 867, and it was the first time I ever went to war.

And I have never ceased.

"You will not fight in the shield wall," my father said.

"No, Father."

"Only men can stand in the shield wall," he said, "but you will watch, you will learn, and you will

discover that the most dangerous stroke is not the sword or ax that you can see, but the one you cannot see, the blade that comes beneath the shields to bite your ankles.”

He grudgingly gave me much other advice as we followed the long road south. Of the two hundred and fifty men who went to Eoferwic from Bebbanburg, one hundred and twenty were on horseback. Those were my father's household men or else the wealthier farmers, the ones who could afford some kind of armor and had shields and swords. Most of the men were not wealthy, but they were sworn to my father's cause, and they marched with sickles, spears, reaping hooks, fish gaffs, and axes. Some carried hunting bows, and all had been ordered to bring a week's food, which was mostly hard bread, harder cheese, and smoked fish. Many were accompanied by women. My father had ordered that no women were to march south, but he did not send them back, reckoning that the women would follow anyway, and that men fought better when their wives or lovers were watching, and he was confident that those women would see the levy of Northumbria give the Danes a terrible slaughter. He claimed we were the hardest men of England, much harder than the soft Mercians. "Your mother was a Mercian," he added, but said nothing more. He never talked of her. I knew they had been married less than a year, that she had died giving birth to me, and that she was an ealdorman's daughter, but as far as my father was concerned she might never have existed. He claimed to despise the Mercians, but not as much as he scorned the coddled West Saxons. "They don't know hardship in Wessex," he maintained, but he reserved his severest judgment for the East Anglians. "They live in marshes," he once told me, "and live like frogs." We Northumbrians had always hated the East Anglians for long ago they had defeated us in battle, killing Ethelfrith, our king and husband to the Bebba after whom our fortress was named. I was to discover later that the East Anglians had given horses and winter shelter to the Danes who had captured Eoferwic so my father was right to despise them. They were treacherous frogs.

Father Beocca rode south with us. My father did not much like the priest, but did not want to go to war without a man of God to say prayers. Beocca, in turn, was devoted to my father who had freed him from slavery and provided him with his education. My father could have worshipped the devil and Beocca, I think, would have turned a blind eye. He was young, clean shaven, and extraordinarily ugly with a fearful squint, a flattened nose, unruly red hair, and a palsied left hand. He was also very clever though I did not appreciate it then, resenting that he gave me lessons. The poor man had tried so hard to teach me letters, but I mocked his efforts, preferring to get a beating from my father to concentrating on the alphabet.

We followed the Roman road, crossing their great wall at the Tine, and still going south. The Romans, my father said, had been giants who built wondrous things, but they had gone back to Rome and the giants had died and now the only Romans left were priests, but the giants' roads were still there and, as we went south, more men joined us until a horde marched on the moors either side of the stony road's broken surface. The men slept in the open, though my father and his chief retainers would bed for the night in abbeys or barns.

We also straggled. Even at ten years old I noticed how we straggled. Men had brought liquor with them, or else they stole mead or ale from the villages we passed, and they frequently got drunk and simply collapsed at the roadside and no one seemed to care. "They'll catch up," my father said carelessly.

"It's not good," Father Beocca told me.

"What's not good?"

"There should be more discipline. I have read the Roman wars and know there must be discipline."

"They'll catch up," I said, echoing my father.

That night we were joined by men from the place called Cetreht where, long ago, we had defeated

the Welsh in a great battle. The newcomers sang of the battle, chanting how we had fed the ravens with the foreigners' blood, and the words cheered my father who told me we were near Eoferwic and that next day we might expect to join Osbert and Ælla, and how the day after that we would feed the ravens again. We were sitting by a fire, one of hundreds of fires that stretched across the fields. South of us, far off across a flat land, I could see the sky glowing from the light of still more fires and knew they showed where the rest of Northumbria's army gathered.

"The raven is Woden's creature, isn't it?" I asked nervously.

My father looked at me sourly. "Who told you that?"

I shrugged, said nothing.

"Ealdwulf?" He guessed, knowing that Bebbanburg's blacksmith, who had stayed at the fortress with Ælfric, was a secret pagan.

"I just heard it," I said, hoping I would get away with the evasion without being hit, "and I know we are descended from Woden."

"We are," my father acknowledged, "but we have a new God now." He stared balefully across the encampment where men were drinking. "Do you know who wins battles, boy?"

"We do, Father."

"The side that is least drunk," he said, and then, after a pause, "but it helps to be drunk."

"Why?"

"Because a shield wall is an awful place." He gazed into the fire. "I have been in six shield walls," he went on, "and prayed every time it would be the last. Your brother, now, he was a man who might have loved the shield wall. He had courage." He fell silent, thinking, then scowled. "The man who brought his head. I want his head. I want to spit into his dead eyes, then put his skull on a pole above the Low Gate."

"You will have it," I said.

He sneered at that. "What do you know?" he asked. "I brought you, boy, because you must see battle. Because our men must see that you are here. But you will not fight. You're like a young dog who watches the old dogs kill the boar, but doesn't bite. Watch and learn, watch and learn and maybe one day you'll be useful. But for now you're nothing but a pup." He dismissed me with a wave.

Next day the Roman road ran across a flat land, crossing dykes and ditches, until at last we came to where the combined armies of Osbert and Ælla had made their shelters. Beyond them, and just visible through the scattered trees, was Eoferwic, and that was where the Danes were.

Eoferwic was, and still is, the chief city of northern England. It possesses a great abbey, an archbishop, a fortress, high walls, and a vast market. It stands beside the River Ouse, and boasts a bridge, but ships can reach Eoferwic from the distant sea, and that was how the Danes had come. They must have known that Northumbria was weakened by civil war, that Osbert, the rightful king, had marched westward to meet the forces of the pretender Ælla, and in the absence of the king they had taken the city. It would not have been difficult for them to have discovered Osbert's absence. The trouble between Osbert and Ælla had been brewing for weeks, and Eoferwic was filled with traders, many from across the sea, who would have known of the two men's bitter rivalry. One thing I learned about the Danes was that they knew how to spy. The monks who write the chronicles tell us that they came from nowhere, their dragon-prowed ships suddenly appearing from a blue vacancy, but it was rarely like that. The Viking crews might attack unexpectedly, but the big fleets, the war fleets, went where they knew there was already trouble. They found an existing wound and filled it like maggots.

My father took me close to the city, he and a score of his men, all of us mounted and all wearing mail or leather. We could see the enemy on the walls. Some of the wall was built of stone—that was the Roman work—but much of the city was protected by an earth wall, topped by a high wooden palisade, and to the east of the city part of that palisade was missing. It seemed to have been burned

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