

Topic: Warfare

Information for parents and teacher

Warfare and the threat of warfare was a feature of medieval (as it is of modern) society, it was also significant in social constructions of status, as leaders sought to recruit people willing to fight and die for their cause. Given the involvement of modern-day re-enactors there is a lot of interest in, and information about, warfare in the Viking Age. A picture of the weapons and conduct of war can be built up from archaeological finds, descriptions of battles and law codes.

Before the Viking Age, English rulers did not maintain a standing army, although they would have a military retinue or bodyguard which protected the king in peace and fought for him in war. In war, the household guard were supplemented by local forces raised and led by ealdormen and royal reeves. King Alfred reorganised the army of Wessex in order to defend his kingdom from viking attackers. He divided those who were eligible for military service (freemen of a certain age and ability) into two groups so that at any time half would be at home and half were available for military service elsewhere. This mobile force worked with the system of fortifications or 'burhs' that Alfred planned across Wessex. Alfred was also credited in bringing innovations in warship design to try and match the superior capabilities of viking warships although it is uncertain how much success the designs had, it shows that Alfred's military innovations also extended to naval defence and shipbuilding. In the tenth century, military organisation reverted to raising armies as the situation demanded rather than funding an expensive and burdensome standing army. It was an obligation on landowners to provide men equipped for military service for a specified time (e.g. upto 60 days) as required by the king, the number of men provided was linked to the size of the landholding.

In terms of weaponry, warriors were skilled in more than one, so that if a weapon broke or a situation determined that a particular tool of war was better, that they were able to adapt. A sword was a treasured item in English and Scandinavian society and high rank warriors would be expected to be proficient in sword fighting. Spears were a more common weapon, one that the lower rank of freeman might possess in battle, while these could be thrown, the main purpose was to keep the enemy at arm's length, beyond the reach of a sword. Axes were also used in war, particularly by vikings and certain types with a broad cutting edge were developed for close range fighting. Bows and arrows were also used in warfare, both short and long varieties are recorded in the tenth century. In terms of defensive equipment, the most common type was a shield, round, made of wood, with a conical boss at the centre to protect the hand and to strengthen the structure. These are sometimes said to brightly coloured perhaps to have a combined effect of awing or intimidating the enemy. Helmets were unusual and might only be worn by the elite, and the same can be said of mail shirts, although such armour became more common in the late tenth and eleventh centuries.

We know a little less about military tactics. In naval warship, there is reference to the main ship being bound on either side to lesser ships in order to project it, the aim in naval warfare was to board enemy ships, by sailing alongside and using grappling hooks, and firing projectiles into enemy ships to inflict maximum damage. In warfare on land, we learn of armies being divided into different contingents with tactics such as trying to encircle the enemy, or holding a contingent in reserve to surprise them or to drive a wedge in enemy lines, sometimes using a triangular formation called a 'boars snout', defensive tactics include

the shield wall (interlocking shields to make an impenetrable barrier) and using long range projectiles such as arrows and spears before engaging in hand to hand combat. The aim of course, was to breach the enemy line, to make maximum damage and cause the enemy to flee. Such victories were then celebrated in poetry such as the 'Poem on the Battle of Brunanburh' preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (AD 937).