

Saxons and Danes around the Watling Street, c900AD

Danish Occupation of Anglo Saxon England

During the early 9th century, the Danes were a constant threat to the Anglo Saxon population of England. Starting in 800AD, Danish sea-raiders carried out a series of attacks on the poorly defended English coast, and gradually captured parts of England. By 865AD, Danish settlers had begun to arrive and lay claim to English land.

The Danes first took control of East Anglia in 867AD. Securing a hold on East Anglia, they launched a surprise attack on Northumbria, defeating Northumbria's fragmented defenses which were caught up in a civil war over the Northumbrian throne. The Danish king Gunthrum ignored the claims of both the deposed Northumbrian king and his local usurper, and placed an English puppet king on the Northumbrian throne.

The Danish forces focused on Mercia next. Despite attempts from King Ethelred I of Wessex to block their progress, the Danish warriors surged forward, and Gunthrum forced King Burgred of Mercia to purchase peace and accept Danish rule. By 871AD, the Danes controlled East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia. Anglo Saxon England began to refer to the areas under Danish rule as the 'Danelaw'. Only Wessex and few small independent kingdoms remained unconquered.

The Fight for Wessex

The Danes were determined to conquer Wessex, which in 871AD was ruled by King Alfred the Great. Though Alfred's army could not match the skills of the Danish forces, the Danes still found it difficult to capture Wessex; by a combination of surprise attacks on small bands of Danes, temporary peace negotiations and competent defensive measures, Alfred kept the Danish forces at bay.

For several years the Danes inched forward into Wessex, despite a series of peace treaties and frequent scimmages between the two enemies. Between 875AD and 877AD, the Danes appeared to gain the upper hand, with a presence in parts of Wessex such as Dorsetshire and Exeter. However, Alfred's army laid siege to the Danes and forced them back to Mercia.

By 878AD Gunthrum had grown weary of the lack of progress. He led a large army to Wessex, intent on capturing Alfred and finally establishing Danish rule, ordering a second Danish force to block any possible escape route that Alfred might attempt. The plan might have worked had Alfred been trapped between two armies as Gunthrum had intended. However, the second Danish force made the mistake of attacking a small English fortress, and was defeated before they ever had a chance to lay a trap for Alfred. Even though the Danes did not capture Alfred at this time, his forces were outmatched. He was forced into hiding for a few months to prevent capture.

After sending Alfred into hiding, Gunthrum may have thought that final victory was imminent. However, Alfred suddenly appeared with a strong army and laid siege to the Danes at Edington. When Gunthrum surrendered, all hopes for a Danish victory in Wessex were dashed, and Gunthrum and Alfred issued the Treaty of Wedmore in 878AD, formally defining the old Roman Watling Street as the boundary between Danish and Saxon lands.

The Fall of the Danelaw

The failure to capture Wessex led to the eventual fall of the Danelaw. The Danes honoured the peace treaty signed by Gunthrum for ten years. During that time Alfred established control over all parts of England not under Danish rule and strengthened the army. The unification of England, the strong defenses and organized army prevented the Danes from capturing more English lands.

Gradually the English regained control of the Danelaw lands - and by 954AD, when Edward the Elder forced Eric Bloodaxe out of Northumbria, the Danelaw had ceased to exist.

The Watling Street boundary around 900AD

Investigation of placename evidence (both village names, area names, fieldnames and other local names) can reveal a great deal about the gradual re-formation of society during this period of high volatility, when many of our local hamlets and villages were first coming into existence. A draft research paper on this topic ('Some evidence for Saxon-Danish paired settlements involving migrant socmen in late-C9 / early-C10 Northamptonshire', G.W.Hatton, 2011) is available in PDF format for [viewing/download via this link](#) .

This topic is currently under discussion in a forum on early Anglo-Saxon meeting-places, led by a group of UK universities.

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