

# RETHINKING 'SAXON' WARGAMING

By Ryan Lavelle 

The way in which Anglo-Saxon (or 'Saxon') armies are presented on our wargames tables can be pretty formulaic, but rethinking the military history of the Anglo-Saxons during the Viking Age (c. 800-1066) opens a host of possibilities for the wargamer and with it the Anglo-Saxons move from being a 'reliable but dull' miniature army to one which represented the cutting edge of western European military societies, an army that could more than hold its own against Viking forces.

So you'd like to field a few Anglo-Saxons on the wargames table? My bet is that, like me, your games have often followed the same basic plots. One, 'Saxons versus Vikings', sees the poor villagers of the Anglo-Saxon 'fyrd' alongside a strong but small elite force of 'thegns' try to fight off a band of Vikings who, for some reason, want to raid one of the smaller and less distinguished of the 13,000 or so settlements found in pre-Norman England. If we're lucky, there may be a hall or a church as a focus for the game, which would presumably give the local reeve or ealdorman (a kind of earl) reason to get onto the tabletop, but too often we may be left wondering why they bothered. The second scenario, 'the Hastings reflight', sees the fyrd as a rather bigger contingent on the tabletop

(though not necessarily quite the same size as the force reckoned to have been at Hastings!) against a large and varied force of Normans. Here they seem to have sacrificed mobility for numbers, as the Normans, the archetypal medieval all-arms combat team, bristle with groups of well-trained cavalry and archers; by comparison, the poor old Saxon fyrd can only hold its ground. Or at least its well-trained, motivated core holds its ground. The peasants, the apparently part-time part-trained warriors of the 'general fyrd' get one whiff of victory and there they are, charging down the hill as an ill-disciplined rabble, leaving the Anglo-Saxon gamer doing some serious head-scratching, wondering what went wrong.

So that is the Anglo-Saxons on the tabletop: 'not the most exciting', as Neil Thomas characterized it in his *Ancient and Medieval Wargaming* (2007), but it 'can be very effective'. Those who managed to reflight Hastings and learn the lessons of history could attest to Neil's point, but as a young gamer I was struck by an otherwise impressive demonstration game of the Battle of Hastings at a wargames show a few years ago.

"Wow," my younger self commented, "it must be cool to get to fight the Battle of Hastings on a scale like this".

"Not really," came the reply, "if you're the Saxons it's pretty boring".

I paraphrase and I'm sure that the discussion was more involved than that, referring to recent rule mechanisms and suchlike, but the point is there. One young gamer almost (but not quite) put off one of the most fascinating areas of European history as a source for tabletop gaming.

In writing on the evidence for Anglo-Saxon warfare in the Viking Age (roughly from the Ninth to the Eleventh Centuries) I've been struck by both the ways in



Above: A final stand by Saxons warriors around their lord. Figures by Gripping Beast.

which wargaming with Anglo-Saxons follows quite a conservative pattern and by the fact that if we look beyond this, there is a range of possibilities for wargaming. Now I realized while writing this article that Barry Hilton's classification on wargamer types (W1266) could place me dangerously in the category of 'the period bore' but I want to stress here that the point is not to be held down by the repetition of wargaming dogmas. The Anglo-Saxons are very much a victim of this: thou shalt not bring horses on the battlefield; though shalt remember thy corls, that sort of thing. There is a range of evidence out there and it doesn't all say the same thing, but thinking again about it can be useful. What follows is my attempt to throw a couple of cats amongst the pigeons.

## FYRD DINKUM, MATE...

For me, the big problem is the idea of the 'Great Fyrd' (a.k.a. the 'General Fyrd'), with its littler, but more able, brother the 'Select Fyrd'. This is reflected in many Anglo-Saxon army lists and figure ranges, in which unarmoured, often raggedly and poorly-armed peasants (corls) predominate. I have to admit that this had been an attraction of collecting an Anglo-Saxon wargames army to begin with. 'Half-armed rustics' (as one Nineteenth-Century author referred to them) are quite easy to paint and allow an army to be bulked out, allowing a bit of effort focused on the "bling" of a few thegns to really stand out. Then there was the added bonus that your average peasant doesn't look out of place in a Fourteenth-Century battlefield if needs be, so you can collect for a range of medieval wargames.

But the problem is that there just isn't evidence for a 'Great Fyrd' and a 'Select Fyrd' as distinct groups. The roots of the origins of this distinction, at least the recent roots, lie in a book published in 1962 called *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* by Warren Hollister. Now I won't bore you with the details (though it is actually quite a short book and still in print), but its author never intended the terms 'Select Fyrd' and 'Great Fyrd' to be anything more than convenient terms to describe two groups. The first, he saw as representing the obligation of one man from every five hides of land (6-700 acres or thereabouts) to turn out, when required, for a military expedition (that's what a 'fyrd' means, literally a journey). The second, the so-called 'Great Fyrd', he saw as every able-bodied man turning out in the kingdom in cases of emergency.

Writing about the first group was actually pretty revolutionary for the time, and Hollister's work on that group was rather less influential than it ought to have been, but it was the second group which seems to have continued to be so influential, finding its way into wargames rules, often under the catch-all moniker of 'fyrd'. In fact, there is very little evidence of armies of half-trained peasants in late

Anglo-Saxon England. Don't despair if you have such peasants in a miniature army; they will come in handy in some situations (more anon) but it seems very unlikely that they played much of a role in fighting on the battlefield, certainly not as anything like a 'Great Fyrd'. Records in the contemporary history, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, of 'all the people' being gathered against Vikings, have been thought to be references to every able-bodied man coming to war, but actually refer to the forces from across neighbouring shires (counties) to distinguish the occasions from the gathering of a force from a single shire. Not everybody followed Hollister's divisions of the Anglo-Saxon army, but a different - and, to my mind, more likely - distinction in Anglo-Saxon forces was noticed in a book published in 1988 by Richard Abels, called *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England*.

In this other interpretation there were what Abels called the fyrdmen of 'group A' and those of 'group B'. It seems a pity that the terms 'Select Fyrd' and 'Great Fyrd' were already bagged by Hollister as they would work just as well (especially for wargamers) to describe Abels's groups, which were basically, the thegns of the king - those

**"But the problem is that there just isn't evidence for a 'Great Fyrd' and a 'Select Fyrd' as distinct groups."**

The Saxon army prepares to move forward.

