

# Fact or folklore: the Viking attack on London Bridge

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One of the most dramatic events in London's history is the Viking attack, led by Óláfr (or Olaf) Haraldsson on London Bridge. However, as it is not mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, some historians doubt it took place. Brooke summed up the problem of the historical authenticity of the attack thus: "How much of this vivid scene belongs to the age of St Olaf, how much to imagination playing on the old wooden bridge in its last days at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, is a nice question. What is certain is that Æthelred returned, and that in the confused campaigns which followed London remained the key to his power; it is equally certain that St Olaf's memory was kept alive in London by the dedication of six churches to him, one, in Southwark, very close to the bridge he is supposed to have pulled down".<sup>1</sup> We wish to re-examine the historical context and date of this alleged attack in the light of new research. Also we wish to reconsider the work of the poet or skáld, Ottarr the Black, who was the first person to describe this event. Clark recently reviewed the linguistic origins of the London Bridge nursery rhyme, debunking the popularly held belief that it enshrines an English folk memory of the Viking attack.<sup>2</sup>

## The Scandinavian invasions of England 991–1013

In 991 the Scandinavian or Viking forces led by Óláfr Tryggvasson, Jostein and Guthmund Steitasson defeated the Anglo-Saxon forces at the Battle of Maldon.<sup>3</sup> This crushing defeat forced the English King Æthelred II 'the Unready',<sup>4</sup> to conclude a peace treaty with the victors and pay them £10,000 in *Danegeld* (tribute) in gold and silver.<sup>5</sup> It is widely believed that such tribute was paid by Æthelred to get the Scandinavians to return home, when in fact it was paid to conclude treaties and truces or make them change sides.<sup>6</sup> Óláfr Tryggvasson, who was a Norwegian

adventurer, now became one of the commanders of Æthelred's mercenary army and he was baptised in 994. In 995–7 he returned home to become King of Norway. He only reigned until 1000 when he was defeated at the Battle of Svöld and the victor, Eirik Hakonarson, became ruler of Norway, but as a Danish vassal. It is quite likely that Óláfr Tryggvasson had received English assistance in his bid for power, in an attempt by Æthelred to weaken his enemies.<sup>7</sup>

The years after 991 were followed by more Scandinavian raids on England and by further payments of *Danegeld* in 994, 1002 and 1006. In 1009 Æthelred gathered a fleet at Sandwich to repel the expected invasion, but this measure failed as a large part of his fleet either went raiding along the south coast or was lost in storms. The remaining vessels were withdrawn to London to bar the Thames to Thorkell the Tall's invasion fleet. In August 1009 Thorkell's army landed in Kent, and attacked Canterbury, which promptly paid them £3,000 in *Danegeld* to save the city from destruction, and then they unsuccessfully attacked London.<sup>8</sup> It is possible that this failure was due to the presence of a fortified bridge, which had been built since the successful attack on London in September 993, to prevent further marine incursions up the Thames.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, there is both archaeological and historical evidence for the existence of London Bridge by c. 1000. The first phase of the Saxo-Norman Bridge was constructed of timber felled c. 987–1032, and it was replaced by a second bridge constructed after 1056.<sup>10</sup> The existence of a Saxo-Norman London Bridge is first documented in a law code known as 'IV Æthelred', which includes a section on London tolls and regulations. Interestingly this section ends with the words – 'if the king concede that to us', which implies that it was the Londoners who were codifying their own rules.<sup>11</sup> It is widely accepted that this code is a hybrid document and



**Fig. 1: a reconstruction of the 1014 Viking attack on London Bridge by Peter Jackson**

when it was issued is uncertain. However, recent research suggests that it may have been issued by Æthelred in the mid-990s.<sup>12</sup>

In 1012 Thorkell made peace with the English and his army received £48,000 in *Danegeld*.<sup>13</sup> Thorkell remained in England afterwards with a fleet of 45 ships to defend the country against his fellow Scandinavians as a part of his arrangement with Æthelred.<sup>14</sup> This action would have meant Thorkell had renounced any allegiance he may have owed to Swein Forkbeard, King of Denmark.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this arrangement seems similar to the one that Æthelred had formerly made with Óláfr Tryggvasson.

In 1013 Swein invaded England. His motives were undoubtedly to extend his own domains and to check Thorkell's power as a potential rival. Swein's campaign was a brilliant success and soon the whole of southern England north of Watling Street, apart from London, had capitulated to him. In London Æthelred and Thorkell still held out. However, shortly before Swein's death in February 1014 London capitulated to Swein. Æthelred was deposed and he fled to Normandy, but Thorkell's fleet remained at Greenwich.<sup>16</sup> After Swein's death there was regal chaos. The Scandinavian army in England chose Swein's second son Cnut as their king, but at home in Denmark Cnut's brother Harold became king and it was only after his death in 1018 or 1019 that Cnut took over the Danish throne. The *Witan* asked Æthelred to

return to the throne, so he returned home and Thorkell got his old employer back plus £21,000 in *Danegeld*.<sup>17</sup> The fact that only the people of Lindsey (North Lincolnshire) supported Cnut and that the English nobility felt able to invite Æthelred to return, implies Cnut had little control over Swein's newly conquered territories. Presumably Swein had realised that London was the key to controlling the kingdom, so he would have garrisoned it with trustworthy troops to ensure the loyalty of the city. According to the skalds Ottarr the Black and Sigvat, London Bridge and the Southwark bridgehead were strongly defended by such troops.<sup>18</sup> So Æthelred first sought to recapture London from Anglo-Scandinavian forces loyal to Cnut. The recapture of London apparently involved the ships of Óláfr Haraldsson another Norwegian adventurer.

## **Óláfr Haraldsson and the attack on London Bridge**

The chronology of Óláfr's early career as a soldier is uncertain. It is possible that he had previously served as a mercenary with Thorkell's forces in England or Jutland.<sup>19</sup> According to Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241), the Icelandic historian, Óláfr was one of Æthelred's army commanders, who volunteered to lead his ships in a daring attack on London Bridge. Snorri states that this attack was only undertaken to help Æthelred regain his throne, which places it after

Swein's death and before Æthelred's own death in 1016.<sup>20</sup> The attack on the bridge in 1014 involved sailing westwards upstream to the defended timber bridge, fixing ropes and grappling irons to it, then sailing downstream again and pulling down or badly damaging the superstructure of the bridge and compelling its defenders to surrender London to Æthelred's forces (Fig. 1).<sup>21</sup> Next, Æthelred's forces defeated the Scandinavians and their allies in Lindsey, forcing Cnut into exile.<sup>22</sup> According to Snorri, Óláfr then helped Æthelred recover Canterbury and other territories and he may have remained in England until 1016, after which he probably went raiding in western Europe.<sup>23</sup>

In 1016 Cnut returned to England with a large army intending to seize the English throne. Shortly after his arrival on 23 April, Æthelred died in London (aged *c.* 50) worn out by years of 'great toil and difficulties'.<sup>24</sup> The succession to the English throne was disputed; the Londoners wanted Æthelred's eldest son Edmund Ironside to rule, but others preferred Cnut. In May 1016 Cnut's forces attempted to sail up the Thames, but they were unable to capture London Bridge and dragged their ships overland across north Southwark, so they could continue upstream.<sup>25</sup> The matter of the succession to the English throne was decided on 30 November 1016 by Edmund's sudden death, an event which made Cnut the Great the undisputed king of England until his own death in 1035.<sup>26</sup> In 1017 Cnut partitioned England into four provinces, ruling Wessex himself and giving East Anglia to Thorkell, by way of thanks for his support.<sup>27</sup>

The part Óláfr played in these events is uncertain, as according to traditional chronology he gained the throne of Norway in 1016, presumably taking advantage of Cnut's preoccupation with English affairs. Recently, it has been argued that in 1017 Óláfr over-wintered in Normandy and took part in an unsuccessful attack on England with Æthelred's younger sons and only returned to Norway in 1018 to become king.<sup>28</sup> However, in 1029 Óláfr was driven into exile by forces loyal to Cnut. The following year Óláfr died at the Battle of Stiklestad attempting to regain his throne. After Óláfr's death Cnut ruled Norway. Óláfr was buried at Nidaros (Trondheim), where miracles begun to occur, which led to his

canonization. His popularity as a saint was greatly boosted by the widespread hatred of Cnut's son Swein, who ruled Norway as his father's regent. After Cnut's death in 1035 the Norwegians asked Óláfr's son Magnus 'the good' to be their king, and he ruled until 1047. St Óláfr was a popular saint in England too; the parish church at the southern end of the bridge was one of six churches in medieval London and Southwark dedicated to him.<sup>29</sup>

### **Ottarr the Black – Icelandic poet (skáld)**

The oldest sagas about Óláfr Haraldsson (St Olaf) relate a story about the poet Ottarr Svarti (the black) who on one occasion was compelled to compose a *drápa* (elaborate poem) about the king in order to pacify him and thus save his own head.<sup>30</sup> Such a poem was referred to as *HÁfuðlausn* 'Head-Ransom'. Just a few stanzas of Ottarr's poem are quoted in the sagas about Óláfr Haraldsson. A poem of 20 stanzas has, nonetheless, been pieced together from different sources, mainly from manuscripts of the *Heimskringla*, by scholars of later times. The order of the stanzas, suggested first and foremost by Jónsson,<sup>31</sup> has not been seriously challenged by later scholars, such as Fidjestøl.<sup>32</sup> The interpretation of individual stanzas has, however, been subject to discussion. Stanza no 7 of *HÁfuðlausn* is quoted by Snorri in the *Heimskringla* in evidence for Óláfr Haraldson's raids in England – the sixth attack leading to the tearing down of London bridge[s] related in ch. 16 of Óláfr's saga. In this stanza the destruction of *Lundúna bryggjur* – London Bridge[s] – is mentioned.<sup>33</sup> The first part of Ottarr's *HÁfuðlausn* is in content close to Sigvat skáld's *Vikinga-vísur* (Viking poems). In the *Heimskringla* Snorri made use of stanzas from both these skálds as evidence for Óláfr's battles in England, among others the stanza by Sigvat that mentions the attack on *Suðrvirki*.<sup>34</sup> The second half of this stanza is quoted also in the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise* – a linguistic analysis of Old Icelandic material from the mid-12th century.<sup>35</sup>

The point of interest is the first half of the stanza in which the *Lundúna bryggjur* are mentioned (the wording of the second part of the stanza is

not discussed here).<sup>36</sup> The complex syntax of the first half stanza may be rewritten in the syntax of ordinary prose in slightly different ways, without changing the content significantly – at least when our purpose here is concerned:

*Enn brauzt bryggjur Lundúna, Yggs veðrþorinn*  
[or: *gunnþorinn*] *éla linns kennir, þér hefr snúnat*  
*at vinna lÁnd.*

Alternatively:

*Enn brauzt bryggjur Lundúna, Yggs veðrþorinn*  
[or: *gunnþorinn*] *éla kennir, þér hefr snúnat*  
*at vinna linns lÁnd.*

Comments on the significant ‘kennings’ of these two readings:

1. *Yggs veðrþorinn* [or: *gunnþorinn*] *éla linns kennir*

*Yggr* = Odin, *él* = hailstorm, *Yggs él* = battle  
*linnr* = lit. ‘a snake’, *Yggs éla linn* = the battle’s  
snake = a sword

*kennir* = he who knows, *Yggs éla linns kennir* =  
‘he who knows the sword’ = the warrior.

*veðrþorinn* [or: *gunnþorinn*] = ‘daring’, ‘stout-  
hearted’, even ‘gallant’.

2. *linns lÁnd*. – *linnr* – ‘snake’ may in some  
contexts also be associated with gold. The phrase

*linns lÁnd* has in consequence by some scholars  
been interpreted as ‘gold’.<sup>37</sup>

Suggested translation of the first alternative:

“Yet you broke [destroyed] the bridge[s] of  
London, stout-hearted warrior, you succeeded in  
conquering land”.

Second alternative:

“Yet you broke [destroyed] the bridge[s] of  
London, stout-hearted warrior, you succeeded in  
conquering gold.”

## Discussion

The opening lines of Ottarr’s stanza 7 reads :

Yet you broke [destroyed] the bridge[s] of  
London,<sup>38</sup>

Stout-hearted warrior,

You succeeded in conquering the land.

*Iron* (earn) swords made headway

Strongly urged to conflict;

Ancient shields were broken,

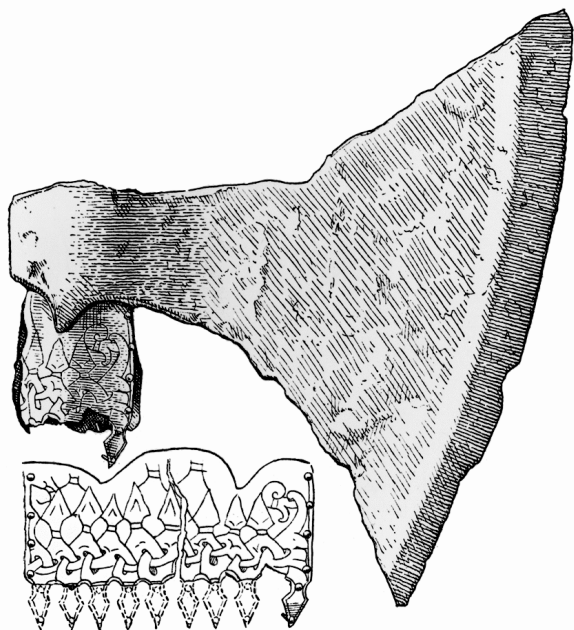
Battle’s fury mounted.

The wording of the third line and its possible  
variations are interesting. They offer a motive for  
Óláfr’s actions as they could have furnished him  
with both the gold and prestige required to make  
his own bid for the Norwegian throne a few years  
later (discussed earlier). It is worth considering  
whether the English might have encouraged or  
even financed Óláfr’s bid to become king in the  
same way they may have done for his namesake  
some 20 years earlier to create conflict amongst  
their enemies.

## Conclusions

As skaldic verse contains little Anglo-Saxon  
material, it has been under-used as a source by  
some English historians. One student of Anglo-  
Saxon material in skaldic verse has observed that  
the “information in the skaldic verses though not  
fully confirmed elsewhere, has a general  
plausibility that encourages acceptance and adds  
to our awareness of the deficiencies of our main  
source.”<sup>39</sup>

The question of whether or not the alleged attack  
took place on London Bridge in 1014 cannot be  
proven in so far as it is not described in  
contemporary English documents, but as the



**Fig. 2: 11th century Viking battle axe with an ornamented socket recovered from the Thames near London Bridge, length of blade 208 mm (source MoLpl; Wheeler 1927 fig 3, A23346).**

existence of many of the events described in the *Heimskringla* compiled by Snorri can be corroborated by other sources, there is no reason to disbelieve his account of the attack on London Bridge. It has a very plausible context within the turbulent history of this period, if Howard's revised chronology is accepted.<sup>40</sup> Certainly there was a bridge standing at this time for Æthelred's forces to attack. Dredging and redevelopment near the site of the medieval bridge has produced a number of spearheads, battle axes and a grappling iron of 9th- to 11th-century date, some of which may be of Scandinavian origin. However, it has been suggested that some of the axes may have been lost by carpenters during bridge construction, not dropped in battle ( Fig. 2).<sup>41</sup> The extent of the damage inflicted on the timber bridge may well have been exaggerated as Ottarr's life apparently depended on Óláfr's approval of his composition (discussed earlier). The attack by ship-borne forces on a defended

bridge during the 11th century was clearly a very bold undertaking, so Óláfr's success in 1014 could be favourably contrasted with his enemy Cnut's failure in 1016.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to John Clark of the Early Department of the Museum of London for his assistance with aspects of our research, and to the late Peter Jackson for permission to reproduce Fig. 1. This image along with another ten of his paintings appear in B. Watson *Old London Bridge lost and found* (MoLAS 2004). Fig. 2 is reproduced by kind permission of the Museum of London picture library. Thanks to NIKU, the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research ([www.niku.no](http://www.niku.no)) for providing the cover image of the St Óláfr altar frontage for details see [www.niku.no/olvasfro/english/1\\_olvas.htm](http://www.niku.no/olvasfro/english/1_olvas.htm). The photograph was taken by Birger R. Lindstad.

1. C. Brooke assisted by G. Keir *London 800–1216: the shaping of a city* (1975) 22.
2. J. Clark 'London Bridge and the archaeology of a nursery rhyme' *London Archaeol* 9 (2002) 338–340.
3. H. R. Loyn *The Vikings in Britain* (1977) 83; R. Lavelle *Aethelred II King of the English 978-1016* (2002) 68–70.
4. Æthelred was King of England from 979 until the autumn of 1013, when he was deposed by Swein Forkbeard, who ruled until his death in 1014, when Æthelred regained the throne and ruled until his own death in April 1016.
5. Loyn *op cit* fn 3, 83.
6. I. Howard *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England, 991-1017* (2003) 145.
7. Lavelle *op cit* fn 3, 74–77.
8. Lavelle *op cit* fn 3, 118–21; D. Whitelock (ed) *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1961) 89–90.
9. This attack is often wrongly ascribed to 994; Howard *op cit* fn 6, 42–43.
10. B. Watson, T. Brigham and T. Dyson *London Bridge: 2000 Years of a River Crossing* MoLAS monograph 8 (2001), 57, 75.
11. P. Wormald *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century Vol 1*, (1999) 322.
12. Wormald *op cit* fn 11, 443. Previous research has dated the issue of this law code to c. 1000 and accepted that elements of it date from the last years of Cnut's reign (1016–35), see Watson *et al* *op cit* fn 10, 57.
13. Whitelock fn 8, *op cit* 91.
14. Howard *op cit* fn 6, 97–98.
15. Swein was the illegitimate son of King Harold Blue Tooth, King of Denmark, ruler of southern Sweden and overlord of Norway. After Harold's death in c. 987, he was accepted as king as all Harold's legitimate sons were already dead.
16. Whitelock *fn 8*, (1961) 93.
17. The *Witan* was the Anglo-Saxon national council; Whitelock *op cit* (1961) 93; Lavelle *op cit* fn 3, 131.
18. J.R. Hagland, ch 14.12 'Saxo-Norman London Bridge and Southwark – the saga evidence reconsidered', in Watson *et al*, *op cit* fn 10, 232–3.
19. Howard, *op cit* fn 6 appendix 1, 147–62, explains the serious chronological discrepancies within the various historical sources. He argues that Óláfr's fifth battle, when he was serving with Thorkell took place at Friesland, Denmark in 1010 or 1011. Óláfr fought his sixth battle at London Bridge in 1014. His seventh battle is cited as Hringmaraheiðr (1015), identified as Ringmere pit, near Thetford, Norfolk, a strategic location where there was an earlier battle fought in 1010, see Howard *op cit* fn 6, 88. Previously Óláfr's seventh battle was dated to 1010. Óláfr's eighth battle was the capture of Canterbury; previously equated with the 1011 siege of Canterbury; While the ninth battle was fought at Nyjamóð[a], identified as Newemouth near Orford, Suffolk (1015-16), see R. Poole, 'Skaldic verse and Anglo-Saxon history: some aspects of the period 1009–1016', *Speculum* 62 No 2, (1987) 268–78.

# Books

## Aspects of Archaeology & History on Surrey: towards a research framework for the county

Edited by Jonathan Cotton, Glenys Crocker and Audrey Graham

*Surrey Archaeological Society*, 2004

260 pages, 120 photographs and drawings in colour and in black and white, bibliographies and index.

£24.70 paperback including p&p.

This book consists mainly, but not entirely, of papers given at the conference *Archaeology in Surrey 2001: Towards a Research Agenda for the 21st century*. Eighteen chapters deal with aspects of Surrey's past from the Palaeolithic to WWII,

and bring the reader up to date on the latest discoveries and ideas. Since the arrival of PPG 16, archaeological interventions in Surrey have multiplied and many new sites, particularly prehistoric ones, have come to light. At the same time, this increasing knowledge focuses attention on what we still don't know, which is considerable, and on where further work is needed. London readers may be particularly interested in John Schofield's 'What did London do for us?', which examines the impact of London on its hinterland from 1450 to 1700, drawing on sources that may not be familiar to most archaeologists. Also welcome in such a volume

(continued on p. 334)

- Óláfr' was King of Norway from c. 1018–30, traditionally his reign is cited as 15 years (1016–30).
20. Hagland *op cit* fn 18, 232–3.
  21. This attack is only described in the Olaf sagas, plus the works of Ottarr the Black and Sigat þorðarson, see Watson *et al*, *op cit* fn 10, 57, 80; Hagland *op cit* fn 18, and B. Watson *Old London Bridge lost and found* (2004) 22–24.
  22. Whitelock *op cit* fn 8, 93.
  23. Howard *op cit* fn 6, 122, 160.
  24. Whitelock *op cit* fn 8, 95.
  25. Whitelock *op cit* fn 8, 95.
  26. For most of this period Cnut was also King of Denmark, for some of it he was King of Norway and in addition ruler of part of Sweden.
  27. Howard *op cit* fn 6, 141.
  28. Howard *op cit* fn 6, 160.
  29. M. Carlin and V. Belcher 'Gazetteer' in *The City of London, British Atlas of Hist Towns* 3 (1989) 91. The churches are: St Olave's Broad Street, Hart Street, Old Jewry, Silver Street, and St Nicholas Olave Bread Street in the City of London; plus St Olave's Tooley Street, Southwark.
  30. O.A. Johnsen and Jón Helgason, *Saga Óláfs konungs hins helga. Den store saga om Olav den hellige*. Oslo (Norsk historisk kjeldeskrift-institutt) (1941) 689, 706.
  31. F. Jónsson *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigting* I. A. Tekst efter Håndskrifterne, B. Rettet Tekst. København og Kristiania (Gyldendalske Boghandel. Nordisk Forlag) (1912).
  32. B. Fidjestøl *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*. Øvre Ervik (Alvheim and Eide) (1982) 123–24.
  33. See Hagland *op cit* (2001) 232–3 for details of primary sources.
  34. For an unrestored version of Ottarr's stanza no 7 in Heimskringla see Jónsson *op cit* fn 31, A, 291–2.
  35. The second part of Ottarr's stanza no 7 is included in the 14th century Codex Wormianus manuscript H. Benediktsson *The First Grammatical Treatise*, Univ. of Iceland Publications in Linguistics No 1. Reykjavík (1972) 226.
  36. Benediktsson *op cit* fn 35, 227 and E. Haugen *First Grammatical Treatise. The Earliest Germanic Phonology*, second, revised edition. (1972) 21.
  37. The latter interpretation is less convincing in the opinion of Ashdown's translation of the opening lines of Ottarr's stanza reads – 'And further, O provers of the serpent of Ygg's storms, valiant in war, you broke down London's bridge'. M. Ashdown *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (1930) 220.
  38. The use of the plural 'bridges' to refer to a single bridge is quite common in the sagas and related literature.
  39. Poole *op cit* (1987) 298.
  40. Howard *op cit* fn 6, appendix 1, 147–62.
  41. R.E.M. Wheeler *London the Vikings*, London Mus catalogue 1 (1927) fig 1 18; Watson *et al*, *op cit* fn 10, 54. The finds-spot of the material illustrated by Wheeler in Fig. 1 is believed to be the 1921–25 redevelopment of Adelaide House, King William Street, John Clark (*pers comm*). MoL accession numbers: battle axes A23339–A23343 and A23345–A23346; felling axe A23344; grappling hook A23347; spears A23348–A23353, tongs A23506. There also a battle axe A25364 from the adjoining site of New Fresh Wharf, it was apparently found during the 1937 redevelopment of this site.