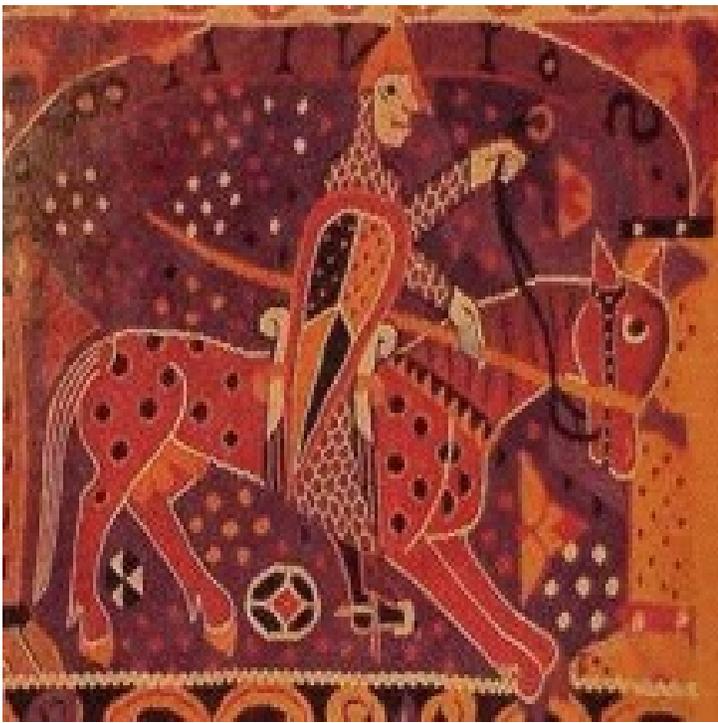


The Viking “Air Force”: How Norway’s King Harald Copied Russia’s Queen Olga

Viking brawn and booty, yes, — but also brains ! Viking muscle and might, used for piracy and plunder, is well-known, — but what about Viking brain-power? Historically, the Vikings prided themselves on their shrewdness and wisdom, perhaps moreso than on physical power and ferocity.

One classic example of those Viking traits, living inside one giant of a man,¹ was Norway’s 11th century Viking king, **Harald III “Harðráðe”** (“Harsh-ruler”) Sigurdsson, the founder of Norway’s capital city, Oslo. Surely Harald was famous for both his brawn² and his booty³, but also for his brains!⁴



Harald first appears, in history, as a 15-year-old, fighting in the Battle of Stiklestad (August 31, 1030). Harald is wounded while fighting for his brother, Norway’s King Olaf the Holy (“St. Olaf”). King Olaf is killed in battle, but the wounded Harald escapes (with help) to Sweden, then to Russia. Many adventures involving Harald soon follow.



Harald’s daring decades of travels and truculence began in the Baltic (e.g., Poland in 1031), with Novgorod’s ruler Jaroslav (a co-king of Russia, then), followed by Harald’s journey south of Russia (with a group of adventurous Viking “Varangian” companions) into the Byzantine Greek Empire (a/k/a the Eastern “Roman” Empire). While adventuring in the Byzantine territories, Harald and his men achieve fame and fortune in Constantinople, Sicily, and the Holy Land, – even visiting Jerusalem, and bathing in the Jordan River. After campaigning in “the land of the Saracens” (i.e., Muslim-populated Mediterranean coast-lands and various parts of Asia Minor), and conquering at least 80 cities there,

Harald returns to Russia, in 1042, to the court of his friend, King Jaroslav, who now rules all of Russia.

While in Russia, Harald marries Russian princess Elizabeth, King Jaroslav's daughter.⁵ A few years later he returns (with Elizabeth) to his native Norway, to become Norway's joint-king (in 1046) with his nephew, King Magnus.

For the next few years Harald wars against Denmark



(against King Svein, who once tried to assassinate Harald), until he is invited, at age 51, to invade England.

But it was in England where Harald made a fatefully reckless decision (in reaction to a military surprise), and he soon died for it.

To the shock of many who knew him, the seemingly invincible King of Norway, Harald Hardråde, **was killed by an arrow in his throat**, during the Battle of Stamford Bridge (Monday, September 25th, 1066), not far from Jorvik (i.e., York), almost 3 weeks before Normandy's William the Conqueror wins the Kingdom England in the Battle of Hastings (Saturday, October 14th, 1066). So, Harald's invasion in September (of 1066) weakened England's defenders, catalyzing the defenders' defeat by the Normans' "second wave" invasion, in October, the last time England was conquered !



Of course, King Harald's 3 dozen years of adventures are too much and too many for this paper. However, one episode in Harald's colorful campaigns deserves special attention, because of its connection to Russia, involving King Jaroslav's family history. Specifically, Harald's first

siege in Sicily, which is recorded in the sixth chapter of *Harald's Saga*, involves a type of Viking “air force”, an idea Harald surely learned at Jaroslav’s court in Novgorod. Yet in order to recognize this “Russian connection”, we first review *Harald's Saga*’s sixth chapter, titled “In Sicily”:

As soon as Harald landed in Sicily he started plundering there too, and laid siege to a large and populous town. He surrounded it, because he realized that the walls were too stout to be broken down. But the townsmen had plenty of provisions and all other necessities to withstand a siege.

So now Harald thought up a scheme: he told his bird-catchers to catch the small birds that nested within the town and flew out to the woods each day in search of food. **Harald had small shavings of fir tied to the backs of the birds, and then he smeared the shavings with wax and sulphur and set fire to them.** As soon as the birds were released they all flew straight home to their young in their nests in the town; the nests were under the eaves of the roofs, which were thatched with reeds or straw. **The thatched roofs caught fire from the birds, and although each bird could only carry a tiny flame, it quickly became a great fire; a host of birds set roofs alight all over the town. One house after another caught fire, and soon the whole town was ablaze.** At that all the people came out of the town, begging for mercy – the very same people who had been shouting defiant insults at the Greek army and its leader for days on end. Harald spared the lives of all those who begged for quarter, and took control of the town.



Quoting Chapter 6 of Snorri Sturluson’s King Harald’s Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway (Penguin Classics, 1966 translation from Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, by Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson), pages 52–53.

Quite a clever strategy Harald employed! Was he a military genius to do so? Before answering that question, consider first some Russian Viking history, i.e., some history of the Viking dynasty that established the Russian nation.

A Baltic Viking named Rurik ruled in Russia, in the late 800s. When Rurik died, his brother Oleg ruled as regent for a time, while Rurik’s son Igor grew to manhood. Then, Rurik’s son Igor ruled Russia, with serious help from his wise wife, Queen Olga (during the early-to-middle 900s). One of Igor’s sons (via Olga) was Svyatoslav, who ruled in Russia (as Rurik’s grandson) during the mid-to-late 900s. One of Svyatoslav’s sons (and thus Rurik’s great-grandson) was Vladimir, who ruled in Russia during the late 900s and early 1000s. One of Vladimir’s sons (and thus Rurik’s great-great-grandson) was Jaroslav, who ruled in Russia during the early-to-middle 1000s. It was he who befriended Harald Sigurdsson during the early 1000s, and it was a Jaroslav’s daughter (Elizabeth Jaroslavsdottir) whom Harald Sigurdsson married during the 1040s. (In fact, Harald’s

wife Elizabeth accompanied Harald when he invaded England in 1066; she survived that war.)

As the above family history shows, Harald was a friend of Russia's King Jaroslav, and



Jaroslav was the great-grandson of Igor and Olga. It is thus unsurprising that Harald would have learned of Olga's military adventures, as a result of attending Jaroslav's court in Novgorod. But what adventures did Queen Olga have, — which could be relevant to Harald's siege in Sicily?



Olga (a/k/a Helga, who ruled Russia from A.D. 945 to 964) was the queen of Russia's Rurikid king (or "prince"), **Igor Ruriksson**, who ruled Kiev and its environs, from A.D. 913 until A.D. 945, when Igor was killed by Derevlyanins (a/k/a Drevlianians), a neighboring people-group.

Very soon, the victory-flushed Derevlyanins sent messengers to the just-widowed Queen Olga, proposing that she accept a re-marriage to their ruler, Mal. (This marriage proposal was communicated as a Godfather-like "offer" she "could not refuse", i.e., a turf-war variation of the shotgun-wedding concept!) It appeared that the Derevlyanins would summarily assassinate the under-age monarch, the boy prince Svyatoslav.

With cunning wisdom (and a goal of revenge), Queen Olga negotiated some time she needed to re-group, as she devised counter-attack schemes, — then she replied to Mal's "proposal".

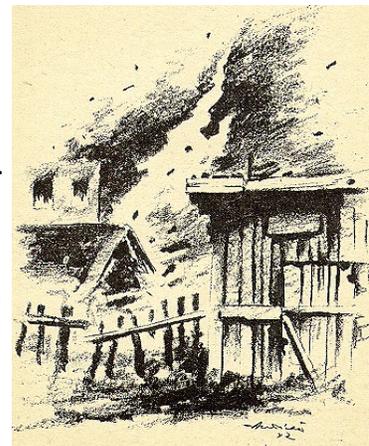
Olga, Igor's widow, was in Kiev with her son, the child Svyatoslav. The Derevlyanins said, 'Now we have killed the prince of Rus. Let us take his wife Olga to marry our prince Mal; and let's take Svyatoslav and do what we want with him.' The Derevlyanins sent their best men, twenty in number, in a boat to Olga. Olga was told that the Derevlyanins had come. She summoned them to her and said: 'Welcome, strangers. Tell me why you have come her.' The Derevlyanins said, 'The land of Dereva sent us to say this: *We have killed your husband. For your husband was like a wolf, stealing and plundering, while our princes are good and have taken good care of the land of Dereva. Marry our prince Mal!*' . . . And Olga said to them, 'Your words please me. I cannot resurrect my husband. But I want to honour you tomorrow before my people. Go to your boat, and wait there with pride. Tomorrow I will send for you. You will say, "We will not ride on horses, nor go on foot; carry us in the boat!" And they will carry you up in the boat.' Then she dismissed them.

Olga ordered a big and deep pit to be dug at the tower yard outside the keep. In the morning, sitting in the tower, she sent for the guests. The Derevlyanins replied, “We will not ride on horses or on carts nor will we go afoot; carry us in the boat!” So they began to carry them in the boat. The Derevlyanins sat on the [boat] benches with their great buckles, proudly, and were carried into the yard to Olga. When they had arrived, the Kievans threw them into the pit, with the boat as well. Leaning down, Olga said to them, ‘Is this honour good enough for you?’ And they said, ‘It is worse for us than Igor’s death.’ She ordered them to be buried alive, and they buried them.

Olga then sent to the Derevlyanins and said to them, ‘If you are really asking for me, send distinguished men, so that I may come in duly great honour to marry your prince; otherwise the people of Kiev will not let me go.’ When the Derevlyanins heard that, they chose the best [remaining] men, who were in charge of the land of Derevna, and sent for her. When the Derevlyanins came, Olga ordered a bath to be prepared, saying, “Wash yourselves and come to me.” The [sauna-like] hut was heated up and the Derevlyanins went in. They began to wash. Olga’s men barred the hut around them, and she ordered that it be set on fire, starting from the door. They are burned inside.

Olga hastened with her son [the boy Svyatoslav] to the town of Iskorosten, for they were the ones who had killed her husband. And she took up positions around the town with her son. She stayed through the summer but couldn’t [militarily] take the town. So she thought up this plan. She went to the town, saying, ‘Why do you want to sit out the siege; all your towns have surrendered and agree to pay [me] tribute? They are working their fields and land, but you will die from hunger, because you do not agree to pay tribute.’ The Derevlyanins said, ‘What do you want from us? We will gladly give honey and furs.’ She said, ‘Now you have neither honey nor furs, but I ask little of you. Give me three doves and three sparrows from each house. I do not want to levy heavy tribute like my husband, for you have become weak in the siege. Just give me this little bit.’ And the Derevlyanins were glad. They collected three doves and three sparrows from each household, and sent them to Olga. Olga said to them, ‘Now you have submitted to me and my child [Svyatoslav]. Go into the town and tomorrow I will move out and go to my own town.’ The Derevlyanins were glad. They went into the town and told the people, and the people rejoiced.

Olga distributed the doves to some soldiers and sparrows to others, and ordered them to tie tinder to each dove and sparrow, wrapping it up with thread to each of them. She ordered that as soon as it began to get dark her soldiers were to release the doves and sparrows [*igniting the tinder just before release*]. The doves and sparrows flew to their nests, the doves to their dove-cotes, and the sparrows under the eaves [*of houses and other buildings of the town*]. **In this way the dove-cotes caught fire, here outbuildings,**



there towers, elsewhere barns. There was no household where there was no fire, and it was impossible to put it out, for all the households had caught fire. The people fled the town, and Olga ordered her soldiers to capture them. As soon as she took the town, she burned [*the remainder of*] it.

The elders of the town she captured, and as for the rest of the people, some she killed and others she gave to her men as slaves, the rest she left to pay heavy tribute.⁶

Rough lady! So why is Queen Olga routinely depicted, in churches all over the lands of medieval Russia, in saintly glory? What occurred in A.D. 955, that re-defined her “wisdom”?

Olga, after reaching age 60, decided to visit Constantinople (a/k/a Byzantium, now called Istanbul), then capital of the Byzantine Greek Empire. She there became an Eastern Orthodox Christian, and was baptized as such by the Byzantine emperor (Constantine, son of Leo), taking the Greek baptismal name “Elena” (or “Helena”). “Olga returned to Kiev, where she lived with her son Svyatoslav. She kept instructing him to be baptized (as an act of decisively accepting the Christian faith), but he would not even hear of it. However, he said,

if anyone wanted to be baptized, it was not forbidden; but he [i.e., any Russian publicly professing to be a Christian] would be ridiculed. Olga often used to say, ‘I have come to know God, my son, and I rejoice. If you come to know Him you too will begin to rejoice.’

But he did not listen, saying, ‘How can I alone accept another faith? My retinue will laugh at it.’ And she said to him, ‘If you are baptized, everyone will have to do it too.’ But he did not heed his mother, and [Svyatoslav] kept pagan customs, not knowing that he who does not heed his mother will fall into misfortune. However, Olga loved her son Svyatoslav, saying, ‘May God’s will be done. If God wants to have mercy on my family and the land of Rus, let Him put it into their hearts to turn to God, as God granted me that gift.’ After she had said this, she prayed for her son and for the people all the time, night and day, while she nourished her son to manhood. Having reached maturity — and his mother Olga the ripe old age of 80 — Svyatoslav ruled as prince [or, to use the Viking sagas’ term, “*konung*”, king] of Kiev from 962.

Meanwhile, when Svyatoslav was away from Kiev, attacking other lands (e.g., Bulgars, Pechenegs), it was left to Olga to use her wisdom to defend the Russian capital from invaders (with a “near-miss” episode in 968).⁷ One of those she protected, during those perilous times, was a



grandson — Vladimir. In time, and in Providence, Olga’s prayer for Russia would be granted, in and through the amazing life (and conversion) of her grandson, Vladimir Svyatoslavsson.

It was Olga’s grandson, Vladimir, once thoroughly pagan, who became a Christian (in the Greek Orthodox tradition, albeit with a Russian variation), in part due to the friendship and influence of Christian Viking adventurer Olaf Tryggvasson (who later became king in Norway). And, it was King Vladimir who effectively mandated that the Russian Empire officially embrace Russian Orthodox Christianity. One of Vladimir’s sons, Jaroslav the Wise, would become both friend and father-in-law to the Varangian warrior, Harald Hardråde. **Now, having reviewed Olga’s adventures, it thus appears that Harald copied his “Viking air force” tactic from Olga, a case of copying from a great-great-grandmother-in-law !** © A.D. 2007 James J. S. Johnson



Depiction of the Battle of Stamford Bridge (September 25th, A.D. 1066)

1. *Harald’s Saga* (at § 99, pages 160–161) says he was 5 *ells* (Sturluson’s Icelandic “ell” = cubit, ~ 18 inches long) tall, i.e., about **7½ feet tall!** Also, Harald was famous for his long mail-coat, providing protection even as far down as Harald’s knees. Regrettably for Harald, however, at Stamford Bridge (where Harald was killed), he was caught not wearing his usual mail-coat.
2. *Harald’s Saga*, § 20, page 68, says: “Harald was much taller and stronger than most men” (See also the prior endnote, indicating that Harald’s height as being about 7½ feet tall.)
3. *Harald’s Saga*, § 5, page 52, says: “Harald spent several years ...[in Muslim-populated coastlands of the Mediterranean world] ... and garnered there an immense hoard of money, gold and treasure of all kinds. All the booty [that] he did not require for expenses he used to send by his own reliable messengers to Novgorod [in Russia] into the safe keeping of King Jaroslav. In this way Harald amassed a vast hoard of wealth — not surprisingly, considering that he had been plundering in the richest parts of the world where gold and treasure are the most plentiful, and considering the scale of his achievements there: it has already been stated in truth [on p. 51, by

the historian–poet Thjodolf] that he conquered eighty [Saracen] towns.”

4. Besides the “Viking air force” anecdote (which this article focuses on), Harald demonstrated Harald’s shrewdness is repeatedly shown in *Harald’s Saga*, — e.g., in § 1 (hiding after the Battle of Stiklestad, while recovering from battle wounds), § 2 (befriending King Jaroslav in Novgorod, his patron and future father-in-law), § 7 (tunneling to defeat a besieged city, a trick done before by Russia’s King Vladimir, the father of Jaroslav), § 12 (practicing reverence while in the Holy Land, in ways that communicated his Christian faith), § 15 (escaping from prison while in Constantinople), § 16 (securing his treasures in Russia), § 17 (successfully marrying Elizabeth, King Jaroslav’s daughter, and thereby securing alliances with the royal families of both Russia and Sweden), § 20 (succeeding in his Baltic adventures, by strategic alliances and shrewdness), § 22 (successfully suspecting and thwarting an assassin, by substituting a log for himself one night, so that the assassin, who attacked his bed with an ax, failed to ax Harald to death), § 24 (prudently negotiating a joint–kingship with his nephew Magnus), § 27 (practicing self–restraint when tensions arose between Harald and Magnus as joint kings of Norway), § 29 (Securing the entire kingdom of Norway promptly, as soon as his nephew King Magnus died of an illness), § 36 (helping the Icelanders during their time in serious need, which secured loyalty and friendship for Harald, as in many similar alliances), etc. In fact, King Harald was described by Sturluson as follows, in § 36 (at page 86): “King Harald was a powerful king and ruled his kingdom firmly; he was so shrewd a man that it is generally agreed that there was never a king in Scandinavia to match him in profound wisdom and acumen.”

However, despite Harald’s years of military experience, even with his invasion force of about 300 Viking ships, bearing some 9,000 Viking warriors, could not win the war at Stamford Bridge in September of 1066.

Even so, King Harald did have the practical foresight, in Trondheim, to designate his (illegitimate) son, Magnus Haraldsson, as joint king (and regent) of Norway, *before Harald left Norway to invade England*, ensuring that his son (as “Magnus II”) would perpetuate Harald’s line on Norway’s throne after Harald himself died. In another part of *Harald’s Saga* (§ 99, page 160), Snorri Sturluson eulogizes Harald’s wisdom, by saying: “It is generally agreed that King Harald had surpassed all other men in shrewdness and resourcefulness, whether he was taking sudden decisions or making long–term plans for himself or others.”

Brawn and booty? Yes, Harald had them both, but Harald had a good brain, too!
(*And hopefully, King Harald, who professed to have Christian faith, was truly wise enough to have a genuine saving faith in the real Jesus Christ, Whom Harald claimed to believe in.*)

5. *Harald’s Saga*, § 17, page 64, says; “King Jaroslav gave his daughter Elizabeth in marriage to Harald; the Norwegians call her Ellisif.” (*Check Dr. Bill Cooper for the proper spelling.*)

6. *Quoting The Russian Chronicles: A Thousand Years that Changed the World*, edited by Cecilia Walters (San Diego, Calif.: Thunder Bay Press, 2001), pages 37–38.

7. The Russian Chronicle says the Pecheneg ruler had Svyatoslav’s skull made into a chalice.