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My Ancestor's Fatal Mistake Changed the Whole World

To the worst for all of us

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How a hot September day, one forgotten chainmail, and a little too much Viking confidence reshaped the English language forever.



Grandpa Harald

My 24th great-grandfather, Harald, made a mistake on September 25, 1066. A BIG mistake. He left his chainmail, *Emma*, on his Viking ship because it was hot and he didn't expect any fighting that day. He had clearly not read his Hávamál recently and forgot to be vigilant.

Had he not done that, the English language would most likely have been much easier for us Scandinavians to learn today. MUCH easier. Without more than 10,000 incomprehensible French loanwords cluttering up what should have been a nice, sensible Germanic tongue.

Thanks a lot, grandpa.

The man they called “the Thunderbolt of the North.”

To be fair to Harald Hardrada, he had survived worse odds before. Much worse. The man had fought his way across half the known world, from the Byzantine Empire's Varangian Guard to Sicily, from Constantinople to the frozen fjords of Norway. He had accumulated more battle scars and war stories than most men do in a lifetime. By 1066, at around fifty years old, he was arguably the most legendary warrior alive.

So when he sailed to England with over 300 ships and roughly 10,000 Vikings to claim the English throne, he probably thought this would be just another conquest to add to his impressive resume. The early signs were encouraging. On September 20, his forces crushed the northern English army at the Battle of Gate Fulford so thoroughly that the survivors were driven into marshes to drown. York surrendered. England's north lay open.

Harald moved his army to Stamford Bridge to await hostages and tribute. It was a warm late September day, unseasonably warm, by English standards. The Norwegians had left their ships anchored about fifteen miles away at Riccall. Many warriors, including Harald himself, left their heavy chainmail armor on those ships.

Why carry all that weight on a pleasant stroll to collect tribute from defeated Englishmen?

This is where the Hávamál, the ancient Viking wisdom poem I've written about before, becomes painfully relevant. Verse 1 warns: *“Always observe your surroundings carefully before entering a new place. You never know where hidden dangers or enemies may be lurking.”* Verse 38 is even more direct: *“Never walk a single step in the open field*

without your weapons. The world is unpredictable, and you never know when you might need to defend yourself instantly.”

Harald had apparently forgotten both verses.

The English king who moved like lightning

What Harald didn't know — couldn't have known — was that King Harold Godwinson of England had already learned of the Norwegian invasion. And Harold was about to demonstrate something remarkable: he could move an entire army faster than anyone thought possible.

Harold had been waiting all summer on England's south coast, expecting an invasion from Normandy. When news of the Norwegian landing reached him around September 16, he wheeled his army northward and marched 185 miles in four to five days. That's roughly forty miles per day, an extraordinary pace for a medieval army, the equivalent of a forced march even by modern standards.

On the morning of September 25, Harald Hardrada was relaxing at Stamford Bridge, probably enjoying the unexpected sunshine, when his scouts reported a dust cloud on the horizon. Then a glittering line of approaching soldiers. Then the awful realization: this wasn't a delegation bringing hostages. This was the entire English army, and they were not in a negotiating mood.

According to Snorri Sturluson's saga, there was one last moment of potential peace. Harold Godwinson rode forward and offered his brother Tostig, who had treacherously allied with the Norwegians, forgiveness and restoration of his earldom if he would switch sides. When Tostig asked what Harold would offer the King of Norway, the reply was legendary:

”Seven feet of English ground, or as much more as he needs, as he is taller than most men.”

Diplomatic negotiations concluded.

A single arrow, an uncovered throat, a world transformed

What followed was a slaughter. The Vikings, many without armor, formed a shield wall and fought with desperate fury. A single Norwegian berserker allegedly held the bridge alone against the entire English army until someone floated under it on a

barrel and speared him from below. (The English, it seems, could be inventive when motivated.)

But the outcome was never really in doubt. Harald Hardrada, fighting in the front ranks without his beloved chainmail, was struck through the throat by an arrow. The “Thunderbolt of the North,” survivor of thirty years of warfare across three continents, died because of a warm afternoon and a moment of overconfidence.

Tostig died beside him. Of the 300 Norwegian ships that had sailed to England, only 24 were needed to carry the survivors home.

The Viking Age, which had terrorized and shaped Europe for nearly three centuries, effectively ended at Stamford Bridge on that September afternoon.

But wait — it gets worse

If this were where the story ended, it would merely be a family tragedy and a historical turning point. But fate, or perhaps divine irony, was only getting started.

Just three days after Harald's death, on September 28, William of Normandy finally landed on England's south coast with approximately 7,000 men and 700 ships. The timing could not have been more catastrophic for Harold Godwinson. His army was exhausted from the battle and the forced marches. His best troops were depleted. He was 250 miles away from the new invasion.

Yet Harold repeated the same strategy that had worked so brilliantly against Harald. He force-marched his weary army south, covering roughly 200 miles in about a week. By October 13, he had assembled perhaps 7,000–8,000 men at Senlac Ridge, eight miles from Hastings.

On October 14, 1066, in a nine-hour battle, Harold's exhausted army met William's fresh forces. The English fought magnificently, their famous shield wall holding for hours against repeated cavalry charges. But late in the afternoon, Harold was struck in the eye by an arrow, according to the Bayeux Tapestry, though accounts vary. His brothers Gyrth and Leofwine had already fallen.

The last crowned Anglo-Saxon king was dead. And England would never be the same.

The delicious irony nobody talks about

Here's the thing that history books often overlook: this was essentially a family squabble among Viking cousins.

Harald Hardrada was a direct representative of the Norwegian Viking world. William of Normandy was descended from Rollo, the Viking chieftain who had been granted Normandy by the French king in 911, making William a Viking descendant as well, though he now spoke French and rode horses. And Harold Godwinson, the Anglo-Saxon king? He ruled over an England that had been heavily shaped by Danish Viking settlement, including the vast Danelaw territories. His own father may have had Danish ancestry.

Three cousins from the same Scandinavian-Germanic gene pool, fighting over the same island, just wearing different cultural costumes.

Viking descendants won England in 1066, no matter what. The only question was *which* Viking descendants, and which language, they would bring with them.

The linguistic catastrophe

William's victory didn't just change who sat on the English throne. It fundamentally transformed the English language, and we still live with its effects today.

The Normans made French the language of the court, law, and power. Latin dominated the Church. Old English, that sensible Germanic tongue perfectly comprehensible to Scandinavians, was relegated to peasants and the powerless.

Over the following two centuries, this created a bizarre linguistic class system. English peasants raised animals with Germanic names: *cow*, *sheep*, *pig*, *deer*. But when those animals appeared on Norman lords' tables, they acquired French names: *beef*, *mutton*, *pork*, *venison*. The people who did the work spoke one language; the people who enjoyed the results spoke another.

The eventual merger produced Middle English and ultimately modern English, a language containing approximately 10,000 French loanwords and borrowings from 87 different languages. It's why we have both "freedom" (Germanic) and "liberty" (French), both "begin" (Germanic) and "commence" (French), both "kingly" (Germanic) and "royal" (French).

As a Scandinavian, I look at modern English with a mixture of recognition and bewilderment. The basic structure is clearly Germanic, familiar, and friendly, like

meeting a distant cousin. But then comes the French vocabulary, the Latin pretensions, the spelling system that appears to have been designed by a committee of sadists.

“Through,” “though,” “thought,” “thorough,” “tough,” “cough.” All spelled similarly, all pronounced completely differently. This is not how sensible Germanic languages behave.

And it's all Harald's fault.

What if?

History doesn't deal in hypotheticals, but I find myself unable to resist.

If Harald Hardrada had worn his chainmail that day, if he had remembered his Hávamál and stayed vigilant, he might well have defeated Harold Godwinson at Stamford Bridge and then turned to face William with a fresh, rested, armored Viking army.

Or if Harold Godwinson had arrived just one day later, found Harald already dead from heatstroke instead of battle, and had time to rest his army before marching south with full strength...

Or if William's fleet had crossed the Channel just a week earlier, while Harold was still watching the southern coast, and met an English army that hadn't been worn down by a 400-mile round trip and a pitched battle...

In any of these scenarios, England is likely to remain a Germanic-speaking nation. Old English evolves naturally into something much closer to modern Scandinavian languages. Norwegian tourists today might understand English news broadcasts. Swedish students might find English as easy as Danish or German.

Instead, thanks to one warm afternoon and one forgotten chainmail, English became the magnificent, frustrating, illogical, globally dominant linguistic chimera it is today.

The verdict of history

The Hávamál tells us that *cattle die, kinsmen die, and we ourselves will die — but one thing never dies: the reputation of the one who has earned a good name*. Or, one might add, the one who made a really spectacular mistake.

Harald Hardrada is remembered as one of history's greatest warriors, a man who fought his way across empires and nearly conquered England at fifty. It is a saga of extraordinary adventure and ultimate tragedy.

But from my perspective, twenty-four generations later, I mostly remember him as the grandfather who ruined English spelling for the entire world.

Rest in peace, Harald. And next time, if there is a next time, wear the damn chainmail.

This story is dedicated to all Scandinavians who have ever struggled with English irregular verbs, inexplicable spelling, and the question of why "tough," "though," and "through" don't rhyme. Now you know who to blame.

If you enjoyed this exploration of how personal decisions shape world history (and linguistic nightmares), consider following for more tales where the author's family tree intersects with major historical disasters.

And, yes, I am still struggling every day to learn French.

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