

The Battle of York 867

A Fury of the Northmen 2-hour adventure by Matthew Bey

I put this adventure together as a demo play for Armadillocon 2025. We were able to get the adventure concluded in about two hours and fifteen minutes. I'll add some of the options that the players considered as well as what they attempted to give an idea of possible directions this might take.

I put together four pre-made character sheets to maximize game time, and gave the PCs the options to pick the characters which appealed to them (I intend to post the character sheets for public use as well), and then spend a little bit of time thinking about how they all knew each other. The PCs decided that they were primarily Angelcynn and not so much Viking in background. Tell them that they are an adventuring group and that they already have a few adventures under their belts.

The adventure begins and the four PCs (first levels all) find themselves bound and stripped of their gear on the hard-packed earth of the city of York council house. Behind each of them, stand two high-level priests of Odin to prevent escape. From the many layers of blood on the priest's boots, they know that these guys are good at killing adventurers like them.

To the left of them, also bound, and trying to control his sobbing, is the fifth NPC member of their group, Timmy. He's a first level human fighter who's only recently off the farm, but he's already won the position of honorary group mascot.

When the PCs have absorbed the setting, they hear a sound coming from the the entrance behind the dias and high seat of the council house. It sounds almost like the slap of bare feet against the earth (but maybe a little more floppy), followed by the sound of something dragging. When the sound travels behind the two-foot tall dias, but they don't see anyone walking there, they begin to suspect who has captured them. Give them the option of making a 'reverse' history check, to try and find a different explanation than the growing certainty that they are the prisoners of Ivarr the Boneless (p118 World Book). Unfortunately it is him after all, and he comes into view around the edge of the dias, dragging himself by his sinewy strong arms and dragging his atrophied legs behind him. If you can do an accent like from the TV Show "Vikings" so much the better. "Why do you think you can steal from me?" Ivarr asks them.

Through conversation, Ivarr reveals to them that on their last adventure they had attempted to take treasure from his territory, which means they took it from him. The solution to that problem is to sacrifice them to Odin, which involves a hanging while getting stabbed by a spear and roasting over a fire all at the same time. Ivarr turns away to let the priests of Odin do their thing, when the PCs start to bargain for their life and offer to make themselves useful (if they don't do

this, Ivarr can say something like “I really can’t think of any reason not to sacrifice you. You are more useful to me as a sacrifice for the battle that is coming”).

So when they offer to help, Ivarr explains why the PCs might be useful to him. He explains how the invasion is predicated on the murder of his father (if that hasn’t already been explained) and how he plans to take revenge on King Aella, who is at that moment less than a day away from York with the Northumbrian Fyrd (p123 World Book). As it happens, King Aella has the Thane rings that his father once wore along his upper arm. Ivarr would like to take possession of those and their symbolic value to cement his position as the foremost leader among Ragnar’s sons. The danger being that Ivarr’s brother, Bjorn Ironside, who is also in York, will get the rings instead.

To prove his seriousness and to give the adventurers motivation, Ivarr moves faster than they would have guessed a differently-abled person could move, and cuts off half of Timmy’s left hand. Ivarr will keep Timmy until he gets the rings. If he doesn’t get the rings, or they fall into Bjorn’s hands, then Ivarr will sacrifice Timmy to Odin. A win-win for Ivarr.

The PCs are released into the Viking-occupied city of York and given their gear back. My PCs considered approaching Bjorn (p117 World Book) to get his support. If that had happened, we’d see where some diplomacy checks got us. He could double-down on threats to get their cooperation, or he could simply turn them away (you could always kill or imprison a PC and then offer the player a backup character sheet to play for the remainder of the adventure). They also considered trying to steal Timmy back, which could also play out poorly.

They chose to scout out in their animal forms. They saw that York was surrounded by a sub-par ruin of a Viking fortification wall. They were able to make an undercount of the Viking army (p125 World Book), because a number of the participants were inside buildings or tents, and the undead had already been thoroughly concealed. But they could see the dragon-draugr perched ontop of the York church. They also saw the Northumbrian Fyrd, a warrior angel flying as a brilliant light above them, and make the estimate that the battle was two hours away. The speed of approach of the Angelcynn can proceed at the pace of the narrative, you want the climax of the battle just before the end of the adventure.

They could also get information by talking to people in the area, which is a different set of d20 rolls.

Going out to the approaching army and scouting around, the PCs discover that King Aella does not appear to be wearing the rings himself, and that there’s what appears to be a treasure wagon about one-third of an army length to the rear, with the other support wagons. It’s guarded by whatever quantity of first level human fighters seems like would be difficult but not impossible for the PCs to tangle with. And also an entire army.

As the battle commences, the PCs infiltrate the army with varying degrees of success. The army around the treasure chest thins out as the armies clash, and the Angelcynns charge over the crumbling Roman walls into the city.

Here is a good opportunity to use the new battle dynamic system (p127 World Book). I did some back of the envelope math, and according to the "Short Version" of running a battle, King Aella gets 241 added to his d20 roll on the first left flank roll, and the vikings get 305 added to the roll. You can have the PCs do the d20 rolls. On the roll for the center of the line, that's when the horde of undead that Ivarr had hidden in the city appear, bursting out of every shallow grave, haystack, and hovel, ambushing the Angelcynn and dragging them down under their boney embrace. King Aella's army is obliterated. For the PCs this means that anyone from the Northumbrian Fyrd still in the vicinity of the treasure wagon flees in panic, including the guards assigned to the wagon, either before or after an appropriate number of combat rounds.

The PCs ride the treasure wagon back into the city, which does contain the aforementioned rings. They give the rings of Ragnar to King Aella, maybe not mentioning the three magic rings (Rings of Swimming, Puzzlers Wit, and Truthtelling) or the bag of 300gp that they also found in the wagon.

Ivarr gives them Timmy back in more or less good shape, and the group has a tearful reunion, while in the background the vikings gather solemnly to watch King Aella get blood-eagled. If they don't succeed somehow (mostly by running out of time I would imagine), Timmy gets blood-eagled right next to them.