

The Story of the Raven Banner

The Orkney Islands lie at the shipping crossroads where the passage from Iceland to Norway meets the sea lane going south to Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. There is good fishing there, and sheep do well. The Vikings settled them early on, and it grew to be an important Earldom.

There was a jarl or Earl of Orkney whose name was Sigurd the Stout. His mother was from Ireland: her name was Eithne, and they say she was the daughter of King Cearbhall of Ossory. Sigurd would go plundering in the summers in Scotland, the Hebrides, and Ireland. One time Sigurd quarrelled with a Scottish earl, and they agreed to meet and do battle. Fearing that he might lose, Sigurd went to his mother for advice.

‘Had I thought you would live forever,’ Eithne said to him, ‘I would have reared you in my wool-basket. But lives are shaped by what will be, not by where you are. Now take this banner,’ she said. ‘I have made it for you with all the skill I have. I believe it will bring victory to the man it is carried before, but death to the man who carries it.’ Even though she was Irish, Eithne was known to be a powerful sorceress, and the banner she had made for Sigurd was truly magical. It was very finely woven, and it was embroidered with the figure of a raven. When a breeze stirred the banner the raven appeared to hop and flutter, and when the wind sang the raven soared.

Sigurd gathered the farming men of Orkney and they sailed to Scotland to do battle with the Scottish earl. The two sides formed up, but the moment they clashed Sigurd’s standard-bearer was struck dead. Sigurd

ordered another man to pick up the banner, but before he long he was killed, too. Three standard-bearers Sigurd lost, but he won the battle in the end.

When Sigurd went to Dublin to fight against the great King Brian he took the raven banner with him again. Earl Sigurd had no quarrel with Brian, but he had agreed to help the king of Dublin, a Viking called Sigtrygg. Sigtrygg's mother had been married to Brian, but Brian had divorced her and now she was mad for revenge. Sigurd only agreed to assist them on condition that he marry her, for she was a very beautiful woman, and he wanted to be made king.

Earl Sigurd arrived in Dublin Bay with his raven banner and a fleet of on Palm Sunday as arranged. The Vikings from Man were there too. The battle was fought on the Good Friday after.

In the very first clash of battle the man bearing Sigurd's raven banner was killed. Someone else took up the standard and the fighting flared up again; almost at once the new standard bearer was killed with those all around him. Soon no one would take it.

'Hrafn the Red!' called the earl, 'take up the banner!'

But Hrafn only shouted back, 'Carry your own devil yourself!'

'Very well,' said the earl, 'a beggar should carry his own bundle.' And he ripped the flag from its staff and stuffed it under his clothing. He was killed soon after, with a spear thrust through him. So he never married Sigtrygg's beautiful mother and he was never made king. There are some who say that they buried Sigurd with the fateful banner wrapped around him and that put an end to all its evil magic.