

ANGLO-SAXON BOY



TONY BRADMAN has been writing children's books for over thirty years. He has written poetry and picture books, and lots of stories, including the highly successful Dilly the Dinosaur series, and was also lead author of the popular Project X primary reading scheme. In recent years he has turned more to historical fiction, and has written books set in a wide range of periods, from Roman Britain to the First and Second World War. Tony is also a reviewer of children's books, and has been a judge for the Smarties Book Prize, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize and the BookTrust Teen Awards, and chairs The Siobhan Dowd Trust, a charity founded in memory of the writer Siobhan Dowd, which supports projects to bring the joy of reading to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. *Anglo-Saxon Boy* is Tony's second historical novel for Walker, a companion title to *Viking Boy*.

About *Anglo-Saxon Boy*, he says: "I was always fascinated by the story of Harold, the king who died at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the last Anglo-Saxon monarch of England. When I was doing some reading about the period, I discovered that his son Magnus would have been about fifteen at the time of the battle – and suddenly I *had* to tell the story of Magnus and his father. And that's the story in this book."

Also by Tony Bradman:

Viking Boy

ANGLO-
SAXON
BOY



TONY BRADMAN

Illustrated by Sam Hart



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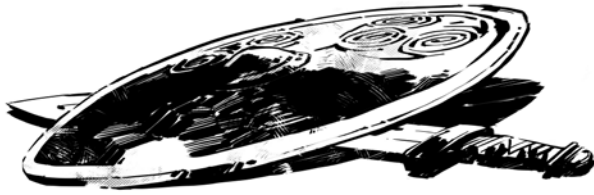
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THIS IS DEDICATED TO
THE ONE I LOVE

*“Þagalt ok hugalt skyli þjóðans barn
ok vígdjarft vera...”*

*(The son of a ruler should be quiet and watchful,
and skilled in warcraft...)*

– The Havamal, or Words of the High One,
ninth-century Old Norse



*“Him be healf e stod hyse unweaxen,
Cniht on gecampe, se full cafllice
braed of ðam beorne blodigne gar...”*

*(Beside him in the battle stood a boy not fully grown,
who bravely pulled the bloody spear from his wound...)*

– The Battle of Maldon, tenth-century Old English





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PROLOGUE

SENLAC RIDGE

14 OCTOBER 1066

*“Here they come again!”
somebody yelled, although
there was no need. Magnus
and everybody else in the
English shield-wall could see
the mass of men advancing
up the slope towards them,
the low autumn sunlight*



glinting off helmets and the blades of spears and axes. All along the top of the ridge the English tightened their grip on shield straps and weapons, stared ahead, waited for the shock of battle.

The dead lay between the two armies, and the grass was slick with blood beneath the boots of the living. Magnus felt the sweat running down his face from under his helmet, and the men on either side of him squeezing in more tightly, their chain-mailed arms grinding against his. He hefted his spear, pushed its shaft over the rim of his shield, rolled his shoulders to try and get the terrible aching out of them.

“Steady, lads!” another voice called out. Magnus craned round to look at the hill crest, where two banners streamed in the breeze, The White Dragon of Wessex and The Fighting Man. A knot of men was there too, chief among them his father. Their eyes met and his father nodded, but Magnus turned away – just in time to see the opposing shield-wall split, each half swiftly moving aside to leave a wide gap.

A squadron of mounted warriors with lances burst out of the gap and charged up the slope, the ground trembling

beneath the hooves of the horses. Suddenly the sky darkened, and Magnus saw yet another cloud of arrows dropping towards the English line, the deadly barbed points slicing down through the air. The arrows arrived first, men screaming and falling, and then the horses crashed into them too.

The man to the left of Magnus died quickly, a lance ripping into his throat and out through the other side, flinging him backwards. The man beyond him stepped into his place, overlapping his shield with that of Magnus, both of them thrusting their spears up at the mounted warriors in front of them. One loomed over Magnus, chopping and hacking at him with a sword, trying to knock his shield down or smash it.

For a while the madness of battle took over, Magnus jabbing his spear at the horsemen, their wild-eyed, foam-flecked mounts rearing, lashing out with their iron-shod hooves. Blade clashed on blade, men yelled and cursed and grunted and fell dying around him, until at last he glimpsed a sword swinging in an arc, bright sunlight flashing like fire off its steel. He tried to duck, but wasn't quite fast enough.

There was a great CLANG! as the sword hit his helmet, and he was knocked sideways, dropping his shield and falling across several bodies, hot blood running down the side of his face. The roar of battle faded and Magnus lay staring up at the cold blue sky, a bird circling far above. It looked like a kestrel, he thought, or perhaps a hawk, and it seemed to be moving further and further away...

Darkness filled his mind like night falling.

ONE

DANGEROUS TIMES

FIFTEEN MONTHS EARLIER – MAY 1065

THE MESSENGER ARRIVED just as the sun was rising over the hills. Most people on the farm were rising over the hills. Most people on the farm were



still asleep, but not Magnus – he had decided to go hunting in the woods that day. He was leaving the hall with a spear in his hand and a couple of

hounds from the farm's pack at his heels when he heard someone calling from beyond the gates. The guard in the wooden watchtower looked down, then signalled to the two guards below, who raised the great bar across the gates and pulled them open.

A man rode into the courtyard on a chestnut stallion, and Magnus recognized him immediately. Hakon was a member of his father's bodyguard, the housecarls. The last time Magnus had seen him, Hakon had been in full war gear – in mail shirt and helmet, carrying shield and spear. But that had been on the war trail against the Welsh last autumn, and now Hakon wore ordinary clothes – red tunic, dun trousers, black cloak. His long fair hair was tied back, and his drooping moustache was neatly combed. All he had to mark him out as a warrior was the short sword hanging from his belt. That and his broad shoulders and the easy way he sat in the saddle.

“Is your mother awake, Magnus?” he said, jumping down from his horse. He spoke English well, but with an accent. Like many of the housecarls, Hakon was a Dane.

“I am wide awake,” said a voice behind them. “Has something happened?”

Magnus turned and saw his mother framed by the carved posts of the hall doorway. She was wrapped in a simple blue gown, and the morning sun touched her hair with gold as if it were her due – people called her Edith the Fair. There was worry in her lovely face, though, and Magnus guessed why. They lived in dangerous times, and messengers often brought bad news.

“Not yet, my lady,” said Hakon with a smile. “But it will soon. My lord the Earl Harold is nearly home. He sent me on ahead to tell you of his coming.”

“I should have known he would play one of his tricks,” she muttered, frowning. “I suppose he made you all ride through the night. How long do I have?”

Magnus smiled too. His father loved to take everyone by surprise. He was famous for it in war, often striking before his enemies had any idea he was even near.

“An hour at the most,” said Hakon, grinning now.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Magnus,” his mother said. “We have work to do!”

She turned round and hurried back into the hall. Magnus heard her yelling at the servants and his brothers and sisters, and before long everyone was awake and dashing in different directions and colliding with each other. Magnus couldn’t help thinking it was like watching a bee skep that had been knocked over, the bees buzzing around in sheer panic while their queen tried to render order out of chaos.

He knew his mother would do exactly that. She ran everything while his father was away, and she was very good at it. These days his father seemed to be away more often than not. It was mostly fighting, of course – against the Welsh, the Irish, Viking raiders. But Earl Harold Godwinson was a great man, a power in the land of the English, so he was often with the other great men at the court of King Edward.

“No hunting for you today then,” said Hakon, leading his horse to the stables, a low building that formed one side of the courtyard and had room for fifty mounts.

Magnus shrugged and followed him. He was wary of Hakon. The housecarl was one of the best warriors in England, and he had looked after Magnus on the war trail, making sure his first campaign – at the age of fourteen – wasn't his last. Hakon had a sense of humour, but he was a hard man too, one who didn't suffer fools gladly.

The hounds, sensing they wouldn't be needed now, ran off across the courtyard. "I might try to slip out a bit later," said Magnus. "I doubt anyone will miss me."

"You couldn't be more wrong," said Hakon with a snort. "Your father told me to make sure I gave you a message as well, Magnus. He wants to talk to you."

"What about?" said Magnus, surprised. They had reached the stable doors and stood there for a moment. Magnus realized he had grown – last year Hakon had been a hand's breadth taller than him, and now his eyes were on a level with the housecarl's.

It was Hakon's turn to shrug. "He didn't say. You'll find out soon enough."

Hakon led the horse into the dark stables, leaving

Magnus alone with his thoughts. He wondered if he had done anything to anger his father since he had last seen him. Perhaps his father wasn't happy with how he had handled himself on the war trail. Earl Harold had fought a major campaign in North Wales two years ago, defeating and killing Gruffudd, Prince of Gwynedd, but last autumn he had only been chasing raiders. There hadn't been much real fighting – just a few skirmishes, an ambush or two – and Magnus hadn't made a single kill. He sighed, and headed for his favourite place to do some brooding, the orchard on the slope above the hall. He stuck his spear into the ground beside an apple tree and sat down, his back against the trunk.

Stretched out below him was the whole farm, although Magnus knew that was far too small a word to describe the family's rich holding. At its heart was the great hall with its long, whale-backed roof and crossed beams at both ends. Other buildings surrounded it – the stables, several large barns, animal sheds of one kind or another. A wooden palisade circled them all, a watchtower at the gate. Beyond

were the wide paddocks with their herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, and further still were fields full of crops. It was late spring here on the coast of Sussex, the land of the South Saxons, and the wheat and barley was young and green in the furrows.

Southwards lay the village of Bosham that gave their manor its name. Magnus could see the square tower of the church above the thatched houses, the small harbour, the blue sea glittering in the low sunlight. This was where Godwin, his father's father, had begun the family's rise to power. Magnus had never met him – he had died before Magnus was born – but he had heard the stories. His grandfather had been an outsider with nothing, and he had fought and struggled and built until the Godwins were the greatest family in England, respected and feared by all.

Magnus knew most boys would give anything to be part of such a family, and of course he was proud to be a Godwin. But he was a very minor Godwin. His father was Earl of Wessex and owned vast swathes of land in Mercia and East Anglia. His father's sister – another Edith – was the king's wife, and therefore

Queen of England. His father's younger brothers, Tostig, Gyrrh and Leofwine were earls as well. Magnus had two older brothers, both surely destined for great futures. How could he hope to match all that? He might just as well give up before he had even started.

When he went back, servants and slaves were still milling around inside the hall, but it had been swept and tidied, the fire lit in the great hearth, food and drink laid on the long tables – cold meat and cheeses and fresh loaves of bread, and great jugs of foaming ale and mead. His mother had changed into a dark green gown of the finest wool and had combed her long golden hair till it shone.

“Where have you been, Magnus?” she said. “I was beginning to think you’d run away. And why are you wearing those old clothes? You should change.”

“These are fine, Mother,” he said. “You’re the one Father will be looking at.”

“Oh Magnus, I wish that were true,” she said, although he could tell she was pleased. “I’m sure he

meets much more beautiful women all the time...”

“My lady, Earl Harold is at the gate!” cried a servant from the doorway.

She laughed and ran out of the hall. A crowd swept Magnus out after her – and there was his father riding into the courtyard at the head of his men, fifty housecarls on fine mounts. Earl Harold sat tall in the saddle of his great black stallion, his brown hair hanging to his shoulders, his moustache thicker and longer than Hakon’s, his cloak blood-red. Magnus thought he looked magnificent, like a king. Behind the housecarls were the spare horses, each one carrying a warrior’s weapons and armour, the round shields all bearing the same image, the White Dragon of Wessex.

Earl Harold jumped from his horse and strode up to the hall. “Now then, Edith, what have I done to make you frown at me like that?” he said, looking concerned. “I have ridden hard to get here, desperate as I am to see the fairest face in England.”

Magnus glanced at his mother. “You know exactly what you’ve done, you rogue,” she said, unable to

stop herself smiling. “But I suppose I’ll have to forgive you.”

“That is all I could hope for, my lady,” said Earl Harold, returning her smile, taking her hand so he could pull her close and kiss her. “Come, let us go into the hall and eat the feast I know you will have prepared for me. It is good to be home.”

Magnus tried to catch his father’s eye, but his parents swept past him and through the doorway, the crowd pushing and shoving each other as they followed.

It was nearly two more days till Magnus found out what his father wanted.