

# THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

## A Casebook

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The location of the Battle of Brunanburh is a problem that has fascinated historians, literary scholars and toponymists alike, many of whom have expressed strong views on the subject. These views tend to divide between those who think that the location cannot be identified and that the attempt should probably not be made; and those who see this lack of certainty as an opportunity to explore possible sites selected on the basis of a wide variety of criteria. Among the former, significant voices are those of Alistair Campbell and Dorothy Whitelock; among the latter are the voices of Alfred P. Smyth, Michael Wood, and Cyril Hart (all of these discussed below), but many earlier and later voices could be added on both sides.

The evidence relating to the question of the battle's location is extraordinarily diverse. Some assessment has to be made of this diverse range: the relative reliability of the source texts; the spellings and variants and meanings of the elements and names in the sources; other indications of location given in the sources; the validity of scholarly assumptions about, and accounts of, the place and the battle.

This volume presents as fully as possible the range of evidence relating to the battle, bringing the latest scholarship to bear. What this essay aims to add is a perspective using, in addition to palaeographical and textual evidence, recent developments in toponymical research. One of the controlling factors in discussing the location of the battle must be the fact that the place-names in the sources refer to places; that the kind of terms used define, often very precisely, the topographical and other features of the place; and the corollary is that names of places tell us something significant about the places themselves.

In this essay, therefore, I will begin by discussing the sources briefly (section 1; see earlier essays for more detail), setting out as objectively as possible the evidence relating to the names given for the site of the battle (section 2). This involves linguistic and, where relevant, topographical analysis of the elements (section 3). As the essay progresses, I will discuss the various locational interpretations of ancient (section 4) and modern scholars (section 5), and it will become clear that I think the evidence points in a particular direction for the site. I will ultimately propose that, while an element of doubt remains, the site of Brunanburh can with reasonable confidence be located in the light of all the evidence available (section 6).

## 1. THE SOURCES

The original source of many of the traditions can be traced. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* versions supply the earliest accounts of the battle, and clearly the Old English poem extant in four copies derives ultimately from a single original. Some of the texts depend on sources not extant but of a type that can be identified: Henry of Huntingdon used a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* related to MS E, but also other versions, which show closer corres-

pondence with MS C.<sup>1</sup> Later accounts show writers like Bartholomew of Cotton and John of Oxnead copying their information from Henry of Huntingdon, and Symeon of Durham (directly) and, for example, Richard of Cirencester (indirectly) copying some of theirs from John of Worcester.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate source of some of the variant traditions is uncertain: for example, Æthelweard reports the battle as taking place “in loco Brunandune,” and it is impossible to say whether that represents a genuine tradition or whether he garbled the name or made it up: that Symeon of Durham has an apparently independent tradition which includes a name with *-dun*, “We(o)ndun,” may be thought to reinforce the credibility of Æthelweard’s report.

Some extant texts may have used sources now lost. As the evidence now stands, the source of the tradition that the invading forces came into the Humber is John of Worcester: the passage in Symeon of Durham’s *Historia regum* copies directly from John (this strand of tradition is labeled *c* below). But Symeon has his own independent traditions: the *Historia regum*, in a passage separate from that borrowed from John, reports that the battle took place at “Wendun” and that the invaders had 615 ships (this is labeled *a* below); those same traditions are found in Symeon’s *Libellus de exordio*, but there the variant names “Et Brunanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig” are also given (this particular tradition is labeled *b* below). We cannot be sure whether John or Symeon made up the details that are peculiar to their works or knew traditions, oral or written, that recorded them, though further analysis may make some conclusions possible here. It may be, for example, that Geoffrey Gaimar knew his near-contemporary Symeon’s *Libellus* since he gives a name for the battle that apparently represents “Brunanwerc” (see further the discussion in section 3.5 below);<sup>3</sup> but since all the manuscripts of Gaimar spell the name, however garbled, with a single *-n-*, it is possible that Gaimar knew the source used by Symeon for this particular detail and the *-nn-* forms are Symeon’s variant spellings.

There is no very strong reason to believe that these particular details were available in, and used from, other sources than Symeon and John in the later tradition. For example, Pierre de Langtoft writes of 715 (sic) ships at “Bruneburge sur Humbre,” thus apparently conflating and garbling material borrowed from Symeon, and by Symeon from John.<sup>4</sup> It would certainly be unwise to claim that Langtoft had any other immediate source for his information at this point than Symeon. Langtoft or an intermediate source added an extra *C* to the “DC et XV” ships of Symeon, just as William of Malmesbury or an intermediate source read the number of dead *comites* as XII instead of the VII *eorlas* of the vernacular tradition. Interestingly both of these errors indicate that the tradition here is most likely being passed on by document, not by word of mouth, since the numbers indicate graphical confusion.

The Irish, Welsh, and Norse sources appear to be independent of the English, Anglo-Norman, and Anglo-Latin sources; and in turn, the Irish, Welsh and Norse sources appear to be independent of each other. These sources provide the tersest notice of the battle in the *Annales Cambriae*, and one of the most extensive and imaginative accounts of it in *Egil’s Saga*. Though it is difficult to be sure, the medieval Welsh sources seem to recognise an English

<sup>1</sup> Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Greenway, p. xci.

<sup>2</sup> For the texts mentioned in this essay, see the collected accounts in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Gaimar, *L’Estoire*, ed. Bell, p. lii, gives the date of its composition as 1135–40; Symeon, *Libellus*, ed. and trans. Rollason, p. xlii, shows that the *Libellus* was written by 1115.

<sup>4</sup> *Chronicle*, ed. Wright, 1.330.

place or person, *Brun(e)*, which gives no difficulties of interpretation in the spread of name-spellings.<sup>5</sup> The *Scottish Chronicle*'s *Duinbrunde* appears also to make independent reference to an unproblematic *-brun-* name. On the other hand, *Egil's Saga* gives a welter of topographical information about the site of the battle, and references to woods, hills, and streams abound. Scholars have made much of this, but it is unlikely to be more than imaginative reconstruction. However, the place-names *Vínheiðr* and *Vínuskógi*, because they are more likely to be preserved in tradition (and thus possibly become the basis of imaginative reconstruction), merit detailed treatment (see 3.9, below). The same applies to the name *Othlyn(n)* found in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*.

Thus, while the relationships between texts can be complex there are some clear lines of descent and some clear indications of independence. In discussing the sources it will be a useful shorthand to refer by way of (for example) "John of Worcester" to "the tradition found first extant in John of Worcester, and for which no other source is known or can plausibly be reconstructed."

## 2. EARLY SPELLINGS OF THE NAME *BRUNANBURH* AND ALTERNATIVE NAMES FOR THE SITE

<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS A	<i>Bru"nanburh</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS B	<i>Brunanburh</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS C	<i>Brunnanburh</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS D	<i>Brunanburh</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS E	<i>Brunanbyrig</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS F	<i>Brunanbyri</i>
<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , MS O <sup>3</sup>	<i>Brunanburh</i>
Æthelweard	<i>Brunandune</i>
Symeon of Durham (a), <i>Libellus de exordio</i> and <i>Historia regum</i>	<i>Weondune, Wendune</i>
Symeon of Durham (b), <i>Libellus de exordio</i>	<i>Et Brunnanwerce uel Brunnanbyrig</i>
William of Malmesbury	<i>Brunefeld, Bruneford</i>
John of Worcester	<i>Brunanburh</i>
Henry of Huntingdon	<i>Brunebirih</i>
Geoffrey Gaimar	<i>Bruneswerce, Brunewerche, Burneweste</i> (x2)
Twelfth-century charters	<i>Bruningafeld</i>

<sup>5</sup> See further the essay by Bollard and Haycock in this volume, and Items 5.28, 23.60, and notes.

Scottish traditions	<i>Bruningafeld, Brouningfeld</i>
Scottish Chronicle	<i>Duinbrunde</i>
Welsh traditions	<i>Cad Tybrunawc</i>
<i>Annales Cambriae</i>	<i>Brune</i>
<i>Annals of Clonmacnoise</i>	<i>Plaines of othlynn, othlyn</i>
<i>Egil's Saga</i>	<i>Vínheiðr</i>

## Derivative accounts

## (1) from John of Worcester

Symeon of Durham (c), <i>Historia regum</i>	<i>Brunanburh</i>
Richard of Cirencester	<i>Brunkerih</i>
<i>Eulogium historiarum</i>	<i>Brunanburge</i>

## (2) from Henry of Huntingdon

Bartholomew of Cotton	<i>Brunesberich</i>
John of Oxnead	<i>Brunesberich</i>
<i>Annals of Waverley</i>	<i>Bruneberi</i>

## (3) from William of Malmesbury

Ranulf Higden	<i>Brumford, Brunfort</i>
<i>Book of Hyde</i>	<i>Brunfort</i>

## (4) from Symeon of Durham

<i>Chronicle of Melrose</i>	<i>Brunanburch</i>
Pierre de Langtoft	<i>Bruneburge, Brunesburgh, Bronneburgh</i>

This list (see above for the sources and manuscripts) differs in several respects from that given by Campbell: it is fuller, and the manuscript spellings have been more widely collected.<sup>6</sup> An account needs to be given of the various elements in these different place-name forms: the most common first element, *bruna* or *brune*; the most common second element

<sup>6</sup> *Battle of Brunanburh*, p. 60. The main differences are: *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, MS B, where Campbell reads *Brunmanburh*; Henry of Huntingdon, where Campbell has *Bruneburh*, *Brunesburh* (see further Appendix, below); and Campbell's "Pictish Chronicle" (following Skene) is now called *Scottish Chronicle* (see Smith's essay on the Latin sources, above, pp. xxx-xxx).

*burh*; *dun*; the first element in *we(o)-*; *weorc*; *feld* and *ford*; *-inga-*. Other names relating to the location of the battle include *othlynn* and *Vinheiðr*, recorded respectively in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* and *Egil's Saga*. And two further place-names are mentioned in the Old English poem not as the site of the battle but as the departure point and destination of some of the defeated Norsemen: *dingesmere* and variants (line 54), and *difelin* and variants (line 55) [Dublin]. While the name *difelin* [Dublin] is uncontroversial, some discussion of the others is needed. But first, it may be suggested that while there is a variety in the name-forms and elements, there is sufficient consistency, not solely related to borrowing, for the accounts to be plausibly conceived of as referring to the same place and its general area.

### 3. DISCUSSION OF THE ELEMENTS

#### 3.1 *Bruna* or *brune*

Some recognizable form of this element appears in all the names except Symeon's *We(o)ndune*, *Othlynn* in the *Clonmacnoise Annals*, and *Vinheiðr* in *Egil's saga*.

In the vast majority of cases, the first element appears as an Old English weak noun, with oblique (here genitive) singular inflection *-an*. In one MS of Henry of Huntingdon (see appendix), and in traditions derived from Henry, namely Bartholomew of Cotton and John of Oxnead, there is evidence of a Middle English secondary genitive *-s-*; this spelling also appears in the Anglo-Norman traditions of one MS of Gaimar and one of Langtoft. In distinctively northern sources, namely Symeon and Langtoft, and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MS C and in an addition/correction to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MS A, the element appears with *-nn-*.

This element might be thought to represent Old English *Bruna*, a weak masculine personal name; Old English *brune*, a weak feminine river-name meaning "dark, brown, shining (one)"; or a metathesized version of the Old English weak masculine noun *burna* [a stream]. Formally, the majority of spellings could fit equally well with the first two Old English elements. The Scandinavian noun *brunnr* [a stream] (genitive singular *brunns*) might have influenced the northern forms with *-nn-* and those with the genitive *-s-*; or, as these two variants do not coincide (there are no *-nns-* spellings), these spellings may be expedients used by scribes to make sense of an unrecognized element; or they could be without significance.<sup>7</sup> The Old English noun *burna* [stream] could be represented, but metathesized and unmetathesized spellings are usually present in the series of name-forms, and if this were *burna*, the only unmetathesized spelling available is in the garbled Gaimar forms, *Burneweste*.

The spellings with *-e-* for the inflectional *-an-* (William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Gaimar, Waverley, and Langtoft) represent the Middle English reduction of unstressed weak inflections to schwa [ə]. Those forms without an interconsonantal vowel (Higden and the Book of Hyde) represent the further reduction of the unstressed inflection to zero. The *-s-* genitive forms generally may be seen as hypercorrection, the substitution of the Middle English generic genitive for a recognized weak Old English genitive on the part of one or two scribes within the tradition.

The strong masculine personal name *Brun* is well evidenced in sources from Anglo-Saxon England, but the element *brunan-* is clearly declined weak. Searle, *Onomasticon*, pp. 117–18, lists several men called *Brun*, two men called *Bruna*, and a considerable number with *Brun-* as the first element of the name (*Brunfrith*, *Brungar*, *Brunheard*, *Brunhelm*, etc.). Compound

<sup>7</sup> See further Cavill, "Site," pp. 304–05.

names with *Brun-* would become *Bruna* in shortened, hypocoristic, form. And while the genitive inflection in the specific of place-names may be used in relation to animate or inanimate subjects, it is most often used to denote association with or ownership by a person.

### 3.2 *burh*

The origin of the predominant second element of the battle place-name in the sources is Old English *burh* [a fortification]. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A, B, C, and D, the manuscripts including the Old English poem, have the *Brunanburh* form of the name, since the preposition *ymbe* in the poem, line 5, takes the accusative. Other sources have the dative (*-byrig* and variants), following other prepositions including Old English *to* and Latin *apud*. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* E and F, Symeon of Durham's own tradition (*b*), and Henry of Huntingdon and those following him, use dative forms. However, after the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, it is difficult to be sure whether forms have inflectional endings or are simple appellatives: spellings such as *Bruneberi* or *Bruneburge* may simply be fossilized variants of an uninflected name.

The *Scottish Chronicle* form of the name, *Duinbrunde*, apparently reflects a Gaelic tradition: as Campbell noted, "*dun* in Gaelic place-names is equivalent to *burh*."<sup>8</sup> This form, in a clearly non-English source, together with the fact that *Brunanburh* and variants appears in Old English prose accounts, discredits recent interpretations suggesting that the *burh* element might not have been the name of the original site of the battle, but made up and inserted in the poem for metrical reasons. Kevin Halloran supposed the *burh* element to have been introduced as "a variant of the real place-name that was poetically more satisfying" and a "poetic paraphrase of the *werc(e)* original"<sup>9</sup>; and Hart that it was "added to make up the metre and alliteration."<sup>10</sup> The additional fact that it is the *Brun-* syllable that satisfies the requirements of the metre here vitiates this argument.

The type of fortification referred to by the element *burh* in place-names ranges from that of the Iron-Age hillfort, which tends to be a near-permanent landscape feature, to mainly wooden or earthen and hence often temporary and barely traceable Anglo-Saxon fortifications. The former names may be represented by Burrough on the Hill in Leicestershire, the site of a hillfort. A program of fortification of the latter type at strategic places was undertaken by Edward the Elder and Æthelflæd in the first half of the tenth century. It is probably no more than a casual error that a *burh* constructed by Æthelflæd, *Bremesbyrig*, recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 910 in the annals from the source known as the Mercian Register, is identified as *Bruneberich* by Bartholomew of Cotton.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that the fortification might not have outlived its immediate usefulness, but that the non-hillfort sites themselves tend to be important places, close to major roads, boundaries or coasts.

### 3.3 *dun*

The element *dun* appears in Æthelweard's *Chronicle*, *Brunandun*, and in Symeon of Durham's own tradition (*a*), *We(o)ndun*. These traditions are independent.

<sup>8</sup> *Battle of Brunanburh*, p. 61n1. See also Cavill, "Site," p. 313, where the parallel of Edinburgh's Gaelic name *Dunedin* is offered in illustration.

<sup>9</sup> "Brunanburh Campaign," p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> *Danelaw*, p. 520.

<sup>11</sup> Luard, in his edition of Bartholomew's work (p. 21), suggests Brentford (!) as the place.

The element, while common in early English nomenclature, has a specialized meaning and a restricted distribution. Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole note that the element “is consistently used in settlement-names for a low hill with a fairly level and fairly extensive summit which provided a good settlement-site in open country”; typically the element refers to “hills of 200ft–500ft.”<sup>12</sup> Names with *dun* cluster in the south Midlands and Essex; there are examples further north both west and east of the Pennines, but none north of the Ribble in Lancashire and the north-west.<sup>13</sup> Isolated examples of *dun* in Scotland are found in the eastern counties and conform to the low hill pattern, as shown by Stella Pratt.<sup>14</sup> It should be stressed that Gelling’s and Cole’s studies relate to early settlement-names: they have not collected and dealt with late-recorded minor names. But the early settlement-names clearly indicate the main aspects of the meaning of the name element and its distribution in English place-names. These criteria have implications for the location of the battle if we are to take Æthelweard and Symeon’s traditions seriously.

### 3.4 *we(o)-*

The first element of Symeon’s *We(o)ndun* was suggested by Campbell to be a scribal error for *\*Weordun*, with the first element being the name of the river Wear in County Durham.<sup>15</sup> A. H. Smith reads it as an oblique case of *\*weoh* [holy], used in relation to heathen rites.<sup>16</sup>

Sites with heathen names have been examined most fully by Gelling, and her conclusion, that “the evidence for an adjective *\*weoh* [holy] in English place-names is not sufficiently strong for it to be regarded as established,” was endorsed by Carole Hough.<sup>17</sup> The distribution of heathen names, predominantly in the central and eastern parts of England, was the most important factor leading these scholars, and Campbell, to dismiss the possibility that Symeon’s *We(o)ndun* might refer to a “holy hill.”<sup>18</sup> It is, however, worth noting that the *dun* element and feature provides us with a significant number of heathen names: with *hearg* [a heathen shrine], Harrowden in Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire and possibly Harrowdown in Essex; and with *weoh*, *wih* [a heathen shrine], Weedon in Berkshire, and Weedon Bec and Weedon Lois in Northamptonshire.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the uncertainties relating to this “heathen” interpretation in relation to Symeon’s *We(o)ndun*, I am not aware that any serious alternative has been proposed other than Campbell’s *\*Weordun*. Some further evidence is offered below (section 6.5) that may serve to address the problem of distribution.

<sup>12</sup> *Landscape*, pp. 164–65.

<sup>13</sup> Gelling, *Place-Names*, pp. 155–58.

<sup>14</sup> “Summer Landscapes,” p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Battle of Brunanburh*, p. 62n2. Campbell’s statement that the confusion might be due the “great similarity of *n* and *r* in O.E. MSS” is also open to doubt. While in certain insular scripts at this time, such as that of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle A, there are similarities between *n* and *r*, the long descender of *r* generally distinguishes it clearly from the short descender of the *n*. In other scripts such as the Carolingian minuscule, the two letters are even more distinct.

<sup>16</sup> *Elements* 2.254.

<sup>17</sup> “Further Thoughts,” p. 102, and “Some Ghost Entries,” pp. 28–29, respectively.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, p. 73n2.

<sup>19</sup> See the discussion of these names in Gelling, “Further Thoughts.”



### 3.5 *weorc*

This element appears in the alternative names for the battle given by Symeon in his *Libellus*, *Et Brunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig*, and in the forms in manuscripts of Gaimar. Two of the latter have the spelling *Burneweste*, which is generally thought to be a scribal error for some form of *Brunewerc*, a reasonable conclusion given the spellings *Bruneswerce* and *Brune-werche* in the other two manuscripts. It is noted above that Gaimar might have known Symeon or his source for this particular name.

The element (*ge*)*weorc* refers in place-names to a building or structure, usually defensive in nature, and thus it has much in common with *burh*. Symeon's collocation of the two forms *Et Brunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig* led John Dodgson, to conclude that "the *-werc(e)* forms are no more than a paraphrase of *Brunanburh*" (*PN Ch* 4.238).

### 3.6 *feld* and *ford*

The element *feld* is found in most manuscripts of William of Malmesbury in the form *Brunefeld*, and in non-contemporary charters and the Scottish traditions as *Bruningafeld*, later *Brounyngfeld*. The Old English poem has the phrase *feld dennade* in line 12 and the noun *wælfeld* in line 51. There is no reason to suppose that the use of the simplex and compound nouns in the Old English poem is related to the *-feld* place-names in the later traditions; it is, rather, an intriguing coincidence.

An alternative form found in some manuscripts of William of Malmesbury and later writers using his material, is *ford*. The variant *-frord* is taken to be a scribal error. In Higden and the *Book of Hyde*, *-fort* is a variant of *ford*. It seems probable that the apparently distinct *ford* element is a misreading of *feld*: this form appears only in one family of related manuscripts, and no early source makes reference to a river-crossing in the account of the battle. There remains a possibility that the first element of *Brunanburh* is a river name (see above), though a river does not feature in the early accounts of the battle, and in *Egil's Saga* the place-name *Vínheiðr* has a river name as its first element (see below).

In late Old English the element *feld* developed the sense that gives us the modern word *field*, namely "an enclosed piece of land, usually arable." But in early and settlement-names it means "open land." Gelling and Cole write:

The word is used in literary texts to describe unencumbered ground, which might be land without trees as opposed to forest, level ground as opposed to hills, or land without buildings. In many references there is a contrast between *feld* and areas which are difficult of access or passage. The contrast most often recorded is that with woodland, but contrast with hills is also well evidenced, and . . . *feld* might be contrasted with marsh as well as woodland and hills.<sup>20</sup>

Gelling and Cole note that not all *feld* names refer to settlement-sites, but "include sites of battles and synods" (p. 272). In these cases, the unencumbered and accessible nature of the ground was what made the site suitable for the purpose of military or ecclesiastical encounter: though there might be other landscape features in the vicinity, the pitched battle was initially sited on open land.

<sup>20</sup> *Landscape*, pp. 269–70.

### 3.7 -inga-

The charter forms and Scottish traditions with spellings like *Bruningafeld* reinforce the notion that the first element of *Brunanburh* is most likely to be a personal name *Bruna* or a river name *brune*. The element -inga- is clearly present, though it is later reduced to -ing- in Bower, for example. This is the genitive of a group name, in this case the *Bruningas*. There are two types of -ingas name according to Smith: those which refer to an individual and those which refer to a geographical feature.<sup>21</sup> Those of the former type are ancient names, the latter more chronologically spread. If *Bruna* is the masculine personal name, the *Bruningas* might then be “the followers or descendants of *Bruna*, *Bruna*’s people”; if the element is *brune*, a river-name, the *Bruningas* might then be “dwellers by the river *Brune*.” Gelling and Cole list nine places (and two further probable ones) with the generic element *feld* combined with a personal name + -inga- as against one place with a name combining *feld* with a topographical element + -inga-.<sup>22</sup> An example of the personal name type is Bene-field in Northamptonshire, recorded as *Beringafeld* [open land of Bera’s people] in c. 970; the only example of the topographical name type is Waldingfield in Suffolk, recorded as *Wealdingafeld* [open land of the forest dwellers] in c. 995.

### 3.8 othlynn

This name occurs only in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, a source only known in a modern English translation and thus quite possibly corrupt: “the Danes . . . gave battle to the Saxons on the plaines of othlynn.” Campbell dismissed a range of suggestions as to the derivation of this name in unequivocal terms, and suggested that the name represented *Lothlinn*: “If the initial consonant of *lothlinn* had been lost at some point in the transmission of the *Annals*, the form *othlynn* would be explained. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* possibly used *Lothlinn* vaguely of almost any place beyond the seas east of Ireland.”<sup>23</sup> In a recent article, Colmán Etchingham has reviewed the evidence for the location of *Laithla(i)nn* and has concluded that it was most likely part of Norway.<sup>24</sup> This adds to the difficulty of a lost consonant in the proposed identification of *othlynn*. A brilliant suggestion was made by Nicholas Higham that this might be Old English *oð Lynne* [up to the Lyme (Lyne)], with the preposition *oð* [as far as, up to] and a regional name ultimately of Celtic origin.<sup>25</sup> This is discussed further below in section 6.4.

### 3.9 Vínheiðr

This is the name of the place of the battle in the Icelandic *Egil’s Saga*. The second element, *heiðr*, occasionally replaces Old English *hæð* [heath, uncultivated open land] in north-country names.<sup>26</sup> In Icelandic, *heiðr* is “chiefly used of a low barren heath or fell” (Cleasby-Vigfusson, *Dictionary*, p. 247). There is significant semantic overlap between *heiðr*, *hæð*, and *feld*, and little problem therefore in accepting that the second element of the Icelandic name might imaginably refer to the same kind of terrain as the English names containing the element *feld*.

<sup>21</sup> *Elements* 1.300 (5).

<sup>22</sup> *Landscape*, p. 276.

<sup>23</sup> *Battle of Brunanburh*, p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> “Location,” p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> “Context,” p.152n66.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Elements*, 1.242, s.v. *heiðr*.

The first element of *Vínheiðr* is (according to the pattern of names given by the saga-writer) the river name *Vína*, and the saga also identifies a wood, *Vínuskógi*. This river name *Vína* is also that of the Russian river Dvina, where Egill and his brother Thorolf fought and raided. Campbell believed that the saga conflated accounts of two battles, one in Bjarmaland near the Dvina, where he believed Thorolf was killed, and the other at *Vínheiðr*; later tradition confused the two, he thought, locating Thorolf's death in England.<sup>27</sup> This suggestion, and Campbell's associated rejection of the possibility that Symeon's *Wendun* and the saga's *Vínheiðr* might be related, are effectively rebutted by Matthew Townend. Townend points out that before the saga was composed, a twelfth-century Icelandic poem, the *Íslendingadrápa* by Haukr Valdísarson, recorded Thorolf's death in Athelstan's battle.<sup>28</sup> He goes on to argue that though the assimilation of Symeon's *Wen-* to *Vína* is problematic, it is not inconceivable. So far as this name is concerned, then, the Icelandic saga might have preserved a tradition which at some removes relates to the Battle of Brunanburh.

### 3.10 Dingesmere

*Dingesmere* appears in the A and C versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* at line 54 of the poem, with variants *dyngesmere* in B, *dynigesmere* in D, and *dinnesmere* in O:

Gewitan him þa Norþmen    nægledcnearrum,  
dreorig daraða laf,    on Dingesmere  
ofer deop wæter    Difelin secan,  
eft Ira land,    æwiscmode.<sup>29</sup>

Both Old English scribes and modern scholars have struggled to make sense of this, as may be deduced from the variant forms in the early documents and the explanations, or lack of them, in the later literature. I have discussed the modern interpretations of the name at length,<sup>30</sup> but to summarize, explanations invoking *dyng*e [noise, or storm] and poetic *mere* [sea] seem to me to be strained both on the basis of logic (what sea is not “noisy” or “stormy”?) and on the basis of usage (*mere* in poetical compounds means “sea” by metaphorical extension, explained by the first element; the base meaning is “pool”). I argue instead that *Dingesmere* is, as it most naturally presents itself to be, a place-name, the place of the departure of the Norsemen, who sailed thence to arrive at *Difelin*, Dublin, in lines 53–56 of the Old English poem.

*Mere* occurs very commonly in place-names with a genitive singular specific. It means “pond, lake, pool, wetland,” and refers to a landscape feature, not a maritime one, though it may occur in coastal situations. The first element of *Dingesmere*, I suggest, is Old Norse *þing* [meeting, assembly], there being a wide range of names, particularly in Norse territory in England and Gaelic-influenced Norse territory in Scotland, where *þing* is realized as *ding-* in compound place-names.<sup>31</sup> I suggest, then, that *Dingesmere* is “wetland of the assembly,” a site named to identify both a feature near where a Norse Thing met, and to warn travelers to it of potential danger.

<sup>27</sup> *Battle of Brunanburh*, pp. 74–78.

<sup>28</sup> *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 88–93.

<sup>29</sup> Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, pp. 52–56.

<sup>30</sup> Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, “Revisiting,” and Cavill, “Coming Back.”

<sup>31</sup> Cavill, “Coming back,” pp. 31–35.

This survey of the extant place-name spellings and toponymical elements used in the sources for names relating to the Battle of Brunanburh and its area reveals an internal consistency in the names and their meanings. Within reasonable limits, the aberrations and variations in the spellings can be explained by the vagaries of textual transmission; the topographical features denoted by the elements in the names broadly tally in sources which are not obviously textually related, and across languages; the main types seem to be meaningful and not random, and once again occur in apparently unrelated sources; and even where a name like *We(o)dun* occurs only in Symeon, the second element of the name is found in another source. It is clear that not all the scribes fully understood the meaning of the place-names they recorded, but that makes it less likely that they egregiously created names themselves rather than attempted to record what they saw or heard. The overall pattern of consistency, then, yields a certain amount of critical evidence that needs to be considered in locating the battle.

The principal name of the site had an Old English weak noun for the first element, most likely the male personal name *Bruna* or a feminine river name *Brune*. There was an area occupied by people who characterized their social group by reference to their relationship to *Bruna* or the river *Brune* (this is the import of *-inga-*). The elements *burh* and *weorc* indicate that the principal site, probably that of a settlement, was fortified. In the vicinity was a rounded hill of low elevation (*dun*), and an expanse of open uncultivated land (*feld*, *heiðr*) on which the fighting began. There was a site of heathen significance (referred to in *\*weoh*), possibly a river ford (*ford*) or a wood (*skógr*) somewhere in the vicinity, and a boundary or region called Lyme or Lyne at some further distance; in addition there was probably a wetland feature in the area, close to a navigable river or the sea.

#### 4. JOHN OF WORCESTER AND THE HUMBER ENTRY

There are some strong elements in the tradition that apparently have little or no bearing on the site of the battle. Among these we might include the hagiographical stories of the loss of or damage to Athelstan's sword and its miraculous restoration, and William of Malmesbury's and others' use of the king-disguised-as-an-entertainer topos. But other elements may have significant bearing on the site of the battle, and the most important of these is John of Worcester's statement that the invading forces came via the Humber.

Darlington and McGurk observe, "The description of Olaf's dominion and the statements that he was Constantine's son-in-law, that he was incited by the Scottish king, and that the fleet sailed up the Humber are peculiar to J[ohn of] W[orcester] and are not in A[nglo-]S[axon] C[hronicle]."<sup>32</sup> It is to be noted that this information forms the introduction to John's entry, and the remaining details in the account following are essentially a summary of the Old English poem as it appears in the *Chronicle*.

In one respect, however, John misreads or adjusts the information given in the poem, namely in reporting that Athelstan and Edmund "reges Anlafum et Constantinum ad naues fugere compellentes" [forced kings Anlaf and Constantine to flee to the ships]. In the Old English poem, it is Anlaf who is forced to flee to a ship, followed at some remove of time or

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<sup>32</sup> John of Worcester, *Chronicle*, 2.393n9.

place by the rest of the surviving Norsemen;<sup>33</sup> and Constantine escapes north, presumably by land (the usual meaning of *fleam*).<sup>34</sup> Later, in 941, John reports that the Northumbrians chose Anlaf, “rex Nordmannorum” [king of the Norsemen], as their king. This was Anlaf Sihtricsson, but John does not distinguish this Anlaf from Anlaf Guthfrithsson who was at Brunanburh. Anlaf Guthfrithsson is called “Norðmanna bregu” [chief of the Norsemen] in the Old English poem at line 33, perhaps giving rise to John’s confusion.<sup>35</sup> These two passages, with their conflation and misreading of information in the *Chronicle*, associate Anlaf with Northumbria. It would be logical for John, with these associations in mind, to assume that if Constantine and Anlaf were northern confederates, then the likeliest waterway for their entry and escape would be the Humber.

As the most significant northern English river and boundary, and as a place of entry for invading forces, the Humber figures numerous times in the *Chronicle* and other authorities.<sup>36</sup> One of the series of battles around the time of the Norman Conquest, as reported by John using a version of the *Chronicle* related to C, was when Harald Hardrada’s force landed at the mouth of the Tyne “in ostio Tine fluminis intrauerunt,” and was joined by Tostig’s forces:

Ad quem comes Tostius . . . sua cum classe uenit, et citato cursu ostium Humbre fluminis intrauerunt, et sic aduersus cursum Vse fluminis nauigantes, in loco quo Richale dicitur applicuerunt.

[Earl Tostig joined him with a fleet . . . and on a swift course they entered the mouth of the River Humber; sailing thus up the River Ouse, they landed at a place called Ricall.]<sup>37</sup>

Darlington and McGurk note that “The approach through the Humber and the landing-place are not mentioned in ASC.”<sup>38</sup> In this case the Humber entry is accurate, but the almost formulaic addition of the details to the *Chronicle* record, closely parallel to those John records for Brunanburh, reveals a habit of mind; in the preceding passage John even confuses Harald Harfagri with Harald Hardrada, much as he confuses the two Anlafs.

No earlier or independent tradition mentions the Humber in relation to the Battle of Brunanburh, but many of the traditions show a knowledge of that important waterway. John misunderstands the Old English poem, confuses personnel, and regards the Humber as the point of entry typically used by northern forces. All these factors make it reasonable to doubt that John has the only accurate tradition about Brunanburh and that all the others omitted such a useful detail.

<sup>33</sup> Lines 32–36 of the Old English poem, detailing Anlaf’s flight, strikingly use singular verbs; *lille weorode* [with a small company] (line 34b) is similar to *mæte we(o)rode*, which in *The Dream of the Rood* lines 69 and 124 means “alone.”

<sup>34</sup> The abundant examples refer to land-based flight: Vercelli Homily 19 neatly illustrates the distinction between land and sea flight: “He [Jonas] þeah on fleame wæs, oð he to sæ becwom, & him þær scip gebohte” [Jonah fled, instead, until he reached the sea, where he took passage] (ed. Scragg, line 115).

<sup>35</sup> William of Malmesbury, *GR* 2.131.4, also confuses the two Anlafs.

<sup>36</sup> Higham, “Context,” p. 144n6, and Lendinara, “Later Histories,” p. 206.

<sup>37</sup> John of Worcester, *Chronicle*, 2.602–03.

<sup>38</sup> John of Worcester, *Chronicle*, 2.602n5.

## 5. THE LOCATION OF THE BATTLE IN RECENT DISCUSSION

There is a tendency among scholars discussing the battle and its location either to call the place-name evidence “speculation” or actually to treat it as such. The caution of early scholars such as Alistair Campbell and Dorothy Whitelock was expressed in a context where onomastic study was developing, and a good deal of relevant material was not available. Taking that caution as the scholarly consensus, more recent investigators have selected sites for the battle on the basis of partial or superficial similarity of names, political or social conditions, or resemblance of sites to adventitious detail in narrative sources. No-one has taken very seriously the idea from *Guy of Warwick* (Item 37) that the battle (transmuted into single combat between Guy and Colbrond)<sup>39</sup> took place just outside Winchester; nor the specific location of the battle in *Eulogium historiarum* (Item 43) at *Donelew in Wilthschire* [Dunlow in Wiltshire].<sup>40</sup> And indeed while accurate history, together with political and social conditions, might well rule out certain sites such as these, superficial similarity of names and reliance on late narrative sources is not a strong basis on which to construct a theory of where the battle might have taken place.

At its most extreme, this results in populist writers such as Cockburn, *Brunanburh and its Period*, in 1931 and Hill, *Age of Athelstan*, in 2004 assembling an assortment of names, mostly beginning with *B-*, which might by some prestidigitation be made to match details in the sources. Serious recent claims have also been made for Burnswark (Dumfriesshire), Brinsworth (Yorkshire), Bromswold (Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire) and Bourne (Lincolnshire). All these display a partial or superficial similarity of name to the Old English *Brunanburh*; all but the first of these rely on John of Worcester’s tradition of the Humber entry for the invading fleet. Against these stands Bromborough on the Wirral (Cheshire), the only site suggested for the battle where the name actually derives from Old English *Brunanburh*. I have elsewhere examined some of the arguments put forward in support of Burnswark, Brinsworth, Bromswold, and Bourne, but some summary comments are appropriate here.<sup>41</sup>

### 5.1 Burnswark

Burnswark near Dumfries is an Iron-Age hillfort reaching 920 ft above sea level. The name is recorded from 1542 in the spelling *Burnyswarke* and variants.<sup>42</sup> The second element is late Middle English/Scots *wark*, deriving from Old English *weorc*. Thus there is a similarity with Symeon’s *Brunnanwerce* and Gaimar’s *Bruneswerce*, with which, Kevin Halloran maintains, “there is no doubt that early forms of the place-name Burnswark would fit.”<sup>43</sup> Apart from the

<sup>39</sup> See also Lendinara, “Battle of Brunanburh,” and Rouse, *Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 57–62.

<sup>40</sup> This place can be identified as the meeting-place of Dunlow hundred, now preserved in the name Dunley, in Littleton Drew, Wiltshire, approximately halfway between Chipping Sodbury and Chippenham. Early forms recorded for the name, which appears to be compounded of a personal name *Dun* and *hlaw* or its mutated form *hlæw* [mound, tumulus], include *Denelau* 1086 Domesday Book, *Dunelewe* 1268 Assize Rolls, *Donlowe* 1476 Patent Rolls. See Gover, Mawer, and Stenton, *Place-Names of Wiltshire*, pp. 75–76, Anderson, *English Hundred-Names*, 2.156. Why the *Eulogium* identifies this place as the site of the Battle of Brunanburh is a matter for speculation.

<sup>41</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Cavill, “Site.”

<sup>42</sup> Neilson, “Brunanburh and Burnswark,” p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> “Brunanburh Campaign,” p. 144.

fact that currently there are no known spellings of the place-name Burnswark within 600 years of the battle, there is no philological “fit” in the forms. Only the garbled Gaimar spellings *Burneweste* give any evidence that *Brunanburh* might have had a metathesized *burn-* form in any tradition. Indeed, the best explanation for the first element of the Dumfries name is *burn* [a spring, a stream], in possessive and/or plural form: there are numerous springs and streams around the hill and numerous *burn* names. None of the recorded spellings for Burnswark suggest that it originally had a weak Old English noun in the first element.

Another argument put forward by Halloran in favor of identifying Burnswark with *Brunanburh* is that the *dun* referred to in Æthelweard’s *Brunandun* and Symeon’s *Wendun* associates the battle site with “a prominent hill.”<sup>44</sup> Gelling’s and Cole’s examinations of the early settlement-names containing *dun*, however, as mentioned above (section 3.3), show that *duns* are not necessarily “prominent” and rarely reach higher than 500 ft, that *dun* is not used “to describe great prehistoric hill-forts,” and that *dun* names are significantly lacking in the north-west of England and south-west Scotland. There is thus very good reason to doubt the identification of *Brunandun* or *We(o)ndun* with Burnswark.

One further shred of evidence is to be found in the Old English poem. Following the mention of the name *Brunanburh*, the poet claims that it was natural for Athelstan and his brother to defend their land, treasures and homes (lines 7b–10a). The verb used here is *ealgian* [to defend], and though Henry of Huntingdon garbles some of the Old English verse, he has here, accurately, “defenderent patrie” [they should defend their native land]. The implication is that *Brunanburh* was English, was part of the English king’s patrimony in a way that the Solway region never was at this time, nor Northumbria, and even in a way that east Mercia was not when Edmund overran it in 942 capturing the Five Boroughs. Although one might take William of Malmesbury’s observation that Anlaf and his forces “multum in Angliam processerat” [had advanced far into England] with a pinch of salt (since he is the only one to make such a statement and it most likely refers to the raiding that preceded the battle), the general consensus of the sources is that the battle was fought on English soil, and that the Scots and Cumbrians were not on home territory.

## 5.2 Brinsworth

The argument for Brinsworth has been advanced by Michael Wood.<sup>45</sup> The strength of his argument is that Brinsworth is in an area of south Yorkshire close to important lines of communication and several fortified places with *burh* names. There is a hill nearby, White Hill reaching 230 ft, and suggested by Wood to be Symeon’s *Wendun* on the basis that the northern part of it, Canklow, has Iron-Age and Roman remains which include a temple podium. This suggests confusion, on the part of the tradition, of Old English *wiht* [river bend] in the name White Hill, with *wih* [holy].<sup>46</sup> And Brinsworth, first recorded as *Brynesford*, might be confused with *Bruneford* in William of Malmesbury (though Wood does not argue for this).

<sup>44</sup> “Brunanburh Campaign,” pp. 144, 147.

<sup>45</sup> “Brunanburh Revisited” and *In Search of England*, pp. 206–14.

<sup>46</sup> “Brunanburh Revisited,” p. 212. There is a significant difference, however, between the proposition that *wiht* in place-names may develop into “white,” as illustrated by Wood (“Brunanburh Revisited,” p. 217n74, which is demonstrable), and the proposition that *\*wih* was confused with *wiht* and gave rise to White Hill in this particular example (for which there is no evidence at all).

Despite introducing place-name evidence of this kind, Wood essentially dismisses it:

The evidence of the place-name is not decisive: what the Norman scribe wrote down [for the name Brinsworth] in the later eleventh century implies a *Brȳni*, not a *Bruna* or a *Brune* as in *Brunanburh*. This does not allow us to be definite about the name the site bore in 937. Indeed the uncertainty over *Brunanburh* has always been compounded by the multiplicity of names for the site which arose as early as the tenth century, suggesting that the real location was soon forgotten in the south of England. It is the strategic significance of *Brynesford* which forces our attention upon it.<sup>47</sup>

To the central assertion of this passage, Ray Page responded, “it is also clear that, whatever the name was in the tenth century, it is unlikely it was *Brunanburh*”: so whatever the uncertainties about *Brunanburh*, and whatever the significance of *Brynesford*, no source links the two places.<sup>48</sup> And in terms of the strategic importance of the site, Nicholas Higham and Sarah Foot have separately argued with just as much evidence and conviction for the strategic and political significance of west Mercia at this time.<sup>49</sup>

The point is, perhaps, that arguing for a series of name confusions can only be an expedient when all other suggestions fail to give a reasonable interpretation of the evidence; and despite the variety of names, as has already been observed, there is a remarkable level of consistency in the attestation of the grammatically weak first element in the name *Brunanburh*.<sup>50</sup>

### 5.3 *Bromswold*

This was an area of ancient woodland along the borders of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire, and Alfred Smyth argues that the name, first recorded as *Bruneswald*, is consistent with *Brunanburh* and its variants, placing particular emphasis on the Rolls Series edition of Henry of Huntingdon which attests a form *Brunesburh*.<sup>51</sup> In my earlier article, I doubted that this spelling was in any sense standard,<sup>52</sup> and in fact my research has shown since (1) that it does not occur in the manuscript (London, British Library MS Arundel 48), but is a reconstructed form for *Brunesburi(t)h*;<sup>53</sup> and (2) that these spellings with -s- are idiosyncratic and do not accord with the spellings in any other of the main manuscript traditions of Henry of Huntingdon; indeed a manuscript which was apparently copied from the same exemplar as Arundel 48 consistently has *Brunebur(i)h* spellings.<sup>54</sup> The spellings of *Bromswold* are thus not consistent with the grammatically weak first element of *Brunanburh*.

Only one of the names recorded as near the battle site refers to a wood, namely *Egil's Saga's* *Vínuskógi*. It has been argued that *Egil's Saga* is a tissue of conventional story ele-

<sup>47</sup> “*Brunanburh Revisited*,” pp. 211–12.

<sup>48</sup> “*Tale*,” p. 345n4.

<sup>49</sup> See Higham, “*The Context*,” and Sarah Foot, “*Where English Becomes British*.”

<sup>50</sup> Contradicted in this proposal by the persistent -s genitive in *Brinsworth* spellings, also noted by Page, “*A Tale*,” pp. 344–45.

<sup>51</sup> Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>52</sup> Cavill, “*Site*,” p. 309.

<sup>53</sup> This fact is acknowledged by the editor, Arnold, p. 160n1.

<sup>54</sup> Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. Greenway, p. cxviii; see the Appendix, below.



ments, and this might be thought to throw some doubt on the validity of the wood name; and not even in this source is the battle fought in the wood.<sup>55</sup> The Old English poem, however, has a reference to “wulf on wealde” [the wolf of/from/in the wood] in line 65a. But the reference to the wolf here is doubly conventional: the creature is persistently associated with woodland in Old English poetry<sup>56</sup> and the particular context of the reference in the poem is the “beasts of battle typescene,” where the wolf, raven, and eagle pick the bones of the slain on the battlefield.<sup>57</sup> At most, the evidence might suggest that there was a wood in the vicinity of the battle site; it offers no support for the notion that the battle was fought in a predominantly wooded area such as Bromswold was. In Fox’s words, “where the element [*wald*] occurs in names first recorded before about 1200, . . . we can be sure that a woodland context of some kind is implied.”<sup>58</sup>

In my earlier article, I pointed out some of the topographical difficulties associated with *Bruneswald* as the battle’s location.<sup>59</sup> Gelling’s and Cole’s study of early settlement-names, quoted above (section 3.6), has shown that *feld* is used in names to distinguish open land from forest or hill. And upon examination, there is no evidence of early names with *feld* in the Bromswold area; the same is true of *dun* and *weorc* names; and while there are good numbers of *burh* names along the Watling Street Roman road in particular, there are none in the Bromswold region.

#### 5.4 Bourne

Hart pointed out that there was more than one medieval *Bruneswald*, and one of them, spelt *Brun(n)eswold*, *Brounesweld* in thirteenth-century sources, covered “the whole of the high clay-lands of the Isle of Ely”;<sup>60</sup> and the other, *Waldis de Brun(n)e* and *Burneweld* in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively, along the border of Cambridgeshire into Huntingdonshire. It is, as Hart acknowledges, a little difficult to assess what the first element of these compounds might be, but he dismisses the idea that it could be a personal name *Brun*, as there are too many *Bruneswald* areas for them all to be named after the same man, or men with the same name (p. 518). He suggests instead that the West Saxon who wrote the poem might have been unfamiliar with “either the local topography or the Old Norse elements in dialects within the Danelaw”; that the name might actually be a simplex and the Old English poem might have added *burh* “to make up the metre and alliteration”; and that the simplex element might be Scandinavian *brunnr* [a spring], which in the dative plural gives name to Bourn in Cambridgeshire and Bourne in Lincolnshire. Hart settles on the latter of these as the site of the battle (pp. 520–22).

<sup>55</sup> McDougall, “Discretion.”

<sup>56</sup> The phrase “wulf on w(e)alde” occurs also in *Elene* (line 28a) and *Judith* (line 206a). In *Elene* again (line 113a), the wolf is termed “holtes gehleða” [companion of the wood], in *Maxims II* (line 18b), “wulf sceal on bearowe” [the wolf belongs in the wood], and in *Wulf and Eadwacer* (line 16b), the wolf carries off its prey “to wuda” (all references are to editions in Krapp and Dobbie’s *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*).

<sup>57</sup> Griffith, “Convention and Originality,” pp. 197–99, lists eight examples.

<sup>58</sup> “People of the Wolds,” p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> “Site,” pp. 317–18.

<sup>60</sup> See Hart, *Danelaw*, p. 518, and Reaney, *Place-Names of Cambridgeshire*, p. 54.

Since independent sources, including prose Old English and Celtic ones, refer to the site as *Brunanburh* or *Duinbrunde* (an accurate translation), since *burh* adds nothing essential to the alliteration and meter of the poem, and since *brunnr* is not inflected as *brunan*, this string of supposition breaks down. Moreover, some of the topographical objections mentioned above in relation to Bromswold also apply here. Bourne in Lincolnshire is on flat, low-lying land, with no *dun* feature in the locality; there are *feld* names in the area, but they are predominantly later than the enclosing of land in the late Anglo-Saxon period, that is, they are “fields” rather than “open land.”

Any support for the Bourne or Bourn *Bruneswald* location from the spelling *Bruneswerce* in one Gaimar manuscript may be considered weaker for the fact that Gaimar knew very well where *Bruneswald* or *Bruneswalt* was: the name is given at lines 5548 and 5574 of his poem.<sup>61</sup> Gaimar records at length the story of Hereward’s campaigns and skirmishes in the area. He does not, however, relate or confuse *Brunanburh* and *Bruneswald*. Indeed, the story of Hereward told by Gaimar shows that the *Bruneswald* region offered refuge for outlaws conducting guerilla warfare: it was not a place for pitched battles.

Many another site has been proposed for the battle. Those above have been discussed in some detail because they are the ones most prominent in recent literature, and have been proposed by scholars with a detailed knowledge of the context of the battle. Some of the weaknesses of these arguments have been exposed, however: they dismiss the name as it appears in the sources or fail to account for the grammar; they make false assumptions about the topography implied by the name elements; they do not embrace the range of evidence relating to the place in the sources; and they do not always assess the relative value of sources such as John of Worcester or Gaimar. If we cannot ultimately be certain where the battle took place, we can at least weigh up the merits of these suggestions and point out why and in what particulars they do not fit the evidence.

## 6. BROMBOROUGH

The remaining generally-accepted possibility for the site of the battle is Bromborough on the Wirral. There is now no doubt that this modern name derives from an Old English *Brunanburh*, and when Campbell and Whitelock were initially writing about the uncertainties of the name, the comprehensive survey of the names of Cheshire (in which county Bromborough appears) had not yet been published. The etymology of the name was supposed by Ekwall (*Dictionary*, s.n.), to be “*burh* where broom grows” as late as 1960, despite Smith’s evidence that it derived from *Brunanburh*.<sup>62</sup>

There is now *a priori* good reason to consider Bromborough as the site. But this fact has either been disregarded or minimized in the search for alternatives. There has been a good deal of scholarly reticence about making sweeping claims: Dodgson concurred with Campbell that “the identity of place-name does not prove that this *Brunanburh* in Wirral is the same as that near which the battle took place.”<sup>63</sup> However, the failure of any of the alternatives to provide anything remotely like the consistent range of spellings of *Brunanburh* in

<sup>61</sup> Gaimar, *L’Estoire*, ed. Bell.

<sup>62</sup> “Site of the Battle,” pp. 58–59.

<sup>63</sup> “Background,” p. 249.

the sources, or to fit spellings of the alternative sites to the fundamental grammar of, and topography indicated by, the elements, makes a re-examination of the claims of Bromborough necessary. So the evidence relating to this location needs to be reviewed, to see whether it can be reconciled with the basic philological, sociological, and topographical information provided by the sources.

### 6.1 From the name *Brunanburh* to *Bromborough*

The processes by which *Brunanburh* changes to *Bromborough* were summarized by Niles and are here illustrated from the spellings recorded by John Dodgson.<sup>64</sup> Dodgson believed that Bromborough was the site of the battle of 937, but with proper caution he refrained from giving the various spellings of *Brunanburh* as the earliest forms of the modern name. It should be noted that the changes outlined by Niles are not necessarily sequential in the spelling record, but represent trends in pronunciation and orthography before the standardization of spelling in the modern era. The dates given are those of the original document:

- loss of nasal after unstressed syllable → *Bruneburgh* (1153)
- syncope of unstressed vowel → *Brunburg* (1100–35)
- assimilation of *-n-* to the following bilabial *-b-* → *Brumburg* (1153)
- lowering of *-u-* to *-o-* → *Brombur* (1153–59)
- parasite vowel appears in second element → *Bromboreh* (c. 1200), *Bromborough* (1277)

One might also note within the series of spellings for *Bromborough* many of the minor variants in the series of spellings for *Brunanburh*: thus we find the second element spelled *-burch-*, *burg(h)*, *-burth*.

### 6.2 *Bruna* or *Brune* and the *Bruningas*

Dodgson notes that “there is evidence which suggests that before 1086 Bromborough was the capital of an extensive tract of country” (*PN Ch* 4.239). Its name indicates that it was fortified, and it may be surmised that this fortification dated from the earliest settlement since the land at any point of Anglo-Saxon history was threatened to south and north by the Celts of Wales and Cumbria, and in the tenth century particularly by the Irish and Norse from the west. Dodgson reports that local tradition holds that the original fortification was at Court House, which had an early earthwork enclosing nine acres of land, and was later used as a stronghold by the abbots of St. Werburgh’s monastery in Chester (*PN Ch* 4.241).

Two other names, presumably of originally different places, but later merged, contain the same first element as *Brunanburh*, *Bruna*, or *Brune*, namely Brimstage and Brimston. Brimston is now lost, Brimstage is three miles west of Bromborough, equidistant from the Dee and Mersey shores in the middle of the Wirral peninsula. The second elements of the names are respectively *stæp* [river-bank, landing-place], and *stan* [stone], probably a boundary marker. Dodgson gives *Bruna*, the masculine personal name, as the first element in all these names (*PN Ch* 4.234–36). Though the stream (on which Brimstage stands) might seem to make the alternative river-name *Brune* plausible as the first element, it is hardly a significant landscape feature, and thus the name of a leading settler may be more likely. What Dodgson apparently missed was the significance of these names and the ancient territory they mark out. So far as we can tell, this area was never known locally by a clan- or tribe-

<sup>64</sup> Niles, “Skaldic Technique,” p. 364n2; Dodgson, *PN Ch*, 4.237–38.

name in *-inga-* or *-ingas*; indeed such names are rare, possibly altogether absent, in Cheshire (*PN Ch* 5.1.249–50), and in Mercia as a whole.<sup>65</sup> This reinforces the possibility that what the *Bruninga-* spellings from the twelfth-century charters and Scottish sources reflect is a non-local administrative and onomastic convenience, a way of referring to a territory containing *Bruna*-named settlements that borrows or imitates naming convention elsewhere. In Norfolk, for example, Happisburgh [*\*Hæp's* fortification] (*Hapesburch* 1086 Domesday Book) is in the region of Happing [area of land belonging to *\*Hæp's* people] (*Hapinga* 1086 Domesday Book). Happing was named as a hundred in the twelfth century as it became an administrative land-unit.<sup>66</sup> The uncultivated area surrounding Bromborough, Brimstage, and Brimston might then have been known for non-local convenience as Bruningafeld [open land of the Bruningas].<sup>67</sup>

### 6.3 The topographical elements

Much of the Wirral peninsula consists of low hilly land of the type referred to by the element *dun*. An area which retains *dun* in the name is Haddon [heath hill] (*hæð* + *dun*, *PN Ch* 4.213) between Burton and Ness about six miles south-west of Bromborough; Dodgson surmises that Dunstan Farm might also contain the *dun* element (*PN Ch* 4.212). Neither of these names is recorded early. The closest expanses of *dun* land in extant names are Weathertons in Little Neston and the lost, but identical, *Wethredoun* in Willaston [sheep hill] (*wæðer* + *dun*, *PN Ch* 4.227, 234): these are four and three miles distant from Bromborough respectively, and though they are (clearly) not originally settlement-names, *Wethredoun* is recorded from 1309. However, the toponymy of the Wirral was influenced by particularly Scandinavian settlers and it is possible that some English names were replaced; certainly as *Wethredoun* shows, some were lost; and the more general and later term *hyll* is common in the area.

The battle initially took place on an expanse of open uncultivated land of which the terms *feld* in Old English and *heiðr* in Old Norse were used. The crucial term here is *feld*, which is used in several sources, but the significance of *heiðr* (used in a single, and unreliable, source) and the cognate Old English *hæð* is that they refer to broadly the same type of land and vegetation as *feld*. Along much of the coast of the Wirral can be found a string of Heathfield and Heath Field and other heath names, too many to specify, and while (as noted above) *feld* began to change its meaning at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, Old Norse *heiðr* and Old English *hæð* retained their core sense of “heath, uncultivated land.” Haddon, the area of *dun* land mentioned above, also contains the element *hæð*. In Bromborough, Far, Higher and Lower Heath still exist as names, found earliest in the documentary record as *le heth* in 1412 (*PN Ch* 4.243).

One of the more common field-names in the rural parishes of the Wirral is Hay or Hey, from Old English (*ge*)*hæg* [enclosure], which denotes the taking-in of common land, and implies the existence of large areas of such land before enclosure. The *feld* names in Bromborough include some early and interesting examples. New Field is recorded as *le New(e)feld* from 1412 and may imply the existence of an old *feld*, or be named in contrast to Oldfield across the Wirral at Heswall. *Lathegestfeld* 1412 and *Ranesfeld* 1265–91 appear to preserve

<sup>65</sup> See further Ekwall, *English Place-Names in -ING*, pp. 7–116, esp. p. 98.

<sup>66</sup> Sandred et al., *Place-Names of Norfolk*, 2.84, 92–93.

<sup>67</sup> If, with due regard to the obscurities and difficulties of the text, we accept the translation given above of *Glaswawt Taliessin*, Item 5.28, we have another non-local reference, from early Welsh tradition, to “Brun’s region.”

Norse names: *Lathegest* is probably in origin a Norse personal name (*PN Ch* 4.244); *Ranesfeld* may preserve the Norse name *Hrafn* or the English *Hraefn* or *hræfn* [raven] (*PN Ch* 4.245). It is impossible to be sure whether these early names refer to tracts of originally open land, but overall, the names chime with the modern topography to suggest that much of the central part of the Wirral was land of this type.

Two of the remaining topographical features referred to in the various names for the area of the battle, namely a (possible) *ford* and a wood, *skógr*, also appear in the names of Bromborough. The Marfords is Old English (*ge*)*mære* + *ford* [boundary ford], between Bromborough and Poulton in Bebington parish, the name first recorded in 1406. Bromborough Wood is recorded from 1347 (*PN Ch* 4.242), and there are later names Oak Wood, Shore Wood, Slack Wood, and Woodlands in the parish. There are similar patches of woodland throughout the central area of Wirral, and the names indicate that there were larger areas of woodland in the north and west of the peninsula.

#### 6.4 *Othlynn* and *Dingesmere*

These two are apparently place-names, one in Irish annals and perhaps garbled, the other in the Old English poem. The possibility that *othlynn* in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* referred to the region called The Lyme or Lyne was suggested by Nicholas Higham,<sup>68</sup> and the suggestion that *Dingesmere* in the Old English poem referred to the wetland at Heswall was made by Cavill, Harding, and Jesch, “Revisiting *Dingesmere*,” later augmented in Cavill, “Coming Back.” The first of these names refers to the general area where the battle took place; the second, an area from which the surviving Norsemen embarked for the return to Dublin.

The Lyme is an upland area (over 400 ft) which forms the eastern and south-eastern boundary of Cheshire, but stretches north into Lancashire, and runs through Staffordshire and Shropshire. The place-names which make reference to the feature include Audlem and Burslem, Ashton under Lyne, Newbold, Moreton, Laughton, Norton, and Betton all under Lime, Newcastle under Lyne, and Whitmore under Lyne.<sup>69</sup> At its closest, The Lyme is about twenty-five miles east from Bromborough. From an Irish perspective, any battle between the Irish Sea coast and the uplands of north-central England might be described as taking place “on the plains of othlynn,” because the significant boundaries were the sea and the upland ridge of The Lyme. Richard Coates suggests that the name itself might ultimately derive from Latin *limen* [threshold], or *limes* [boundary].<sup>70</sup> The Lyme might have had two particular features of interest to the writer of the annals: it was wooded, thus providing cover for fugitives; and it was an ancient territorial boundary at the limits of the Mercian and later palatine power of Chester (*PN Ch* 1.4).

It is clear from the sources that the defeated forces from Ireland were unable to return immediately to their ships and escape: the day-long pursuit detailed in the Old English poem suggests that the coalition forces were cut off from any simple escape route, possibly with the exception of Anlaf who apparently made good his escape alone or with a small company (see above). Fugitives from the battle fleeing west and north-west might intend to take refuge among the potentially more sympathetic Scandinavian settlements of Thingwall, West Kirby, Meols, or in the woods and marshes of those parts of the peninsula.

<sup>68</sup> “Context,” p. 152n66.

<sup>69</sup> Gelling, *West Midlands*, p. 64, fig. 32.

<sup>70</sup> “Lyme,” p. 48.

Four miles directly west of Bromborough is Thingwall, named from the meeting-place of the *thing*, the local moot of the Scandinavian settlers (*þing-völlr*, *PN Ch* 4.273). Two miles further west is the expanse of Dawpool Bank, and the river Dee. In medieval times the course of the Dee varied: it sometimes flowed closer to the north Wales coast, sometimes closer to Wirral, and Ranulf Higden records the tradition that the closer side to the flow of the river would have the disadvantage in war.<sup>71</sup> The river was canalized in 1737 to stabilize its course, but there is still a vast area of mud and sandbank along the littoral. The *mere* element in Old English usually means “pool, lake,” but Ann Cole identified a different sense, “wetland,” which has been augmented by Jacobsson, as “land liable to flood.”<sup>72</sup> This sense may be found in coastal features subject to periodic or tidal flooding such as Mersea Island in Essex, and Cuckmere Haven near Eastbourne in East Sussex.<sup>73</sup>

The west coast of Wirral is commanded by the low hills of Thingwall, Pensby, and Heswall, and the suggestion is that *Dingessmere* in the Old English poem refers to “the wetland of the *thing*.” Evidence to support John Dodgson’s proposal that it is a “poetic and figurative invention of a name for the Irish Sea” is in the nature of the case lacking, whereas supporting evidence for the kind of name-formation suggested here is plentiful.<sup>74</sup> There may well be a contrast intended by the Old English poet between the embarkation point *on Dingessmere* — far from ideal, even for shallow-draft Viking warships — and the relative safety of the river and sea, sailing *ofer deop water* to Dublin.<sup>75</sup>

#### 6.5 *We(o)ndun*

One of the significant hesitations that scholars have had, as outlined above (section 3.4), was that if the first element of this name is the adjective *\*weoh* [holy], the evidence is lacking for heathen sites as far west in England as Bromborough. While this may be a problem of evidence and distribution, it is not one of possibility. With topographical names we can say that some features do not exist in certain areas, but even if evidence were lacking of heathen names in certain areas, heathen practices and sites plausibly existed at one time. In other words, the issue of distribution here would be by no means as conclusive as it is in names relating to topographical features.

However, two separate pieces of evidence have been brought forward to suggest that there were names relating to heathen practice in the Wirral. Prudence Vipond, in “*Harrow Fields*,” discussed the Harrow names along the boundary of Heswall and Thurstaston. She disputed Dodgson’s etymology (Old English *herra* + *hoh* or Old Norse *hærri* + *haugr*, both meaning “higher hill”) on the grounds that these fields are on the gentle slope down towards the Dee. She argued that as elsewhere these refer to a heathen site, Old English *hearg*. In a postscript to Vipond’s article (“Paganism and Christianity”), Margaret Gelling

<sup>71</sup> Harding, “Locations and Legends,” p. 120.

<sup>72</sup> “Distribution and Use of *mere*,” and *Wells, Meres and Pools*, p. 218, respectively.

<sup>73</sup> See further Gelling and Cole, *Landscape*, pp. 21–27.

<sup>74</sup> See Cavill, “Coming Back,” pp. 36–37, and Jacobsson, *Wells, Meres and Pools*, p. 216.

<sup>75</sup> The assumption made by Halloran (“Brunanburh Campaign,” p. 146n84) that the place of embarkation for Anlaf and the Northmen was the same is not justified by the poem. Not only does it deal with the two episodes separately (lines 32a–36 for Anlaf, lines 53–56 for the Northmen), but the persistent singulars of the first episode contrast strikingly with the plurals of the second. Thus the fact that Anlaf puts out “on flot” and “on fealene flod” [on the water . . . on the yellowy-brown sea] very likely has no relevance to the departure of the other Norsemen.

accepted the evidence, suggesting that Landican probably commemorates a Welsh missionary saint, Tegan, who worked among the heathen here.

The second piece of evidence was Richard Coates' discussion, "A Further Snippet," of an earlier name for Rice Wood in Bromborough, *Welondrys* 1357, which he interprets as *We-land*, a Middle English form of an inflected Old English *\*weon land* [sacred land], with the addition of the specifier *hris* [scrub].

David Wilson has suggested that a *hearg* site "occupied a prominent position on high land and was a communal place of worship for a specific group of people," as against the *weoh* which was "a small wayside shrine."<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note that the Harrow names of Heswall are at the foot of a steep hill, leveling out towards Pensby and Thingwall. The Rice Wood site is, as Coates observes, just over half a mile from the Court House, the earthworks which may be those of the *burh* of *Brunanburh*;<sup>77</sup> and it is even closer to the modern A41 road which follows an ancient non-Roman routeway; it is also on gently rising land. Thus in names of the Wirral, there is not only evidence of heathen sites, but also evidence that the particular elements *hearg* and *\*weoh* were used in a similar fashion to those in the rest of the country.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the nature of the case, it is not possible to map in precise detail the progress of the battle and its aftermath, despite the best efforts of commentators. In the discussion above I have tried to take seriously and present carefully the evidence provided by the names used in the medieval sources. What I think has been established is that Bromborough on the Wirral and its area fits the philological, topographical and sociological descriptors given in the names; and it fits these descriptors in a way that none of the other proposed sites do.

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<sup>76</sup> "Pagan Saxon Worship Sites," pp. 181, 182.

<sup>77</sup> "Further Snippet," p. 289.

## APPENDIX ON HENRY OF HUNTINGTON'S BRUNANBURH SPELLINGS

In the table below, I give the spellings of *Brunanburh* in MSS of Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*. There are three references to the place of this name in Henry's history: the first is in Book 5.18, the general introduction to the battle and the poem translation that follows; the second is in Book 5.19, Henry's translation of the Old English poem; and the third, in Book 5.32, Henry's summary of the reigns of the West Saxon kings. Early copies of MSS representing each of the 6 versions have been consulted as follows:

Version 1: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS 33.5.4

Version 2: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 382

Version 3: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 280

Version 4: London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 327

Version 5: London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 118

Version 6: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS 33.5.2

In addition, the readings of London, British Library, MS Arundel 48 (the text edited by Arnold), and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 564, copied from the same exemplar as Arundel 48 (Greenway's  $\delta$ , *Henry of Huntingdon*, p. cxviii), have been included. Arundel 48 is a text of version 5, but as will be clear from the spellings listed below, the *brunes-* forms are unique to this scribe.

Version	Book 5.18	Book 5.19	Book 5.32
1	brunebirih	brunebirih	brunebirig
2	brunebiri	brunebiri	Brunebiri
3	brunebirih	brunebirih	brunebrig
4	brinebirih <sup>78</sup>	brunebirih	brunebiri
5	bruneburih	brunebirih	bruneburith
6	bruneburih	brunebirih	brunebirih
Arundel 48	brunesburith	brunesburih	brunesburith
Laud Misc. 564	bruneburih	bruneburih	bruneburh <sup>79</sup>

This evidence clearly demonstrates that the *-s-* genitive is idiosyncratic to the scribe of Arundel 48 and not organic to the *Historia Anglorum* tradition as a whole. This reinforces the point made earlier that the earliest sources represent the first element of *Brunanburh* as originally an Old English weak noun. Interestingly, it appears to be from the idiosyncratic tradition of Arundel 48 that the source(s) of Bartholomew of Cotton and John of Oxnead descend.

<sup>78</sup> A minim in the first syllable is missing.

<sup>79</sup> With *-i-* (*-burih*) underdotted for excision.







STEPHEN HARDING

## WIRRAL: FOLKLORE AND LOCATIONS

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Earlier chapters have examined the possible locations within Britain for the Battle of Brunanburh and have shown that it might have taken place in the Wirral peninsula in north-west England. If this is correct then it is possible to make suggestions as to where the battle may have taken place and the possible escape route of Anlaf's men. But this is a rather hazardous enterprise because the earliest sources give little indication of place beyond names: the contemporary (or near-contemporary) Old English poem provides only a few clues, but these, together with knowledge of the current and former topography of the area and surrounding coastline, and knowledge of how the local Scandinavian and English populations were distributed in tenth-century Wirral, enable some suggestions to be made. First, though, this essay examines the local folklore to see if any reliable evidence may be found as to the location of the battle from antiquarian traditions of the Wirral.

### 1. LOCAL FOLKLORE: BROMBOROUGH COURT HOUSE AND WARGRAVES

Two places on Wirral have been associated in local antiquarian lore with the battle and both are within the (modern) township of Bromborough itself. These traditions are interesting in themselves and are worth investigating; but generally tell us more about the antiquarian enthusiasm of the writers than the location of the battle.

The first of these is at what was formerly a set of fields near the banks of the River Mersey referred to in a 1731 map as *Wargraves* and in the 1839 Tithe Apportionment as *Wergreaves*. Because of its unusual name, local folklore has associated this place with the battle. Reflecting this folk-etymology, a well-known local Victorian clergyman, the Reverend Edward Dyer Green, later echoed by the local historian Phillip Sulley,<sup>1</sup> made the suggestion that the elements were ME *werre* [war] and *graef* [a grave, a digging] (an etymology at first accepted by Dodgson).<sup>2</sup> Thomas Helsby also records Green as reporting that

A large tract of land near the sea shore at Bromborough, has long been known by the name of Wargraves. This fact, and that of the recent discovery (June 1877) of a large number of skeletons near the coast of the Dee, a few miles further off, with other circumstances, combine to prove that this parish was the unquestionable site of Athelstan's famous victory over the Danes and their allies in 937.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sulley, *Hundred of Wirral*, pp. 213–16.

<sup>2</sup> Dodgson, "Background of Brunanburh," p. 303n7, rpt. in Cavill et al., *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, p. 61n7.

<sup>3</sup> See Ormerod, *History of the County of Cheshire*, p. 427n1.

Dodgson later more plausibly suggested the second element to be OE *græfe* [a wood] and the first to be ME *werre* or ON *verri* [worse, the less valuable], and concluded that the name is not evidence for a battle (PN Ch 4.242). Today Wargraves is an industrial area off the A41 trunk road and on the 1831 Bryant map of Wirral (the relevant part of which is shown in Figure 1) — which, besides the tithe maps, provides one of the last maps of the area before heavy urbanization — it corresponds approximately to the area between Rice Wood and Bromborough Mills.

Secondly and more recently, 1.5 km (1 mile) further north along the A41 (New Chester Road) at Bromborough Pool the formerly highly ditched/moated nine-acre site of what used to be (until 1969) the Bromborough Court House and Court House Farm, has been associated with the battle, possibly as the site of the *burh* or stronghold. The site is located on the south bank of the River Dibbin just near its entry into the River Mersey. The earliest attestation of the name is 1412 *le Courteway* [the way to the court] (see Dodgson, PN Ch 4.241). The site was the manor house of the abbots of St Werburgh's in Chester and is described in 1819 — not long before the Bryant and Tithe maps were produced — as follows: “occupying



**Figure 1.** Part of 1831 map by A. Bryant of the Wirral. The map shows the ridge of high ground (now Mount Road) in the Storeton/Bebington area running up to Tranmere Pool and Oxtun. Bebington Heath and Storeton woods can be seen as well as “Court Hall” near the mouth of the Dibbin and Poulton Hall to the bottom of the map and Brimstage Hall to the left. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.

an extremely strong position at the neck of land, accessible only from the south, to the east it is defended by the estuary, on the other sides by precipitous banks descending to an inlet which forms a channel between this parish and Bebington" (*PN Ch* 4.241).

The unlikelihood of the name Wargraves having anything to do with "war" does not preclude the possibility that the Courthouse could have been sited on the ancient fortified site of Brunanburh. The occupation of some such site commanding the river by Athelstan's forces would have denied the defeated forces the means of a quick escape to ships arriving via the Mersey and could have forced the day-long retreat mentioned in the Old English poem.

*Mount Road Ridge, Bebington, Storeton, Brimstase, and Heathland*

In the early decades of the twentieth century local historians were fostering the belief that the battle had taken place around what is now Bebington Heath, 2.4 km (1.5 miles) south-west from Bromborough Court House, and (if that was where the *burh* was sited) still very much *ymbe Brunanburh*. Bebington Heath is adjacent to the Norse townships of Storeton to the west and Tranmere to the north: on the Bryant map (Figure 1) its position is centered around the first of the large L letters. Just over 1000 years later World War II American soldiers were using the same heathland for battle practice. Today part of it is common land and part of it is the site of Brackenwood Golf Course sloping eastwards to the ridge of high ground of Prospect Hill and Storeton Hill. Mount Road — the township boundary — now runs along the ridge. The ridge is now partially wooded and although some of this is due to seventeenth- to eighteenth-century fir plantations it is not unimaginable this might have been the case in medieval times. Sir John Stanley, Knight of the Garter (1453–1519) was resident at Storeton Hall (top left corner of Figure 1) and Master Forester of Wirral.<sup>4</sup>

One early twentieth-century local historian, Godfrey Mathews, made the suggestion that the ridge would have made an ideal defensive position for Anlaf's army, as recalled by Anne Anderson, and that it was from this ridge between Spital and Higher Bebington that the battle was fought.<sup>5</sup> Another, Francis Tudsbery, a student at Oxford and colleague of the Icelandic antiquarian Eiríkur Magnússon,<sup>6</sup> in his 1907 book, *Brunanburh AD 937*, argued that the bulk of the fighting took place on the *western* side of this ridge between Brimstase and Storeton which was also, he says, heathland.

Although a lot of the evidence presented by these historians is based on unreliable sources, for example *Egil's Saga*, this is an intriguing argument. The topography of the area can be gauged from the Bryant map of Wirral in 1831 and one can see that, regardless of which side of the ridge the bulk of the fighting might have taken place, the heathland around Mount Road makes a plausible site for a battle. From here it is 8 km (5 miles) as the crow flies to the Dee estuary at Heswall or Ness, and 13 km (8 miles) to the medieval seaport of Meols. Anlaf's raiders escaping from the Saxons might have headed in these directions (Figure 2).

*The Lancelyn Greens and Poulton Hall*

Although the Reverend Dyer Green may have been building on an earlier tradition with his learned suggestion concerning Wargraves — only shown by later scholarly analysis to be unlikely — this cannot be said for some other interesting pieces of Victorian folklore sur-

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Wilson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Stanley family," pp. 308–16.

<sup>5</sup> See *Story of Bromborough*, p.18.

<sup>6</sup> See Wawn, "Vikings and Victorians," in Cavill et al., *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, pp. 100–07.

rounding the battle. Although these stories are based on fantasy rather than fact, they nonetheless demonstrate the wish of the locals to appropriate the significant battle for the area and its history: they are also interesting in a study of the imaginative and sociological impact of local history on residents.<sup>7</sup> The first piece of Victorian tradition concerns the roadway leading down from Mount Road to Storeton Hall known as Red Hill Road (the road running below “Danton Dale” on Figure 2), which was so named from “the blood that once ran down it”; in reality the Red Hill refers to the red sandstone: Storeton Hill is part of one of two ridges of sandstone running through Wirral. The other ridge of red sandstone runs along the western side of the peninsula, and at Thurstaston Common is an impressive outcrop known as “Thor’s stone.” It has been impossible to trace this name before the Victorian period and it appears to have been introduced by the prominent Liverpool antiquarian Sir James Picton on the mistaken assumption that the place-name Thurstaston derived from Thor’s stone<sup>8</sup>: the origin of Thurstaston was shown by Dodgson and others to derive from the personal name Thorsteinn with *tún*. Nonetheless Picton’s association of the place with the Norse god was quickly echoed by others, culminating in Hilda Gamlin’s suggestion in *Twixt Mersey and Dee* that “the stone was probably raised by the Danes to commemorate the great battle of Brunanburh.” Not only does the folklore have the Danes fighting at Brunan-

burh — and celebrating a victory — but also has King Alfred fighting, too: King’s Road on the Bebington side of Mount Road was once believed to have been named after King Alfred, who was thought in this tradition to have fought at Brunanburh. Although locals now accept this could not possibly be true, another piece of folklore was that King’s Road had not been improved since King Alfred’s time — this is considered true!

One final piece of folklore which is worthy of more serious consideration concerns the Lancelyn Green family, residents at Poulton Hall (2 km south of Bebington Heath) since 1093. The late Roger Lancelyn Green was a well-known author and his many books included *The Saga of Asgard: Retold from the Old Norse Poems and Tales* (Puffin, 1960) reprinted in 1994 as *Myths of the Norsemen* (Puffin Classics, 1994). He was well-versed in all



**Figure 2:** Escape routes to the coast. Dark line: to Heswall. Lighter line: through the carrs and holms to Meols. Adapted from 18th-century map of Moll (ca. 1724).

<sup>7</sup> For evidence of widespread interest in Brunanburh among the Victorians, see Joanne Parker’s essay in this volume, pp. xxx–xxx, Wawn, *Vikings and Victorians*, and Wawn, “Vikings and Victorians” in Cavill et al., *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Picton, “Great Stone of Thor,” pp. 364–65.

things Viking. In memory of him the family commissioned the *Brunanburgh Viking*, a bronze sculpture which was unveiled in April 2004 and stands high in the gardens of the hall. The family believe the grounds were once the site of Bruna's stronghold or *burh*, with some stones from it remaining not far from the present building.<sup>9</sup>

The parish/township map of Wirral shown in Figure 3 is a map that has changed little over hundreds of years. Although Poulton is now in the parish of Bebington, it lies between the two modern townships of Bromborough and Brimstage which make up Bromborough parish: right in the middle of the territory anciently bearing Bruna's name. Poulton as a name may not have existed in AD 937 (it is not recorded before 1260). The commanding position of Poulton Hall, flanked by the River Dibbin and overlooking the Norse settlements at Raby and Storeton, would have made this location an ideal position for a boundary or border stronghold and a good alternative to Bromborough Court House as a possible location of Bruna's *burh*. As Ormerod reports,

Poulton Hall and the ground adjacent are situated above the most romantic part of the valley, sheltered with respectable timber and commanding a delightful prospect of the Clwydian mountains. The former hall stood at short distance from the present one, on a knoll, overhanging the dale below, and within the area of the ancient castle of the Lancelyns, the site of which is still indicated by the slight traces of earthworks, and was remarkably strong, defended by the dale in front, and on the two sides by deep ravines issuing from it. At the early period of its erection its strength and difficulty of access was materially increased by a large pool or mere, then formed by the tide below, which seems to have given its name to the township, and to the contiguous tracts of meadow ground called the Marfords. The effects of waves are still visible in the worn face of the rocks, at the upper end of the valley.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Folklore Conclusions*

This brief review of the local traditions reveals a great deal of interest in the battle and the possibility that it might have taken place locally. None of the supposed connections between the names and local features made by enthusiastic antiquarians can be historically verified, but nevertheless the traditions show a serious and creative interaction between the literary sources and the Wirral topography. It remains a question worth asking: how does the local evidence chime with arguments that the battle was fought on the Wirral?

## 2. WIRRAL AS A POSSIBLE LOCATION FOR THE BATTLE

#### *The Old English poem*

The tenth-century poem tells us the following geographical information:

1. The battle took place *ymbe Brunanburh* [around *Brunanburh*];
2. The retreating raiders were chased by troops of West Saxons *ondlongne dæg* [for the entire day] (though it may be this is a poeticism meaning "for a long time");
3. The fleeing raiders from Dublin escaped from a place on or near the coast called *Dingesmere* and sailed to Dublin.

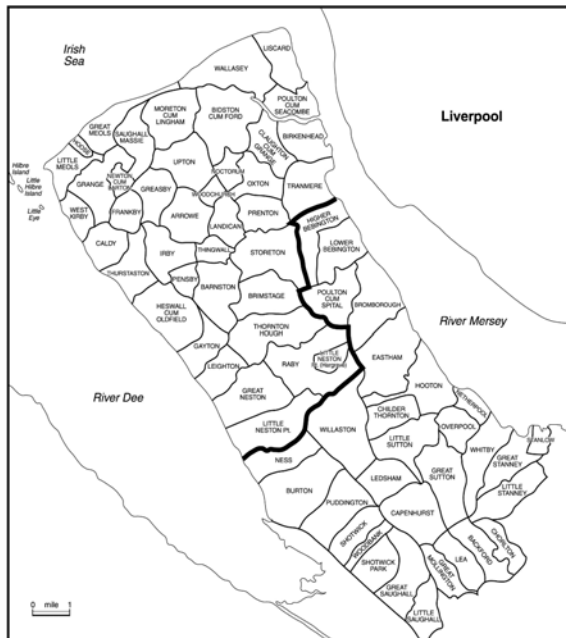
<sup>9</sup> Mrs. June Lancelyn Green, personal communication.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the County of Cheshire*, p. 440.

This information indicates that the battle took place somewhere around *Brunanburh* but at some distance from the point of escape; it took Anlaf's men an entire day of evading hostile forces to get to *Dingesmere*. If, as has been argued in other chapters, *Brunanburh* is Bromborough and *Dingesmere* is "the wetland by the Thing" (the meeting-place denoted by the name Thingwall), then the battle ranged from east to west across the Wirral. The escape-route for the repelled raiding army was one that might have been used by sea-travelers trading with the Wirral or visiting the Thing.

### *Tenth-century Wirral*

By the time of the Battle of Brunanburh, a linguistically Scandinavian population had been established in the north and west of the Wirral peninsula, and the existence of its Thing at Thingwall — one of only two surviving Thingwall place-names in England — attests to the Scandinavians being the dominant population. Although there may have been some degree of integration, the English-speaking communities were concentrated to the south of the peninsula. Within the conjectured Norse area there are some English named places like Moreton, Upton, Bidston, and (just outside) Poulton: these could have been in existence by the time the Norsemen arrived although there is no clear evidence to support this (the earliest of these, Upton, is first recorded in Domesday Book, 1086); they could equally have been established after the Scandinavian settlement period.



**Figure 3:** Wirral parish/township map (19th century). The bold line demarks the approximate boundary of the 10th-century Norse enclave, based on baronial manor holdings and place-names. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.

Norse Wirral is blessed with many fine examples of Viking Age stonework and treasure, the most outstanding examples include the magnificent hogback grave marker at St. Bridget's Church, West Kirby (recently beautifully restored by the Merseyside Conservation Centre), and another smaller hogback from Bidston, identified in 2004. Other examples include a large number of Viking artifacts discovered in low tides off the old Viking port of Meols. Although the majority of the finds were made in the nineteenth century they have only recently been catalogued and include coins, Hiberno-Norse pins, brooches, a drinking horn and what appear to be weapons from a possible pagan burial.<sup>11</sup> Evidence was presented at a recent public meeting of the remains of an elliptically shaped Viking house at Irby.<sup>12</sup> Amongst other impressive evidence of the Viking settlements are artifacts at the Church of St. Mary and St. Helen at Neston. There are seven fragments belonging to at least

<sup>11</sup> See Griffiths et al., *Meols*, pp. 58–76.

<sup>12</sup> Philpott and Adams, *Irby, Wirral*.

three Hiberno-Norse crosses, with fascinating imagery including the touching scene of a Viking couple embracing.<sup>13</sup> Three years after Brunanburh, Anlaf was king of York and intriguingly a coin (a round halfpenny) attributed to him was also found in Neston, shortly after the discovery of a silver ingot not far away in Ness.<sup>14</sup>

This wealth of archaeological evidence has been supported by modern genetic research tools. Recent y-chromosomal DNA analysis of men from old Wirral families (i.e., those possessing surnames extant in the area prior to the industrial revolution) has shown, in common with neighboring West Lancashire, substantial Norse ancestry with a prevalence for example of the haplogroup R1a, common in Norway but relatively rare in other parts of Western Europe.<sup>15</sup>

Ness and Neston probably mark the southern extremity of the original Norse enclave, and it is possible to assess the initial boundary of the settlements from the distribution of Scandinavian place-names and the topography. The neighboring settlement of Raby (ON *rá-byr*) means “boundary settlement.” On the English side of the posited boundary is the Old English place-name Hargrave [grey wood], with Old English *hār* [grey] used in a specialized sense meaning “boundary.”<sup>16</sup> From Raby the boundary appears to have run north-eastwards along the River Dibbin and the ridge of high ground separating Bebington from Storeton (ON *stórr* [big], presumably with ON *tún* [farm]), up to Tranmere (ON *trani-melr* [crane sandbank]). This division (Figure 3) also corresponds to the boundary of major baronial holdings in Domesday Book which, according to Dodgson, “represents a Norman adaptation of an administrative pattern that already existed when the Norman earls took over the shire. It looks as though the Norse enclave in Wirral was so politically distinctive that it justified a special feudal administration,”<sup>17</sup> an administration that survived in relict form as the “Hundred of Caldy” until 1819.<sup>18</sup> Along the boundary there is evidence from early field-names of a certain degree of assimilation or communication between the originally distinct communities. In the township of Storeton, for example, there is an old name (last recorded 1330) *le Gremotehalland*, where the first element is the ON compound *grīða-mót* [place of a meeting under a truce], which may reflect a mechanism for the resolution of disputes (*PN Ch* 4.256).

There is evidence for the notion that in 937 there was an originally Scandinavian community to the west and north of the boundary shown in Figure 3, and a primarily English community to the east and south. In assigning battle lines for Anlaf’s men it would therefore make sense to place them with their backs to this community (for the reason that there might be some element of sympathy between the marauders and the originally Scandinavian settlers), and *vice versa* for Athelstan’s forces. This, together with the three points identified from the poem above, may help us in the attempt to locate the battlefield and *Dingesmere*.

<sup>13</sup> White, “Viking Period Sculpture,” pp. 45–58.

<sup>14</sup> See Blackburn, “Currency Under the Vikings,” and Bean, “Silver Ingot,” respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Bowden et al., “Excavating Past Population Structures,” pp. 301–09; see also Harding and Jobling, “Looking for Vikings,” pp. 22–25.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 1.234.

<sup>17</sup> Dodgson, “Background of Brunanburh,” p. 312; rpt. in Cavill et al., *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Ormerod, *History of the County of Cheshire*, 2.518.

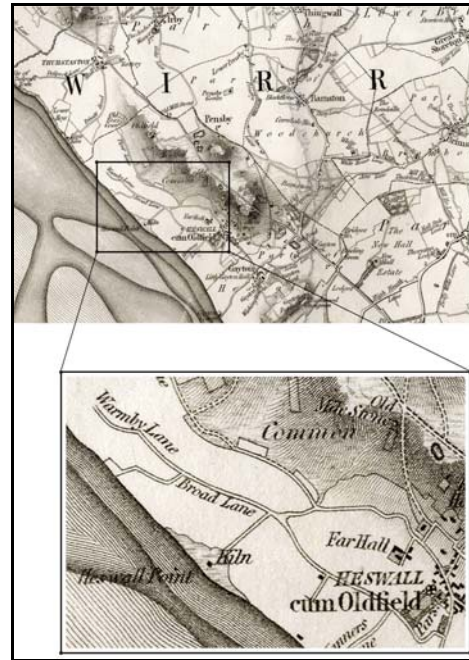




**Figure 4:** View of Cross Hill, probable site in Thingwall of the Thing. Photo: Stephen Harding.

#### *Dingesmere, and Heswall*

Placing Anlaf's (and Constantine's) forces with their backs to the enclave would therefore be consistent with the local tradition considered above that the battle had taken place at or near Bebington Heath (or on the other side of the ridge near Storeton and Brimstage). In the battle, however, the tenth-century poem tells us the surviving marauders were put to flight. So where on the coast would Anlaf's forces head for? The solution to the Dingesmere mystery offered in 2004 allows us to make some informed suggestions.<sup>19</sup> It is a distinct possibility that the fleeing forces were prevented from reaching their own vessels which *might* originally have been moored as far away as the River Ribble as hypothesized by N. J. Higham: the escaping forces would have attempted to head for any part of the coast likely to have seaworthy vessels, or where their own vessels manned by a skeleton crew could have hurried, to effect an escape (Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> One such place was the coastal water used by travelers to the Wirral from Wales and elsewhere. The Dee bank of the Wirral, as suggested in our 2004 paper, could be named *Dingesmere* as in the Old English poem, from the Norse assembly (*þing*) of Thingwall,



**Figure 5:** Part of Bryant map showing Bebington, Thingwall and Heswall in 1831. Storeton and Brimstage are at the right, Cross Hill and Thingwall can be seen at the top, with the area around Heswall Point highlighted. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies.



**Figure 6:** Heswall Point today, now known as Sheldrakes' after the nearby restaurant of the same name. Photo: Stephen Harding.

<sup>19</sup> See Cavill et al., "Revisiting Dingesmere."

<sup>20</sup> "Context of Brumanburh," p. 153.

and the wetland or tidal marshland that lines the coast (OE *mere* [pool or wetland]).<sup>21</sup> But where was this Dingesmere? The nearest accessible point (that is to say not involving negotiation of a cliff) on the coast to Cross Hill (believed to be the site of the Thing at Thingwall, Figure 4) is at Heswall Point (Bryant map of Figure 5) not far from the former, now lost, settlement at Warmby. Figure 6 shows the scene from there today. Based on the present-day topography of Wirral, this would appear to be a good candidate for the escaping forces after Brunanburh after they had dodged their way to the coast in search of anything seaworthy: today the area is marshland and, depending on the tide, vessels can reach the estuary only by a channel through it. Moving along the coast northwards the marshland has disappeared before Thurstaston. Moving the other way along the Dee coastline to the south is the ancient ferry at Gayton — connected to Thingwall via an old track: this is another candidate as a coastal entry point for visitors to the Thing. Still further down the coast there are other ancient ports at Parkgate and Neston which may also have been coastal targets for the fleeing raiders. Tudsbery has also suggested the promontory at Ness, another entry point used by medieval mariners.<sup>22</sup> Wherever the main entry point for the Thing was, the whole stretch of the Dee coast from Ness to Heswall Point could have been known by the locals and sailors as *Dingesmere*.

Some caution is necessary here as we know the topography of the Dee river and coastline was different at the time of the battle. Large changes are known to have occurred in the nineteenth century through silting and colonization with *Spartina* grass brought in by ships from America, rapidly colonizing the coastline from Heswall down to Chester.<sup>23</sup> The once-thriving seaports of Parkgate and Neston and the old ferry between Gayton and Holywell in north Wales all ceased to operate. However it is possible to gauge from earlier records that areas of difficult navigation along the Dee coast may well have existed in medieval times: this has already been alluded to in Paul Cavill's chapter in this volume. In John of Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden, for example, he notes the folklore which had arisen in relation to the Dee:

Below the city of Chester runs the River Dee, which now separates England and Wales. The river often leaves the established channel, and changes the places shallow enough for fording every month, as the local people tell. Whichever side the water draws closer to, either England or Wales, that side will have the disadvantage in war and be overthrown in that year, and the men of the other side will have the advantage and will get the better of them. When the water changes its course in this fashion, it presages these events.<sup>24</sup>

"The river often leaves the established channel" implies that the medieval Dee had large amounts of silt and mud around it even then. The larger-scale Bryant map (Figure 7) shows the distribution of channels and less navigable waters in 1831: this is before the *Spartina* colonizations, which would have required existing marshland and silt to gain a hold.

It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that along the Wirral side of the Dee estuary in 937 there were significant areas of wetland or marshland. This was the mere of the Thing

<sup>21</sup> Cavill et al., "Revisiting Dingesmere," pp. 25–38.

<sup>22</sup> *Brunanburh AD 937*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Freethy and Freethy, *Discovering Cheshire*, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Text taken from Sisam, *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, with translation by Cavill.



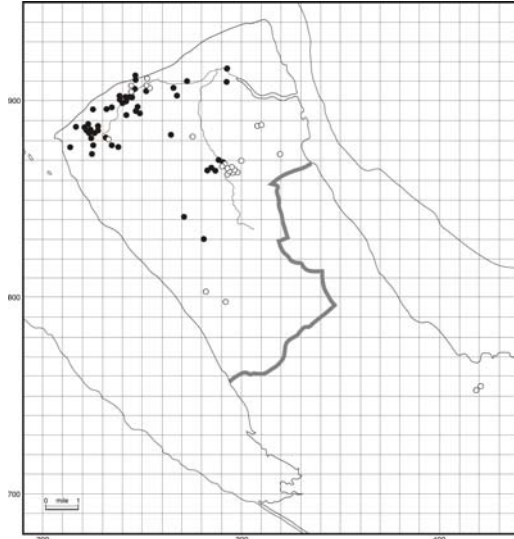
**Figure 7:** Larger scale Bryant map showing the channels of the River Dee in 1831. Courtesy of Chester & Cheshire Archives & Local Studies. Dingsmere, suggested by Cavill, Harding, and Jesch to be the Thing's wetland or marsh is believed to correspond to the shallow channel from Heswall down to Ness.

— *Dingesmere* as suggested in our paper of 2004.<sup>25</sup> The location of *Dingesmere* on the Dee coast is also *at least* consistent with the activities of King Edgar some forty years after the battle. John of Worcester, a twelfth-century historian, reports how in 973 Edgar took a party of Celtic kings in a boat along the Dee in Chester:

Edgar, the peaceable king of the English, was blessed, crowned with the utmost honour and glory, and anointed king in the thirtieth year at Pentecost, 11 May, in the first indiction, by the blessed bishops Dunstant and Oswald, and by the other bishops of the whole of England in the city of Bath. Then, after an interval, he sailed round the north coast of Wales and came to the city of Chester. Eight underkings, namely Kenneth, king of the Scots, Malcolm, king of the Cumbrians, Maccus, king of many islands, and five others, Dufnal, Siferth, Hywel, Iacob, and Iuchil, went to meet him, as he had commanded, and swore that they would be loyal to, and co-operate with, him by land and sea. With them, on a certain day, he boarded a skiff; having set them to the oars, and having taken the helm himself, he skillfully steered it through the course of the Dee, and with a crowd of ealdormen and nobles following in a similar boat, sailed from the palace to the monastery of St. John the Baptist, where when he had prayed, he returned with the same pomp to the palace. As he was entering it he is reported to have declared to his nobles at length that each of his successors would be able to boast that he was king of the English, and would enjoy the pomp of such honour with so many kings at his command.<sup>26</sup>

Edgar was *probably* re-enacting Athelstan's taking submission from the Celtic kings at Eamont Bridge, Westmorland, in 926, reinforced by military power at Brunanburh in 937:

he was asserting his authority over the kings and waterways of those areas which most recently had fomented rebellion against the English crown. The trip along the Dee at Chester would then have been refreshing Celtic memories of what happened a short distance downstream 46 years previously (see further the note below).



**Figure 8:** Distribution map of field/track names in *carr* (filled circles) and *holm* (open circles). Courtesy of the English Place-Name Society.

#### *The Wirral carrs and holms: Meols*

There is another candidate location for *Dingesmere*. There are fifty-one ancient field- or track-names in Wirral with the element *carr*, ultimately from the Old Norse *kjarr* [marsh, or brushwood]. There are a further twenty-four names containing the element *holm*, ultimately from ON *holmr* [an island or useable area in a marsh], a notable example being Lingham (*lyng-holmr*) at SJ252910.<sup>27</sup> All the carrs, and all but four of the holms lie

<sup>25</sup> Cavill et al., "Revisiting Dingesmere."

<sup>26</sup> *Chronicle*, ed. Darlington and McGurk, pp. 423–25.

<sup>27</sup> Harding, "Wirral Carrs and Holms," pp. 46–49.

between Bebington and Meols in the flood plains of the Rivers Birket and Fender (Figure 8). Parts of north Wirral have been subject to inundation throughout the centuries, and this was so until the twentieth-century construction of sea defenses. This flooding has led to the modern local tradition that the famous story of King Canute trying to repulse the sea actually might have taken place here.<sup>28</sup> The early part of the nineteenth century saw the erection of a “Canute chair,” which survived until 1950.<sup>29</sup> An alternative to a coastal *Dingesmere* on the Dee (since a wetland is only rarely coastal) might therefore be flooded marshland around the Fender and Birket, between Thingwall and the north Wirral coast: Anlaf’s men might be trying to get to Meols, the ancient Roman seaport revived by Wirral’s Scandinavian community. This would be consistent with the suggestion that here the escaping raiders would expect to find vessels to escape in, even if they were not their own.<sup>30</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, on the premise that Brunanburh in the contemporary poem is the same place as the modern Bromborough, and with the recent identification of Dingesmere in the poem with the “the wetland or marshland of the Thing,” we can make informed suggestions as to possible sites for the battle and the place of escape for the marauding forces. Bearing in mind the large scale of the conflict and the likelihood the fighting would have taken place over a wide area, two possible sites for the battle — or at least the main part of the fighting — have emerged: Wargraves and Bebington Heath. Two coastal locations for Dingesmere have also been considered: Heswall Point and Meols. Two possible sites for Bruna’s fortress have also been discussed: the former Bromborough Court House where the River Dibbin joins the Mersey, and Poulton Hall, positioned between the two Bruna townships in modern Bromborough parish of Bromborough and Brimstage. Other possible sites for any of these cannot be ruled out, but as yet no evidence for alternatives has been advanced. Narrowing down of the possibilities in this way may also help the field archaeologist although the chances of finding significant remains would appear to be remote. Tudsbery reported the discovery of many bones of unknown age in Storeton Hall garden, Brimstage Hall and moat, and the discovery of bones and arrow-heads in Lower Bebington Church around 1870: these may be significant, but we have no modern analysis of the evidence.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, in January 2005 a group of ten hardy enthusiasts, including two contributors to this book and several members of the re-enactment society (the Wirralh Skip Felag, dressed in contemporary clothing), retraced a possible route of retreat of the Dublin raiders. The 12 km (7.5 mile) route started at Poulton Hall, through Bebington Heath and then up Storeton Hill (possibly near Anlaf’s base), through the woods onto Red Hill Road, past the historic Storeton Hall (ancient home of the Stanley family). From there they cut through the woods connecting Storeton with Thingwall. Emerging from the woods, passing Cross Hill, the probable Scandinavian Thing site, they passed the Barnston *gil* (ON dip or ravine), to refreshment at the Fox and Hounds in Barnston. This was then followed by a field hike to Heswall Slack (ON *slakki* [cutting]), and down to Heswall Point (now known as Sheldrakes),

<sup>28</sup> Cavill et al., *Wirral and Its Viking Heritage*, pp. 120–22.

<sup>29</sup> Ormerod, *History of the County of Cheshire*, p. 473n1.

<sup>30</sup> Higham, “Context,” p. 155.

<sup>31</sup> *Brunanburh, AD 937*, pp. 22–23.

and finally, after a six-hour trek, past Sheldrakes restaurant to the wetland/marshland of *Dingemere*. They fought no desperate rearguard action against enemies, and there was no need for escape to Dublin, but at a comfortable pace the walk took a whole day. As they retired to the local hostelry,

the sun,  
glorious heavenly body, bright candle of God,  
the eternal Lord, . . .  
sank to its resting place.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Acknowledgements*

The author thanks Dr. Paul Cavill, Professor Judith Jesch, Dr. David Griffiths, and Dr. Rob Philpott for helpful comments, and also Mr. Allan Alsbury, author of *Fir Bob Land* (Countyvise Limited, Birkenhead UK, 1999) and Mrs. June Lancelyn Green concerning some aspects of folklore. The views expressed are those of the author.

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<sup>32</sup> Source note.

## A NOTE ON THE DEE-ROWING OF EDGAR IN 973

Paul Cavill

Two articles have recently been published on this episode. David E. Thornton ("Edgar and the Eight Kings") argues the John of Worcester misunderstood Ælfric's phrase about the submission of the "eight" kings of Britain to Edgar, "hi ealle gebugon to Eadgares wis-sunge" [they all submitted to Edgar's rule].<sup>33</sup> According to Thornton, John took the naval situation as the backdrop and interpreted *gebugon* as something like "bent (at the oars)" and *Eadgares wissunge* as "Edgar's steering (at the tiller)." At any rate, this notion of the Dee-rowing appears to be John's invention, and in view of John's weaknesses in understanding Old English evident from his distortion of the poem on Brunanburh, this is entirely plausible as the source of the episode.

The second article, by Julia Barrow ("Chester's Earliest Regatta?"), gives important parallels from European sources for peace meetings and submissions taking place in neutral territory such as on rivers or bridges. However, Barrow's argument that this was a companionable affair, more of a regatta than a submission, depends on the supposition that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* phrase "ealle wið hine getreowsodon þæt hi woldon efenwyrhtan beon on sæ [ond] on lande" [they all pledged to him that they would be helpers/fellow workers by sea and on land],<sup>34</sup> the words "wið hine" "leave open the possibility that all seven swore the same oath" and that "they were making a treaty as equals rather than acknowledging the overlordship of Edgar."<sup>35</sup> This is not the case: *getreowsian* [to pledge oneself] takes the preposition *wið* plus the accusative (here *hine*, i.e., Edgar) to indicate the person to whom submission is made.<sup>36</sup> The same phrase is used of the Northumbrian submission to Eadred at Tanshelf in 947, and there can be no disguising the savagery of Eadred's retribution the following year when the oaths and pledges were not kept.<sup>37</sup>

This broadens the context of Brunanburh. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* D manuscript locates important tenth-century political maneuverings of the English kings in relation to the Celtic kings in the north-west: the 926 submission at Eamont Bridge (near Penrith) and Edgar's taking submission in 973 at Chester, either side of the Brunanburh encounter, all three (if the argument made elsewhere in this volume is accepted) in the north-west. Barrow has helpfully indicated that the peaceful meetings have a ritual function and the place is significant. Perhaps the 973 submission was not as explicitly humiliating as John of Worcester's rowing episode would make it, but the Dee was not merely a convenient site for the day's events: it was, within living memory, the place where the Celtic and Norse forces *were* humiliated at Brunanburh and therefore a timely reminder of the consequences of rebellion.

<sup>33</sup> Text and translation from Lapidge, *Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 606–07.

<sup>34</sup> See s.a. 972 for 973, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [MS D], ed. Cubbin, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Barrow, "Chester's Earliest Regatta?" pp. 89, 92–93.

<sup>36</sup> Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement, sub verbum*.

<sup>37</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [MS D], ed. Cubbin, p. 44.