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The Battle of Brunanburh in 937: Battlefield Despatches

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ABSTRACT The English 'Great War' of the 10th century, the battle of *Brunanburh* of 937, most likely took place at Bromborough on the Wirral. Forceful claims, however, are made for other locations and the Bromborough claim is disputed. This chapter assesses the most recent interpretations denying Bromborough's claim and supporting a location in eastern England or the Solway region. The arguments for the first are not compelling, and those in support of Burnswark in Dumfriesshire lack evidence.

Introduction

The battle of *Brunanburh* was fought by the West Saxon king Athelstan and his brother Edmund against a coalition of Scots, Strathclyde Britons, and Dublin Norsemen in the year 937, and the English won. That summary lists almost all the points of consensus that have so far been reached about the battle.

I have argued in various places that since Bromborough on the Wirral is the only place-name known to derive from Old English *Brunanburh*, it should at least be considered in any discussion of the battle site (Cavill, Harding and Jesch 2004; Cavill 2007 and 2008). But for various reasons, depending particularly on conflicting views of the military and political history of the time, widely various places have been suggested as the location of the battle, from Burnswark near Dumfries in the north to Bromswold in Huntingdonshire and neighbouring shires in the south, and from Bourne in Cambridgeshire or Lincolnshire in the east to Bromborough in the west, and many more.

A near-contemporary Old English poem about the battle appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the conflict is cited in various documents of many genres from charters to verse chronicles in Old and Middle English, Latin, Anglo-Norman, Welsh, Scots, and Old Norse, throughout the Middle Ages; see Livingston (2011) in which 53 sources are collected, edited, and translated. Many aspects of these texts and traditions have been discussed, but I want to home in once more on the issue of where the battle took place, because this continues to be the source of claims and counterclaims.

The place-names are crucial in this area. I say place-names because there are in fact several different names attached to the site of the battle and its aftermath. Localising the battle with any plausibility

involves dealing with this range of evidence, including the grammar, historico-linguistic changes and geographical distributions of the names and their component parts, as well as interpreting the sources as literature. Many of the suggestions about the locality of the battle either misinterpret or ignore the place-name evidence, apparently on the assumption that medieval people could not tell the difference between London and Langdon, or if they could, which they might travel to or fight at was a matter of indifference. In fact, with no maps available, place-names were more significant guides to terrain and location for travellers and armies in the Middle Ages than they are today. To dismiss or diminish the place-name evidence about a significant battle like *Brunanburh* is to eliminate what is arguably the single most important thread linking our present understanding with the historical event.

The earliest sources to name the place of the battle—the versions of the Old English poem appearing as the annal for 937 in several extant *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* versions—give the location of the battle as *Brunanburh*, and this form or slight variations of it were recorded in the 12th century by the Latin historians Symeon of Durham (Livingston 2011, pp. 54–55; Rollason 2000), John of Worcester (Livingston 2011, pp. 56–57; Darlington and McGurk 1995–1998), Henry of Huntingdon (Livingston 2011, pp. 60–65; Greenway 1996), and many others who borrowed from or copied them (Cavill 2011, pp. 329–330).

Knowledge of the battle location was apparently soon lost, and indeed it is probable that the 12th-century historians mentioned did not know its actual location (see further below). Some theories about the location of the battle (anywhere between Devon and Northumberland) were propounded by early antiquarians (Campbell 1938, pp. 58–59, note 4; Foot 2011, p. 173). In more recent years, authoritative statements about its location or, more properly, the indeterminacy of it, have been often quoted: '… all hope of localising Brunanburh is lost,' wrote Campbell, but only the second part of the following sentence is much noted: 'Unless new evidence can be produced, an honest *nescio* is greatly to be preferred to ambitious localisations built on sand' (1938, p. 80).

Such new evidence was in large part forthcoming with publication of the survey of Cheshire place-names in the 1970s by John Dodgson (1970–1997).* Dodgson's survey convincingly demonstrated that Bromborough on the Wirral derives its name from an earlier *Brunanburh*, making it a clear and outstanding contender as the site of the battle. However, Dodgson was reluctant to push the Wirral claim, though he saw that if *Dingesmere*, named in the Old English poem as the area from which the defeated Norsemen fled to Dublin, could be identified nearby, it would strengthen the case enormously (Dodgson 1997, p. 263, note 11; Downham 2008, p. 104). I have published full linguistic and onomastic analyses of the ancient sources (Cavill 2008), have (with colleagues) identified *Dingesmere*, to a reasonable level of probability (Cavill, Harding and Jesch 2004; Cavill 2007), and have shown how most of the evidence converges to make Bromborough on the Wirral the most plausible location for the climactic battle (Cavill 2011).

Even since Dodgson, numerous places have been proposed and reasserted as the site of *Brunanburh*. Brinsworth (Wood 1980), Burnswark (Halloran 2005 and 2010), Bourne (Hart 1992), and Bromswold (Smyth 1987) are the front-runners amongst thirty-odd contenders, most of whose names begin with *B-*, contain *r* and often *u*. However, as Ray Page observed, 'It is hardly enough to look round for the nearest modern name beginning with *Br-* and identify that as *Brunanburh*' (1982, p. 344). Some significant problems with these localisations have been identified over the years, not least that the topographical descriptors used in the sources do not occur in the areas or apply to the topography of the places suggested (Cavill 2008), in addition to the fact that there is no evidence that these places were ever called *Brunanburh* or anything like it.

Two vigorously-proposed objections to the localisation of *Brunanburh* on the Wirral remain current and warrant further attention. One focuses on the tradition first mentioned in John of Worcester in the 12th century, that the sea-borne Viking forces entered the Humber. Michael Wood's argument, first proposed in an article (Wood 1980), reinforced in his book (1999, pp. 203–221), and renewed in public lectures, maintains that this tradition is original and accurate, and he thus locates the battle somewhere

* The survey part of Dodgson's work (Parts 1 to 4) was complete and published by 1972; the elements list (Parts 5.1(i) and 5.1(ii)) was complete and published in 1982. The introductory material and index (Part 5.2) was completed by Alexander Rumble and published in 1997.

in Yorkshire. The other argument proposed by Kevin Halloran in two articles in the *Scottish Historical Review* (2005 and 2010), seeks to dismiss the case for Bromborough and make a case for Burnswark in Dumfriesshire as the site of the encounter.* These arguments serve as the focus of the analysis below.

Humber Entry

The Humber was a hugely important waterway and boundary in Anglo-Saxon England. Old English sources mention it 38 times, not counting its inclusion in the regional name of the kingdom of Northumbria (*Dictionary of Old English Corpus*). There is a profound improbability to the idea of an invading Viking force from the west (Dublin) sailing hundreds of miles around Scotland to the east to meet another force from the west, the warriors of Strathclyde (including Cumberland and Westmorland), and the men of Alba (or Scots as the English sources call them). And it must be doubted that if the Viking force did so, no source would mention such a significant detail until John of Worcester.

The brief poem on the *Capture of the Five Boroughs*, following the poem on *Brunanburh* in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and on the same page in the *Parker Chronicle* manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173, folio 27 recto), mentions the Humber as the boundary between the Danes in east Mercia and the Northumbrians of York. One might also ask why the poet of *Brunanburh* named the rather obscure *Dingesmere* as the route of escape for the Norsemen if he knew it was or was near the instantly and universally recognisable Humber.

Why does John come up with this idea? All the sources referring to the Humber entry derive from John, so the proposal that he had information from a lost early source has no independent corroboration. I suggest that John tended to think of invasions as coming via the Humber. He writes of *Brunanburh* (Livingston 2011: Darlington and McGurk 1995–1998: II, pp. 392–393): 'Hiberniensium multarumque insularum rex paganus Anlafus... ostium Humbre fluminis ualida cum classe ingreditur.' (Anlaf, the pagan king of the Irish and of many other islands … entered the mouth of the River Humber with a strong fleet.)

John writes of Harald Hardrada and Tostig's expedition, about 130 years later (Darlington and McGurk 1995–1998: II, pp. 602–603): 'Ad quem comes Tostius … sua cum classe uenit, et citato cursu ostium Humbre fluminis intrauerunt.' (Earl Tostig joined him with his fleet … and on a swift course they entered the mouth of the River Humber.) This reveals a kind of formulaic expression in John's account (Woolf 2007, p. 171 also points out that John recorded another Humber entry three years later); it perhaps also indicates that while John knew the name of the place, Brunanburh, he did not know its location.

It is suggested that the account of the battle in the *Annals of Ulster* (AU Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, 1983) supports the idea of the Humber entry. The 937 annal reads (AU pp. 384–387):

> Bellum ingens lacrimabile atque horribile inter Saxones atque Norddmannos crudeliter gestum est, in quo plurima milia Nordmannorum que non numerata sunt, ceciderunt, sed rex cum paucis euassit.i. Amlaiph. Ex altera autem parte multitudo Saxonum cecidit. Adalstan autem, rex Saxonum, magna uictoria ditatus est.
>
> (A great, lamentable and horrible battle was cruelly fought between the Saxons and the Norsemen, in which several thousands of Norsemen, who are uncounted, fell, but their king, Amlaíb, escaped with a few followers. A large number of Saxons fell on the other side, but Athelstan, king of the Saxons, enjoyed a great victory.)

In the following year, 938, the *Annals* report Anlaf's return to Dublin (AU pp. 386–387): 'Amhlaiph m. Gothfrith i nAth Cliath iterum.' (Amlaíb son of Gothfrith in Áth Cliath [Dublin] again.) The delay in Anlaf's return is suggested to represent the length of time it took him to sail from the Humber to Dublin: 'Anlaf Guthfrith's son's arrival in Dublin "with a few" after the battle is recorded in the New Year of

* The first of these, 'The Brunanburh campaign: a reappraisal' (Halloran 2005), was discussed in Cavill (2008), but the second, 'The identity of *Etbrunnanwerc*' (Halloran 2010), was published too late to be given much attention in Michael Livingston's comprehensive volume, *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook* (2011). As will be evident from the discussion below, no significant new evidence or argument relating to *Brunanburh* is brought forward by Halloran, and Livingston (2011) is likely to remain definitive.

938' (Wood 1980, p. 202), and again, 'If the fleet landed in the Humber, as is most likely, then it will have returned via Scotland, and the notice of its arrival at Dublin early in 938 would support this' (Wood 1980, p. 215, note 40). This is not quite accurate, since the *Annals* mention only Anlaf, not the fleet or the 'few' in 938 (see above), nor is it an inevitable inference.*

The 937 annal very closely follows the information given by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with the addition of circumstantial information about the awfulness of the battle, the numbers lost to the Norsemen, and the losses on the English side, none of which is beyond imaginative reconstruction. It is all written in Latin in a part of the *Annals* where Irish was becoming the norm (Dumville 1982). The Irish or hybrid Irish–Latin of the surrounding annals, including the reference to Anlaf returning to Dublin in 938, is typical of the *Annals* at this point of the text's development. This might suggest the annalist used a Latin source close to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the *Brunanburh* entry and local knowledge for the 938 one.

The *Chronicle* poem indicates that Anlaf and a few followers escaped at a certain stage of the battle (Livingston 2011, pp. 40–41, lines 32b–36):

> Þær geflemed wearð
> Norðmanna bregu, nede gebeded
> to lides stefne litle weorode.
> Cread cnear on flot, cyning ut gewat
> on fealene flod. Feorh generede.
> (There was put to flight the Northmen's chief, driven by need to the ship's prow with a little band. He shoved the ship to sea. The king disappeared on the dark flood. His own life he saved.)

The poem does not say where Anlaf fled, and the language clearly indicates that one ship escaped by the use of the singular verbs and nouns. The *Annals*, having repeated the unnumbered dead of the Norsemen (Old English poem line 29, *unrim heriges* (countless men of the army); AU pp. 384–385, *que non numerata sunt* ([men] who are uncounted), likewise mentions Anlaf's escape with a small company (Old English poem line 34, *litle weorode* (with a little band); AU pp. 384–385, *rex cum paucis euassit* (their king escaped with a few followers) without saying where he fled. The Old English recounts a separate flight of the surviving Norsemen on *Dingesmere* back to Dublin, where the main verb and nouns and adjectives are plurals (Livingston 2011, pp. 42–43, lines 53–56):

> Gewitan him þa Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
> dreorig darəða laf, on Dingesmere
> ofer deop wæter Difelin secan
> eft Iraland, æwiscmode
> (Departed then the Northmen in their nailed ships, dreary survivors of the spears, on Dingesmere, over deep water to seek Dublin, back to Ireland, ashamed in spirit.)

In the nature of the case, the poem is likely to be describing piecemeal flight rather than a disciplined and united withdrawal, and it is perfectly plausible that Anlaf might have escaped in a flight separate from that of his men, and as the poem implies, earlier than they did. The exigency of flight and the sense that his flight was an abandonment of men and responsibility might have caused Anlaf not to sail immediately to Dublin in the shame that the Old English poem so exultantly describes, but north perhaps, to stay with his allies until the dust settled. His return the following year might well have involved some negotiation to ensure his welcome at Dublin after the depleted forces had returned earlier and told

* Michael Livingston (personal communication, August 2011) notes that 'if such a delay is accepted for the aftermath of the battle, an even longer delay must also be accepted for the preparations leading up to the battle, and the historical record reveals that to be an impossibility. Anlaf Guthfrithsson took his army from a campaign in central Ireland to the field at *Brunanburh* in less than two months.'

their story. The sources do not tell us these things directly; but there is no particular reason, and no textual warrant, to suppose that the delay in Anlaf's arrival in Dublin recorded in the *Annals* had anything at all to do with a Humber entry of the fleet.

Michael Wood focuses on the putative Humber entry because he thinks 'we can be sure first of all that the object of the 937 invasion was Northumbria,' and that 'York was undoubtedly at the centre of these events, as it was in all the wars between the Norse of York and their allies on the one hand and the southern English on the other in the period 927–954' (1980, p. 201). Wood argues that the poem inserted by William of Malmesbury into his history shows that the Northumbrians submitted willingly to the invaders (1980, p. 201), and indeed that Northumbrians fought on their side in the battle. There can be no doubt that York was important, but this analysis fails to consider the composition of the invading forces and their joint objectives. While the Norse of Dublin were assuredly concerned with recreating the axis between Dublin and York, the submission of the Northumbrians (if true) would show their willingness for that too. Any ravaging in Northumbrian territory or Danish Mercia would likely be counterproductive, especially when rich pickings were available in west Mercia (Livingston 2011, p. 15, note 46). The force was not predominantly 'the Norse of York' but was a coalition of hitherto antipathetic groups, Scots and Cumbrians along with the Norse of Dublin and Northumbrians, who had all felt the sting of Athelstan's takeover of Northumbria in 927.

In the earlier years of Constantine's long reign, he and the Norse of Dublin fought each other at the battle of *Tinemore* or Corbridge in 918 when the Norse invaded the north. However, later events including Athelstan's northern expedition in 934 when he laid waste areas of Constantine's territory and forced his submission, made the formation of a coalition to withstand Athelstan's imperial pretensions imperative. Hatred of Athelstan was the motivating factor for the coalition, and 'Æthelstan's hegemony over the whole of mainland Britain … was threatened by an alliance' (Foot 2008, p. 133). The last thing the Scots and Cumbrians wanted was to substitute a Norse York- and Dublin-controlled Britain for an English-controlled Britain. The goal of the coalition was Winchester, not York. Ravaging English Mercia west of the Pennines would be part of the strategy and indeed that is what William of Malmesbury also tells us: *multum in Angliam processerat* (he [Anlaf] had advanced some distance into England) (Mynors, Thomson, and Winterbottom 1998–1999, I, pp. 206–207).

The tradition of the Humber entry cannot be traced earlier than John of Worcester and has been shown to reflect John's preconceptions about invading forces. There is little reason to suppose that the details recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* support the tradition of the Humber entry as they tally with those of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* account and refer to the apparently independent movements of Anlaf and the fleeing Norse forces. A proper understanding of the objectives of the coalition forces would direct attention away from York and Northumbria as the targets of the invasion. There is very little to support the notion that the invading force came and left via the Humber.

Burnswark

Kevin Halloran's 2010 article, 'The identity of *Etbrunnanwerc*,' simply reasserts views that fail to engage with the evidence about the battle.[*] Early in his article, for example, he attempts to discredit the

[*] Some of these are referred to in the discussion of Burnswark below. My articles of 2007 and 2008 took issue with some of Halloran's ideas and arguments in his 2005 work and indicated where they were at variance with known fact or fuller evidence. Halloran's 2010 article selectively ignores both facts and evidence. He still maintains that his 'acceptance of the *burh* form [of *Brunanburh*] as genuine in no way detracts from the validity of … the suggestion that it was adopted for poetic purposes' (2010, p. 248, note 3), when it is a fact that a single alliterating stress in the first half an Old English poetic line is all that is required by the metre and, as I have shown, the battle was known as *Brunanburh* in prose texts where no alliteration is required (Cavill 2008, pp. 312–315). Halloran chooses 'correct' spellings of elements purely on the basis of what meanings he intends to attribute to them, so '*Wendune* rather than *Weondune* is the correct form and refers to the hill of Burnswark' (2010, p. 250) despite evidence to the contrary. He also decides that for the dative plural *nægledcnearrum* in line 53b of the Old English poem, 'the poet meant "in" rather than "to" the nailed ships' (p. 253, note 24) for no reason other than the need to align the sources to fit his proposed identification.

Bromborough case by quoting Campbell's comment, 'of course, the coincidence of *Brunan-*, a common, and *-burh*, a very common, place-name element, proves nothing relative to the site of the battle' (Halloran 2010, p. 249, note 6, quoting Campbell 1938, p. 59, note 4; cf. Wood 1980, p. 213, note 4). Certainly *-burh* is, as Campbell says, a very common element in place-names; but though I am aware of some place-names with the inflected element *brunan-* as the first element, it can hardly be called 'common.' Campbell was mistaken on this matter. But Halloran's logic is also at fault here. Even if *Brunan-* were a common element, and *-burh* very common, as Campbell supposed, then speaking from a merely statistical view, their co-occurrence in Bromborough would make that infinitely more probable as the location of the battle of *Brunanburh* than Burnswark, Brinsworth, Bromswold, or other candidates whose names contain neither of the elements. The fact is, however, that only Bromborough is reliably known to contain both elements, suggesting that naming it as a battle site is far less of a coincidence than has been thought.

Halloran begins by admitting that his earlier translation of the phrase 'apud Weondune quod alio nomine Etbrunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig appellatur' from Symeon of Durham as 'at *Weondune* which is otherwise named *Etbrunnanwerc* or called *Brunnanbyrig*' (2005, p. 145) was wrong. He now accepts that Symeon's phrase should be translated 'at *Weondune* which is called by another name *AetBrunnanwerc* or *Brunnabyrig*' (2010, p. 248 note 3). Symeon, in other words, makes clear by the use of the singular *alio nomine* (by another name) that he thought the names *Etbrunnanwerc* and *Brunnanbyrig* were for practical purposes synonymous, different versions of a single name.

Halloran nevertheless goes on to deny this result and to maintain that these variants refer not merely to different features but in fact represent the alterations of the name from *Brunnanbyrig* to *Etbrunnanwerc* (2010, p. 249). He proposes that the *burh* element refers to the fort on the summit at Burnswark and the *werc* element to the earthworks of the Roman camps on the slopes, undeterred by the fact that no evidence suggests that any part of Burnswark was historically referred to by *burh*, a term used in the area by English settlers, but not for this place (Barrow 1998, pp. 67–69).

Other commentators and I have suggested that a reasonable explanation of Symeon's phrase is that in some circumstances *burh* and *weorc* might both refer to fortified places or fortifications (Cavill 2008, p. 314; Woolf 2007, p. 171); certainly, they are used as synonymous variants frequently in Old English poetry. There is no doubt that the elements can historically refer to different aspects of the same place. These elements are not semantically inert, and where there is overlap, *burh* tends to refer to a fortified settlement and *weorc* to physical fortifications. Halloran sees the example I have given, culled from Smith's *Elements* (Newark Priory, originally *Aldebury*, Smith 1956, II, p. 254; Cavill 2008, p. 314, note 55) as 'questionable' and clearly doubts that the near-synonymy or partial overlap of these elements can be asserted, even though his entire argument ultimately depends upon it.

I have not conducted an exhaustive search, but the following may be offered as evidence for the co-existence and near-synonymy of names with *burh* and (*ge*)*weorc*. Simon Taylor's work, quoted by Halloran, gives the example of Southwark, also found on coin legends with *byrig*: 'there is some evidence to suggest that before the last type of Æthelræd II some coins reading SVÐB[yrig] were also struck at the Southwark mint, and that this was an alternate suffix for the place-name' (Smart 1981, p. 105; Taylor 1997, p. 17, note 31). Other examples include *Barnewerc* 13th century 'Beorn's fortification' in Burton Lazars, Leicestershire, which has the element (*ge*)*weorc* and Cox concludes 'this appears to represent the site of an early fortification, perh[aps] that from which Burton [*burh* + *tun*] took its name' (Cox 2002, p. 71). In East Bridgford, Nottinghamshire, near the Romano-British fort of *Margidunum*, known as *Aldwerch ca.* 1230 'old fortification' and Castle Hill is Burrow Fields 'from *burh*' (Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1940, p. 222).* Symeon, in common with these sources and their respective places, was most likely talking about the same place when he referred to 'Weondune quod alio nomine Etbrunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig appellatur.'

Halloran sees the 'problem' with my approach as that it 'relies too much on an analysis of forms that derive variously from copied, altered, difficult to read, and conflicting sources of uncertain provenance'

* A further example from a less documented survey, Buriton 'farm by the fortification' in Hampshire has a name War Down near Butser Hill 'perhaps containing OE (*ge*)*weorc* "(earth)-works"' (Coates 1989, pp. 44–45).

(Halloran 2010, pp. 252–253). This is the nature of the evidence and it has to be dealt with. Halloran prefers to make assumptions. Perhaps his biggest assumption is that the name Burnswark has anything to do with the battle of *Brunanburh*. I have shown that the earliest English sources and the overwhelming majority of spellings in all the sources clearly show that the first element of *Brunanburh* is a weak Old English substantive *bruna* or *brune* in the genitive singular *brunan* (Cavill 2008, pp. 303–309). Halloran's argument requires that we accept the spelling in just one manuscript of Gaimar (of four extant) from the early 14th century, *bruneswerce*, for the name (*Estoire des Engleis* line 3522; Short 2009, p. 192 (for text); pp. xix–xxii (for date). Bell (1960, p. 112) gives variant spellings (line 3518).

One 13th-century 'corrupt and contaminated' manuscript of Henry of Huntingdon (Greenway 1996, p. clxi) gave rise to a small number of late strong substantive spellings with *Brunes-* (Cavill 2008 and 2011, p. 349). The equation made by Halloran, '*Etbrunnanwerc* (*Bruneswerce*)' (2010, p. 251) is not made by any historical source and depends on grammatical and textual confusion on his part. The further implied equation, '*Etbrunnanwerc* = *Bruneswerce* = *Burnswark*' depends simply on the notion that the names look a bit similar (by the kind of logic, one supposes, that *suet* and *sweet* and *sweat* would equate). It also supposes that a nearly correct spelling of the place of the battle was first hit upon by the scribe of an Anglo-Norman poem in the 14th century and by no one else in the whole record.

Halloran directs attention to the *Burnswark* name and it is necessary to consider this name in some detail. I will first consider the new proposal broached in his article, that the first element of Burnswark might derive from a Celtic word *brïnn* (hill) in contradiction of his previous assertion that the *Burn-* of Burnswark cannot refer to a burn or burns because Neilson and others think it refers to *Bruna* (see below). Then I will re-examine my own suggestion for the etymology and bring forward some new evidence.

*Brunn

Halloran suggests a new etymology based on Alan James's generally excellent *Brittonic Language in the Old North* (2007 and continuing). Part of James's entry under *brïnn* (hill) reads:

> Burnswark Dmf (Hoddom) G Neilson in ScHistRev7 (1910), p39 n6 [**brïnn-**+ OE *-weorc* > "work"]; K Halloran pers. comm., and see ScHistRev84 (2005), pp133-48. If this was formed from a simplex **brïnn-**, it was in the "Pritenic" form **brun[n]-*.

This may be correct, and the gap of many centuries between the supposed formation of the name and the earliest extant spellings for Burnswark (given below from Neilson 1910 and Johnson-Ferguson 1936, with the earliest reference from 1541) may not argue against it. But any evidence to fill that gap of six centuries would add significantly to our understanding, and the absence of evidence makes circumspection appropriate. Halloran further quotes James as suggesting 'Burnswark could, then, have been a "Brit/Pict" simplex name *Brun[n]* taken up by Northumbrian English speakers to form *Brunes-weorc*' (2010, p. 251, note). There can be no serious argument about this because there is no evidence to take it beyond speculation.

I have no objection to the notion that 'there might be parallels for pre-English topographic names being used in OE place-name formation' (James, quoted by Halloran 2010, p. 251, note 16), or the evidence brought forward by Fox in 'The P-Celtic place-names of north-east England and south-east Scotland' (2007) that perhaps more names in the north derive from P-Celtic than have been hitherto recognised, as Halloran suggests. However, a further factor bears on the plausibility of the suggestion that Burnswark might derive from *brïnn*. Another part of James's entry relates to the etymology of the word: 'the root **bhreu-* is associated with "swelling" in various senses, and the close affinity between this word and that for "breast" (see **bronn**) may indicate the characteristic shape of a **brïnn**, "hill"' (see also VEPN under **brunnjo-*, 'ModW *bron* "breast, hill" is a related term … which is also common in Welsh p.ns.'). Burnswark is an extraordinary looming plateau with very steep sides and a flattish top (see the cross-section in Roy 1793 and Figure 6.1). Given that all hills are some types of swellings or protuberances, a less breast-like hill than Burnswark would be hard to imagine.

FIGURE 6.1 Burnswark, Dumfriesshire, from the south—not 'a breast-shaped hill.'

If we were to suppose that **brunn* could be the etymon of the first element of Burnswark, the fact remains that nothing whatever in that proposed etymology identifies Burnswark with Brunanburh. James points out that **brunn* may also be the etymon of other names in the north. As a term for a topographical feature, it may also refer to many a hill now with another name. If we suppose that the phrase in one manuscript of the *Annales Cambriae*, 'Bellum Brune,'* actually refers to a **brunn* generically, it could refer to any appropriate hill. Certainly if it were to refer to a named place, a specific hill, there is no particular reason to suppose it to refer to Burnswark rather than, say, Bryn in Lancashire, The Brinns in Westmorland, or any of the other possible examples of *brïnn* or **brunn* cited in James's work.† If this etymology were accepted, it would be a peculiarly non-referential annal in terms of the location of the battle, amounting to no more than 'battle of the [or a] hill' or 'battle of Hill.'

Do the *Annales Cambriae* in fact refer to a **brunn*? The actual evidence can be read in different ways, although it might be noted that most references to battles in the *Annales* mention named places rather than generic topographical features.‡ Scholars of P-Celtic tend to think that the entry does not refer to a **brunn*. Andrew Breeze suggests that it was English: '*Brun(e)* was a place-name known to the Welsh,' and again 'the English name *Bruna* or *Brune* was presumably understood by the Welsh as meaning "stream"' (1999, p. 481). John Bollard and Marged Haycock read the **kattybrunawc* of the late 10th-century Welsh *Glaswawt Taliessin* as 'the battle for the settlement in Brun's region,' the *Cad Dybrunawc* of the late 12th-century *Canu y Dewi* as 'the battle of Brunanburh(?)', and the '*Ac y bu ryfel Brun*' in the late 13th-century *Brut y Tywysogion* as 'and there was the battle of Brun' (Livingston 2011, pp. 48–49, 66–67, and 88–89, respectively). The consensus here is that this *Brun* and *-brun-* were probably references to the English element in *Brunanburh* and not a meaningful Celtic element where one would expect such an element to be recognised.

* The actual manuscript of the *Annales Cambriae* that contains the reference to *Brune* (London, British Library, MS Harley 3859) is early 12th-century. The *Annales Cambriae* text is 'interpolated … into a copy of … *Historia Brittonum*'; it took material from an Irish chronicle of the first half of the 10th century. The Harley manuscript is the only text to record 'Bellum Brune' whereas all the other battles (except possibly *Conani,* 881; see next note) in the period of vernacular annals, 682–954, figure in at least two. This suggests that *Brune* might have been a battle recorded in an independent tradition unknown, or of no interest to the scribes of the other manuscripts.

† It might be noted that Ekwall 1922, p. 100 accepts 'W. bryn' as the etymon of Bryn, but Smith 1967, II, p. 173 is not inclined to think that The Brinns derives from *brïnn*.

‡ In the section of the texts 682–954 edited by Dumville (2002), there are references to battles in 722 *bellum Hehil*, *gueith Gart Mailauc* and *cat Pencon*; in 728 to *Bellum Montis Carno*; in 750 to *gueith Mocetauc*; in 760 to *Bellum … gueith Hirford*; in 796 to *bellum Rudglann*; in 844 to *Gueith Cetill*; in 848 to *Gueit Finnant*; in 870 870 to *Cat Brinonnen*; in 874 to *Gueith Bannguolou*; in 877 to *Gueith diu Sul in Mon*; in 881 to *Gueit Conguoy*; in 906 to *Gueith Dinmeir*; in 921 to *Gueith Dinas Neguid*; in 937 to *Bellum Brune*; and in 951 to *bellum Carno*. Most of these places have been identified.

The point, then, is first that a supposed **brunn* in Burnswark does not in any sense enforce a link between 'Bellum Brune' and that place; and second, that good arguments have been made for the *Brune*, *Brun*, *-brun-* to refer to the English element. Halloran's speculations make for a false syllogism which runs something like this: 'the etymon of the first element of Burnswark might be **brunn* (a hill); Celtic sources might refer to a **brunn* (a hill) as the scene of the battle; therefore Burnswark was the site of the battle.' Neither of the propositions is demonstrably true and the conclusion manifestly does not follow. As far as determining the site of the battle is concerned, the proposed new etymology of Burnswark is a red herring.

Burn

Halloran pours scorn on my observation that Burnswark might actually be derived from Scots or Middle English *burn* (a stream) and *wark* (a fortification), calling these possibilities 'unfeasibly late' and asserting that I give 'no detailed etymology' for my suggestion (2010, p. 252). He prefers to ask 'what were the original names for the hill and the hill-fort?' (2010, p. 252). Sadly, he does not tell us the answer to his question, unless it is something to do with the posited **brunn* element discussed above.

I have no doubt that the hill-fort was called something else earlier in its existence, but what that name was and whether the name had any relation to the present one is anybody's guess. We can only wait for the evidence to be found. For the present, we must deal with the evidence we have.

Halloran refers to the opinions of Neilson (1910), Johnston (1934) and Mills (2003) about the meaning of the name* to dismiss the notion that the early spellings of Burnswark offered by Neilson, namely *Burnyswarke* 1542, *Burniswork* 1608, *Burneswark* 1623, and *Burnswark* 1661 might refer to a burn or burns. Johnson-Ferguson adds two further early spellings, *Burniswerkhill* 1541 and *Burniswarkleyis* 1625 (1930, pp. 54–55). Halloran cites one additional spelling of *Brunswork* from Sir John Clerk in 1730 as if this negates or cancels out the multiple earlier *Burn-* spellings (2010, p. 252).

Halloran appears to think that the 'presence of "burn" names for a few farmsteads in the locality' (and, as I noted, for the streams in the vicinity, of which there are many) somehow makes it especially implausible that there is a reference to *burn* in the name Burnswark, as reflected in the earliest spellings we have. Likewise he argues that the complete absence of *dun* names nearby and the complete absence of characteristic *dun* features make Burnswark a plausible *dun* (2010, p. 252; see further on **brunn* above). This is, to say the least, a counterintuitive use of topographical evidence.

In terms of the detailed interpretation of the spellings, the *Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (DSL) gives plenty of evidence for *burn* '1. A brook or stream,' and for *wark* '9.a. The (action of or activity concerned with) building, repairing, etc. (*of* an edifice, etc.).' The northern Middle English and Scots plurals and genitive singulars of nouns are typically *-ys*, *-is*, and *-es*. Both dictionary entries specifically mention the use of these words in place-names, so my proposed etymology 'fortification of the burn, fortification (in the area) of the burns' clearly reflects this particular strand of historical, geographical and linguistic evidence. This interpretation is entirely plausible if the name Burnswark represents a late Middle English formation.

Birrenswark

An alternative explanation for the name derives from the persistent but not yet fully documented form *Birrenswark*. This is listed by Johnston (1934) and Johnson-Ferguson (1936) as the headform of the name; is depicted as 'Plan and sections of Birrenswork-hill' as early as 1793 in Plate XVI of William Roy's *Military Antiquities of the Romans in North Britain*; and is mentioned by Christison (1899) and

* The only one of these interpreters able to revise his view on the meaning of Burnswark in the light of the evidence, David Mills, has done so: 'I shall certainly want to change the entry for Burnswark in my Dictionary (this should be possible when they next do a reprint). I'm inclined to be a bit cautious about the first element, so will probably have something like: ME wark (OE weorc) "fortification" (here referring to a Roman camp), first element uncertain, possibly ME burn (OE burna) "spring"' (personal communication, January 2011).

the *Scottish National Dictionary*. In the dictionary, *birren* is glossed 'a camp,' and it is noted, 'Occurs in the proper name *Birrenswark* in D[u]mf[ries]sh[ire].' The element, from Old English *burgæsn*, is 'a northern term, especially common in We[stmorland]' (VEPN), but also known in Dumfriesshire. The *Scottish National Dictionary* records it in use in 1834 in Dumfriesshire with a quotation reading, 'small entrenched camps or *Birrens*, as they are called.' The explanatory gloss in the quotation indicates that the writer was not certain that his 19th-century readers would understand the term. The word is found in Dumfriesshire place-names, e.g., a Birrens Hill at NY 2481 and a Birrens Sike at NY 3992.

Perhaps more interesting is the fact that the Roman fort of Blatobulgium, just outside Ecclefechan at NY 218752, is called Birrens, at least from 1793 in Roy's work mentioned above and continuing into the present (Robertson 1975). The interest of this name is that Burnswark or Birrenswark was clearly an outpost of the garrison at Birrens–Blatobulgium, and it is likely that here we have a good illustration of Taylor's model of name development: 'There existed originally a core simplex name…. This core simplex name referred in general terms to an estate or area of land perceived as some kind of entity. To this simplex could then be added elements defining the particular aspect of that entity which the speaker wished to single out' (1997, p. 11). Birrens, the English name of the station of Blatobulgium, is the simplex form that may well have given rise to the compound Birrenswark, 'the fortification or earthworks on the Birrens estate, the land commanded by Birrens,' with the defining generic *wark* (fortification, earthworks, camp).

Birrens and the derived Birrenswark descend from Old English *burgæsn* (burial, cairn) and here we may have the evidence for 'the original names for the hill and the hill-fort' that Halloran guesses at (2010, p. 252). This takes the evidence back some way at least.

It is possible, furthermore, that the *birrens* element of Birrenswark was assimilated to the more familiar *burns-* of the present Burnswark and the early spellings. This process can be documented for Westmorland names deriving from *burgæsn*, namely Swathburn (*Swarthburchanes* 1295), Griseburn (*Griseburghanes ca.* 1216), and Mossburn (*Mosburhannes* 1291), all documented in VEPN under *burgæsn*. This may well explain the early *burn(e, y, i)s-* forms of the present Burnswark name discussed above and makes a plausible link with the main variant of the name.

The case for Burnswark as the site of the battle of *Brunanburh* has not been advanced by the addition of more speculation to the extremely speculative suggestions already proposed by Halloran. Michael Livingston (2011, p. 19, note 59) observed, for example, that his interpretation of the military and tactical aspects of the campaign that form a major plank in Halloran's argument (2005, pp. 138–140; 2010, p. 248, note 4), is nowhere as secure as he suggests. More thorough examination of the onomastic evidence relating to Burnswark makes any connection with *Brunanburh* vanishingly remote.

Dingesmere

If we do not trust the explicit link between *Brunanburh* and Bromborough, one other name in the Old English poem may help locate the battle. This is *Dingesmere*, the place from which the Dublin Vikings fled by ship after the rout. Campbell rightly recognised it as a key piece of information for identifying the battle site. In a recently-published article colleagues and I argue that *mere* is the place-name element meaning 'wetland, land which is subject to flooding' and that the *ding* is an English reflex of Old Norse *þing* (local council), well exampled in English names and more widely in names such as Dingwall in Inverness (Cavill, Harding and Jesch 2004; Cavill 2007).*

We suggested that the name made reference to the *þing* of Thingwall, the meeting place of the Viking settlers in the Wirral. *Dingesmere* would then be the wetland, the muddy estuary regularly flooded and drained by the Dee, and overlooked by the Thing at Thingwall (Figure 6.2). If then, as the poem says, the survivors of the Norsemen went to or in their ships 'on *Dingesmere*, over the deep water back to Dublin,' an area somewhere along the Dee coast for this escape is plausible. The politically independent Norse enclave in the north and west of the Wirral in the 10th century, and woodland in the north of the

* Following an initial suggestion by Steve Harding that *Dingesmere* may possibly derive from 'Thing's mere.'

FIGURE 6.2 *Dingesmere*? Heswall Point on the Dee estuary at low tide. In the distance is the coast of north Wales, and between there and the bank dividing the picture is the Dee. At the highest tides, the water reaches beyond the vegetation at the bottom of the picture. The small water outlet flows from left to right and meets the estuary proper about 500 m right of the area at the border of the picture. The coastline has changed since the Middle Ages, but the usefulness of the area for beaching craft is visible even today. (Photo courtesy of Steve Harding.)

peninsula, might have been thought to be more hospitable to Vikings fleeing from Bromborough than the English garrison at Chester.*

One of the difficulties in assessing the welter of suggestions about the location is the fact that arguments are made on the basis of selected and often out-of-date opinions rather than evidence. The careful argument about *Dingesmere* already mentioned has been dismissed because, in desperation, Joseph Bosworth glossed *On dinnes mere* as 'on a stormy sea' and *On dynges mere* as 'on the sea of noise' (Bosworth and Toller 1898, pp. 205, 221 under headwords *dinne* and *dynge*). It should be noted that the headwords and definitions relate only to the name occurring in the *Brunanburh* poem, and there are no other quotations to exemplify the words.

None of those opposing the 'wetland of the thing' interpretation answered these real objections to Bosworth's glosses, that Toller in 1921 could see when he excised the whole *dynge* entry and suggested that *dinnes* 'seems to point to a proper name' (Bosworth and Toller *Supplement* 1921, p. 162). The least technical of these objections is the fact that neither the proposed **dinne* (storm or tempest) nor **dynge* (noise, dashing, or storm) (see Halloran 2010, p. 253, note 24) exists in Old English according to the *Dictionary of Old English*, the most comprehensive linguistic collection and analysis of Old English. They are in fact ghost words.

The variant spellings of the word in the Old English poem manuscripts are as follows:

ASC A, Cambridge, Corpus Christ College, MS 173, *dinges mere*
ASC B, London, British Library Cotton Tiberius A. vi, *dyngesmere*
ASC C, London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B. i, *dinges mere*
ASC D, London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B. iv, *dynigesmere*
[ASC O, London, British Library Cotton Otho B. xi (lost), *dinnesmere*].

The ASC A and C manuscripts agree on the spelling *dinges-*; B's *dyngesmere* is a spelling variant (*y* for *i* is common in late West Saxon); the D reading with *dyniges-* might have been thought to mean 'mere of

* Sources such as *Egilssaga* must be used with caution, but it is worth noting that Keith Kelly discerns an echo of Chester in the saga's reference to Athelstan's troops occupying a fortress south of the battle site (Livingston 2011, p. 210).

the wild parsnip' (see DOE under *dynige*, although there is only one example of the word, among a list of plants). The last, the O spelling *dinnesmere*, is only extant from a 16th-century copy of a copy of A and is of no independent evidential value (Campbell 1938, pp. 1, 115, 133–144). It must be regarded as a misreading, transcription error, or 'an alteration by the scribe' (Campbell 1938, p. 115). Thus while the O scribe or his 16th-century counterpart might 'have meant *dinnes* as gen. s. of *dyne* "noise"' (Campbell 1938, p. 115), and indeed Campbell might have 'considered it a reasonable explanation for the *Dinnes*-form' (Halloran 2010, p. 253, note 24), that can have no 'value in determining … the text … of the poem' (Campbell 1938, p. 1)—or its meaning.

The spelling with *-g-* is persistent, and that rules out a form of the verb *dynian* (to resound) and the noun *dyne* or *gedyne* (din, loud noise). The feminine noun *dyncge* (dung, manure) has been suggested in some quarters, but this only occurs in glosses, apart from a word appearing in a law text as *ðingan* (DOE). In neither the weak (Laws example) nor the strong (glosses) forms would the genitive singular inflection be *-(e)s*. Some early glosses (DOE Corpus) spell *þing-* forms *ding-*, for example *quoquemodo – aengi dinga* (in any way), *aduocatus – dingere*, *dingare* (counsellor). An English etymon for *dinges*—is thus hard to find.

The Norse language yields no better source for the *dinges-* spellings, The verb *dynja* (to gush, shower, pour) gives no *-g-*; *dengja* (to whet) is rare and not spelt with *-i-* or *-y-*; and the noun *dyngja* (lady's bower) (Cleasby, Vigfusson, and Craigie 1957, pp. 111, 99, and 111, respectively) may with some ingenuity approach the Old English spellings, but the word would not make much sense and certainly would not mean 'din'. The idea that *Dingesmere* means 'sea of noise' or something similar is thus founded on no valid evidence.

A more technical objection, but important nevertheless, is the fact that, as I have shown, the simplex *mere* and *mere* as the first element of compounds unproblematically refer to the sea or an expanse of water in verse, including Grendel's mere in *Beowulf*. But as the second element of a compound in verse or in place-names, *mere* does not denote 'sea'; in poetry its core meaning is 'pool.' In place-names, its core meaning is 'pool, wetland' (Cavill 2007, pp. 35–38).

We have many examples of place-names with qualifiers in the genitive and the generic *mere*, like *dingesmere*, but no non-toponymic poetic compounds with such a configuration of 'specific in the genitive + *mere*', thus, in the configuration in which it appears in the poem, the evidence suggests first that *dingesmere* is a place-name and second that it refers to a (coastal) wetland, not to the sea. The appropriateness of that description to the estuary of the Dee at Heswall and overlooked by Thingwall has already been outlined.

Painful though it may be, we must reckon with a wide range of linguistic, stylistic, and topographical evidence to arrive at conclusions about words like *dingesmere*. The analysis of the evidence that I have presented shows that the word refers to neither noise nor sea. The interpretation of *dingesmere* as 'wetland of the *þing*' (Cavill, Harding and Jesch 2004) may not yet be unassailable, but it has not been effectively challenged by appeals to outdated guesswork.

Conclusion

This book brings together a wealth of evidence relating to the North Sea coasts and the Chester area, showing their significant roles in war and trading, even if they did not feature very prominently in the written sources of the first millennium. I have tried to give a brief account of where the debate about *Brunanburh* stands at present, and in so doing have had to interact in detail with opinions that place the battle elsewhere than the Wirral. I have not been able to include and discuss all the material that is added daily on the Internet. New interpretations are constantly being proposed, but ultimately they all float or founder on the evidence.

I believe that that evidence decisively points to the battle of *Brunanburh* having been fought on the Wirral, and that careful scholarship locates this particular encounter between the English and the Vikings most plausibly at Bromborough. We have come far in our search for the battle: to Campbell's *nescio* we can now say, with some confidence, *puto scio*.

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