

Torgrim Titlestad

VIKING NORWAY

PERSONALITIES, POWER AND POLITICS

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Appendix

V

NORWAY'S "COLONY" OF WIRRAL, LIVERPOOL

BY STEPHEN HARDING

Wirral – a small peninsula in North West England – is the only place in mainland Britain with documented evidence of Norwegian Viking settlers. Ancient Irish Chronicles known as the *Three Fragments*¹ – reinforced by contemporary Welsh sources² report a comprehensive expulsion of Norsemen from Dublin in 902 AD, an attempt to settle in Anglesey – repulsed by the Welsh – followed by settlement in “mass migration numbers” into previously sparsely settled lands after being given permission to do so by Æthelflæd, Queen of the Mercian English and daughter of Alfred the Great. Their leader was a man called Ingimund:

*The Saga of Ingimund*³

We have related above, namely in the fourth year before us, of the expulsion of the Norse hosts from Ireland; through the fasting and praying of the holy man, namely Céle Dabhaill, for he was a saintly, devout man. The Norsemen, then, departed from Ireland as we have said and Ingimund was their leader, and where they went to was

the island of Britain⁴. The king of Britain at this time was the son of Cadell, son of Rhodri. The men of Britain⁵ assembled against them, and they were driven by force from the territories of the men of Britain. Afterwards Ingimund came with his forces came to Edelfrida queen of the Saxons, for her husband, that is Edelfrid, was that time in disease (let no one blame me although I have already mentioned the death of Edelfrid, and it was from the disease that Edelfrid died, but I did not wish to leave unwritten what the Norsemen did after going from Ireland). Now Ingimund was asking lands of the queen in which he would settle, and on which he would build huts and dwellings, for at this time he was weary of war. Then Edelfrida gave him lands near Chester, and he stayed there for a long time.

Æthelflæd had given the land presumably because it was not wanted by the English – the existence of large numbers of minor names with Old Norse

kjarr and *holm*⁶ tell us that Wirral contained a lot of marshy land of poor quality for farming. And for a while the Norsemen were able to survive by fishing, hunting and basic farming – e.g. there are lots of field names with the Old Norse *érgi* – a shieling – which attest to that. *The Three Fragments* then tell us though of how they became discontented and in 907 after an emergency meeting decided to attack Chester:

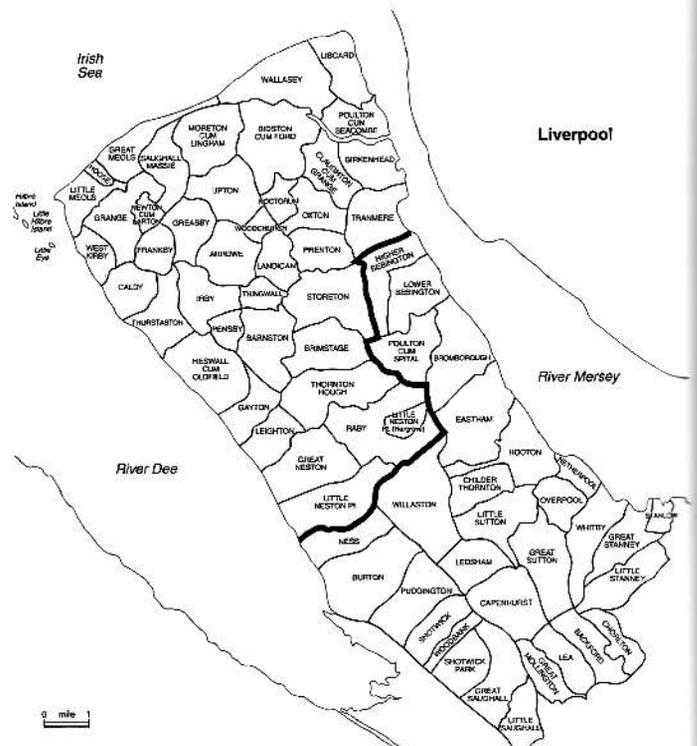
The result of this was, when he saw the city full of wealth and the choice of land around it, he desired to possess them. Afterwards Ingimund came to the leaders of the Norsemen and the Danes; he made a great complaint in their presence, and he said that they were not well off without good lands, and that it was right for them all to seize Chester and to possess it with its wealth and its lands. Many great battles and wars arose on account of that. This is what he said: “Let us beseech and implore them first, and if we do not get them willingly in this way let us contest them by force”. All the leaders of the Norsemen and the Danes agreed to do this. Ingimund then came to his house, with an assembly following him. Though they made this council a secret, the queen came to know of it. Therefore the queen collected large forces around her in every direction, and the city of Chester was filled with her hosts.

The saga continues by telling us of the measures used by the Vikings to capture the city and the countermeasures used by the English to defend it, and ends on the ominous note:

It was not long after that [before they came] to wage battle again.

Relatively peaceful settlement in Wirral – and Liverpool

Although the intricate details concerning the attacks on Chester are dubious, scholars accept that the basis of the story is true – namely the peaceful settlement of “lands near Chester” – which most scholars accept has to be Wirral – by Norsemen expelled from Ireland followed by attacks on Chester. From the distribution of major old place-names in the region (for farmsteads, settlements or villages) it is possible to get an idea of the extent of the settlements.



The line indicates the boundary of the original Norse enclave passing through Raby.



Torgrim Titlestad (left) and Stephen Harding at Brunanburh. Photo: Hogne Titlestad.

The majority of Scandinavian place-names are in the north-western part of the peninsula, with the boundary passing through *Raby* (Old Norse: rá-byr) and with *Thingwall* (Old Norse: Þing-vollr) – the site of their assembly – at the centre of the enclave. And in Tranmere (Old Norse: tran-melr) Wirral boasts the only major football team in England with a Norwegian Viking name: place name analysis⁷ for the region shows the settlers were mainly Norwegian rather than Danish. But place name analysis for the whole of the north west of England shows the settlements were not just confined to Wirral but extended along the coastal regions as far as the south of Scotland, including West and North Lancashire, the Lake District and what is now Dumfriesshire. For example across the Mersey into what later became known as Liverpool

and South West Lancashire there are the similar place names Roby and Thingwall Hall, indeed Wirral and Liverpool possess the only definite Thingwall place names in the whole of England, demonstrating that the settlements in these areas were particularly substantial.

The Battle of Brunanburh

Another and much larger encounter involving Vikings and English is also considered to have taken place in the region – this is the Battle of Brunanburh fought in 937 AD.

By this time the British Isles had become a political melting pot. The Germanic English tribes had control of the southern and the western central part of England, the Danes had control of the East

and large parts of the North and the Norwegians parts of the North West. Further to the North the Celts were in control of Scotland and to the West in Wales. Dublin was back under Scandinavian control again.

Athelstan became king of the Wessex English in 925 AD and proceeded to try to assert his authority over the Norwegians, Danes and Celts by a strategy of patronage, intermarriage and military force. In 926 he married his sister to the Irish-Norse king of York and Northumbria, Sithric and then made peace with the Celtic kings of South Wales, Cumbria and Scotland. Unfortunately diplomacy fell apart following the death of Sithric in 927: Sithric's brother Guthfrith, king of Dublin, tried to take over only to be expelled by Athelstan who saw him as a threat. In 934 Guthfrith died and was succeeded by his son Olaf or "Anlaf" and in the same year Athelstan made a devastating raid on Scotland. Coins being minted after 927 AD announced himself as the "King of Britain".

Needless to say he had upset many people and by 937 AD some had decided enough was enough and it was time to bring him down. It has to be said though that Athelstan was not the enemy of *all* Vikings – some liked him some didn't. He was always a friend of Norway's King Harald Finehair for example. One of Finehair's sons, Prince Håkon, was to spend long periods in Athelstan's court and he is reputed to have helped another, Eirik Bloodaxe, to acquire the overlordship of Northumbria. Iceland's most notorious Viking – Egil Skallagrimsson – was also a friend of Athelstan. By contrast the Dublin Viking leader Olaf Guthfriths-

son clearly had a score to settle, namely the revenge of his father. Owein, King of the Strathclyde Welsh and Constantine King of the Scots were also both bursting with the desire for revenge following Athelstan's 934 campaign. So in 937 a large force from Dublin arrived and joined with their Celtic allies from Britain. Where they rendezvoused we do not know but it is likely they went campaigning and ravaging in the English part of the Midlands before they encountered Athelstan's army and his own Viking allies at what the only contemporary record – an Anglo Saxon poem – records as the *Battle of Brunanburh*. The battle ended as a victory for Athelstan's forces with the defeated forces of Olaf returning to Dublin and the Constantine's forces returning to Scotland. Nothing more is heard of Owein. Two years after the battle, Athelstan himself had died and Olaf Guthfrithsson succeeded in getting his hands on English Midlands (Mercia) and York/Northumbria.

So where was Brunanburh? This has been hotly debated over the last 100 years but most scholars agree that the confrontation took place on Wirral. The contemporary poem records the battle taking place "im Brunanburh" – round Brunanburh or "Bruna's burh – Bruna's fortress":

*King Athelstan, the lord of warriors,
Patron of heroes, and his brother too,
Prince Edmund, won themselves eternal glory
In battle with the edges of their swords
Round Brunanburh; they broke the wall of shields,*

and how Olaf's raiding forces escaped from a place called Dingesmere back to Dublin.



King Edgar took a party of Celtic chiefs in a small boat along the Dee coast c. 973 – reminding them of the battle of 937.

*The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,
The sad survivors of the darts, on Dingesmere
Over the deep sea back they went to Dublin,
To Ireland they returned with shameful hearts.*

No other places are mentioned. Much later accounts written between 50 and 300 years after the battle give variant names for Brunanburh (= Bruna's stronghold or fortress), such as Brunandune, Wendune, and in *Egil's Saga* it is Vinheith but it is possible to show that these all relate to open uncultivated land belonging to a man called Bruna.⁸ There is only one place in Britain where the relevant form of these names appear and that is Wirral. The old name for the modern town Bromborough is listed as late as 1732 as Brunburgh, and Bruna's name also

appears nearby in the parish names of Brimstage and the now lost Brimston. Very recently Dingesmere was also identified⁹ as the "Things mere" or "Things mjarr" (Old Norse: mjarr) – the wetland or marshland of the Thing, a name used to warn seaborne travellers coming to the Thing at Thingwall – on Wirral – of the hazard of marshland as they arrived on the mainland: the nearest coastal point to Thingwall is between Heswall and Thurston on the River Dee.¹⁰ Alternatively it could have referred to wetland or marshland near Mcols (Old Norse: melr) the former port used by the Romans and revived by the Scandinavian settlers. A number of other places have been suggested for the battle site, such as *Burnswalk* in the south west of Scotland and *Brinsworth Hill* near Rotherham



in the north-east of England. The cases for these *non-Brunanburh* (and *non-Dingesmere*) sites have been closely scrutinised by a number of scholars such as the late John McNeal Dodgson and more recently Paul Cavill¹¹ and Nicholas Higham,¹² and all have been shown to be implausible on linguistic and logistical grounds.

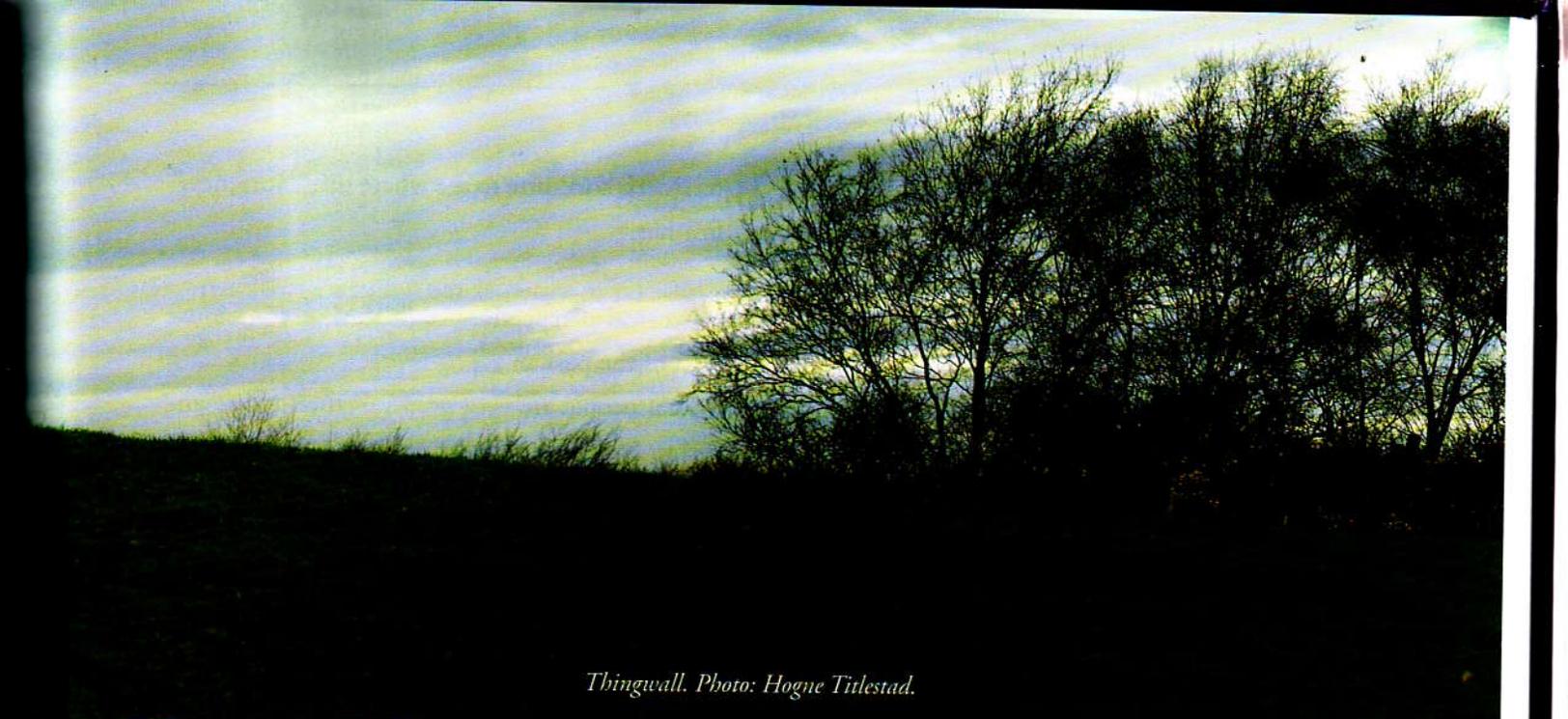
If indeed the battle took place on Wirral then the favoured site appears to be Bebington Heath situated not far from what is now the M63 motorway. But what happened to the local population? The poem offers no clues and reports in *Egil's Saga* of Vikings fighting on both sides may have confused the issue. Douglasson¹³ has given a recent and plausible analysis of this problem. He suggests that despite the strong propaganda pitch of the poem the Anglo-Saxon victory was far from complete with Olaf's and Constantine's men being sent home in defeat rather than being annihilated. The local Norse militia provided cover for Olaf and Constantine's retreating forces and in such

a way it impressed the pursuing – but severely depleted Anglo-Saxon forces. Athelstan's forces also suffered heavy losses and he too returned home to Winchester after paying off his troops. William of Malmesbury writing 200 years after the battle reports of Athelstan's cousins being killed and *Egil's Saga* recounts the loss of Egil's brother. Whatever happened the effect on the local population seems to have been transient.

Blood connection

So what has been left behind by these Norse settlers? Through the centuries their influence has been substantial. Besides the many major place names in the area there are hundreds of minor or "field" names with Scandinavian roots. Although many of these cannot be traced back to the settlement period, they do tell us about the language or dialect persisting through the centuries. The distinguished antiquarian F.T. Wainwright in a paper in 1943¹⁴ says the following:

It is known that during the early part of the



Thingwall. Photo: Hogne Titlestad.

tenth century there occurred a large scale Norse immigration into Wirral. How heavy was this influx is illustrated by the field names, which even in their modern forms, preserve ample proof of the intensity of the Scandinavian settlement.”

Besides the *kjarr*, *holmr* and *ærgi* there are many place names with Old Norse *rak*, *slakki*, *brekka*, *inntak*, *klint* and *þveit* and there are also two examples on Wirral of Heskeths or Old Norse *hestaskeið* – horse race track. Evidence of a prevailing dialect comes from surprising sources – for example the famous 14th poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – believed to be written by someone in or near the region – not only has *Sir Gawain* roaming through Wirral in search of his challenger but contains a significant proportion of Norse dialect words. The Vikings have also left behind some marvelous artifacts such as two hogback tombstones – one at St. Bridget’s Church at West Kirby, the other recently

discovered in somebody’s back garden at Bidston. In Neston there are fragments from at least three 10th century crosses of the hiberno-Norse “ring-head” type and other ones at Bromborough, Woodchurch and West Kirby. A replica of one of the Neston crosses is being constructed and depicts a hunting scene, which appears to be a jousting contest and the touching image of a woman with pigtails with her hand around the man and with an angel flying horizontally over their heads.

But the most interesting and important legacy of the settlements is in the blood of the people living there today. A collaborative study between the universities of Leicester and Nottingham and University College London has used the connection between surnames and DNA to show a remarkable degree of Viking ancestry in Wirral and neighbouring West Lancashire. Viking traces in the genes of modern people from these regions, however, are likely to be obscured by the massive population growth, including immigration from

other parts of the British Isles, since the Industrial Revolution. To bypass this problem, the research teams collected samples from men who carried surnames that were found in early local documents. One list contained the names of men who had promised to contribute to the stipend of the priest of the altar of Our Lady at Ormskirk in 1366; another recorded the names of all those households paying taxes in Wirral in the reign of Henry VIII. Surnames derived from local place-names were also included. An analysis of the genetic make up of these men focused on the Y chromosome, which, like a surname, is passed down from father to son. Surnames provide a link to the past, so the Y chromosomes of men with old local surnames might give a genetic picture of what the population was like, closer to Viking times.

The study – now published in *Molecular Biology and Evolution*¹⁵ showed that when such samples of men were compared with samples based only on the birth-place of the paternal grandfather, they were found to carry a much higher proportion of Norse ancestry. In fact, the population carries about 50% male Norse ancestry – about the same as modern Orkney, confirming the belief that the region was once heavily populated by Scandinavian settlers. The survey is now being extended to north Lancashire, Cumbria and then through

to North Yorkshire to see where the “Norseness” finishes.¹⁶

Historical perspectives on/historical consciousness of the past

Wirral people are very proud of their Norse ancestry. Modern appreciation – and awareness – of the area’s Norseness, however, started in the 18th century by the poetess Anna Seward and one of the most prominent families in Wirral and the north west of England – the Stanley family.¹⁷ Today a Viking heritage trail has been mapped out,¹⁸ there is an “Olsok” Viking Churches heritage walk held every July, and there are plans to construct a Wirral Viking Centre which will help with tourism and education, reinforcing an excellent Schools web resource¹⁹ which has now been set up with the help of Wirral’s Cultural Ambassador Michael McCartney, brother of Sir Paul. And like Nottingham with its Robin Hood, Wirral too has its legends. One such legend – albeit of dubious antiquity – insists that a large outcrop of sandstone at Thurstaston (Old Norse: *Þorsteinns-tún*) is *Mjollnir* – the head of Thor’s hammer. A delegation from Trondheim – the Deputy Mayor and Cultural Advisor – recently visited the site and came to the conclusion that “we are happy with the way the people of Wirral are looking after *our* stone and so will not be taking it back with us ... on this occasion”.²⁰

Professor Stephen Harding from the University of Nottingham is an expert on the Vikings in the north west of England and has helped in raising public awareness of their Viking heritage. He is author of two books – *Ingimunds Saga: Norwegian Wirral and Viking Mersey*, and co-author (with Dr. Paul Cavill and Professor Judith Jesch) of *Wirral and its Viking Heritage* and has published several peer reviewed articles. Along with Professor Mark Jobling (University of Leicester) and Judith Jesch he helped direct the recent genetic survey of the north west of England.

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- ⁴ Island of Britain = Anglesey.
- ⁵ Britain = Wales. The Vikings called Wales *Bretland*, “Land of the Brits”.
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- ⁸ P. Cavill (2001) *Vikings. Fear and Faith*, Harper Collins, London 97–111
- ⁹ P. Cavill, S.E. Harding and J. Jesch (2004) Dingsmere Revisited, *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 36, 25–38. Some of the newspapers also picked up on the fact this was the first major battle where Anglo-Saxon tribes fought together as a combined English force – with Egil’s Viking allies. See also B. Hoyle (2004) Is this the battle that shaped England’s destiny? *The Times*, 20th December, p28; L. Jury (2004) For the cradle of English civilisation – go to Wirral, *The Independent*, 8th December, p15.
- ¹⁰ Significantly some 36 years after the battle King Edgar took a party of Celtic chiefs in a small boat along the Dee coast – reminding them of what happened in 937. See P. Cavill, S.E. Harding and J. Jesch (2000) Wirral and its Viking Heritage, *English Place-Name Society*, Nottingham, UK, p123.
- ¹¹ P. Cavill (2008) The site of the Battle of Brunanburh: manuscripts and maps, grammar and geography, in *Festschrift for Margaret Gelling*, O. Padel and D.N. Parsons, eds (in press).
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- ¹⁴ F. T. Wainwright (1943) Wirral field names, *Antiquity* 27, 57–66. Excerpt reprinted in See P. Cavill, S.E. Harding and J. Jesch (2000) Wirral and its Viking Heritage, *English Place-Name Society*, Nottingham, UK 98–99.
- ¹⁵ G. R. Bowden, P. Balaesque, T.F. King, Z. Hansen, A.C. Lee, G. Pergl-Wilson, E. Hurley, S.J. Roberts, P. Waire, J. Jesch, A.L. Jones, M. G. Thomas, S. E. Harding and M. A. Jobling (2008) Excavating Past Population Structures by Surname-based Sampling: the Genetic Legacy of the Vikings in Northwest England, *Molecular Biology and Evolution* (in press).
- ¹⁶ Yorkshire was populated by Danish Vikings. Unfortunately the y-chromosome distribution of populations of men from modern Denmark is indistinguishable from men from the Anglo-Saxon homelands of North Germany and Friesland. Fortunately the distribution for Norway is different enough to allow a distinction.
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- ¹⁸ <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~sczsteve> and links therein
- ¹⁹ <http://www.wirral-abc.gov.uk/vikings/> and links therein
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