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VIKING WIRRAL AND THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

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One of the historical debates of the 20th Century has been the location of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, with the majority of experts favouring Bromborough on Wirral. It was a battle fought between a combined army of Celts from Scotland and Vikings based largely in Dublin, with a combined army of West Saxons and Mercians led by King Aethelstan. Our primary source of information about the battle is a contemporary poem recorded in various versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937. According to the poem, the battle “fought round Brunanburh” was one of the bloodiest in the history of the British Isles: “Never yet on this island has there been a greater slaughter”, with victory to Aethelstan. After the battle, the poem records how the defeated Norsemen fled: “Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, went in the nail-studded ships on *Dingesmere*, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed”. The only mention of places that gives us a clue to the location of the battle are Brunanburh and Dingesmere. If we can locate these with some certainty then we can locate the battle.

Brunanburh

Aethelweard writing later in the 10th century places the battle at *Brunandune*, the 12th century Icelandic Egil’s Saga places it at *Vinheith*. The English “dune” and Norse “heath” both mean “open cultivated land”. *Brunan* looks like the English personal name Bruna, so we have “Bruna’s open land” which may be the name of the land over which the battle was fought. Egil’s saga mentions a fort being near the battle site. The poem refers to the battle by the name of the nearest settlement ‘Bruna’s fort’, or *Brunanburh*. Three places in the North West of England appear to derive from Bruna, and they all happen to be in the Wirral: Bromborough (earlier forms Brunburgh, Brunanburgh), Brimstage and the now lost Brimston. The site of Bruna’s fortress is probably now Poulton Hall, home since 1093 of the Lancelyn-Green family. Bruna’s open land is probably Bebington Heath, flanked by the River Dibbin on one side and rising to Storeton Woods at the other. Egil’s saga records a river on one side and woods on the other – through which the defeated forces fled. The Saga also says that one group of Vikings – led by Egil – fought with the English against their kinsmen from Dublin.

Dingesmere

The final piece in the jigsaw – the location of Dingesmere – may now have appeared. The surviving Norsemen, after being chased for hours “in troops” (not as has been mistranslated by some as “by cavalry”) by the Saxons, reached Dingesmere. No satisfactory explanation as to the location of Dingesmere has appeared... until now. Shortly an explanation is to be published in the *Journal of the English Place Name Society* and it relates to the old Viking parliament or *Thing* which used to be held at Thingwall on Wirral (similar to Tynwald in the Isle of Man and Thingvellir, Iceland). Thingwall (Old Norse: *þing-vollr* “Assembly Field”) is in the centre of Wirral and served Wirral’s Scandinavian population from the establishment of the colony in 902AD through the 10th and possibly into the 11th century. The Thing field itself – believed to be Cross Hill just off the A540 is on relatively high, gently sloping ground just over two miles from the Dee at Heswall, a coastal area even today coloured by marshland: Dingesmere derives from the Old Norse *þings-marr* ‘marshland of the thing’.. The element *marr* frequently interchanges with OE *mere* in English place-names but the purpose of the name would be clear to those who used it: it would locate the feature near the important *þing* site; and it would warn travellers using the shallow tidal waters of the Dee estuary - including those coming to the Thing - of the danger of marshland.

If this interpretation is correct, the poet’s purpose is clear: it highlights the brutal facts that the visiting Norse-Celtic army fled from a place close to, and named after, the centre of local Scandinavian power and symbol of Scandinavian independence and self-determination - the *þing*; and it emphasises the desperation of the fugitives, in that they had to depart as best they could from an unsuitable place, flooded marshland, before they could make the safety of the deeper water and escape to Dublin.

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