

A
COMMODITY OF
GOOD NAMES

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF
MARGARET GELLING

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The site of the battle of *Brunanburh*: manuscripts and maps, grammar and geography

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In recent (and not-so-recent) years there has been much speculation concerning the whereabouts of the *Brunanburh* of the poem written into the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, s.a. 937. There are two particular areas of scholarly development since the edition of the poem published by Campbell in 1938¹ that have a bearing on this vexed question. These two areas of advance are, firstly, the publication of modern and more comprehensive editions of medieval texts which mention the place, giving more (or different) spellings; and, secondly, the work done by Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole on the particular landscape features denoted by place-name elements. In what follows, I aim to bring information from these two sources to bear on what can be deduced from the earliest records as to possible sites for the battle. It may be, of course, that 'the site of the battle cannot be identified',² but onomastic philology and topography may at least narrow down the possibilities.

1. *Early spellings of the name Brunanburh*

Campbell listed the spellings as follows:³

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle	
A	<i>Brw^unanburh</i>
B	<i>Brunnanburh</i>
C	<i>Brunnanburh</i>
D	<i>Brunanburh</i>
E	<i>Brunanbyrig</i> (dat.sg.)
F	<i>Brunanbyri</i> (dat.sg.)
O ³	<i>Brunanburh</i>
Æthelweard	<i>Brunandune</i> (dat.sg.)

¹ *The Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Alistair Campbell (London, 1938).

² Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, I, 500–1042, 2nd edn (London, 1979), p. 38.

³ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, p. 60. The names of ancient writers cited by Campbell have been silently updated.

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Symeon of Durham	<i>Et Brunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig</i>
	<i>Weondune, Wendune</i>
William of Malmesbury	<i>Brunefeld (v.l. Bruneford)</i>
John of Worcester	<i>Brunanburh</i>
Henry of Huntingdon	<i>Bruneburh, Bruniburh</i>
Gaimar	<i>Bruneswerce</i>
Various twelfth-century documents	<i>Bruningafeld</i>
Scottish Chronicle ⁴	<i>Duinbrunde</i>
<i>Annales Cambriæ</i>	<i>Brune</i>
<i>Annals of Clonmacnoise</i>	<i>Plaines of othlynn (v.l. othlyn)</i>

In a number of important respects, these authorities need to be adjusted.

The manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle B text is obscure at the top of folio 31v where the name occurs. The reading that Campbell gives, with *-nn-*, was also Whitelock's reading.⁵ However, the latest editor, Simon Taylor, with the aid of the best available technology, reads *Brunanb[ur]h*.⁶ If this is correct, the evidence for the *-nn-* spelling consists of a later but undated addition to the A manuscript of the Chronicle, the reading of the mid eleventh-century C manuscript, and that of Symeon of Durham manuscripts in the twelfth century. This strongly suggests that the *-nn-* spelling is a variant and not an original early form: the tenth-century chronicle versions A⁷ and B,⁸ and independently, the early eleventh-century manuscripts of Æthelweard,⁹ as well as all the later sources apart from Symeon, have a single *-n-*.

This means that the first element of the name *Brunanburh* is, on the evidence of the earliest spellings, *brūna* or *brūne*: the first most likely to be male personal name, the second possibly a river-name 'dark, brown, or shining one'.¹⁰ Campbell felt obliged to consider several

⁴ Campbell's 'Pictish Chronicle' (following Skene). The Chronicle is edited from the Poppleton MS (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, latin 4126) by Marjorie O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973), pp. 235–60, with the reference to *Duinbrunde* at p. 251. I am grateful to Dr Oliver Padel for this reference, and for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁵ Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 219 note.

⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, IV, MS B, ed. Simon Taylor (Cambridge, 1983), p. 51.

⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, III, MS A, ed. Janet Bately (Cambridge, 1986). The scribal 'Hand 3' writing at this point is dated to the 'mid-tenth century' (p. xxxv).

⁸ The A and B ('late tenth century', according to Taylor, p. xi) versions at this point are tenth-century; there are of course later additions.

⁹ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. A. Campbell (London, 1962), p. xii.

¹⁰ David N. Parsons and Tania Styles, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names* (Brace-

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options to explain the forms with the *-nn-* spelling, which thus become unnecessary:¹¹

The form with *nn* is less easily explained: it may be the gen. s. of O.E. **brunne* or **brunna*, a form of *burne* 'stream,' without primitive metathesis, or of O.E. *burne* in a form in which the *r* has been restored to its former position by a later metathesis, and the medial *n* doubled by the influence of O.N. *brunnr*.¹²

Symeon's forms may well be influenced by ON *brunnr*. The run of spellings for the County Durham name Burnigill, 'Hill called *Bruning*, the place named after the River Browney', includes *Brunnighil* c. 1200, *Bruninghil* 1260, *Burninghille* 1280:¹³ the first of these forms may similarly show the influence of ON *brunnr*. It is doubtful that the C Chronicle scribe was so influenced, however. Scribe 2, writing the section here, sometimes doubles consonants where the vowel remains long: compare *wigges* in the *Brunanburh* poem at lines 20 and 59 of the edited text.¹⁴ The possibility, even likelihood, is that we have here in the A addition and the C text an orthographical variant without phonological or etymological significance. At any rate, the original first element of the name *Brunanburh* is even less plausibly ON *brunnr* than it was before, and this effectively rules out Cyril Hart's identification of the battle-site with one of the Bournes in Lincolnshire or Cambridgeshire.¹⁵

The only spelling quoted by Campbell for Gaimar is *Bruneswerce*. This is the reading of a single manuscript of *L'Estoire des Engleis*; two others read *Burneweste*, and another *Brunewerche*.¹⁶ We may take *-weste* as a scribal error for *-werce* in the exemplar of the two

Cæster) (Nottingham, 2000), s.v. *brūn*¹. It is important to note the caveats that Parsons and Styles express about identifying the meaning of the element. The first part of the present article aims to avoid being too specific about the meaning, which is uncertain, and to concentrate on the grammar and palaeography of the name *Brunanburh* and variants, which are more definite.

¹¹ It is to be noted that the *-nn-* spellings (as in Campbell's explanation quoted) generally support a riverine feature for the specific element in the name. The weaker evidence for this spelling argued above makes the riverine identification of the specific both less necessary and less compelling.

¹² *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, p. 61.

¹³ Victor Watts, *A Dictionary of County Durham Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2002), p. 21.

¹⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, v, *MS C*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Cambridge 2001), pp. 77 and 79 for *wigges*, and cf. p. xcvi, (x) [b] for doubling of consonants.

¹⁵ Cyril Hart, *The Danelaw* (London, 1992), pp. 515–25 (at p. 520).

¹⁶ *L'Estoire des Engleis by Geffrei Gaimar*, ed. Alexander Bell, *Anglo-Norman Texts*, 14–16 (Oxford, 1960), p. 112, line 3518 and notes.

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manuscripts having this spelling;¹⁷ but irrespective of this, we are left with a predominant grammatical form even in Gaimar representing the regular Middle English reduction of the OE weak genitive singular inflection ending *-an* to *-e*. The genitive *-s-* in *Bruneswerce* is an apparently conscious representation of the grammatical case, but an independent variant of the predominant form: that is, these spellings indicate that the *-s-* is a secondary genitive.

The significance of this becomes clearer when we consider the forms given by Campbell for the name in Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*. Campbell gives two spellings from Arnold's edition, *Bruneburh* and *Brunesburh*. Arnold used the early thirteenth-century MS British Library Arundel 48, and the spelling of the second of these in the manuscript (noted by Arnold), at v. 19, is in fact *Brunesburith*.¹⁸ This is an interesting spelling in its own right, showing the attempt by the scribe to represent the genitive of the first element and what appears to be a current spelling or pronunciation of the second element. Parallels for the pronunciation of the final consonant [x] in *burh*, or its dative *byrig*, as [θ], as represented by the spelling, are to be found in a wide range of place-names from Dorset¹⁹ north, including (perhaps significantly) the Cheshire Bromborough, *Brumburth* 1297 (15th), *Bromborth* 1291, 1348.²⁰

The spelling *Bruneburh* occurs twice in Arnold's principal manuscript, MS British Library Arundel 48, once in v. 18, once in v. 32. Arnold also records the reading of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS latin 6042, of the mid-twelfth century, *Brunebirih*, at v. 19.²¹ Thus, even in Arnold's edition, we have evidence for three definite *Brune*-spellings against one *Brunes*-.

The latest editor of the *Historia Anglorum*, Diana Greenway, uses MS British Library Egerton 3668, written in two or more hands of the mid-twelfth century, for the base text of her edition.²² The Egerton text is preferred by the editor to the 'corrupt and contaminated' text of the

¹⁷ *L'Estoire des Engleis*, ed. Bell, p. xxiii, where the stemma derives D and L (*burneweste* spellings) from an exemplar Y.

¹⁸ *Henrici Archidiaconi Huntendunensis Historia Anglorum*, ed. Thomas Arnold, Rolls Series (London 1879), p. 160 and note.

¹⁹ *EPNS Dor*, I, 174, where 13th-century spellings of Winfrith Newburgh include *~ Neuburth*, *~ Nouborthe*.

²⁰ *EPNS Che*, IV, 237. I have counted around two dozen examples, predominantly from the 13th century, in Devon, Dorset, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Cheshire, Yorkshire and Cumberland. The sound-change is specifically mentioned by *EPNS YoW*, VI, 3, in relation to Keighley.

²¹ *Henrici Archidiaconi Huntendunensis Historia Anglorum*, ed. Arnold, p. 160, note 1.

²² *Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon: Historia Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford, 1996), p. clxiii.

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Arundel MS.²³ Though Greenway does not specifically collate all the manuscripts (there are too many for this to be coherently presented), her readings for the name are *Brunebirih* (twice, once in v. 18, once in v. 19) and *Bruneberi* in v. 32.²⁴ Here once more is evidence that the *-s*-genitive is secondary in the 'contaminated' later manuscript, and in addition it is not as prominent in the tradition as Campbell's list would seem to imply. On this evidence, the *Brunesburith* spelling in MS British Library Arundel 48, v. 19, looks like a singularity, a one-off variant introduced by the scribe here, when elsewhere he used the more standard *Bruneburh*.

Cumulatively, then, the spellings of the name *Brunanburh* throughout the early sources point to the fact that the first element was historically a weak Old English substantive, either *brūna* or *brūne*, both of which have the genitive singular form *brūnan*. The possibility that we have an original metathesised version of Old English *burna* or *burne*, lacking primitive metathesis or with later metathesis, as Campbell suggests,²⁵ cannot be entirely ruled out, but for the latter we might expect some evidence of a duality of forms before, and in addition to, the garbled spellings *Burneweste* in manuscripts of Gaimar.

In the Middle English period, weak substantives in common usage lost their *-an* genitive endings and adopted the strong *-es* genitive endings. In compounds such as place-names often are, the internal inflectional ending often weakened from *-an-* to *-e-* to zero, though some names preserve the internal inflection. Old English compound names had by the time of this change become appellatives rather than combinations of meaningful elements, and the shift from the weak to the strong paradigm in substantives affects very few place-names. The Cheshire names Tittenley 'Titta's clearing or wood' and Budworth 'Budda's enclosure' illustrate these processes. Tittenley has spellings *Titesle* in Domesday Book 1086 and 1286, but the modern name preserves the original weak internal inflection. Budworth has spellings *Budeswurda* c. 1115, *Buddesworda* 1154–60 (1329), *Bodesworth*, *Bodisworth* 1307, and the modern name has lost the weak internal inflection.²⁶ The two names, unusually, take occasional strong genitive inflections on the originally weak specific.

The scribal forms of *Brunanburh* with the unhistorical genitive *-es* fit into this pattern of minor variants within an established series of spellings representing the weak grammatical form. The two *-es-*

²³ *ibid.*, p. clxi.

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 310, 332.

²⁵ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, p. 61.

²⁶ *EPNS Che*, III, 90, and II, 107–8 respectively. See also V, part 2, pp. 216–17.

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inflected variants, however, one in a Gaimar manuscript, one in a Henry of Huntingdon manuscript, seem to point to analogical and individual adaptation of the name, rather than a tradition where the place was known to the scribes by a different spelling. On the balance of the evidence, I suggest these variants are linguistic. In other words, I think it more likely that Henry's scribe thought or instinctively wrote as if he had thought, 'Brune is probably somebody's name so I'll make it possessive *Brunes*, and I spell *burh* as *burith*', than 'I know this place, and it is now called *Brunesburith*'. The Gaimar tradition obviously began from a different starting-point, probably **Brunewerce*, but the other spellings of the name similarly suggest that the form *Bruneswerce* is a single scribe's linguistic adaptation rather than his knowledge of an existing variant of the name.

Names consistently spelt with *Burns-* or *Brunes-* are naturally to be derived from *brūn* or *burn*. These are strong substantives with the genitive *-es*, and thus in a different class from the weak substantives *brūna* or *brūne*, *burna* or *burne*, with the genitive *-an*. If these first elements are in fact personal names, as is often assumed, both *Brūn* and *Brūna* are reasonably well attested.²⁷ Though we cannot doubt that they are related, *Brūn* is not to be confused with *Brūna*; they are not 'alternative form[s]',²⁸ and Redin lists them separately under 'Strong Names' and 'Weak Names' respectively.²⁹

To summarise the textual and general place-name evidence, then, we can say that the early spellings of *Brunanburh* represent it as a compound comprising a weak Old English substantive in the genitive for the specific, and the element *burh* as the generic. A small number of individual scribal variants show an unhistorical strong genitive inflection in the spelling of the specific, but these do not call into question the basic grammatical fact that strong and weak substantives are usually quite distinct. To most readers of the present volume, this point of grammar hardly needs to be made — or made again, since Ray Page outlined the issue very clearly a quarter of a century ago.³⁰ While it is not impossible that a name with modern spellings showing the internal strong genitive *-s-* might derive from an original weak Old English

²⁷ William George Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Cambridge, 1897), p. 117. That *Brūn* is better attested than *Brūna* makes the insistent manuscript evidence for a weak form significant, and the occasional drift on the part of scribes towards a strong form all the more likely.

²⁸ Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: the history and archaeology of two related Viking kingdoms*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1987), II, 52.

²⁹ Mats Redin, *Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English* (Uppsala, 1919), pp. 11 and 45 respectively.

³⁰ R. I. Page, 'A tale of two cities', *Peritia*, 1 (1982), 335–51 (a review of Smyth's *Scandinavian York and Dublin*), at pp. 344–5.

form, this must be thought unlikely.³¹ Without the support of evidence of earlier weak substantival inflection, arguments to the effect that names like Bromswold or Burnswark can be identified as *Brunanburh* (see further below) simply do not pass the first hurdle.

A great deal of current theorising about the site of the battle thus sits uncomfortably on the horns of a dilemma. Some people propose various sites dismissing what they disparagingly refer to as 'the mere place-name', yet they perhaps realise that without some plausible link to the name *Brunanburh* or its variants, any proposal as to the site is purely a matter of opinion and interpretation of the otherwise vague and varied information about the battle. It remains the case that most of the places suggested begin with *B-*: from Hill's recent shortlist of 21, some 16 or 17 do.³²

Bromswold

Two of the more recent and prominent suggestions as to the site of the battle are Bromswold or *Bruneswald* (a stretch of ancient forest particularly along the borders of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire),³³ and Burnswark (Dumfries).³⁴ These both immediately fall into

³¹ Proving a negative is difficult. There are occasional examples of change of grammatical ending in the conversion of Scandinavian names to English forms, for example Rotherby, Leicestershire, has predominant spellings reflecting the Scandinavian name Hreiðarr, but two thirteenth-century spellings with an *-s-* English genitive: *EPNS Lei*, III, 121–2. There are occasional names which have apparently different grammatical forms where the specific is obscure in meaning (and may have been in the Middle Ages also), for example Woodsford in Dorset, which has parallel spellings with and without the *-s-* genitive from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries: *EPNS Dor*, I, 186–7. (Mills notes the specific may be the personal name Wigheard or *wierde* 'beacon'; in his *A Dictionary of British Place-Names* (Oxford 2003), s.n., he adjusts this to the personal name *Weard.) *EPNS Essex*, p. 169, suggests that the *-s-* in a small number of spellings in the record for the name Shenfield 'is pseudo-genitival'. I do not know of any name reliably interpreted as deriving from an originally weak substantive in the specific where the modern form has the characteristic *-s-* of the strong genitive: Erik Tengstrand, *A Contribution to the Study of Genitival Composition in English Place-Names* (Uppsala, 1940), for example, does not mention this as a process in name formation.

³² Paul Hill, *The Age of Athelstan: Britain's forgotten history* (Stroud, 2004), pp. 141–2. Seventeen if Aldborough near Boroughbridge counts as one on the basis of Boroughbridge beginning with *B*. Hill follows in the footsteps of John Henry Cockburn, *The Battle of Brunanburh and its Period Elucidated by Place-Names* (London, 1931), pp. 40–8, where 22 names beginning with *B-* (amongst others) are considered. Page, 'A tale', p. 344, observes drily: 'It is hardly enough to look round for the nearest modern name beginning *Br-* and identify that as *Brunanburh*.'

³³ Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, II, 51–5, followed without further analysis by Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1996), p. 93.

³⁴ Geo. Neilson, 'Brunanburh and Burnswark', *Scottish Historical Review*, 7 (1910), 37–55, and Kevin Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign: a reappraisal', *Scottish Historical Review*, 84 (2005), 133–48.

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the category of names which do not accord with the grammar of the predominant spellings of *Brunanburh*.³⁵ Certainly it is not true to say, as Smyth does, that ‘The name *Bruneswald* is happily consistent with the linguistic requirements set out so rigorously [*sic*] by Professor Campbell.’ He goes on:

The first element is the genitive of the personal name *Brun* of which an alternative form, *Bruna* or *Brune*, occurs in the placename *Brunanburh*. Henry of Huntingdon has the form *Brunesburh* (and *Bruneburh*) in his account of the battle, not only preserving the older form of the first element, with one *n*, but also giving a nominative *Brun* (rather than *Bruna*) which is the same as that in *Bruneswald*.³⁶

The matter of the second sentence here has been covered by the discussion above: the variations in spellings of the stem are not necessarily significant; and the nominative form *Brun* as apparently used in the spelling *Brunesburith* may be the same as in *Bruneswald*, but it is an unhistorical variant from one scribe in one place in relation to *Brunanburh*, not the form (so far as it can be deduced from the manuscript tradition) that seems normally to have been used by medieval scribes in Henry’s work.

The fact that no reference to the battle uses a name with *w(e)ald* might also be regarded as making this theory particularly fallible. It is clear that the topographical features *feld*, *dūn*, and probably *ford* are associated with the site of the battle and the first element *bruna* or *brune* in the sources. These generic elements may be represented in names in the vicinity of *Bruneswald*, but it cannot be assumed this is the case. In other words, while it is perfectly possible that there were other *Brunes-* names in the area of *Bruneswald*, it should not be assumed either that these could include any generic (on which see further below), or that they have anything to do with *Brunanburh*.

³⁵ Similar flaws are to be found in the argument for Brinsworth, suggested by Cockburn, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, and supported with detailed argument by Michael Wood, ‘Brunanburh revisited’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 20 (1980), 200–17, and *In Search of England: journeys into the English past* (London, 2000). Brinsworth is recorded from 1086 Domesday Book as *Brinesford*. Though manuscripts of William of Malmesbury record a name for the place of the battle apparently containing the element *ford*, *Brunef(r)ord*, the personal name in Brinsworth is acknowledged by Wood to be *Bryni*, but he maintains that ‘[t]he evidence of the place-name is not decisive’ (‘Brunanburh revisited’, p. 211). Still, the *-s* genitive cannot be reconciled with the overwhelming weight of evidence for a weak substantive as the first element.

³⁶ Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, II, 51–2.

Burnswark

The case for Burnswark was first made seriously by Neilson, 'Brunanburh and Burnswork', and it was not ruled out by Smith.³⁷ It has been reasserted most recently by Kevin Halloran. One of the more enticing facets of the theory was that the name could apparently be reconciled with the form given for the battle in one of the historical sources, Gaimar, and there was also some similarity with one of Symeon's forms. Thus Nielson, isolating the site on the Solway, writes, 'Gaimar names it Brunswerc, Brunewerche, and Simeon of Durham calls it Brunanwerch.'³⁸ Likewise, but more assertively, Halloran writes: 'There is no doubt that early forms of the place-name Burnswark would fit with both *Etbrunnanwerc* and *Bruneswerce*.'³⁹ While Burnswark and the names in Gaimar and Symeon share an element ultimately from Old English *weorc*, neither the predominant spellings in Gaimar manuscripts nor Symeon's *-brunnan-* allow for the *-s-* genitive of Burnswark to 'fit' or identify it with those historical forms. In the present state of knowledge, there is in addition no evidence for the metathesised *Br-* spelling in the name Burnswark. In short, the similarity of the one manuscript spelling of *Bruneswerce* in Gaimar and the name Burnswark must be regarded as a coincidence.

A further difficulty is the late evidence for the Dumfries name, a regrettable, but not uncommon situation for Scottish names. At present, the earliest known spelling is from 1542, *Burnyswarke*; Neilson also lists *Burniswork* (1608), *Burneswark* (1623), *Burnswark* (1661). Johnston explicitly invokes Neilson's interpretation of the name (s.n. Birrenswark) in his definition '*Bruna's work*',⁴⁰ and is followed by David Mills in his *Dictionary*: "'Brūna's fortified place". OE masculine pers. name + *weorc*.'⁴¹ This interpretation is not beyond the bounds of possibility, but it assumes rather a lot: metathesis of the *-r-* and change of grammatical form or a secondary genitive *-s-* in the first element. The spellings of the place-name give no warrant for the interpretation '*Bruna's work*': it is based on the prior assumption that this place is *Brunanburh*.

The *wark* in Burnswark is unquestionably the Roman camp on the hill. But there is no compelling reason to suppose that the first element of Burnswark refers to anything other than the other dominant feature of the area. The number of burns and burn-names is remarkable:

³⁷ A. H. Smith, 'The site of the Battle of Brunanburh', *London Mediæval Studies*, 1 (1937), 56–9.

³⁸ Neilson, 'Brunanburh and Burnswork', p. 49.

³⁹ Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign', p. 144.

⁴⁰ James B. Johnston, *Place-Names of Scotland*, 3rd edn (London, 1934), p. 107.

⁴¹ Mills, *Dictionary of British Place-Names*, p. 87.

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Gimmenbie Burn, Ecclefechan Burn, Burnhead Burn and Staney Burn among them. At least two springs rise on the hill and there are numerous others in the vicinity. Just over a mile to the north of the hill is Burnhead, a similar distance to the south is Burnside.⁴² The earlier spellings *Burnys-* and *Burnes-* thus plausibly represent the genitive singular or plural, or nominative plural, of *burn*. There is, then, the possibility that Burnswark means 'fortification of the burn', 'burns-fortification' or 'fortification (in the area) of the burns', and certainly the spellings of the name are consistent with the Scots and Middle English elements *burn* and *wark*.

The attempts, analysed above, that have been made to accommodate names such as Bromswold and Burnswark to the early spellings of the names given to the place of the battle, founder on the palaeographical and philological evidence. The assumption or assertion is persistently made that these place-names fit the evidence when it becomes clear, upon examination, that they do not. We cannot assimilate either of these place-names with the predominant forms of the battle place-name *Brunanburh*.

Burh

In order to privilege another version of the name and alternative sites for the battle, Halloran has argued that the *burh* element was not original, but an invention of the Old English poet: 'There remains the real possibility', writes Halloran, 'that *Brunanburh* never existed as a place, but that in constructing his panegyric the author invented a variant of the real place-name that was poetically more satisfying.'⁴³ Like Hart,⁴⁴ he supposes that all the *burh* forms derive from the Old English Chronicle poem, and that metre dictated the particular dominant form that we have, 'providing ... the bonus of alliteration'. In other words, it is suggested that the Anglo-Saxon poet made up the place-name *Brunanburh* because it was necessary to his metre. The line of the poem reads (in the A Chronicle, but there is no metrically significant variant in the other versions):

ymbe Brunⁿanburh bordweal clufan

As far as the structure of Old English verse is concerned, the syllable *Brun-* is the one which carries the necessary alliteration to bind with the head-stave of the line, *bord-*. Thus *Brunandun*, *Bruneswerc*, *Brunefeld*, or *Bruneford* would equally well supply the structural

⁴² All these are clearly to be seen on the OS Explorer Map 322, Annandale.

⁴³ Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign', p. 146.

⁴⁴ Hart, *The Danelaw*, p. 520.

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alliteration. The metrical objection to *burh* thus proves specious.⁴⁵

It should be noted, moreover, that though the earliest recorded forms of the name are found in the Old English poem, the Chronicle entries in E and F are not poetical. E and F, and the Latin of F, have a prose entry, which reads (in the Old English of E): ‘Her Æðelstan cyning lædde fyrde to Brunanbyrig’,⁴⁶ ‘in this year King Athelstan led an army to Brunanburh’. Both E and F used an exemplar which entirely omitted the tenth-century verse entries of A, B, C and D.⁴⁷ There would be no reason for these chronicles to give the *burh* form unless the place was known with that element.

In addition, Campbell noted that ‘*dun* in Gaelic place-names is equivalent to *burh*’,⁴⁸ and we might refer to the Gaelic name of Edinburgh, Dunedin, by way of illustration. The Scottish Chronicle form of the place of the battle, *Duinbrunde*, thus suggests a *burh* in the name of the place, and demonstrates that this was known to a non-English writer. There is no suspicion that this writer was borrowing from the Old English poem: Marjorie Anderson points out that he was translating into Latin what appears to have been an Irish source.⁴⁹ It is impossible to be sure, but this name, like the reference to Athelstan in the following sentence, ‘Adalstan *filius* Aduar rig Saxon’,⁵⁰ may represent the simple copying of the form of the name from an earlier Irish original, with the implication that the Irish tradition translated *Brunanburh* from a knowledge of the English place and its name. It seems unlikely that the Scottish chronicler would casually Gaelicise a

⁴⁵ W. Pearson, ‘Bramham Moor and the Red, White and Brown Battles’, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 67 (1995), 23–50, at p. 26, also makes the suggestion that metre enters into the choice of name, though with a better understanding of the metrical features of Old English verse. Even so, Pearson’s claim that *Brunanburh* gives *better* alliteration than ‘Brun(n)anwer’ would be unfounded: it merely adds decoration or effect, the significance of which is unclear. I owe this reference to Sarah Foot. I am grateful to Professor Foot for making a draft of her paper, ‘Where English becomes British: rethinking contexts for *Brunanburh*’, forthcoming in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: essays in honour of Nicholas Brooks*, ed. Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham, available to me in advance of publication. This article makes clear the significance of the battle for Athelstan and his rule and trenchantly discusses the proposed sites from the perspective of political history. I am also grateful to Professor Foot for a range of helpful comments on the present paper.

⁴⁶ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, VII, *MS E*, ed. Susan Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), p. 55.

⁴⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, VIII, *MS F*, ed. Peter S. Baker (Cambridge, 2000), § 43, p. xxx.

⁴⁸ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, p. 61 note.

⁴⁹ Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, ‘The Scottish materials in the Paris Manuscript, Bib. Nat., Latin 4126’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 28 (1949), 31–42 (at p. 39).

⁵⁰ Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 251 (Anderson’s expansions in italic).

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place-name, and the earlier example of 'Tinemore',⁵¹ interpreted by A.O. Anderson as (presumably English, though of uncertain location) 'Tyne-moor',⁵² confirms this.

Finally on this point, the passage from Symeon of Durham cited by Halloran to dismiss *Brunanburh* as the original name appears to be misconstrued by him and actually demonstrates the opposite of what he is arguing:

Quarto post hec anno (hoc est nongentesimo tricesimo septimo
Dominice Natiuitatis anno) apud Weondune, quod alio nomine
Aet Brunnanwerc uel Brunnanbyrig appellatur, pugnavit
contra Onlaf...

'In the fourth year after this (that is the year 937 of Our Lord's
Nativity), at *Weondune* which is called by another name *Æt
Brunnawerc* or *Brunnanbyrig*, he fought against Olaf ...'⁵³

Halloran writes:

That the *burh* form is placed last is surprising. So too is the fact
that Simeon does not link the form to the other two by simply
using a conjunction. Instead he adds an extra verb, pointedly
stating that though the place is named *Weondune* and
Etbrunnanwerc it is also called but not named *Brunnanbyrig*.⁵⁴

This is nonsense, as the precise translation of Rollason shows. Symeon
so identifies the names *Æt Brunnanwerc* and *Brunnanbyrig* that he
thinks of them as one, hence *alio nomine*, singular, for the two. This
phrase from Symeon gives the most explicit support for Dodgson's
statement that 'the *-werc(e)* forms are no more than a paraphrase of
Brunanburh (**burh** replaced by the almost synonymous **(ge)weorc**)'.⁵⁵

The notions that 'the *burh* form may be a poetic paraphrase of the
werc(e) original' (Halloran) or that '*burh* [was] added to make up the
metre and alliteration' (Hart), do not bear examination. There can be
no doubt that the place of the battle, for all the alternatives which

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Alan Orr Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1922), I, 446, note 4.

⁵³ *Symeon of Durham Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius, hoc est Dunelmensis, Ecclesie*, ed. and trans. David Rollason (Oxford, 2000), pp. 138–9.

⁵⁴ Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign', pp. 145–6.

⁵⁵ *EPNS Che*, IV, 238. The notion that the elements *burh* and *weorc* in the names are broadly synonymous has some support from Newark Priory, originally *Aldebury*, as noted by *EPNE*, II, 254.

appear in the later tradition, was widely and prosaically known as *Brunanburh*.

2. Landscape features

Among Margaret Gelling's many significant contributions to onomastics are her two volumes on the diversity of Old English terms for landscape features.⁵⁶ These necessitate a reconsideration of the variant names given in the ancient sources for the place where the battle of *Brunanburh* took place. The two main elements that appear besides *burh* and *weorc* are *dūn* and *feld*.

Æthelweard, a near-contemporary witness for the place of the battle, gives the dative *Brunandune*, and Symeon gives dative forms *We(o)ndune*. Two different and apparently independent place-names containing the element *dūn* are thus given for the site of the battle, and for this reason I propose to treat the names which contain the element *dūn* as genuine variants for the battle-site rather than later 'made-up' names. There might be more doubt about the *feld* names, these being evidenced later. And the fact that *feld* and its later variant *field* remained in currency for a battle-field might mean that the names containing *feld* were given in recognition that it *was* a battle-site rather than being pre-existing names. Against this, the twelfth-century forms, *Bruninga-* 'of the *Bruningas*', seem to point to an early clan name, and *feld* thus looks to be the landscape feature 'open land' rather than 'battle-field'.⁵⁷

Dūn

Margaret Gelling has analysed the early *dūn* names, and her analysis has direct relevance for the location of the battle-site.⁵⁸ Though *dūn* combines with *burh* in names, thus demonstrating that a *Brunandun* or *We(o)ndun* could refer to the same place as *Brunanburh*, or could be nearby such a place, 'there is certainly no connotation of defence, and the word is not used to describe great prehistoric hill-forts'.⁵⁹ There is,

⁵⁶ Margaret Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984) and Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000).

⁵⁷ I intend to consider these names in more detail elsewhere.

⁵⁸ The self-imposed limits of Gelling's work should be mentioned: the distribution of, and statistics relating to, the elements she considers concern a restricted corpus of ancient and major names: names in use before the Norman Conquest and important because of settlement or continuation of use. There may be later-attested and minor names containing the elements discussed (see further note 77 below), but Gelling's discussion gives a stark picture of the pre-Conquest patterns so far as they can be discerned.

⁵⁹ Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, p. 144, for names like *Burdon* and *Berrington* with *burh*, and p. 141 for the lack of 'defence' connotation.

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moreover, a distinct type of hill denoted by this element *dūn*, and the element itself has a fairly clear distribution in place-names. Gelling writes, "This word 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, but not invariably, a *dūn* name refers to a settlement 'on hills of 200ft–500ft'; where the hill itself is not settlement-friendly, the settlement might lie at the foot of, or beside the hill. There are clusters of *dūn* names in the south Midlands and in Essex.⁶⁰ There are good numbers of *dūn* settlement-names in the north of England east of the Pennines, and there are smaller numbers of *dūn* settlement-names west of the Pennines and south of the Ribble. But north of the Ribble in Lancashire, in Westmorland and Cumberland there are no settlement-names containing the element.⁶¹ A recent investigation by Stella Pratt into names in Scotland has confirmed the general pattern proposed by Gelling and Cole: "There is a high degree of consistency in sites of villages with *dūn* names, with most examples on hills of 200–500ft."⁶²

Part of the argument for Burnswark as the site of the battle is the fact that it is 'a prominent hill', 'a conspicuous hill'.⁶³ So it is: 'it rises to an altitude of 920 feet above sea level', with 'a tabular summit'.⁶⁴ It is generally supposed that this qualifies it to be the *dūn* in Æthelweard's *Brunandun* and Symeon's *Weondun*. But though the summit of Burnswark is level, it is not extensive; and while it is eminently defensible, it would not be suitable for a settlement of any size; and no settlement of any size is to be found beside or at the foot of the hill. Burnswark is higher than a typical *dūn*, and indeed it is a more dramatic hill than the majority of *dūns*, not rounded or with gently-sloping sides. In addition, it is in an area where there are dozens of *hill* names, but where *dūn* names are sparse if not absent.⁶⁵ All this must

⁶⁰ Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, pp. 164–5.

⁶¹ Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, pp. 155–8. Gelling writes, "The extreme rarity in the north west [of *dūn* names] ... may be due to the comparative late establishment of english [*sic*] speech in that region" (p. 142).

⁶² Stella Pratt, 'Summer landscapes: investigating Scottish topographical place-names', *Nomina*, 28 (2005), 93–114 (at p. 100).

⁶³ Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign', pp. 145–6; Wood, 'Brunanburh revisited', p. 206.

⁶⁴ Neilson, 'Brunanburh and Burnswark', p. 49, from Groom's *Gazetteer*; Halloran, 'The Brunanburh campaign', p. 144.

⁶⁵ One cannot be dogmatic on this point in the absence of proper data for the names of the area, but it might be noted that the *dūn* names in Scotland discussed by Pratt, 'Summer landscapes', are all in the east, namely in Berwickshire, Roxburghshire, around Stirling and in Fife.

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raise doubts that the place-names *Brunandun* and *We(o)ndun* can reasonably refer to Burnswark.

Feld

The other main element used in forms of the place-name is *feld*. William of Malmesbury has *Brunefeld*,⁶⁶ charters and chronicles from the twelfth century have *Bruningafeld*,⁶⁷ John of Fordun from the fourteenth century, followed by Walter Bower, have variants of *Brounyngfeld*.⁶⁸ Of the element *feld* Margaret Gelling writes:

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 ...⁶⁹

Gelling notes that not all *feld* names refer to settlement sites, but 'include sites of battles and synods'.⁷⁰ In these cases, it is likely that the unencumbered and accessible nature of the ground was what made the site suitable for the purpose of military or ecclesiastical encounter.

Now if we are to take seriously those sources which refer to the site of the battle in a name containing the element *feld*, it will be important to have regard for the type of land covered by that designation and the distribution of names which contain the element. Professor Smyth writes:

the great forest of *Bruneswald* or Bromswold which covered a vast stretch of country north of Watling Street on the borders of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire suggests itself as the general location for the great battle ... It covered much of the country between Huntingdon and Peterborough and may have

⁶⁶ *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998–9), I, 206 and note (*Brunefeld*, *Brunef(r)ord*).

⁶⁷ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Campbell, pp. 63–4 and notes.

⁶⁸ *Johannis de Fordun: Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed. William F. Skene (Edinburgh, 1871), pp. 163, 165 (*Brouny(n)gfelde*); *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower*, II, *Books III and IV*, ed. and trans. J. and W. MacQueen (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 330, 340, 342, 346 (*Brounyngfelde*, *Brounyngfelde*, *Brounyngfelde*).

⁶⁹ Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, pp. 269–70.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 272.

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merged in with the other great forests of Northamptonshire. Its main axis, however, seems to have coincided with the high ground along the Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire border.⁷¹

As Fox shows, and Gelling agrees, early *wald* names refer to wooded areas: 'where the element occurs in names first recorded before about 1200, ... we can be sure that a woodland context of some kind is implied'.⁷² Smyth's proposal thus strikingly argues that the battle should be located in an area which is named in direct contrast to the denotation, as outlined by Gelling, of one of the main variant elements in recorded names of the site, *feld*.⁷³

Smyth is not suggesting that the battle took place in the forest, of course, but in the general vicinity of the forest. The area is broadly east of the river Nene between Bedford and Peterborough.⁷⁴ It is a notable fact, however, that major ancient *feld* names are in remarkably short supply in the specified area: there are none at all in Huntingdonshire, only two in Cambridgeshire (neither near the *Bruneswald* area, one a meeting site now lost), one in Bedfordshire (not in the specified area) and six in Northamptonshire (again, none in the specified area). There are rather more *dūn* settlement-names in these counties (though only two in Huntingdonshire, of which one is Huntingdon itself), but the distribution is markedly similar: these names do not occur in the *Bruneswald* area.⁷⁵ Recognising the meaning of the elements *feld* and *dūn* and their distribution in names, we must conclude that the area of *Bruneswald* is not a strong candidate location for the battle.

Conclusion

Palaeographical and grammatical evidence has been brought forward to show that the majority spelling of the place of the battle of *Brunanburh* reflects a weak substantive first element, *brūna* or *brūne*, compounded with the element *burh*. On this ground, one can be quite

⁷¹ Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, II, 51.

⁷² H. S. A. Fox, 'The people of the Wolds in English settlement history', in *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England: studies dedicated to Maurice Beresford and John Hurst* (Oxford, 1989), ed. Michael Aston et al. (Oxford, 1989), pp. 77–101 (at p. 81).

⁷³ The contrast with some of the features of *dūn* as outlined earlier, is also notable.

⁷⁴ See further the map in Fox, 'The people of the Wolds', p. 80.

⁷⁵ These data are compiled from the information in Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, pp. 235–45, and from searching 'The Key to English Place-Names', <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/ins/>>, accessed 30.10.06. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, p. 241, notes, 'in the part of south-east Midlands occupied by [Bedfordshire], [Huntingdonshire] and [Cambridgeshire] *feld* is very rare in ancient settlement-names'.

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dogmatic that in the present state of our knowledge neither Bromswold nor Burnswark can be accepted as certainly reflecting the original first element of *Brunanburh*. The topographical evidence provided by Margaret Gelling's and Ann Cole's studies, too, tells against any simple identification of Burnswark or Bromswold with the recorded variant names for the area of *Brunanburh* containing the elements *dūn* and *feld*. Here one has to be less dogmatic, not least because place-name records are inevitably incomplete. But the facts that ancient names containing *dūn* are particularly sparse in the north west and Solway regions, and that Burnswark itself hardly fits the *dūn* type; and that early *feld* names were given in specific contradistinction to *wald* and *dūn* names,⁷⁶ and are particularly sparse in the area of the ancient *Bruneswald* — these facts make it especially difficult to believe that *Brunanburh*, *Brunandun* or *Brunefeld* is to be located near Burnswark or *Bruneswald*.⁷⁷ Without the support of the place-name evidence, accurately interpreted, any localisation of the battle of 937 will be dependent on vague impressions as to the political significance of possible sites, and over-reliance on suspect detail from sources such as *Egilssaga*.⁷⁸ I have shown that the onomastic and topographical evidence provides no clear support for the claims of Bromswold or Burnswark to be the site of the battle. There is more to be said about that site and the Old English poem on the conflict, but I hope this essay, in using her work to elucidate some of the onomastic and topographical issues, might give some small pleasure to the volume's dedicatee.

⁷⁶ The fact that *dūn* and *feld* are apparently topographically incompatible, yet both occur in the variant names of the battle-site, is a matter that requires further comment. For the sake of brevity, and assuming the variant names were not simply made up, I suggest that in these names *feld* refers to an area of land on or near which there was a fortified site and a modest hill. To my mind this is different from claiming that Burnswark can be identified as the *dūn* of the variant names, or that *Bruneswald* also comprised an ancient *feld* area.

⁷⁷ The emphasis on 'ancient' and 'settlement-names' is important. There are, for example, many minor names with *field* (i.e. modern names referring to enclosed, usually arable, land) in the area of *Bruneswald*; but as Gelling shows, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, pp. 236–7, this reflects a change in farming practice occurring around the middle of the tenth century. She concludes, 'the sense "arable land" need not be reckoned with in ancient settlement-names' (p. 237).

⁷⁸ Campbell (ed.), *Battle of Brunanburh*, pp. 69–70, completely dismissed the saga as a reliable source for details of the historical battle. The approach taken by Ian McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit: a re-examination of a military stratagem in *Egils Saga*', in *The Middle Ages in the North-West*, ed. Tom Scott and Pat Starkey (Oxford, 1995), pp. 109–42, is to show that the account in the saga is a literary topos in which topography is adapted to and dependent on literary convention.