

NAMES, PLACES AND PEOPLE

An Onomastic Miscellany
in Memory of

JOHN McNEAL DODGSON

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The Context of Brunanburh

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In an important contribution to recent debate concerning the battle of *Brunanburh* (937),¹ the late and much lamented John McNeal Dodgson strongly endorsed its identification with Bromborough in north-west Cheshire.² In support, he proceeded to an authoritative discussion of the Norse settlements on the Wirral and in south-west Lancashire, emphasizing the long-lived political distinctiveness of the former in particular,³ and outlining the process of vigorous expansion which had brought these colonies into existence early in the tenth century.⁴ He considered that the presence of these Viking colonies rendered the river Mersey an attractive invasion route into Mercia,⁵ and his examination of the literary evidence for the *Brunanburh* campaign led him to discount the claim made by Florence (John) of Worcester that Anlaf (otherwise Olaf) landed in the Humber estuary.⁶ He concluded that 'Bromborough in Wirral would appear to be the most eligible place for the battlefield'.⁷

This opinion prevailed until the publication of a major revision by Michael Woods in 1980, in which the author attempted to replace this western location with an alternative, Brinsworth, a hill on Ryknild Street between the rivers Rother and Don in southern Yorkshire.⁸ His case rested not on the place-name, for which there is no convincing connection with *Brunanburh* whatever,⁹ but on a complex web of analogies by which Woods sought to persuade his audience

- ¹ J. McN. Dodgson, 'The background of Brunanburh', *Saga-Book of the Viking Soc.* XIV (1953-7), 303-16; see also *idem*, *PNCheshire*, IV (1972), 237-40.
- ² As previously suggested on onomastic grounds by A. H. Smith, 'The site of Brunanburh', *London Medieval Studies* I, i (1937), 56-9. For alternative sites consult A. Campbell, ed., *The Battle of Brunanburh* (London, 1938), 57-80, but note his conclusion that 'all hope of localising Brunanburh is lost'.
- ³ Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 312.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 312-13.
- ⁶ Florence of Worcester, *Chronicon ex chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe, I (London, 1848), 132; the relevant extract is in Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, 147. The source, if any, of this assertion is unknown and it need be based on nothing more relevant than Florence's comparison of this poorly documented event with Harald Hardrada's more fully reported entry to Britain via the Humber in 1066.
- ⁷ Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 312-13.
- ⁸ M. Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', *Saga-Book of the Viking Soc.* XX (1978-80), 200-17, esp. 211.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 211, based on A. H. Smith, *PNYorks (WR)*, I (1961), 177-8.

that this important battle-site should be sought 'between the upper Trent and the Aire ... a heavily fortified zone where the wars of the second quarter of the tenth century were waged'.¹⁰ Professor Dodgson's arguments were dismissed in a brief endnote.¹¹

These views are mutually exclusive and each offers a radically different vision of the political and geopolitical context in which the battle occurred. Yet the battle and the campaign of which it formed the culmination were not isolated events but just one episode in a comparatively long history of conflict between Viking incomers in control of southern Northumbria and the kings of the Mercians and West Saxons. Both sides present at the battle could look back over the experiences of two generations and it seems likely that their strategies were fashioned with one eye at least on precedent. Re-examination of earlier conflicts might, therefore, shed some light on *Brunanburh* itself – more so perhaps than do the subsequent events of 939–42,¹² when the king of Dublin was briefly recognized as king in the Five Boroughs as well as in Northumbria.¹³

The sequence of events which culminated in the *Brunanburh* campaign began with the Danish conquest of York in 867, but for a generation thereafter the intermittent presence of new Danish armies in Britain and Danish control of all eastern England minimized conflict between the English and the 'Northern Army' of York. The situation is illustrated by parts of the complex campaigning of 893–4 when a Danish army from outside Britain attracted reinforcements to its maritime base at Shoeburyness (Essex) from East Anglia and Northumbria, then raided deep into English Mercia via the Thames and Severn valleys, only to stand siege and suffer defeat at Buttington.¹⁴ Retreating to Essex, they once again raised allied forces from East Anglia and Northumbria, the latter reaching them presumably by sea,¹⁵ and raided northern Mercia. This force was besieged at Chester, then raided into Wales, returning thence into Mercia laden with booty in 894. Fearful of English intervention, the Danes spent the minimum time possible in Mercia, returning to base via Northumbria and East Anglia, so presumably crossing the Mersey into the

¹⁰ Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 211.

¹¹ *Ibid.* endnote 4, 213.

¹² *Contra* Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', *passim*, who places undue emphasis on this later period as a guide to Anlaf's probable behaviour in 937. It is at least as likely that the Dublin Norse modified their strategy in response to their defeat, and the political context in 939 had altered radically, with Æthelstan dead and his youthful successor in the throes of establishing himself as king.

¹³ D. Whitelock, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1961), (D), *s.aa.* 940–3.

¹⁴ ASC(A, B), *s.a.* 893.

¹⁵ ASC(A, B), *s.a.* 894; a raid on the coasts of southern Britain by a Northumbrian Viking fleet was recorded under the year 893 by Æthelweard: A. Campbell, ed., *The Chronicle of Æthelweard* (London, 1962).

protection of York via the fords at Runcorn or Warrington.¹⁶ Neither side forgot these crossings thereafter.

Viking and Mercian armies may have fought again in this region if an Irish Norse leader, Ingimundr, besieged English Chester with a mixed force of Norse, Irishmen and Danes.¹⁷ If others of the Dublin Norse in exile were by then actively co-operating with the rulers of York,¹⁸ Ingimundr is likely to have recruited his Danish contingent north of the Mersey. If so, these crossings were once more in use.

Prior to the 'reconquest' of Danish Mercia, the river Mersey was the sole frontier between English Mercia and Northumbria. Consequently it seems most likely that it was this boundary which was breached by a large English force in 909, which invaded, and ravaged for five weeks in the territory of the 'Northern Army'.¹⁹ This foray into Northumbria by West Saxon and Mercian troops was perhaps less precipitate than it may at first sight appear. The 'Mercian Register' recorded that, in the same year, the relics of St Oswald were brought from Bardney (on the river Witham in Lindsey, deep inside the Danelaw) into English Mercia,²⁰ where they were probably deposited in the intended sepulchre of Æthelred and Æthelflæd – the minster at Gloucester.²¹ There is no reason to think that this was achieved by force. The language used is consistent with a diplomatic initiative. Since the removal of these relics was a Mercian objective conceded by the Danes, it implies that Æthelred's influence over the northern Danelaw was considerable. This may be confirmed by evidence for Mercian land purchases in Derbyshire in 906–10.²² An assault on Northumbria from English Mercia would have been foolhardy in the extreme without prior containment of the threat of a counter-move from the eastern Midlands and

¹⁶ N. J. Higham, 'The Cheshire burhs and the Mercian frontier to 924', *Trans. Lancs. and Cheshire Antiquarian Soc.* LXXXV (1988), 200–3.

¹⁷ J. O'Donovan, ed., *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments* (Dublin, 1860), 226–37. There is clearly an element of folklore in this account, the historical descent of which is beyond reconstruction, but there has never been a serious challenge to the establishment of an historical context by F. T. Wainright, *Scandinavian England* (Chichester, 1975), 131–62.

¹⁸ N. J. Higham, 'Northumbria, Mercia and the Irish Sea Vikings, AD 893–924', in J. Graham-Campbell, ed., *Viking Treasure from the North West: the Cuerdale Hoard in its Context* (Liverpool, 1992), 21–30, esp. 25.

¹⁹ ASC(A, B), s.a. 909.

²⁰ 'Mercian Register' in D. Whitelock, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 909; ASC(D), s.a. 906.

²¹ This interest in a royal Mercian cult was hardly likely to have been a West Saxon initiative, *contra* D. Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1982), 56, fig. 86. Bardney and St Oswald seem to have been focal to Mercian control of Lindsey from the late seventh century until this translation: A. Thacker, 'Kings, saints and monasteries in pre-Viking Mercia', *Midland History* X (1985), 2–4.

²² Hill, *Atlas*, 47, fig. 70.

East Anglia. Despite the poverty of our written sources, this problem does seem to have been resolved prior to the English campaign of 909. Without allies south of the Humber or other outside help, the York leadership proved incapable of protecting its own territory or personnel²³ and negotiated a political solution which recognized Æthelred as king (or perhaps ‘overking’) of Northumbria.²⁴ It is tempting to imagine that this settlement mirrored the role of Æthelred in Danish Mercia, creating a political oversight and military protection which reflected his superior military power. There is no suggestion, however, that he had achieved this position by campaigning in that region.

This experiment in Mercian oversight of the northern Danes ran counter to the interests of the Danish king of York, who reacted to the debacle of 909 by launching a massed raid in the following summer deep into Æthelred’s territory. This army penetrated as far south as the river Avon, then took plunder from west of the river Severn before retiring homewards, only to be engaged and decisively defeated early in August at Tettenhall²⁵ or Wednesfield²⁶ in the West Midlands. This raiding party needed to live off the land throughout its foray, so an invasion direct into English territory via the Mersey would have commended itself to the Danish commanders.²⁷ Again, there is no hint that this force might have passed through Danish Mercia and every reason why it should not have done.

Æthelred died within the twelve months following and with him ended Mercian dominance of the northern Danelaw. His core territories passed into the keeping of his wife, Æthelflæd, but shorn of Oxfordshire and London, both claimed by her brother, Edward the Elder of Wessex.²⁸ Æthelflæd made better, or perhaps just better documented, use than had her husband of West Saxon strategies and was responsible for the major *burh* sites of the western Midlands.²⁹ It was she who had constructed the second phase of English defences on Mercia’s Northumbrian frontier (following Chester in 907), building Eddisbury early in 914 and Runcorn late in 915. Her purposes remain a matter of debate, but both would appear to have been forts guarding key land-routes – the one an important road junction and the second the lowest ford on the Mersey.³⁰ Both were, therefore, apparently aimed primarily at

²³ ASC(A, B), *s.a.* 909; ‘they killed many men of those Danes ...’

²⁴ Æthelweard, *Chronicle*, *s.a.* 909.

²⁵ ‘Mercian Register’, *s.a.* 910.

²⁶ Æthelweard, *Chronicle*, followed by Florence (John) of Worcester.

²⁷ *Contra* the passage of Derbyshire and the southern Pennines envisaged by Hill, *Atlas*, 56, fig. 85.

²⁸ ASC(A, B), *s.a.* 911.

²⁹ ‘Mercian Register’, *s.aa.* 912–15.

³⁰ Higham, ‘Cheshire burhs’, 202–4. If the battle between Æthelflæd’s troops and the Irish Vikings recorded in the *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments* under the year 913 (pp. 244–7), should be distinguished from the Tettenhall campaign, then this

Scandinavian forces inside Northumbria, intended to guard against intervention from the North while she re-established her husband's recent superiority over Mercia's Southumbrian neighbours. With her flank secure, Æthelflæd was able to avenge the death of her abbot, Egbert, on the Welsh,³¹ then turn against the Danes inside northern Mercia. Her troops stormed Derby³² as Edward the Elder invaded and began to conquer the southern Danelaw.³³ In 918 the Danes of Leicester secured Æthelflæd's protection (presumably against Edward) in return for recognizing her superiority and, at her death on June 12, York was once more negotiating for Mercian protection, despite the existence of still unconquered Danish territory, centred on Nottingham, within striking distance of Ryknild Street.³⁴

Æthelflæd's death led to the immediate dismemberment of the complex Mercian 'overlordship' which she had so painstakingly rebuilt. Her recent conquests and her Welsh and Danish protectorates were forcibly transferred to Edward's oversight and the West Saxon king completed his sister's work by conquering Nottingham, leaving York isolated once more. He took advantage of renewed crisis in c.919 to suppress the rule of his niece, Ælfwynn, in the rump of English Mercia, taking that kingship upon himself.³⁵

This new crisis was apparently caused by the Norse seizure of York and a consequent confrontation between Ragnald, leader of the Irish Norse in exile, and Edward the Elder. The strategy adopted by each side can be reconstructed. Edward turned first to his most vulnerable frontier – the Mersey – and blocked the fords near Warrington before pushing forward into Northumbrian territory to construct a further *burh* at Manchester on the Roman road west from York.³⁶ This aggressive use of *burh* construction was Edward's own contribution to English strategy and was by this stage well-tested,³⁷ but it is important to note that it was the northern Mercian river-frontier that he chose to reinforce. It was here, apparently, that he expected to be attacked. Only with these measures in

new frontier work was consequent on another and very poorly recorded Viking incursion, under Sihtric, into English Mercia. The alliance between Æthelflæd and the northern Celtic kings recorded in the same annals implies that her interest in Northumbria remained high. The historicity of these events is, however, necessarily dubious.

³¹ 'Mercian Register', *s.a.* 916.

³² *Ibid.* *s.a.* 917.

³³ As illustrated by Hill, *Atlas*, 58.

³⁴ ASC(A), *s.a.* 918. The behaviour of the Leicester army finds a parallel of sorts in Asser's claim that the kings of Glywysing and Gwent submitted to Alfred due to pressure from *Eadred comes* – probably Æthelred of Mercia: D. N. Dumville, *Wessex and England* (Woodbridge, 1992), 7–8, n. 40.

³⁵ 'Mercian Register', *s.a.* 919.

³⁶ ASC(A), *s.a.* 919.

³⁷ As, for example, at Towcester and *Wigingamere* in the summer of 917; ASC(A).

place did he cross the Pennines to construct a second *burh* at the latest and least-trusted of his recent conquests, Nottingham,³⁸ before building a fourth in the vicinity of Bakewell, so providing a loyal, defensible centre for the *Pecsæte* – the now Dane-dominated Mercian people of the southern Pennines. Edward was, therefore, expecting – perhaps even seeking – a confrontation with the northerners on the Mersey frontier while ensuring that the Mercian Danelaw remained firmly under his own control and resistant to Ragnald's incitement to rebel.

With only the resources of York and Dublin behind him, Ragnald needed the co-operation of that same Danish community in Mercia if he were to match the resources at the disposal of King Edward. Sihtric, Ragnald's cousin, operating from Ireland, destroyed Davenport – probably a minor market site replicating modern Congleton, inside English Mercia but close to the frontier with the Mercian Danelaw.³⁹ This border incident was perhaps intended to impress Danish onlookers with the ability of the Norse to campaign deep inside Edward's heavily fortified English Mercia.⁴⁰ The Norse were, therefore, advertising their own capacity to attack Edward's territory, so proclaiming to insular sympathisers that their own protection was a viable option. By so doing they perhaps anticipated that those same sympathisers – primarily the peoples of Danish Mercia – might be encouraged to rise against King Edward.

If that is a correct reading of the evidence (and the hypothetical nature of this suggestion is not in question) then the attack failed of its purpose. The Mercian Danelaw remained firmly under Edward's control, leaving Ragnald little option but to make what terms he could later in the year, releasing other northern rulers from his own grip and acknowledging Edward as his 'father and lord'.⁴¹

Throughout this period, the centre from which the Mercian leadership had directed the war was at Tamworth, close by the ecclesiastical centre of Mercia at Lichfield, and strategically sited near the obvious line of attack from the Danelaw, along Ryknild Street. Its defences had been built at Æthelflæd's instruction in 913, before even those at Stafford;⁴² it was there that the 'Lady' died in 918, so presumably there also that negotiations were in progress with

³⁸ Nottingham had been captured by the 'Great Danish Army' as early as 867, so it had been Danish longer than any other Mercian centre. See ASC(A), *s.aa.* 918, 920. For the location of this second *burh*, see J. Haslam, 'The second burh of Nottingham', *Landscape History* IX (1987), 45–52.

³⁹ For the identity of Davenport, see Higham, 'Cheshire burhs', 211, esp. n. 39, but I now consider the possibility that this attack might have come from the Mercian Danelaw less plausible than is there implied and the speculative association with Bakewell should be ignored.

⁴⁰ Higham, 'Northumbria, Mercia and the Irish Sea Vikings', 27.

⁴¹ ASC(A), *s.a.* 920.

⁴² 'Mercian Register', *s.a.* 913.

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York and the Danes of northern Mercia,⁴³ and thence that her troops had stormed Derby. It was the key palace site occupied by Edward immediately thereafter, at which he imposed his own 'overkingship' on the Mercians and those Welsh and Scandinavian leaders hitherto subject to Æthelflæd. It was there too that Æthelstan met Sihtric in 926 to conclude an unequal alliance under the terms of which the Viking king apparently conceded his claim to the Mercian Danelaw⁴⁴ and accepted Æthelstan's sister in a Christian ceremony of marriage.⁴⁵ The political focus of northern Mercia in the decades before *Brunanburh* was, therefore, in Staffordshire and not in the eastern Midlands. Anlaf recognized as much when he destroyed Tamworth in 942.⁴⁶

This rapid survey of the Anglo-Scandinavian conflict in northern Mercia serves to isolate certain characteristics as consistent across the period. A recurring feature is the importance of the Mersey frontier between the several Scandinavian leaderships successively based at York, and the rulers of Mercia. While the latter invested in various *burh* sites elsewhere in English Mercia, a high proportion of their investment was directed specifically towards this frontier from 907,⁴⁷ at least, until as late as 919.⁴⁸ In this same region Edward continued to invest in new *burh* construction even thereafter.⁴⁹ It was here that he may have demanded territorial concessions from Ragnald,⁵⁰ and here too that he died four years later in the throes of putting down a Mercian and Welsh rebellion against his rule.⁵¹

There is no literary evidence of any corresponding level of military investment by Mercian or West Saxon rulers in the Mercian Danelaw north of Nottingham.⁵² There is certainly no compelling reason to link the numerous *burh* place-names of southern Yorkshire with King Edward the Elder.⁵³ That Doncaster was a long-lived Northumbrian palace site close to the frontier is

⁴³ *Ibid.* s.a. 918; ASC(A), s.a. 918.

⁴⁴ Over part of which Sihtric may briefly have extended his protection during the succession crisis in the England of 924.

⁴⁵ ASC(D), s.a. 926 (925).

⁴⁶ ASC(A, B, C, D), s.a. 942.

⁴⁷ 'Mercian Register', s.a. 907: Chester.

⁴⁸ ASC(A), s.a. 919 (922): Thelwall and Manchester.

⁴⁹ 'Mercian Register', s.a. 921, construction of *Cledemutha* (Rhuddlan).

⁵⁰ Higham, 'Cheshire burhs', 212-14.

⁵¹ 'Mercian Register', s.a. 924; J. A. Giles, ed., *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London, 1876), section 133, but the historicity of those elements of William's account which are not otherwise recorded must be in doubt.

⁵² *Contra* Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 209: 'the submission to Edward undoubtedly gives us a context for the construction or refurbishment of the Don forts ...'

⁵³ M. S. Parker, 'Some notes on the pre-Norman history of Doncaster', *Yorkshire Archaeological Jnl* LIX (1987), 29-44; N. J. Higham, *The Kingdom of Northumbria* (Gloucester, 1993), 142-3.

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beyond doubt,⁵⁴ but the 'Roman Ridge' dyke system arguably belongs to an earlier era of Northumbrian history, perhaps to the late eighth century when Northumbria's rulers faced a series of powerful and potentially aggressive Mercian neighbours.⁵⁵ The northern frontier of Mercia in the tenth century need not have been the result of recent boundary changes.⁵⁶ The geography of the Northumbrian satellites of Hatfield and Elmet implies that Mercia's frontier had never reached the Don other than at such times as Hatfield (and perhaps even Elmet) had been tributary to Mercian 'overkings'.⁵⁷ That the Northumbrians chose to fortify the north valley side of that river need not imply that it was the frontier. Early medieval dyke systems were commonly comparatively remote from the boundaries they were designed to reinforce, inside territory controlled by those responsible for construction.⁵⁸ The low lying topography south of the Don may have suggested to the Northumbrian leadership that the valley side was their best option for a defensive cordon against Mercia, but these dykes are undated and could have very different origins.

That the region between the upper Trent and the Aire was a battle ground for armies from English Mercia and Wessex and the 'Northern Army' in the decades preceding *Brunanburh* is at best unproven, at worst implausible. Without precedent or analogy appropriate to that campaign, arguments in favour of Brinsworth or any other site in this vicinity not named *Brunanburh*, *Brunandune*⁵⁹ or *Weondune*⁶⁰ must be set aside.

Further to these rather negative conclusions it might be appropriate to review the strategy of Anlaf in 937, since it was that which conditioned the locality in which the battle was fought. It is agreed that his primary initial objective was recognition as king of York (i.e. of all southern Northumbria).⁶¹ This need not, however, have required his immediate presence since the

⁵⁴ Parker, 'Doncaster'.

⁵⁵ Higham, *Northumbria*, 143.

⁵⁶ As suggested by Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 209.

⁵⁷ As perhaps under King Cearl before c.615: N. J. Higham, 'King Cearl and the origins of the Mercian "overkingship"', *Midland History* XVI (1992), 1-15; *idem*, *Northumbria*, 84-9.

⁵⁸ N. J. Higham, 'Gildas, the Roman walls and British dykes', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* XXII (1991), 11, n. 35.

⁵⁹ As in Æthelweard, *Chronicle*, s.a. 937.

⁶⁰ Simeon of Durham, *Historia Ecclesiae Dunelmensis*, in *Opera Omnia*, I, ed. T. Arnold (London, 1882/5), 76: 'apud Weondune, quod alio nomine Etbrunnanwerc, vel Brunnanbyrig appellatur'. *Weondune* reappears in the same author's *Historia Regum*, in Arnold, ed., II, 93. For other variants on the name in medieval sources, see Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, *passim*, esp. app. IV and Dodgson, *PNCheshire*, 238-9.

⁶¹ Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 201.

intentions of the political classes in Yorkshire had presumably already been ascertained via diplomatic contacts before the Norse flotilla ever set sail. That the Northumbrians should have willingly submitted to him does not, therefore, guarantee that Anlaf even visited York in 937, particularly since he is most likely to have landed in Britain on the west coast of Viking Northumbria, where such submissions as were necessary could easily have been made. Indeed, there are two factors which render this improbable: one is the production of double obverse coins at both York and Nottingham, apparently at this date.⁶² These coins imply that those responsible for these Danelaw mints were acting with great caution. Local leaders might sympathize with Anlaf but the lack of coins from York bearing his name, so proclaiming his cause, makes it unlikely that he had taken up the reins of government before invading Mercia,⁶³ secondly, the comparatively full descriptions of the fighting at *Brunanburh* make no mention of the 'Northern Army' – the Danes of York⁶⁴ – while distinguishing with some care between Norse, Scots, Strathclyde Welsh, Mercians and West Saxons.⁶⁵ Only one Irish annal makes any reference to Danish participation in the battle but this was in terms analogous to its description of Anlaf and his Irish Vikings.⁶⁶ Had Anlaf taken control of York then the Yorkshire thegns might be expected to have marched with him. With these two factors negating the dubious testimony of Florence (John) of Worcester, there seems little reason to think that Anlaf undertook his *Brunanburh* campaign from York. That the Norse occupied it in 939 before venturing south may mean that they then adopted a different strategy to that followed in 937, based perhaps on the painful lesson taught them by Æthelstan in that year.

That Anlaf opened the *Brunanburh* campaign by ravaging in Mercia is generally agreed.⁶⁷ That he should have caused damage to the one community

⁶² C. Blunt, 'The coinage of Athelstan, 924–939: a survey', *The British Numismatic Jnl* XLII (1974), 92.

⁶³ B. J. Ewing, *The Context and Geography of the Battle of Brunanburh*, unpublished University of Manchester M.A. thesis (1991), 40–1. Contrast Anlaf's rapid institution of a distinctive coinage in 939.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 41. This argument is much weakened by the poor quality and dubious historicity of many of these accounts, and should be treated as no more than supportive of the previous argument.

⁶⁵ ASC(A, B, C, D), s.a. 937.

⁶⁶ Annals of Clonmacnoise, quoted by Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, 159: 'the Danes that departed from Dublin arrived in England, and by the help of the Danes of that kingdome gave battle to the Saxons on the plaines of othlynn'. The text later notes 'a greate slaughter of Normans and Danes' so the presence of Norsemen is recognized. Campbell stressed the lower case 'o' with which 'othlynn' began, which might imply that this was a descriptive term rather than a proper name, perhaps the plains *oð -Lynne-* 'up to the Lyme (Lyne)' of Cheshire. If so, this confirms the western location of the battle. For 'Lyme', see *PNCheshire*, I, 2–6.

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where he had good reason to anticipate a sympathetic response – the northern Mercian Danelaw – seems improbable. All known precedents suggest that Anlaf raided English Mercia via the Mersey. That his large fleet entered the Mersey from the sea does not seem likely, if only because of its extensive mosslands which rendered disembarkation difficult. The river was never to be a medieval shipping lane of any consequence. Additionally, the disaster at *Brunanburh* implies that the Norse fleet was not immediately available for the evacuation of the defeated raiders.⁶⁸ That it was in the Mersey therefore seems improbable. The Ribble estuary was probably the Northumbrian haven normally favoured by the Irish Norse throughout this period,⁶⁹ and the capture of whatever defences then existed there was probably a high priority for Anlaf in 937, if only to guarantee his line of retreat. If the Scots marched south from Cumbria, a rendezvous north of Mercian oversight was probably a necessity.

By then pushing far into English Mercia Anlaf was perhaps pursuing objectives at which it is possible to attempt at least an informed guess:

first, he was keeping his own forces and those of his Celtic allies supplied without making demands which would necessarily be unpopular on those very Northumbrian and Danelaw communities whose long-term support was essential to his success;

secondly, he was demonstrating to every Scandinavian or Scandinavianized community in Britain that he was sufficiently confident of his own military resources to challenge Æthelstan on his own ground. He was, therefore, advertising his own capacity to offer effective protection to both Northumbria and more southerly Danish communities, much as Sihtric may have done at Davenport;

thirdly, he was raising the morale of his own forces by taking the initiative and providing them with opportunities to take booty from traditional enemies. By so doing Anlaf was reviving the heroic raids which characterized the early Viking Age, stories concerning which will have lost nothing in the telling.

Such a strategy was not risk-free but it offered advantages over more cautious policies. From it the Dublin High Command may have hoped to gain the political breakthrough which had eluded the York-bound regime of Ragnald in 919–20. Much depended on Anlaf's credibility as an effective counterweight to Æthelstan, since the Scandinavian community in Britain could not be expected to transfer their allegiance without some real expectation of protection. His credibility would have been enhanced if it could be demonstrated that Æthelstan was unable to protect areas of committed English support inside Mercia.

⁶⁷ Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 313–14; Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 201–3.

⁶⁸ *Contra* Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 312–13.

⁶⁹ Higham, 'Northumbria, Mercia and the Irish Sea Vikings', 27–30.

Anlaf's strategy may also have been less risky than it at first sight appears. On 21 August 937, Æthelstan was probably on or close to the south coast.⁷⁰ Anlaf's invasion arguably occurred within weeks of this date.⁷¹ Large scale mobilizations were difficult to achieve in the medieval period and often led to expeditions launched in late summer or early autumn,⁷² without any suggestion that their leaders intended to await the following spring before taking the field.⁷³ Anlaf's expedition into Mercia demonstrates that he envisaged a very active war *ab initio*. The obvious precedents for his invasion were those of his uncle, Sihtric, in about 919, probably launched direct from the west Northumbrian coast,⁷⁴ and the mass raid of the 'Northern Army' in August 910, which ended at Tettenhall (or Wednesfield). If Æthelstan was otherwise engaged in the far south in the high summer of 937,⁷⁵ the Norse may have believed themselves capable of plundering deep into English Mercia, then escaping across the Mersey with their spoils before an adequate English army could catch up with them. They hoped to achieve, therefore, what similar forces had failed to do in 910 and 920. Had they done so, the political repercussions might have been considerable and that prospect was perhaps enough to deflect them from an immediate march on York, were that their initial objective. The strategy was, therefore, likely to have been opportunistic. Whether or not, it came close to success but the details unfortunately escape us. Only if the non-contemporary account of William of Malmesbury be accepted as historical can the campaign be reconstructed: he emphasized the rapidity with which Æthelstan, after an initial delay, proceeded northwards. Aware of the approach of the English army, Anlaf's forces jettisoned their booty and attempted to reach safety but were defeated and then routed at *Brunanburh*, still south of

⁷⁰ Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 202 and see endnote 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 201–3, but the arguments presented are suspect owing to their heavy dependence on William of Malmesbury, whose work, and some of whose sources, are non-contemporary and of very dubious quality. Had they been otherwise, his remark that the fields which were about to be ravaged were 'green', so were as yet unripe, let alone unharvested, might have suggested an earlier date in the year. For translation, see Whitelock, *EHD*, 283. For comment on this source, see below, n. 75.

⁷² The invasions of 1066, or Henry V's expedition to France in 1415, are pertinent parallels.

⁷³ Excepting perhaps the Danish occupation of York late in 1069 which was to be reinforced early in 1070: ASC (D, E), *s.aa.* 1069, 1070. This strategy proved disastrous and, retrospectively at least, seems inept.

⁷⁴ As noted by Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 313.

⁷⁵ As is also implied by the poem quoted by William of Malmesbury: 'At length the complaining rumour roused the king': Whitelock, *EHD*, 283. That this poem is without independent historical value has, however, been demonstrated by M. Lapidge, 'Some Latin poems as evidence for the reign of Athelstan', *ASE* IX (1981), 61–98, particularly 62–71.

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Northumbria.⁷⁶

Viking raiders preferred to make a circuit when ravaging so as to avoid previously devastated areas on the return journey.⁷⁷ A force loaded with spoils from English Mercia which had crossed out of Northumbria via the Mersey, perhaps on the Roman road at or near Warrington, and proceeded towards the comparatively rich and politically significant centres of Stafford and Tamworth, is likely to have withdrawn via the Roman road system northwards towards Chester, thence intending to seek the nearest ford across the Mersey, perhaps at Runcorn. If they felt it necessary to abandon their spoils during the latter part of the retreat, English forces may have been close at hand. The scale of the Norse disaster that ensued is difficult to explain other than as evidence that Æthelstan's forces reached the Mersey crossings before them, effectively sealing them inside Mercia. If so, Anlaf would have had little option but to continue his retreat from Chester northwards, then turn at bay when he was able to retreat no further – on reaching the Mersey where it was too wide and deep to attempt a crossing. Defeated there, the fugitives perhaps made for Meols, the only beach-head site in the vicinity likely to have offered even a small number of vessels by which to effect an escape from the mounted English soldiers still harrying them.⁷⁸ The few ships there would have been sufficient to rescue the High Command but could offer little succour to the rank and file.⁷⁹

Such a reconstruction is, of course, highly speculative. It would be little else if the Cheshire place-name Bromborough were not descended from a form *Brunanburh*.⁸⁰ This alone establishes a *prima facie* case for the identity of the battle-site. When that case is placed within a context of Anglo-Scandinavian conflicts in the late ninth to early tenth centuries then that identity is substantially reinforced. A major battle close by the Mersey reflects the heavy use of its fords by armies of both sides throughout that period. That Anlaf should have chosen to invade English Mercia replicates the decisions made by several earlier Viking commanders. That he should have ravaged English Mercia seems far more likely than that he should have harmed his own sympathisers (whether potential or actual) in the Mercian Danelaw by wasting territory there. His task was to win both hearts and minds, so Anlaf is likely to have been careful of Anglo-Danish sensibilities, and self-interest. The notion of

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* and with the same reservations: 'There is no delay; he fiercely unfolds in the wind standards, leading victorious cohorts, a hundred banners. A vigorous force of men, a hundred thousand strong, follow their standards to the scene of battle'. Compare Harold Godwinson's march to Stamford Bridge. Reference to a hundred thousand is characteristic of orally-transmitted and semi-fictional stories.

⁷⁷ Hill, *Atlas*, *passim*.

⁷⁸ ASC(C), *s.a.* 937.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Most descriptions of the battle emphasize the totality of the destruction of the Norse and Scottish armies, despite the escape of their respective leaders.

⁸⁰ Dodgson, 'Background of Brunanburh', 303.

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recurring conflict during this period in southern Yorkshire and north-east Mercia finds no support in the literary evidence. There seems good reason to concur, therefore, with John Dodgson and place the battle of *Brunanburh* on the west banks of the Mersey estuary. In a confused day's fighting, spread perhaps over an extended field of battle, the armies of Kings Anlaf and Constantine were routed by an enemy who had cut off their only realistic lines of retreat, via fords further upriver along the Mersey.⁸¹

⁸¹ Woods, 'Brunanburh revisited', 203. The arguments presented by Woods are particularly unconvincing, depending as they do on the partisan rhetoric of ASC(A, B, C, D), *s.a.* 942. The chronicler was recording in triumphant, but stereotyped, terms the suppression of Anlaf's rule in the Mercian Danelaw and taking the opportunity to characterize the Norse king as an oppressor and Edmund as saviour. Earlier crises imply that the attitudes in the Mercian Danelaw were less hostile to Scandinavian kings than this chronicler implied. It might be argued that all otherwise unspecified references to 'Mercia' in English sources during this period referred to English Mercia.