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# VIKINGS

FEAR AND FAITH  
IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND



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## TWO BATTLES, TWO TURNING-POINTS



From the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* accounts of King Alfred's reign, we can see that the battles of Ashdown in 871 and Edington in 878 were significant as the low and high points of Alfred's fortunes in the wars against the Danes. After Alfred's death, the *Chronicle* reverts to the earlier 'clergy movements' style of record. Although there are some longer and more detailed annals about wars and skirmishes with the Danes, the concerns of the chroniclers are principally the internal affairs of Wessex and the battles and exploits of the West Saxon kings.

This tends to obscure the fact that important things were happening in other areas. Sometimes we have to look much further afield to fill in the details of these events. For one very important battle, the battle of *Brunanburh* in 937, we have so little detail relating to the background that we cannot be absolutely certain where it took place. There is, however, a poem about it in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Text 2). Another battle, the battle of Maldon in 991, is briefly mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but a much fuller and more interesting account of the battle was recorded in a poem (Text 12). The manuscript of this poem was missing its beginning and ending when it was bound into a book and later copied by a

scholar, and then it was destroyed in the library fire of 1731 which damaged so many Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

These chances of history can sometimes be frustrating. But they also give us the opportunity to piece together the evidence which enables us to find *Brunanburh* and see the significance of Maldon. And while not even this detective work can tell us all we want to know about the two battles, the fact that the main sources are poems opens up new areas of information about the battles. In prose we get bald accounts of who did what, in verse we get a much richer picture. So first we explore the background of a great English victory at *Brunanburh*.

## MERCIA IN THE EARLY 10TH CENTURY

Under King Alfred England was divided along Watling Street: between the Danelaw, subject to the Danes in the north and east, and English Wessex in the south and west. Alfred's son, Edward the Elder, succeeded to the throne on the death of his father in 899, and with it inherited the long-term struggle for supremacy in England. Edward's brother Ealdorman Æthelred, and Æthelred's wife Æthelflæd, 'the Lady of the Mercians', had responsibility for Mercia. Formerly this had been a large and powerful kingdom covering most of central England, but in the early years of the 10th century it was divided, with the Danes in control of the eastern parts, and Æthelred and Æthelflæd ruling the west. This was an unenviable role for an English nobleman or noblewoman. They were surrounded on all sides but the south by potential enemies: the Welsh in the west, a separate Celtic kingdom of Strathclyde in the north-west, Scandinavian-controlled Northumbria to the north, Norwegian influence further west in Ireland, Danish power to the east.

It might be supposed from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that western Mercia was politically stable and unimportant, because very little about the area is recorded. But the political situation in Mercia was delicately balanced. We learn from obscure Irish and Welsh chronicles that in the first years of the 10th century, Norwegian adventurers were expelled from Dublin, raided around Wales, and finally negotiated for land with Æthelflæd. The same sources tell us that Ealdorman Æthelred was ill and was playing little part in the everyday business of government. Æthelflæd gave these Norse Vikings land in the Wirral peninsula, and the evidence of place-names shows that they were independent and self-governing: their part of the land had boundaries, with Raby ('boundary settlement') on the Norse side; and they had their local council, which met at Thingwall ('place of the council-meeting'). These place-names are duplicated in the Norse settlement north of the Mersey, where we find Roby and another Thingwall.

In due course, these Vikings attacked Chester, but were repulsed. Æthelflæd began to encroach on the north-western parts of Danish and Norse territory, winning back the allegiance of the people south of the Mersey and west of the Pennines. She built fortifications and garrisoned towns throughout the West Midlands and as far north as Runcorn. In 918 Æthelflæd died, and the relative independence of Mercia came to an end when King Edward took over where she had left off. The western parts had always been English Mercia, but now English Mercia became part of the West Saxon dominions.

#### KING EDWARD THE ELDER

Edward seems to have spent his entire life campaigning, fortifying towns, and taking allegiance from his enemies. In 921

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that he marched his army to Stamford and built a fortress there, then in midsummer he went to Tamworth to take the submission of the Mercians and the Welsh kings; then he marched on Nottingham, occupied it and garrisoned it, and all of Mercia submitted to him. The next year he garrisoned Thelwall and took Manchester in Northumbria. The year after that he built a fortress at Nottingham and another at Bakewell, and took submission from the Scots, the Danish king of Northumbria, the English and Norse inhabitants of Northumbria, and the Celtic king of Strathclyde. But the following year he died. And since loyalty to the king was loyalty to a person not to a dynasty, when Æthelstan came to the throne in 925, he had to go through the whole process again.

It is worth looking for a moment or two at what had been achieved in those years. Ealdorman Æthelred, Æthelflæd, and Edward had secured control of most of Mercia. The capturing and garrisoning of places like Nottingham, Stamford and Derby gave control of the essential power centres in eastern Mercia and the communications routes of the northern Midlands. Though the northern areas were less secure, Tamworth, Runcorn and Manchester gave control of the centres of western Mercia. Northumbria was still politically independent, as were the Strathclyde Celts in the north-west, the Danish in the east, and the Welsh in the west. But the kings of all these were nominally tributary to the crown of Wessex. It was precisely these kings that were to rise up against Æthelstan in 937.

#### KING ÆTHELSTAN

King Æthelstan made an agreement with Sihtric, the Irish-Norse king of Northumbria, in 926 and married his sister to him. The same year Æthelstan made a long-lasting peace with

Hywel Dda, the very powerful king of south Wales. He also made peace with Owein king of the Celtic Cumbrians or Strathclyde Welsh, and with the Scottish king Constantine, but these pacts did not last. In 927 Sihtric died and his brother Guthfrith, king of Dublin, tried to take over York and the Northumbrian kingdom. For unknown but perfectly guessable reasons – he had made no agreement with Guthfrith, for example, and could not be sure of Guthfrith's intentions – Æthelstan did not like this idea and expelled him, establishing an Englishman, Ealdwulf, as puppet ruler of Northumbria. Guthfrith died in 934, the same year as Æthelstan made a devastating raid on Scotland. Clearly Æthelstan was cementing his gains of territory and influence in the north by marriage, patronage and intimidation. The raid on Scotland signalled to the Northumbrians and the Strathclyde Welsh that Æthelstan was mobile, aggressive and meant to have his way.

Olaf Guthfrithsson raised a force of Irish-Norse Vikings in 937. He was joined by a Norwegian contingent from Northumbria, the Strathclyde Welsh under Owein, and the Scots under Constantine. All these forces had good reason to hate Æthelstan, and good reason to want to take their spleen out on the English. The most obvious place for the forces to assemble was somewhere in the north-west of England, where an army could plunder and intimidate the local people without being a drain on the resources of allies, and where there were easy escape-routes by land and sea. Olaf and his forces were raiding in Mercian territory before Æthelstan and his army were able to confront them.

In August 937 Æthelstan and his army were campaigning on the south coast. The king marched north with his Wessex men, gathering Mercian support as he went. Somewhere in the north-west of England, he confronted the enemy

coalition forces, attacked and routed them. After an encounter lasting an entire day, the coalition forces broke and ran, and the English forces followed, hacking them down and eventually leaving great swathes of corpses for the carrion-eating birds and beasts. Olaf fled to Dublin by sea. Constantine went back to Scotland, and nothing more is heard of Owein.

After the death of Æthelstan in 939 Olaf Guthfrithsson succeeded, at least for a while, in getting his hands back on Mercia as well as Northumbria. But by the time of the death of Edmund in 946 all England, including Strathclyde, was in submission to the English crown. On the death of Erik Bloodaxe in 954, the remaining Scandinavian hold on York and Northumbria was broken. This battle of *Brunanburh* was a major step forward in the unification of England, a turning-point in which political supremacy was gained by the kings of Wessex over the ethnically different people within the country. We can now begin to piece together the evidence which may lead us to the exact location of that battle.

## THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

There are various accounts of this climactic battle. The most important and earliest is the heroic poem found in four different manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Like much heroic poetry, *The Battle of Brunanburh* seems to rely on an audience which knows the basic story line. Apart from the name of the site, we are not told where the battle took place.

Later chronicles sometimes illuminate, sometimes obscure the story. Æthelweard, writing his *Latin Chronicle* towards the end of the 10th century, records only Æthelstan's accession, this battle, and his death. Using a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as his source, he tells us that

a fierce battle was fought against the barbarians at *Brunandune*, wherefore that fight is called great even to the present day: then the barbarian tribes are defeated and domineer no longer; they are driven beyond the ocean; the Scots and Picts bow the neck; the lands of Britain are consolidated together, on all sides is peace and plenty, nor ever did a fleet again come to this land except in friendship with the English.

There is more than a touch of irony about this passage: it was not so long since the Welsh and Britons were calling the Anglo-Saxons 'barbarians'; nor would it be more than a few years – less than a decade in fact – from the time of writing before many fleets came again in enmity on England. The passage hints at the unpreparedness and sense of superiority prevalent in Anglo-Saxon England prior to the renewal of Viking attacks in the 980s.

John of Worcester's chronicle written in the early 12th century adds certain details to the poem's account. John tells us that Constantine, the Scottish king, was Olaf's father-in-law, so that alliance between the Scots and the Norse Vikings was cemented by marriage. Moreover, John, alone of all the chroniclers, records that the coalition fleet entered the Humber. He records the place of the battle as *Brunanburh*, and some scholars have suggested that the battle might have taken place at Brumby in Lincolnshire. At any rate there are independent traditions in John's chronicle, possibly wrong but interesting for all that. Symeon of Durham, also writing in the early 12th century, records the following:

King Æthelstan fought at *Wendune* and put to flight King Olaf with 615 ships: also Constantine



king of the Scots and the king of the Cumbrians  
with all their host.

Elsewhere Symeon writes of the battle taking place at *Brunanburh*, so this different name looks like a mistake. Symeon gives us an improbable number of ships, a not untypical 'improvement' which enhances the significance of the battle and the greatness of the victory. William of Malmesbury, also in the 12th century, records a lengthy version of the battle in verse, though there is not much new about it. In a prose addition, there is quite a bit of legendary material, but the basic details are as they are in the poem. New information includes the fact that Ælwine and Æthelwine, Æthelstan's cousins, died in the battle, and were buried at Malmesbury.

One final source, from the 13th century, is *Egils saga*, an Icelandic prose text. There are problems with the chronology of the saga in relation to events in England, but the broad outlines of the battle are clearly there. The Icelanders Egil and his brother Thorolf, whom we have met before as raiders and traders, fight on the side of King Æthelstan in a battle at *Vinheith*, near a wood and a fort. The fight is preceded by a whole week of preparations and parleying of all kinds, including Æthelstan making generous offers of payment to the Scots, Irish and Welsh if they will withdraw. In the battle the coalition forces break first and run, they are pursued by Æthelstan and his men, and since they had refused the offer of peace before the battle, no quarter is given to those fleeing. Like all the sources, the saga summarizes, 'King Æthelstan won a very great victory there.' Thorolf dies in the battle, and at the feast afterwards, Egil plays murderously with his sword and takes no part in the festivities until he is personally compensated by the king for his brother's death.

## WHERE WAS THE BATTLE?

Each of these sources has its difficulties and novelties. One of the persistent problems is the location of the battle. We are given several varying locations: Æthelweard locates it at *Brunandune*, Symeon at *Wendune*. The Old English poem refers to the place of the battle as *Brunanburh*, and the water by which the fleeing forces escaped as *Dingesmere*. John of Worcester asserts that the coalition forces came via the Humber. *Egils saga* refers to the place as *Vinheith*. But we can find a way through these confusing accounts by taking them as complementary rather than contradictory, as each giving us a clue to the whole picture. We see that the names *Brunandune* and *Wendune* end in *-dune*, a word which in some of its senses overlaps with the Norse *-heith* in *Vinheith*: 'open, uncultivated land'. The first part of the English forms, *Brunan-*, looks like a personal name, *Bruna*. Putting these together, we have 'Bruna's open land', which may be the name of the land on which the battle was fought. Now *Egils saga* mentions a fort being near the battle site. It is therefore perfectly explicable that the poem refers to the battle by the name of the nearest settlement, 'Bruna's fort', or *Brunanburh*.

The evidence suggests that the battle took place in the north-west of England, in Mercia. There are three place-names in this region that probably derive from the personal name *Bruna* with various other elements attached: Bromborough, Brimstage and the now-lost Brimston on the Wirral. And although *Brunanburh* is not found as an exact early form of the name Bromborough, the forms which are found (such as *Brunburg*, early 12th century), are those which would be expected to develop from the proposed original. Moreover, the same scholar whose research gave us this information, convincingly argued that *Dingesmere* may well mean 'expanse of water associated with the River Dee', possibly the

Dee estuary. Although we do not know exactly what happened, it is therefore possible, discounting John of Worcester's tradition, to propose Bromborough on the Wirral as the site of the battle. We can imagine that Æthelstan trapped the enemy coalition forces on the English side of the Mersey and shadowed them to Bromborough, where he attacked and routed them. The battle can thus with some certainty be located in that politically sensitive area of northern and western Mercia, surrounded on all sides by potential enemies before the battle, by cowed and demoralized tributaries after it.

### THE POEM

The poem (Text 2) is unusual in that it was inserted into the prose historical texts, copied from an original which was circulated to the different centres where the *Chronicle* versions were compiled. It is the first of a series of poems in the *Chronicle* manuscripts: there is another poem, *The Capture of the Five Boroughs*, concerning Edmund's victories in the east Midlands, inserted under 942, a poem on Edgar's coronation in 973, another on his death two years later. It is evident that the *Brunanburh* poem was circulated by Æthelstan's 'press office', as other bulletins were, following King Alfred's establishment of something like a central information office around 891 – and it was adopted almost verbatim by the chroniclers. The main manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* have no further information about the events of this year. And of course the poem is very much about a victory, with the particular heroic spin that victories have in Old English poetry, rather than the prosaic accounts that we find elsewhere.

*Brunanburh* has the preoccupations of most heroic poetry. Heroic poetry originated in the ethos of the warband in

the early years AD. This was the Migration Age, when the Germanic tribes moved into new territories, including most of the Roman Empire and England itself. The major concerns of heroic poetry are battle and glory, loyalty and personal honour among warriors. Curiously, the two poems at the core of this chapter are, apart from the *Battle of Finnsburh* or *Finn Fragment* and the parallel episode in *Beowulf*, the two clearest examples of heroic poetry in Old English – curiously, because they are both from Christian times, when the warband ethic and its expression had been modified to some degree if not by Christian principle, then at least by the establishment of a church which had control over the survival of literature. While they have a similar informing heroic spirit, the poems on the battles of *Brunanburh* and *Maldon* are radically different. Of course the first is about an overwhelming victory, while the second concerns a crushing defeat. But in addition, the first revels in fierce joy, with the only apparent Christian references being such as to reinforce the magnificence of the victory, whereas the second, *The Battle of Maldon*, calls into play all kinds of Christian and religious ideas in order to cope with the defeat.

There are just the slightest echoes of biblical images in *Brunanburh*.

The plain darkened  
with the blood of warriors after the sun,  
glorious heavenly body, bright candle of God,  
the eternal Lord, rose up in the morning,  
glided over the vast expanse, until the noble creation  
sank to its setting-place. There lay many a warrior  
destroyed by spears, Northern men  
shot over their shields, likewise also Scotsmen,  
weary, had had their fill of battle. The West Saxons  
advanced in troops for the entire day,

pursued in their tracks the hateful peoples,  
fiercely hacked those fleeing from the battle from behind  
with milled-edged swords. The Mercians did not withhold  
hard battle-play from anyone among the warriors  
– those who had come to the land with Olaf  
in the ship's bosom over the heaving water,  
doomed to death in battle. Five young kings  
lay dead on the battlefield,  
snuffed out by swords, likewise also  
seven chiefs of Olaf's, and innumerable warriors,  
both Vikings and Scots.

All this is expressed in conventional heroic terms. But there is a curious parallel between the poem and a story in the Old Testament book of Joshua, chapter 10. Here a coalition of five Amorite kings attack the forces of Israel under Joshua. Catching the enemy by surprise, Joshua puts them to flight. He prays that the sun might stand still so that he can finish his enemies off, pursuing them from the rear. It does so, and after the battle he executes the five kings. The monastic readers of the poem in the manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* might well recognize an echo of Joshua's exploits, and God's support and help for him, in this heroic poem.

The image of the sun's rising and setting works even without this parallel. The Old English word for 'noble' and its derivatives is *æthel*. The sun is a 'noble creation' and this nobility links it with *Æthelstan* (literally 'noble stone') and *Edmund*, the prince or *ætheling*, who do what comes naturally to noble men (*geæthele*, line 7) in battle. So as the noble sun progresses from its rising to its setting, *Æthelstan* and *Edmund*, the nobles, are in the ascendant. The poet tells us towards the end that their ancestors came from the east, the

place of the sunrise. The Scots and the Norsemen who came from the north and the west, sink like the sun as it goes down. The image of the sun is a simple device, but it is fully exploited in the rhetoric of the poem.

The poem is highly rhetorical and this gives it a very sharp focus. It is a panegyric, a song of praise and victory, and in its delight at the outcome of the battle, it may seem to lack subtlety. But that may be because it uses subtlety in the service of a very obvious message. The Old English device of understatement is here, with slightly ironic vocabulary: the Mercians did not withhold sword-play from the Vikings. But most particularly this device is used in the form of *litotes*, the denial of a proposition for emphasis, to pour scorn on the defeated. Constantine had no reason to delight in the battle; he had no reason to boast; and Olaf and the tatters of his army had no reason to laugh about the battle. Implied in each denial is of course the utter discomfiture of Constantine, Olaf and their men, and perhaps at the same time, good cause for exultation, boasting and laughing among the English.

There is a hint or two of humour here too. In line 19 we are told the Scots were 'shot over their shields'. The pronunciation of *Scot* and *shot* were the same in Old English, and the grim pun would not have been missed by the audience. The poet refers to Constantine as a grey-haired and experienced warrior, terms of respect in normal circumstances; but then as he warms to his theme, he modifies this by calling Constantine a 'wily old devil' in line 46. The word used here, *inwidda*, is used in other places for Satan and demons. And the picture of Olaf, a great Viking king, at the prow of his ship (and the poet mercilessly borrows the Old Norse word for a ship, *cneor*, for this) is rather punctured by the fact that he is at the prow not to wave regally, but to push it out so that he can flee – a rough equivalent would be

a Prime Minister push-starting his Daimler to escape from the Leader of the Opposition.

The rhetorical pinpointing of the differences between the two sides is taken further as the poem goes on, when implication gives way to explicit contrast. From line 53, we see the miserable, shamed Norsemen go back to Ireland; the rejoicing brothers go back to the land of the West Saxons exultant. Then the poet tells us that they left the unholy trinity of battle to enjoy the feast: the raven, the eagle and the wolf remain to clean up the biggest slaughter that was ever known since the days when the Anglo-Saxons conquered the Britons many years ago and gained the land for themselves. By contrast, Constantine left behind him his own son dead on the battlefield, having gained nothing in the clash.

*Brunanburh* is a very skilful poem. What it lacks in nuance it definitely gains in rhetorical power. What it omits in the way of historical detail, it makes up for in its perception of the historical significance of the event. *Brunanburh* uses the inherited resources of the old tradition in much the same way as heroic poetry of earlier ages. Its metre is regular, as befits an official production, and the other poems inserted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* suffer by comparison. It perfectly expresses the Anglo-Saxon pride in the victory which concentrated power in the hands of the West Saxon kings. This was a turning-point in Anglo-Saxon history, and it seems appropriate that the *Chronicle* should break into song.

The 'hero' of the poem is the English people. Æthelstan and his brother are the noble leaders of the army, who returned from the battle in triumph. But it is not particularly Æthelstan who stands out: more space is given to the sun, the defeated leaders Constantine and Olaf, and indeed the beasts of carrion which clean up at the end. This shows us a king who is confident that his people's glory is his glory, his

people's victory is his own, and their heroic spirit is his also. Æthelstan was content to let the traditional art of poetry tell the story for posterity.

### THE BATTLE OF MALDON (TEXT 12)

Half a century later and things have changed. In 980 seven ships of Vikings attacked Southampton; in 982 three ships attacked Portland in Dorset; in 988 there was an attack on Watchet in Somerset. There were several attacks on Wales that are not noted in the Anglo-Saxon sources. These attacks were small in scale, probably the kind of summer vacation activity that is depicted in the Icelandic sagas. Certainly there was no cause for general alarm. But the fleet of 991 was different. It was certainly much larger, though persistent records of more than 90 ships may be doubted. And the leader of this fleet is named: it was Olaf Tryggvason, along with his uncle Josteinn, and someone called Guthmund, son of Steita. This was still a roving force apparently in search of plunder, which years of peace and plenty had given in abundance to England at this time. Before landing on the island of Northey near Maldon, the fleet had sacked Ipswich and Sandwich. The attraction of Maldon was undoubtedly the mint there: a source of ready money. There is no record of an actual sacking of Maldon, but they got 10,000 pounds weight of silver, the tribute they were looking for.

The following year, the Viking fleet sailed around East Anglia; in 993 the fleet moved north and sacked Bamburgh; the year after London was attacked but repelled the fleet, which then harried on the south coast. King Æthelred made a treaty in 994 with Olaf Tryggvason, Josteinn and Guthmund, in which he promised to give them winter quarters and food, and tribute as long as they stopped the harrying. The amount