



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# THE BATTLE OF NECTANSMERE

685 AD - NORTHUMBRIA'S DISASTEROUS CONFRONTATION WITH THE  
PICTISH KINGDOM OF FORTRIU.

# Versioning

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Draft	1 Nov 2022	Original Draft
0.9	1 Nov 2022	Reformatted
1.0	1 Nov 2022	Initial Publication

# Contents

The Battle of Nectansmere 685 AD - Northumbria's Disasterous Confrontation With The Pictish Kingdom Of Fortriu. 4

Introduction .....	4
685 AD.....	4
658 AD.....	4
671 AD.....	4
Egfrith .....	5
676 AD.....	5
682 AD.....	5
685 AD,.....	6

# The Battle of Nectansmere 685 AD - Northumbria's Disasterous Confrontation With The Pictish Kingdom Of Fortriu

## Introduction

**Nectansmere or the battle of Dunnichen Moss is a little-known battle, especially south of the Scottish borders, but when studied it is clear that it played both an important part in deciding as to who would rule Northern Britain and as to which form of Christianity would hold sway over the region. The church of Rome or that of the Celtic church.**

### 685 AD

By 685 AD, the land which we now call Scotland was occupied by several Kingdoms and tribal groups. The Scots of Dalriata dwelt in the far west of the country. **Saint Columba** had founded a Christian enclave at Iona and he and his followers had embarked on a mission to evangelise the peoples of the north, both Picts and Scots.

In the Kingdom of Strathclyde, the Welsh or Britons were still a potent force with a capable military system that had ensured their Kingdom's survival since the end of Roman Britain whilst to the north of the Forth river, from the lowlands of the north east to the far north, in what is now Caithness, the Picts had their Kingdom of Fortriu.

These Celtic peoples, sometimes allies and often enemies competed for both power and land. Parochial Warfare had been endemic but inter marriage and the ensuing ties of kinship started to forge a bond between these groups though it would take centuries to evolve.

Into this mix came an aggressive and expansionist people, namely the Angles of Northumbria. During the 7<sup>th</sup> century the Northumbrians had carved out a Kingdom that stretched to the river Forth in the north, where they had built a fortress that would become the English city of Eden's burh or Edinburgh. They occupied and incorporated most of today's Scottish- lowlands as well as Galloway into their Kingdom of Northumbria.

### 658 AD

By 658 AD, the powerful Northumbrian King, **Oswy** ruled all what is now Lothian, right up to the river Forth. Details of the Northumbrian's relationship with the Picts are scant but **Bede** recorded that **Oswy** had subjected most of the Pictish race to the dominion of the English. It appears that **Oswy** had subjected the Pictish realm to that of a client Kingdom and that he saw himself as an Overlord.

Though there is no evidence of a Northumbrian settlement north of the Forth, **Oswy** did establish a monastery at Abercorn and installed a **Bishop called Trumwine**. This was a Roman church establishment within an area where the Celtic church held sway. Was this a Northumbrian statement that the Picts were a subjugated people and did they feel as if they were? It's a matter for discussion and debate, but it is probable that Fortriu was a vassal state.

### 671 AD

In 671 AD, **Oswy** was succeeded by his son, **Egfrith**. **Bede** and a contemporary writer, **Eddius Stephanus** tell us a little about his life. As a young man he'd been a hostage of **King Offa at the Mercian court**. **Offa** was one of the truly great Kings of early Anglo-Saxon England and under him, Mercia had become the most powerful of all the English Kingdoms. **Stephanus** recorded that **Egfrith** was a pious and devout Christian King but that he was also a ruthless warrior and a single minded individual.

We can't be sure as to exactly what happened on **Egfrith's** succession to the throne of Northumbria, but it appears that the Picts rebelled and saw an opportunity to throw off the Northumbrian yoke.

## Egfrith

**Egfrith** responded with a show of force and he led a Northumbrian army, north to the Kingdom of Fortriu. He was supported by a sub-King called **Beornhæth**, who may have ruled in the small Anglo-Saxon realm of Bernicia, part of which, lay in what is now Lothian.

**Egfrith** pushed into the Pictish homelands destroying crops and villages as he went. It is recorded in the *Vita Sancti Wilfrithi*, that a large part of **Egfrith's** army were heavy cavalry. The armies came to blows at what is known as **the battle of the two rivers**. The site has never been identified but a possible location is **Moncreith Island**, near modern day Perth. The account of the battle contains scant detail but it suggests that a much larger Pictish army ambushed the Northumbrians but were repelled and forced to flee. The Northumbrian cavalry pursued the fleeing Picts and cut them down with great slaughter.

The annals of **Ulster and Tigernach**, duly record that the Pictish King, **Drest Mac Donuel VI** was deposed and one **Bridie Mac Bili** was proclaimed King in 672 AD.

It is likely that **Bridie Mac Bili** was placed on the throne by **Egfrith** as a 'puppet' ruler, a malleable individual who would obey his overlord's commands. **Bridie** would prove not to be such a supplicant. Several annals and writings state that the Picts were enslaved for the next 14 years. **Nennius** claimed that **Bridie** was **Egfrith's** first cousin and that his mother had been a daughter of King **Edwin** of Deira. Another aspect of this Northumbrian victory is that the likes of **Bede** claimed that it was a triumph of the Church of Rome over the Celtic church. This in itself would have been a cause of great antagonism for the Celtic church and their great monastery on the Isle of Iona.

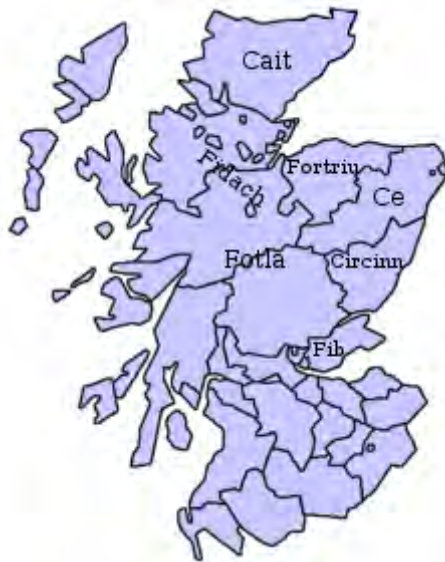
As with any early medieval King, the pursuit of power and expanding the wealth and the lands of his followers was of vital importance and to achieve these aims, Kingdoms such as Northumbria were often in a state of perpetual warfare. By their very nature, they were predatory realms and the King ensured the loyalty of his nobles by enriching them.

## 676 AD

In 676 AD, the Picts, once again rose up in rebellion. We don't know as to what the catalyst for this was and as usual no detailed account is yet known. **Eddius Stephanus** records that the Picts gathered in swarms from every cranny in the north. **Egfrith's** response was ferocious. His armies entered the Pictish lands and laid waste to them. The Northumbrians are said to have cut down a number of Pictish armies as if they were nothing but corn, yet the names of these battles are unknown to us but as to whatever really happened, the Northumbrians carried fire and sword to the Pictish heartlands and left them a smouldering ruin. **Bridie Mac Bili**, however, survived. **Egfrith** appears to have made no move to remove him from power. Whether a treaty was agreed, it is unknown, but it is likely that **Bridie** had to submit to **Egfrith**.

## 682 AD

By 682, **Bridie** was sufficiently strong enough to attack and ravage the Orkney Islands and by the following year, **Bridie** was at war with the Scots of Dal-Riata during which he attacked their capital at Dunadd. **Egfrith** in the meanwhile had been supported by the Northumbrian church for his punitive expedition into Fortriu in 678, probably because they were gifted some of the wealth from the expedition but **Egfrith** then fell out with his two most important advisors, **Cuthbert and Wilfred**. He further incurred their wrath, when in 684, the Northumbrians launched an attack on Meath in Ireland. It appears that this was an unwarranted and unjustified military expedition against a people who had been friendly to Northumbria. Churches and monasteries were sacked which outraged the Northumbrian church even though they had shown hostility to the Celtic church during **Egfrith's** attack on the Picts in 676 AD.



### The Pictish Kingdoms.

This shows the approximate locations of the Pictish kingdoms, as described in Wikipedia, with Fidach included.

Credit: [Lordpeyre](#)

### 685 AD,

In 685 AD, **Egfrith** decided to attack the Picts. Again, it is not known with any certainty as to why the Northumbrians decided on another military expedition into the Kingdom of Fortriu but it is possible that **Bridie** had used **Egfrith's** preoccupation in Ireland to strengthen his own position and to prepare a challenge to Northumbrian power.

**Bridie's** brother, **Owen**, was the King of Strathclyde and it is possible that Strathclyde may have assisted the Picts against **Egfrith's** new onslaught. Inter marriage between the peoples of the north was contributing to new lineages which by the 10<sup>th</sup> century would see the emergence of the nation of Scotland.

**Bede** and the annals of Ulster record the march of the Northumbrian army as it went north. It is stated that **Egfrith** devastated the lands with the most brutal and ferocious cruelty. The Picts refused to meet the Northumbrians in a pitched battle and retreated into their heartlands. The Picts would have likely initiated a scorched earth policy and as the Northumbrians advanced, they were likely subjected to guerrilla attacks and their supply lines must have been stretched or even compromised.

The Northumbrians followed the retreating Picts into the remote countryside of what is now Angus.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 685 AD, at about 3pm, The Northumbrians spotted a large Pictish raiding party on the banks on the now gone Dunnichen Loch. Expecting an easy victory the Northumbrian cavalry charged, but **Bridie** had sprung his trap. A much larger Pictish army lay concealed on Dunnichen Hill and they charged down the hill forcing the Northumbrians towards the Loch. Trapped and outnumbered, the Northumbrians fought ferociously but they were overwhelmed. **Egfrith** was cut down as were his hearth troops, though, by all account, they slew many Pictish warriors.

**Egfrith** was given proper burial. He was taken to Iona where he was buried amongst the Pictish Kings.

**Bridie** died in 693 AD and he too was buried on Iona, his body placed into a hollow tree trunk and buried in the sacred soil. Both **Egfrith** and **Bridie** lie there today though their graves has been lost to time and history.

This defeat ended Northumbria's ambitions to invest and conquer the Kingdom of Fortriu and was a factor in ensuring that what is now Scotland would be carved out by the Picts, Scots and Britons of Strathclyde over the coming centuries. The Picts who had so tested the Roman armies of Agricola and Septimius Severus had regained some of their former glory and had defeated an aggressive and warlike Northumbria, but within another 150 years, a new invader would appear, the Vikings.

The site of the battle of Nectansmere. Dunnichen Hill lies in the background. The small water source is now all that remains of Loch Dunnichen.



Credit. By Karen Vernon, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7768488>.



Picts fighting Northumbrian cavalry on one of the Aberlemno Stones.

Credit. Uploaded by [Karen Barrett-Wilt](#), published on 18 December 2014.

The copyright holder has published this content under the following license:

**Public Domain.** This item is in the public domain, and can be used, copied, and modified without any restrictions.





**Moncrieth or Moncreiffe Island, Perth, Scotland. Was this the site of the battle of the two rivers in 671 AD?**  
 Credit. The copyright on this image is owned by [Mike Pennington](#) and is licensed for reuse under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 license](#).

**Aberlemno church lies some six miles north of the battlefield.**



Credit. The copyright on this image is owned by [Anne Burgess](#) and is licensed for reuse under the [Creative Commons Attribution-share Alike 2.0 license](#).