



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE SEARCH FOR THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

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The Search for the Battle of Brunanburh

Introduction.

For centuries, the site of the Battle of Brunanburh has been lost. Historians, scholars and antiquarians have debated and argued about where the battle took place. Academics too, have studied the various chronicles and have advocated several locations. Some have placed the battle on the east coast, near the River Humber or in Lancashire near Burnley. Other manuscript investigators have claimed to have located the battle site, but the great majority of qualified academic opinion is that it was fought on the Wirral.

Wirral Archaeology have researched every known available source and have studied the etymology, local tradition and most importantly the local geography and landscape. To identify evidence and establish if the battle was fought on the Wirral.

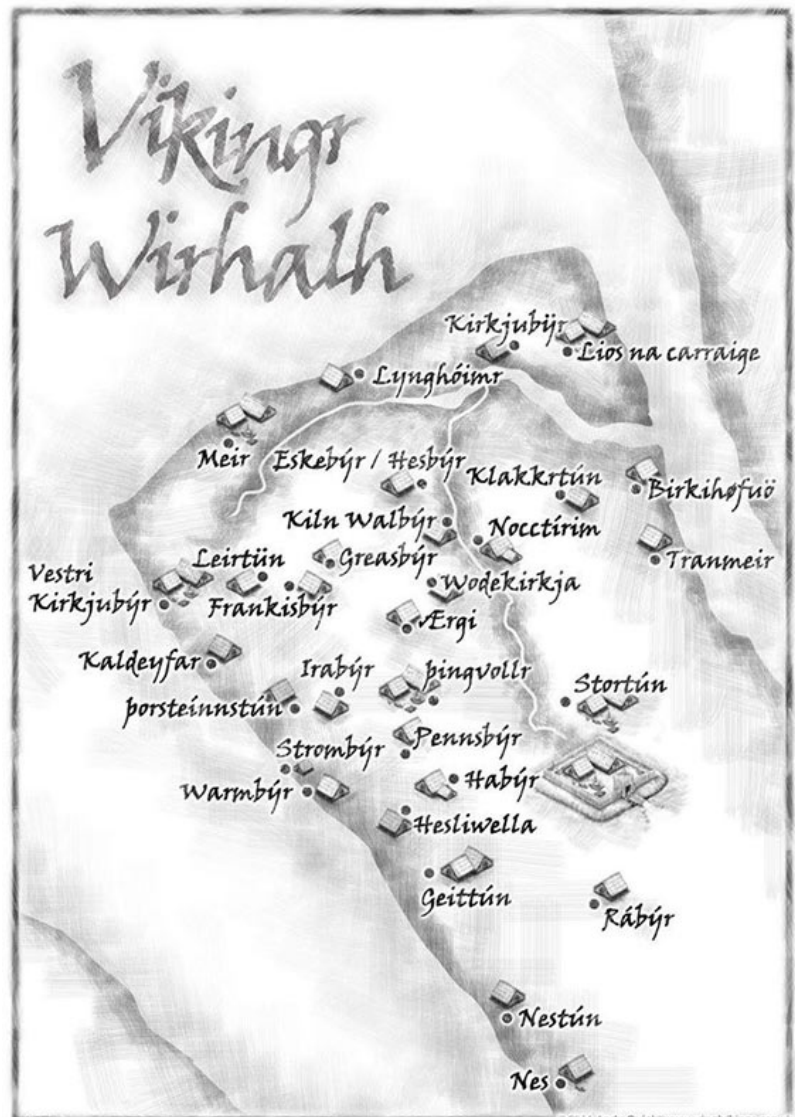
Lost in history - searching for a location

Wirral Archaeology has discovered one particular location which has produced in excess of 4000 finds from a multi period site. The evidence points to a reprocessing area, in which in the aftermath of the battle, damaged weapons and personal items were repaired, recycled or smelted into billets for later re-use.

The diversity of metals is an indicator that this location might have been a temporary camp, dedicated to the recovery of metal objects. So far, iron, bronze, copper, copper alloys, silver and lead silver have been recovered along with large deposits of charcoal and coal.

Evidence of furnaces and furnace waste have also been discovered.

The question is - why is there such a diversity of metals and different objects at an open site? Many of these items were in close proximity suggesting that there was an organised process of some kind going on.



Brunanburh – A brief Outline

We will not discuss the battle in detail in this initial column nor explain the political issues that prevailed at that time as they are too complex and would take too long to explain. Instead we will give a bare and brief explanation.

We will now describe the important factors by 'bullet point' rather than detailing each factor so that the significant events are highlighted.

- The Battle of Brunanburh was said to be the greatest battle fought by the Anglo Saxons prior to that of Hastings in 1066.
- England was a nation in formation. It was not unified in today's modern sense. Athelstan, the English King, and grandson of Alfred the Great, was determined to be the ruler of the whole of Britain. His claim to be King of all Britain was his own personal aspiration rather than an actual fact.
- The British Isles were inhabited by diverse peoples, namely Anglo-Saxons, Jutes, Angles, Britons (ie. Welsh) Scots, Irish, Picts, Danes, Norse and Hiberno-Norse.
- Loyalties changed and, in many regions different peoples had integrated. Such as in Northumbria, and they sought to have some levels of independence.
- Athelstan had humiliated the Northern peoples by military campaigns in 927 and 934 respectively and the rulers of these Kingdoms were forced to acknowledge him as their overlord.
- In 934, the Scottish King, Constantine broke his word to Athelstan and was punished by having his lands ravaged by Athelstan. He was forced to submit again. The Scots were punished by having to pay crippling tribute to Athelstan.
- In Dublin, Anlaf Guthfrithson, the leader of the Viking force at Brunanburh, believed he had inherited the right to be King of Northumbria. He was also engaged in warfare with the Irish, especially Muirchertach Mac Neill, and with Viking ruler Anlaf Cenncairech who was nicknamed 'Scabbyhead' and who controlled Limerick.
- It is clear that Constantine the Scottish King, saw Athelstan as a threat to his nation, but he was acutely aware that he was not powerful enough to resist Athelstan alone. He needed allies and he needed a buffer state between him and Athelstan.
- Anlaf Guthfrithson, if he was to rule in Northumberland, could provide that buffer state, even though Constantine had fought against Anlaf's father years beforehand. The two now had a mutually beneficial alliance if they could either defeat Athelstan in battle or force him to an agreement.

These bullet points outline the general political situation and the main goals of the two most significant enemies of Athelstan.

The Written Sources.

Other factors for consideration are the various written sources from Irish, Welsh, Scottish and Anglo Saxon records, of which virtually all are not contemporary with the battle. They were written years after the event and in some cases centuries after the battle.

The several versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that survive contain, for the record of the year 937, an extensive poem (the Brunanburh poem) which provides a very stylised version of the battle but very few reliable details. It only mentions three places - Brunanburh and Dingsmere (which are both unidentified) and Dublin which is where the defeated Anlaf eventually returned to.

There are other ancient manuscripts which give a few scant details of the battle, and several different titles for the battle (ie. Brunannburh, Brunanwerc, Wendune, etc.) but they were written long after anyone from that period was still alive. These additional spellings and names have been the subject of considerable debate, discussion and argument for several centuries - without identifying the actual site.

Egil's Saga which was originally a verbal story, was first written in 1240 AD by an Icelandic descendent of Egil (An Icelandic Viking who claims to have fought for Athelstan) is the only record that describes the terrain where the battle was fought. The Saga was designed to enhance the reputation of Egil and his dependents, and it must be treated with suspicion. But it has been instrumental in leading Wirral Archaeology to discover artefacts from the period and to discover - what may be the site of the battle.

At present Wirral Archaeology are the only group, that we know of, who have actively searched for the battlefield and have recovered artefacts that are positive battle signatures, and identifiably of that period.

937 AD and the lead up to the battle.

In early August 937 AD, Anlaf Guthfrisson fought a ship to ship battle on Lough Ree in Ireland against Anlaf Cenncairech or 'Scabbyhead' the King of Limerick. Anlaf Guthfrithsson won and added Limerick and its environs to his Kingdom. Anlaf Scabbyhead was taken as a hostage, to ensure that Limerick did not revolt against Guthfrithson, and he would probably have received valuable tribute from the defeated Scabbyhead..

Following the battle Anlaf Guthfrithson and his men spent several days looting the monastery at Clonmacnoise. This would have provided additional funds for the planned invasion.

Anlaf Guthfrithson must have believed it was critical to defeat Scabbyhead before any invasion of England. By the time he had invested Limerick and organised a ruler in his absence and secured the area from any counterattack, a number of weeks must have passed. Anlaf then returned to Dublin to initiate the invasion of England.

Could he have attempted to invade England if he had not dealt with Scabbyhead? No.

It is therefore highly likely, that the invasion fleet embarked for England in September and that it made its way to the North Wirral coast, a mere 130 miles away by the most direct and well known trading route. North Wirral had been settled by a Hiberno-Norse tribe following their expulsion from Dublin by the Irish in 902 AD. Despite a failed rebellion in 907 and a defeat in attempting to capture Chester the Hiberno-Norse were still settled on the Wirral and were also settled on the Lancashire and Cumbrian coasts.

Many surviving place names in Wirral, Western and Northern Lancashire, and Cumbria are of Norse origin.



Landing on the Wirral had major advantages too. It provided a straight route into the Mercian heartland with no physical geographical obstructions that would delay an army heading for Tamworth, the Mercian Capital had it wished to do so. A landing on Wirral/Mersey also provided a land route to attack the capital of Northumbria at York. Although sources say that the Northumbrian's submitted to Anlaf, there is no record of any attempt to take the stronghold of York.

Wirral Archaeology disagrees fundamentally with some theorists on the location of the battle who place it somewhere in south Yorkshire. Various places have been mentioned as a possible battle site there, but no artefacts have been produced to support those theories. These “east coast” theories are largely based on the writings of a monk known as William of Malmesbury who recorded, about 200 years after the battle that “the Danes landed in the Humber with a fleet of 615 ships”.

This is an astounding number of ships, which suggests an army of 10-20,000. We do not believe that this is a feasible number, either of ships or the estimated number of men. His writings are known by academically qualified historians to be suspect for their proven inaccuracy on several other claims that he made. It is also known that several other Scandinavian invasion fleets landed in the Humber, both before and after 937.

In 1066, for example, Harold Hardrada landed in the Humber and sailed up the Ouse to near York before the battles of Fulford, and Stamford Bridge where he was defeated by King Harold Godwinson. The Viking fleet comprised of about 300 ships, and at Stamford Bridge Harold Hardrada’s army was about 9000 strong.

It is inconceivable that in 937 Anlaf’s fleet would have sailed from Dublin north around Cape Wrath and then down the east coast of Scotland to the Humber estuary at that time of the year. The risk of losing his fleet would have been too great. The shortest sailing distance is about 1000 miles.

A landing on the Wirral, the Mersey and Lancashire coast would have been into ‘friendly’ Norse controlled territory, and these points were also on the main trading routes between Dublin/Ireland and York. So, why would a voyage around Cape Wrath taking at least ten to fourteen days be necessary, when a landing on the west coast would have enabled York to be reached on foot by an army in three to four days at most?

If we take it that Anlaf landed on the Wirral in mid to late September and that Constantine’s Scots and the Britons of Strathclyde were on route down the West Coast through Cumbria and Lancashire, we do not know if Athelstan had been caught unprepared or was waiting for his enemy’s to make their move. This time of year was when the harvest was being brought in and if Athelstan’s intelligence network had been working, he would have been able to mobilise his army and be ready to engage his enemy with some expediency. We also know that Athelstan had a large and powerful fleet.

No records indicate that this Anglo Saxon fleet was used in the impending campaign. Is it because Anlaf’s invasion was totally unexpected and that the English fleet was totally unprepared? The logical thing for Athelstan to have done, would be to have sent his army northwards whilst his fleet attacked the Norse fleet on the North Wirral coast or that it cut any supply lines in the Irish Sea. Neither is there any record of Athelstan’s fleet being despatched to blockade the Humber, or any other area. There is no mention of the English fleet in the Anglo-Saxon battle poem, Brunanburh.

There is a record in a Saga that there was an earlier battle or skirmish fought before Brunanburh somewhere in Cumbria or Lancashire, and that an Anglo-Saxon force was defeated by the Scots, Strathclyders and Cumbrian allies. The defeated English Earl, Alfgaer, fled South and informed Athelstan what had occurred. This Saga states that Anlaf was the King of the Scots, so it is further proof on how we have to regard these records which were written centuries after the actual event with caution.

The Saga says that Northumbria had fallen to the enemy but it may be that the Anglo-Norse population in that area readily gave their support to the Scots alliance in anticipation of York and its regions would become independent from Athelstan’s rule. Or perhaps they had no other choice of survival?

Athelstan on hearing the news of the invasion started to mobilise an army. Though some sources criticised him for being slow to react, we think that he realised the danger to his rule and the extent of the rebellion facing him. He would have realised that he had to gather a force of exceptional size for the period, to maximise his chance of victory. He needed critical mass, so he needed time to assemble his forces

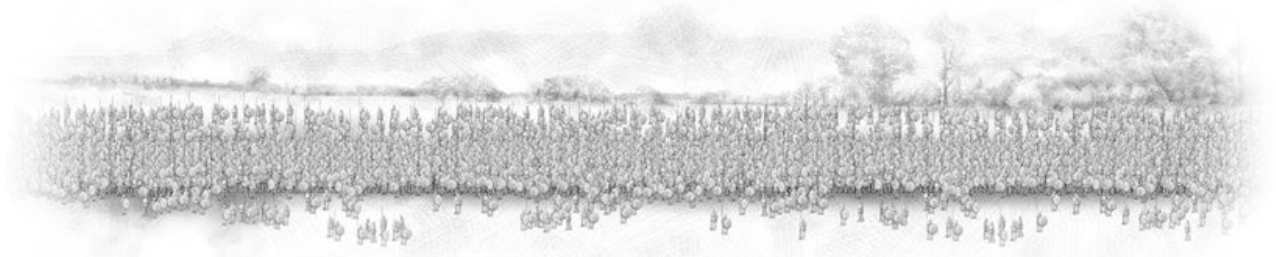
It appears that it took a few weeks for Athelstan to arrive to give battle, and we believe this was on the Wirral with his select Fyrd, (his professional army). In the interim Anlaf is said to have harried the land. Something he was renowned for as he had a specific liking for raiding and looting holy sites such as churches and monasteries.

It is likely that Norse raiding parties harried the Wirral, the Cheshire plain, and perhaps Wales. They would have set pickets to warn of the arrival of Anglo-Saxon forces.

It is probable that the Anglo-Saxon local Fyrds (militia) were the first to arrive on the Wirral and these may have been ordered to contain Anlaf's forces on the Wirral. There is no record of any engagements so it is probable that the Fyrds were instructed to observe and deter raids but not to take on the whole Norse army, who were likely congregated around the North Wirral coast and inland.

Logistics.

It is likely that Anlaf was bringing in supplies from Ireland and the North West coast, including Scotland, whilst he awaited the arrival of Athelstan. It is estimated that 1 tonne of supplies is needed every 2 days by 500 men, so this is clearly a huge logistical problem as the Wirral and local raiding could not have supplied the required amounts for 3-4 weeks.



The sizes of the armies are not known except they were exceptional for the period, so basing them on the numbers that fought at Hastings, some 129 years later, 7000 - 8000 men would be a reasonable guess for the Norse and their allies, with the Anglo-Saxons being able to field 10000-12000 men and even these numbers are just guesses.

Based on 500 men needing 3.5 tonnes of food a week, means an army of 8000 men need 56 tonnes per week and that excludes fodder for horses. Any supplies held by the communities on the Wirral would have been quickly exhausted and would leave the locals facing the prospect of a winter of likely starvation.

Many of the Wirral's Norse settlers must have been aware of the jeopardy they were in regardless of which side eventually won the coming battle. They were in fact impotent and had little if any say on the matter. Most of the ethnic Norse who were settled on the Wirral, were farmers and traders and 30 years of co-existence with the local Saxon population had probably led to a high degree of integration.

Athelstan's arrival.

Athelstan and his army arrived on or near the Wirral in late September (assuming the battle was here) or more likely early October. Athelstan had sent messages to Anlaf asking to negotiate but only if he agreed to stop harrying the land. Anlaf agreed, but there are no records of these negotiations other than what are contained within Egil's Saga.

It is worth considering why Anlaf did not strike into the Mercian heartlands given that Athelstan may have been unprepared for this invasion. There are a number of potential reasons why Anlaf did not do so or, indeed, why did he not attack Chester? We don't know is the simple answer. But the Norse were notoriously poor at taking fortified positions and Anlaf may have not wanted to fight several battles by moving southwards because he would have been unable to replace lost men.

Because of the size of the invading army Anlaf and Constantine might not have expected to fight because they expected Athelstan to consider a negotiation. One that would have gifted Anlaf the prize of Northumbria, which would have likely satisfied the Northern British Kings too, as they would have their kingdom's protected by a 'buffer' state.



According to Egil's Sage negotiations were conducted, and Athelstan's representatives made offers of silver for Anlaf to withdraw and leave unmolested. Hard bargaining took place and the last offer resulted in Anlaf sending further requests to Athelstan demanding more. It appears by this stage, that Athelstan was in Chester and that he was prolonging the talks to give him time to concentrate his troops in position. He now decided to engage in battle. We suspect that this had been Athelstan's strategy, to distract and delay his enemies whilst he prepared an overwhelming force to defeat them.

Anlaf realised this too late to seize the initiative and unable to withdraw without losing credibility, so in time honoured tradition, a place of battle was agreed - it is claimed, and the last throw of the dice was cast.

If they agreed to fight at an agreed location, it would have been at a "level playing field" with no obvious advantages to either side. Hazel rods are said to have been laid out to mark the battle site. This was now a fight in which the winner might gain the whole of Britain, or it would result in Anlaf winning Northumbria.

In the ensuing battle, thousands on both sides were said to have been slain (confirmed by several independent sources) and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded that never before had so many men died in a single battle on the island of Britain.

The first Battle for Britain.

Egil's Saga and the Brunanburh poem both wax lyrical on who did what, but the fact is that we cannot rely on them as accurate sources for what actually happened. The battle went on for most of the day and eventually the Norse and their allies broke and fled back towards their ships. Five Kings are said to have died on the field along with seven great Viking Yarls (the Norse equivalent of Earls). Egil, an Icelandic Viking who claims he fought for Athelstan lost his brother, Thorolf in the battle and the Scottish King's son, Cellach, perished as well. Anlaf 'Scabbyhead' of Limerick, also met his end at Brunanburh. Their names were recorded in the Annals of Clonmacnoise in Ireland. Scottish records also confirm that Cellach died in 937.



The victorious Anglo-Saxons pursued the defeated Norse back towards their ships but were prevented from stopping Anlaf and Constantine escaping. Wirral Archaeology's theory is that the Norse fleet was anchored in what is now Wallasey Pool, and at other beaching sites around Wirral. The Anglo-Saxons were prevented from capturing them and destroying or capturing the fleet, because of a physical barrier, the Dingsmere.

We believe that what is now Bidston Moss is the remnant of this once great tract of marshland. We have some compelling scientific evidence on the extent of the marshland area at that time which is not yet ready for disclosure.

There are many examples of Anglo-Saxons capturing or destroying Norse fleets after being victorious in battle, but in this case it is likely that a fierce rear-guard action by the defeated Norse allowed most of the fleeing Norse army to escape. We think that the rising tide facilitated Anlaf's escape.

Brunanburh, did not form a long lasting state of England. It formed a lasting consciousness in the minds of the Anglo-Saxons that there could be a kingdom called England.

In the years after the battle.

Two years after the battle Athelstan died and was buried at Malmesbury. Athelstan's half-brother Edmund became King at the age of about eighteen, but he was unable to keep control of Northumbria immediately after Athelstan's death. Anlaf immediately moved to take possession of Northumbria and was King in York. It took Edmund the new King, several more years to finally drive Anlaf out of the North and regain Northumbria. Anlaf Guthfrithson the renowned looter of churches was killed during a minor skirmish when he attempted to pillage another church in 941.

That tale is another fascinating story in itself!

So where is Brunanburh?

Wirral Archaeology cannot yet say with complete certainty. We have to protect this site and are working to do so with the local authorities and other organisations.

The artefacts have to be quantified and the metal objects have to be subjected to analysis such as isotopic examination and XRF testing. The results so far, have been exciting...!

Wirral Archaeology and our associates will use forensic analysis conducted by professional scientists to identify the artefacts recovered. We have a formidable team of world renowned Historians and Experts conducting this parallel research.

It is this combined and comprehensive methodology which may positively identify the site of one of the most significant battlefields of British history.

Wirral Archaeology will update progress on a regular basis. But there are many years of research, field archaeology and scientific evaluation to be conducted until a definitive answer can be given.

We hope this information encourages local people to learn more about the Wirral's past history and we hope that you have found these details of our investigations informative.

Some people and some Historians will continue to dismiss the Wirral as a possible location for the battle. They have books, articles and reputations to protect. We are not seeking to undermine or diminish those with other strongly held opinions - but there is one important advantage that we have. We have 10th century artefacts and weapons in significant numbers. The other possible contenders? Not one artefact!