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The Location of the Battle of Brunanburh

Abstract

In this study, I would like to pinpoint the location of the Battle of Brunanburh, which was one of the main battles in the history of the British Isles. To do that this article was distributed in four parts. The first part will tell the events, which lead to the battle. It will help us to define the motives of the participating armies. After that, a criteria system will be created to filter essential information, leading us to the location of the battle. At the end, I will make my conclusions.

Keywords: *history, Battle of Brunanburh, location of the battlefield, army, criteria system*

In 937 two enormous armies met at the border of Northumbria to decide the future of the island. One was led by king Athelstan, who was named king of Britain not long ago. His enemy was a Northman, a son of a chieftain, Olaf Guthfrithson, who sailed from Ireland to challenge the new king's rule. Their battle determined the future of the island, however, its location is completely forgotten. From the 18th century, many professional and amateur historians tried to find Brunanburh. A dozen locations were recommended, but the exact location remained lost. In this article, I will try to determine the battlefield. To do this, first I analysed the previous recommendations and tried to fit them into the chronicles, which tried to determine the place.

To make this happen, this article was divided into four parts. The first part contains the history of Northumbria before the battle. This part is necessary because we had to analyse the previous events of the battle to understand the parties' motives. And also this part will help us in finding the location of Brunanburh. Thus, the previous thirty years will be described in this chapter. In the next part, a criteria system will be developed, to help me filter out the essential pieces of information about the location of the battle. It will help our work because there are many chronicles, studies and works from chroniclers and contemporary historians dedicated to this battle. These works contain enormous information and data, and we had to systematise them if we wanted to acquire the necessary information. Moreover, our system will

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be simplistic, and all of the information can be found in one place. In the next part, two or three locations will be selected for analysis. These might sound little, but we should not forget that there are a dozen recommendations for the place of the battle. We would have filled a book if we wanted to analyse all of them. And the number of pages of this article is heavily determined, which did not allow us to take care of all of the recommendations. Hence, we have to examine only a few possible locations. The first one is quite obvious: Bromborough. We have to examine it carefully because the town, and the circumjacent area are considered the main proponent for the place of the battle. Moreover, most of the sources, which were processed by me, thought that the battle was fought in Bromborough and the surrounding places.

Bromborough is said to be an ideal place because it is near Ireland, thus Olaf possibly chose an easier road to go into England. Also, there were Viking settlements there, thus they could probably give help to Olaf.² One of my first theories about the battlefield (Broughton, in North Lincolnshire), will be examined also. It lay near a Roman road, south of the River Humber and had a huge forest, making the place ideal for the battle. Then Burton upon Humber is next, which lies on the southern bank of the River Humber, hence, it could be ideal for Athelstan, to stop the Viking invasion there.³ Then Michael Wood's theory will be assayed. He thinks the battle has taken place in Barnsdale Bar because the River Went is flowing there, which can give the name of the location (Wendune).⁴ These locations had to be analysed because we would like to see if one of them is fit for the location of Brunanburh. They will be examined beside the different types of information contained in the chronicles. My hypothesis is that they were not the place, where Athelstan fought his final battle with the "Northern Alliance". The name Brunanburh gives us an exact location, which does not mean a natural formation, or an extensive location, like a huge field. Likely, it is the name of a town or a settlement. After the examination of the different recommendations for the battlefields of Brunanburh, I would like to introduce my suggestion for the place, where the battle was fought. I do not want to reveal the current place in the introduction, but I would like to tell you that all the variety of names and suggestions led to one exact place. In the end, the events of the battle will be recreated. We did not have many analyses about it, many historical sources speak of a huge battle, which resulted in Olaf's defeat. However, only Egil's saga preserved a useful description of the battle. Egil's saga dates back to the 12th century; historians, such as, for example, Sarah Foot argue that despite elements of truth it cannot be considered historically reliable. Notwithstanding, the suggestion of the place of this battle in this article considered the landscape, which was conserved in that work. The terrain, which appeared in Egil's work, is precisely traceable at the location, which was given in this article. In the last chapter, I will analyse the battle itself, not only using Egil's saga but the other chronicles and sources that will help me recreate the battle itself. This work will end with my conclusions, in which the findings will be explained better.

² LIVINGSTON 2011: 21.

³ CAVILL 2014: 97–99.

⁴ WOOD 2019.

Before Brunanburh

In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Kingdom of Wessex first fought for its survival and after Alfred's victory in Ethandun or Edington, the kings of Wessex pushed back the Northern invaders and tried to reunite the British Islands. Alfred not only used military power for the unification of the "Kingdom of England", but also marriage (Æthelflæd's marriage with Æthelred).⁵ His successors continued his work and obtained new lands, which were unified under the rule of Wessex. After Æthelflæd's death Edward I, her brother seized her lands from her daughter, and Mercia was also attached to his kingdom. Before that, both Edward and Æthelflæd built castles on the borders, and inside their kingdoms to deter and control the Viking threat.⁶ Edward also managed to bring the Welsh princes under his rule. The successful policy of the king pushed back the territory of the Vikings up north from the River Humber.

In the meantime, in Northumbria, the rule of the land was not secure at all. Because Northumbria was divided between the Northmen, the Scots, the Welsh and the lord of Bamburgh. This territory was conquered in the year 917, when a Viking leader Ragnall appeared and defeated the Scots, conquered York, and vassalised Bamburgh. He came from Ireland, which was pacified and ruled by Sithric, his brother.⁷ Ragnall managed to pacify Northumbria also, and defend his new kingdom against the Scots. After this, he managed to sustain a frail balance between the different entities in here. He was so fearful, that Edward had to build fortresses along the border with Northumbria.

Ragnall could not rule many years from the realisation of the peace treaty, because he died in the same year. He was followed by his brother, Sithric, or in Old Norse Sigtryggr, who now became the sole ruler of a huge territory, which involved Northumbria, and their Irish territories, in the centre of which was Dublin. In the Kingdom of Wessex Edward also died, and his successor, Athelstan tried to ally with Sithric. Hence he met with Sithric in Tamworth in the year 925 and he gave Sithric his sister. With this move Athelstan wanted to achieve two things: first, he wanted to avoid another incursion from the North inside his Kingdom;⁸ second, it is possible that he planned to obtain Northumbria. He hoped this marriage would receive royal sons, which meant that his kingdom would have obtained Northumbria without a fight. If he could not manage to do it, he could invade Northumbria, if Sithric dies.

His true objectives are not known. However, Sithric died a year later, and the throne of Northumbria was empty. Thus Athelstan invaded the country and its territory was attached to the Kingdom of Wessex. He took advantage of the fact that the situation in Northumbria was fluid because of the death of Sithric, and his brothers did not have the manpower to defend their territory. Hence, he could quickly seize the throne and expel Guthfrith and obtain his territory.⁹ He also managed to vassalise the king of the Scots, the Welsh and the lord of Bamburgh.¹⁰ However, Constantine

⁵ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 1895: 117.

⁶ JOHN OF WORCESTER 1848: 122–130.

⁷ LIVINGSTON 2011: 8.

⁸ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 1895: 129; JOHN OF WORCESTER 1848: 130; WOOD 2013: 139.

⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 1895: 96.

¹⁰ JOHN OF WORCESTER 1848: 130.

at the end of 933, or in the spring of 934 broke his treaty with Athelstan, and tried to become independent. Therefore, Athelstan started against Scotland. Athelstan possibly invaded the Kingdom of the Scots, because the leader of Bamburgh died, and he wanted to evade the Scots and Northmen to use this as an advantage.¹¹ Hence, he attacked Constantine's land from two different sides. He used a combined force with land and navy units. With these two simultaneous attacks, Athelstan could penetrate deep into Scotland, as far as Edinburgh. He possibly did not fight a battle with the Scots, because the chronicle of Clonmacnoise tells us that the Scots did not allow him a battle.¹² Athelstan's army looted the Kingdom of the Scots, who used guerrilla tactics against him; however, the Scots could not stop the English soldiers marauding the country. After this campaign, the remaining "kingdoms" realised that the new English Kingdom posed a huge threat. In order to eliminate this threat, they allied, for the first time in their history. However, a new player joined them, Olaf Guthfrithson, who tried to invade the lands of Athelstan from Ireland to take back his uncle's former kingdom.

The main theories about the location of the battle



Figure 1: Site of the Battle of Brunanburh
Source: WESTON 2017.

¹¹ FOOT 2011: 165.

¹² *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* 1896: 149; Wood 2013: 141.

There are mostly two locations of the battlefield itself. The first one is Bromborough, which lays on the bench of the River Mersey. The main supporter of the theory is Michael Livingston or Paul Cavill. The theory appeared at the end of the 19th or in the beginning of the 20th century. The basis of the theory relies mostly on the meaning name of Bromborough. One of the first historians who tried to connect Bromborough to Brunanburh was A. H. Smith. Then A. H. Smith tried to prove that Brunanburh and Bromborough are the same places. The identification as we mentioned before, is based on the correspondence between these two names. The Domesday Book, which was created in the 12th century, mentions the settlement Brunanburh. Paul Cavill also supported this theory and tried to prove the conformability with the determination of the name of Brunanburh.¹³ He said that the first part of the name was used by a person named Bruna. The second part of the name is burh, which means a farmstead, a fort or a hill. Since fortified places were called dun in Viking times, the name may indicate a fort. Thus, the name means Bruna's Fort. In this part, I do not want to speak more about the meaning of the different interpretations of Brunanburh. I just mentioned it, to make this theory clearer.¹⁴

Dodgson in his article tried to analyse the names of the local Viking settlements in the area, however, the contemporary sources could not connect Bromborough with the previous battle. Moreover, Paul Cavill tried to use the Anglo-Saxon chronicle in his verification efforts.¹⁵ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentioned a place, where the defeated Vikings retreated with their ships. It is called Dingismere. The first part of the word "ding" might mean a marshland or a wetland which can be used as an assembly point. Close to Bromborough, there is a town called Thingwall, which might have possibly been an assembly point for the Vikings, and that could be the place, where the Saxons and the Northern Alliance fought the battle.¹⁶ In the last two decades, research activities have grown significantly in the area. Bromborough attracted many historians, archaeologists and amateur historians, who tried to identify the place of the battle. These people created the Wirral Archaeology CIC, which – in order to find the battlefield – tried to harmonise the different areas of sciences. The Wirral Archaeology found several artefacts in the area; arrowheads, spearheads or sword components. They believe that these were manufactured locally to supply a medieval army.¹⁷ However, these artefacts could not be linked with the previous battle, because there were other places, where this kind of metalworking was used and there was no sign of battle on them. Meanwhile, there are some secondary pieces of evidence, which could support this theory. It was situated much closer to Ireland, than the Humber, and it was easier for Olaf to use it when he crossed from Ireland. Moreover, there were many Viking settlements in here, which could be used as a supply base for Olaf's army.¹⁸

¹³ WOOD 2013: 138–139.

¹⁴ CAVILL 2014: 330–337.

¹⁵ WOOD 2013: 150.

¹⁶ CAVILL et al. 2004: 25–38.

¹⁷ LIVINGSTON 2019.

¹⁸ FOOT 2011: 178.

However, the theory could not fit into the temporary sources, which only mentioned the River Humber, not the Mersey. There was another researcher, who tried to determine the site of the battle by the sources, Michael Wood. In his examination, he relied on mostly contemporary accounts. He found a special appellation of the battle, Wendun. He thought that the last part of the name, "dun", refers to a fortified place, which was erected in the 10th century by Edward the Elder, or Lady Æthelflæd. The first part of it possibly alludes to the River Went, which is a smaller river nowadays, but at that time it was a huge tributary river of the Humber.¹⁹ Thus, this could be the river, which was used by Olaf's forces. Wood assumed that the name Brunanburh means a stream, therefore, the name means a fort beside the stream, which may have stood on a hill near the River Went. He had a possible candidate for the battlefield, Barnsdale Bar. Barnsdale Bar laid on the Great Northern Road, which was possibly used by Athelstan's armies when he invaded Scotland, and he could use it against Olaf. Barnsdale Bar is a hill, which has a height of 150 feet, and it had a previous Roman fort of Burghwallis. The fort lies in a strategic point, where the Great Northern Road converged into the Roman Road of Templeborough.

This place with the River Went was on the southern border of Northumbria, and this was the place, where the armies of the kingdom assembled. Thus, this could be an appropriate place for Olaf and Athelstan to gather their armies and fight the battle. Moreover, Burghwallis has a stream, the stream of St. Helena, which could be the stream, which was conserved in the name of the battle.²⁰ There are many other theories, because the sources can be interpreted differently. I would like to notify some of them: Barton upon Humber, for example, which lies on the shore of the River Humber. There were ancient earthworks near the settlement, which could be the place where the battle was fought. Moreover, there is a stream also in the town, which may also identify the place.²¹ On the northern shore of the Humber, there lies Brough, which is also a main candidate for the famous event. The theory was created by Adrien C. Grant. He mostly relied on William of Malmesbury, because he wrote that before the battle, Athelstan visited the church of Beverley. He assumes that the battle was fought in the middle of the Roman road, which connected York with Brough. Then, the Vikings could leave the area, because the Humber had a wider stream, so the Vikings easily used their ships when they fled from the battlefield.²²

The place of the battle

Before we try to summarise the campaign, it is needed to determine the location of the battle. If we started to analyse the campaign first, then move to the location of the battle, it would have resulted in wrong answers. It would be better to start with the place of the battle, then when we found it, analyse the campaign and the battle as a whole. Because from the battlefield the plans of Olaf and Athelstan could be

¹⁹ WOOD 2019.

²⁰ WOOD 2013: 156–158.

²¹ BROWN 1906: 45.

²² GRANT 2012.

deduced easily. If we wanted to find the exact location of Brunanburh, then we would use two methods simultaneously. First, the medieval sources because they contain essential pieces of information about the battlefield. They preserved mostly geographical elements and the different names of the battlefield, which can be used to find Brunanburh. My method here also contains two steps. First, I would retrieve the different information from the sources. These pieces of information help me narrow down the possible candidates for the battlefield. Then I will deal with the different names which were given to the location of the battle. I agree with Paul Cavill when he thought that all of the names of Brunanburh tried to show an exact location. However, we had to act carefully in our efforts, because many places could be the battlefield by their names. We have to take into consideration that many places are determined as Brunanburh when the different authors tried to deduce the place from the variants of names. These attempts ended with failure.

In my search for Brunanburh, the recent works and articles have been used in order to finally find the battlefield. I have relied on Michael Livingston's work, *The Battle of Brunanburh. A Casebook*,²³ Michael Woods's books and articles,²⁴ Sarah Foot's book about Athelstan²⁵ and the different articles,²⁶ which also tried to find the exact location with different methods. They contain many useful information and suggestions about the battlefield. I have tried to synchronise these two elements and also examined their proposals. Because I have not only tried to pinpoint the location of the battlefield, but I also examined some of the proposals, which were made before this article. These locations could show us the exact place of Brunanburh, so possibly they could be right. Thus, these pieces of information needed to be examined and verified.

Now, we have to move further with the different types of information, which possibly can show us, where the location of Brunanburh lies. It is highly possible, that the different types of information show one location. However, we shall premise, that to find Brunanburh, we will have to get through many names and information, and these can be fit for many different places in Northern England. Thus, the chance of failure and misinterpretation is high. Hence we have to take care of the details carefully.

First of all, we need a clear object, which helps us find Brunanburh. And this is the River Humber. The Humber is flowing in the Northern part of the British Isles, and it divided Northumbria and Mercia at that time. The best-known chronicler, who suggested the Humber as the main river of the campaign was John of Worcester. He said that Anlaf (Olaf) entered the mouth of the Humber with a huge fleet. Michael Wood accepted this information. He has written that as a clergyman, John of Worcester possibly accessed the appropriate information. Furthermore, he proved to be reliable, when he preserved the history of England. He also used previous chronicles, for example, the Metrical Chronicle of Robert Gloucester.²⁷ Meanwhile, Paul Cavill in his

²³ LIVINGSTON 2011: 30.

²⁴ Such as WOOD 2019; WOOD 2000: 149–185; WOOD 2013: 138–159.

²⁵ FOOT 2011: 167.

²⁶ For example CAVILL 2014; HALLORAN 2005: 133–148; or BREEZE 2016: 138–145.

²⁷ WOOD 2013: 147–148.

article *Escaping from Brunanburh and John of Worcester* rejected the idea that Olaf and his army arrived at the Humber.²⁸

He has written that John of Worcester did not mention that the battle was fought near the Humber. He also did not mention that ships, which were brought by the army, were near the battlefield. This means, that the fleeing Northmen and the Scots had to reach their ships, which were possibly at the Humber, and move back to Ireland and Scotland. He thought that what John meant here is that Olaf and Constantine were forced to flee with ships, which they have found near the battlefield.²⁹ To decide between the two concepts, we had to use other sources. William Malmesbury stated that Athelstan let Olaf advance far into England.³⁰ Moreover, as Egil's saga said, Athelstan's men chased down Olaf and Constantine's men, which means that they had to find boats if they wanted to escape. In my point of view, the mention of the ships means that the battle was close to the Humber. If the ships had not been so close, all of Olaf's men would have been butchered in the field, because no one can escape from the enemy afoot long enough. Thus, it is better to assume that the army of Olaf and Constantine left the battlefield with the help of the nearby river on their ships.

Symeon of Durham relied on this information,³¹ as did the chronicle of Melrose and the Metrical Chronicle of Robert Gloucester.³² Of course, the Humber was a logical choice, if Olaf wanted to take back Northumbria. This territory was taken away from the brothers of Sithric by Athelstan, thus Olaf wanted to take it back. He could not achieve this in the battle of Brunanburh, but he could do it after the death of Athelstan. Relying on these details, I agree with Michael Wood. Olaf used the Humber to reach Northumbria and John of Worcester preserved the information, which was used by other chronicles later.³³

Now, that we have determined the first geographical object we need further information to restrict the placement of the battle. However, we did not have many clues, which could help us to do it. Only two possible directions were determined in the chronicles, which preserved the battle. The first one, which has written by William Malmesbury, declared that Athelstan let the allied enemy contingents far into England.³⁴ This means that they did not fight the battle next to the Humber. Thus, the famous locations of Barton Upon Humber, and for example, the location of Brough³⁵ could be dismissed. But in what direction did Athelstan let the enemy advance, and why?

The second question could be answered easily. Egil's saga tells us that Athelstan tried to make a bargain. He would have given Olaf a huge amount of money in exchange for Olaf going home. Moreover, he persuaded Olaf that they should fight a battle in the field which was preliminarily agreed by the participants. These details suggest that Athelstan did not have adequate manpower to fight a battle with his enemies.

²⁸ CAVILL 2022: 899–919.

²⁹ CAVILL 2022: 899–919.

³⁰ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 1895: 149.

³¹ SYMEON OF DURHAM 1895: 125.

³² LIVINGSTON 2011: 67, 81, 85.

³³ SYMEON OF DURHAM 1895: 126.

³⁴ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 1895: 149.

³⁵ GRANT 2012: 4–9.

In order to gain the needed time, he had to let the armies of the allies deep into his territories. And he had to use other options to convince the enemy to go home (with a huge amount of money).³⁶

We now know that the enemy was let in deep inside the kingdom of Athelstan, however, we do not know, where or in which direction the army of Olaf went. To solve this problem, other sources needed to be examined. The information could be gained from the Metrical Chronicle of Robert Gloucester. He said that the battle was fought in the south from the Humber.³⁷ This meant all of the Northern and Western locations of the battle could be dismissed (Bromborough,³⁸ Burnley³⁹). Michael Wood's theory of Barnsdale could be criticised also,⁴⁰ because it was too far from the enemy's base of operation (York).

It is more than possible that York was used by Olaf and his allies as a base of operations. This place was adequate for the assembly of the allied troops. Olaf, by the different chronicles, came up via the River Humber with 615 ships.⁴¹ Although this number is too high for a contemporary Viking army, it pictured the greatness of this army. Moreover, we did not count on the armies of Constantine, the different Welsh tribes or the Strathclyde. These armies, when they became united, made such a huge force, that could not be supplied only with marauding the countryside. This huge army needed a fixed logistical base, which was provided possibly by York.

Thus the operations of these armies could not diverge farther from York. And after the conquest of York, Athelstan possibly marched against it and tried to make a battle with the allied enemy, or take back Northumbria. Moreover, the sight of the battle has to be near a river because the defeated allies had to leave the battlefield immediately if they did not want to die in the pursuit.⁴²

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle described that the pursuit has been taken for a day.⁴³ However, it could be doubted. The Chronicle suggested that Athelstan had with him also a cavalry force. If the allies came to the battlefield with ships, they were mostly on foot. If the pursuers used cavalry units, the enemy, who has fought on foot, could not escape from them, only if their ships were near. Without their ships, the forces of the enemy could be wiped out easily. All of these details meant that the battle had been fought on a field that lay in the proximity of a river, which could bear seagoing ships.

We did not consider one element, which could also help us in determine the battlefield. This is the name of the location. The most accepted version of it is Brunanburh. There are many different versions of what it means. The first one, which I wanted to mention is Bruna's Fort. The meaning of Brunanburh possibly contains two elements, the first one is Bruna or Brune, possibly a personal name of a male, and the second could mean a river name.⁴⁴ "Burh" can mean a fort, fortress or farmstead. Geoffrey

³⁶ Egil's Saga. In LIVINGSTON 2011: 71–73.

³⁷ GLOUCESTER 2011: 85.

³⁸ LIVINGSTON 2011: 19–21.

³⁹ WILKINSON 1857: 30–40.

⁴⁰ WOOD 2019.

⁴¹ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY 1895: 149.

⁴² FOOT 2011: 171.

⁴³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 1895: 87–88.

⁴⁴ CAVILL 2011: 331–332.

Gaimar, used the name Bruneswerce, some form of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle called the site Brunanbyrig, and Henry of Huntington also mentioned Brunanbirih. The last of the name in these variations also speaks about a fort or farmstead. Sometimes, at the end of the names the dun element appears, which can mean a hill, a fort or a village. Regardless of this, some names contain the ending ford.⁴⁵ This means that the place, which was sought, was possibly used as a crossing point. This could make our search a lot easier.

We have two different name suggestions for this case. The first one came from Michael Wood, who tried to explain this name with the use of the Old Norse language. He considered that the name Brunanburh comes from the Old Nordic brunnr, which means stream or maybe spring. Thus, the name Brunanburh possibly means the fort at the stream. There is another variation also. Paul Cavill in the book of Michael Livingston suggested that the first element of the name is declined weak, and the word has a masculine form. Hence the name can be interpreted as Bruna, which was a name for a male person. If we read the word carefully, it means the fort of Bruna. This name could lead us to Bromborough, which lies on the coast of the River Mersey, next to Liverpool. Bromborough was possibly called Brunanburh in the Viking era. The town's name means the brown manor or fort, and it possibly has a connection with the name Bruna, which means brown.⁴⁶ I could not decide between the names for now. I would like to examine the possible places, which were found during this research. The pieces of information, which were analysed determined the area of North Lincolnshire as the place of the battle. To choose the perfect candidate I synthesise them and use them carefully to find the best place, where the battle was fought.

We have the following information right now. The battle site had to be on the southern side of the River Humber. Not too far from a river or a stream, which could help the attackers to flee. They were also allowed to enter the realm of Athelstan because he needed some time to gain enough warriors to defeat Olaf. The place where they fought the battle was a hilly plain, which acquired a fort, or some earthworks. However, we did not analyse Egil's saga, which contains some information about the topography of the battle. He said that Olaf first occupied York, the former centre of Sithric. To do that he defeated Athelstan's two earls, Godric and Alfgar. After that Athelstan offered a battle at Vinheath by Vinwood. The place of the battle was settled with hazel wands. First Olaf occupied a fortress, which was situated north of the settlement, where the battle was fought. After that, his men created his camp. By the time his men have finished it, Athelstan came with his army and they camped between the forest and the river. In that place, the battle was fought by the two sides.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ CAVILL 2011: 334–335.

⁴⁶ CAVILL 2011: 330–337, 344–345.

⁴⁷ Egil's Saga. In LIVINGSTON 2011: 71.



Figure 2: Map of the southern shore of the Humber
Source: WINN s. a.

This little description has high importance because other sources did not preserve the topography. It could be a great help to find Brunanburh. With these details in mind, I have started to look after the exact location and spent a lot of time researching the exact location. Many candidates were analysed, and because of contradictory sources, they were rejected. The first place, which was my first choice, is Broughton. It contains the two elements of the name (Fort on a Hill). It lays south from the River Humber, but not exactly on its shore.⁴⁸ Thus, Olaf had to march for two or three days to reach the settlement. It is situated between a forest and the River Ancholme, and it lies on Ermine street, a former Roman road. However, we cannot find a fortified settlement in the north, and Olaf and his defeated army had to escape for two or three days to reach the Humber because the Ancholme could not bear his ships. Hence, it cannot be Brunanburh.

After that, another competitor was found, Burton upon Stather. Burton lies on the shore of the River Trent, south of the River Humber. It lies far from the river also, which means that the Northmen were allowed deep into the Kingdom of Athelstan. We can also examine the place by its name. The first part of it means hill or a farmstead on a hill. This can be related to Brunanburh. The last part is much more interesting. Stather came from the Old Norse word, stothvar, which means landing place. Therefore, the area was used as a landing point for the Vikings. There are other settlements in the area, which have Nordic names. For example, Normanby, Norman village or Coleby, which means the village of the followers of Kolli. It could be the place, where Olaf came to England and the battle was done. However, the two armies did not have many places to collide, thus Olaf and the allied armies could not even develop their

⁴⁸ Broughton s. a.

battle orders. Even more, the River Trent could be navigable for such a force, but none of our sources have spoken about the River Trent, only the River Humber.⁴⁹

Thus our research went upward to the shore of the River Humber. We had another possible location, which could be the legendary Brunanburh. The first choice is Winterton, which could be similar to Wendune or Weindune. It also lies a little deep inside the former kingdom of the English, just south of the Humber. The possible meaning of the name Wendune is a hill with a holy site. Although Winterton's name means Homestead of the followers of Wintra, the eastern side of the settlement has a Roman villa, which can be seen as a fort. Moreover, near it, there was a holy stream, which was used for healing. Also, the site of the battle was conserved by the Scots as Bruneingafield, which can also support this village as the battlefield of Brunanburh, and because of the holy stream, the name Wendune is applicable. However, there was not any fort in the area, which is an important criterion for Brunanburh.⁵⁰

There is another settlement up north on the shore of the Humber, Whitton. There is a debacle about the meaning of the name. Whitton possibly means White Island or Hwita's island of land. It is however on the bench of the Humber, thus the invading force could not go deep inside Athelstan's territory. We do not know any possible fort or farmstead in the area of the settlement. There was a Roman fortified camp here in the era of Vespasian. The settlement was used as a ford by the Romans and later by the local Saxons. It connected the south shore with Brough, the fort, which lies on the opposite side of the river.⁵¹ However, our sources did not mention any isles, where the battle was fought, and the old Roman camp could not be the fortress, where the battle was fought, because it was long gone by that time. Therefore, Whitton is not the battle sight we are looking for.



Figure 3: Barrow upon Humber
Source: *A Vision of Britain through Time* s. a.

⁴⁹ Burton upon Stather s. a.

⁵⁰ Winterton s. a.

⁵¹ *History of Whitton* 2018.

To this moment our research was fruitless. I have turned to the chronicle of Symeon of Durham for answers, which mentioned that Olaf and his forces arrived at the mouth of the River Humber.⁵² Hence, I have searched the area in vain hope to find the place, where the battle was fought. I have examined all of the names and histories of the settlements from Saltfleet to Barton-upon-Humber. I have found only one place that could fit the role of Brunanburh, Barrow upon Humber. First of all, the name does not contain the elements, which can be found in the names of the former settlements. In the name of Barrow, we cannot find any references for a fort, a hill or a holy place. The name means at the forest or rather at the grove.⁵³ However, this is where the story became interesting. In the north of the settlement, there is a motte and bailey castle, situated on a hill or dun, which tried to inspect the River Humber and the nearby stream, the Beck, which flows into the Humber. It was surrounded by moats on mostly all of its sides, and these were filled with the water of the Beck. The Beck was wider in the 10th century, which means it could provide the moats with water. From the motte, a bridge led to the bailey. The motte and bailey were made of timber and it was widened with an outer section to defend the nearby road. It was possibly created in the era of William the Conqueror in 1087.⁵⁴ However, it is even possible that the Vikings fortified the place previously. The Beck was navigable, thus, the Vikings could use it, and make an early fortification, which was used by the later lord Mordcar to build another castle.

Why is this place perfect for the battle of Brunanburh? We have two answers to that. The first one came from Egil's saga. It said that Olaf came from York, and occupied a fort, which was situated to the north of the place of the battle. He needed this fort to store his supply, and it served him as a possible defensive area if he had to retreat from the English armies. The motte and bailey are up north of Barrow upon Humber, hence it could be that fortress, which was used by Olaf. Moreover, the geography of the battle also supports our claim that the battle was fought here. Egil's saga mentioned that the battle was fought between a river or a stream, and a huge forest.⁵⁵ The stream is given, it could be the Humber or the Beck. However, Barrow's name means at the grove. In the 7th century, the area was given to St. Chad to build a monastery at the Barvae, in the woods.⁵⁶ This information means that the area had a huge forest at that time. Also, it continued southwards.

The huge forest, where the battle was fought could be easily determined. First, we have Barrow, which means at the forest or grove. The grove also means a limited extent of wood. Then, to the south of it lays Thornton Curtis. The first element of its name is Thorn, which can be delivered from the hawthorn tree. The other element, dun, means village. Thus, the name of the settlement is the village, where the thorns grew.⁵⁷ From the south of it, there is another place, which is Wootton. The settlement's name also has two elements; the first means wood and the second dun; the

⁵² SYMEON OF DURHAM 1895: 125.

⁵³ *Barrow upon Humber* s. a.

⁵⁴ For information about the motte and bailey see Gatehouse 2017.

⁵⁵ Egil's Saga. In LIVINGSTON 2011: 71.

⁵⁶ *The Life of St. Chad* 1907.

⁵⁷ *Thornton Curtis* s. a.

Wood farm.⁵⁸ The names show us the extent of a huge forest, which was determined in Egil's saga.

We have not talked about the other element in Thornton Curtis's name, the element of Curtis. I have not found any possible explanation for it, hence I have examined the word itself. The name has a Norman origin. It means courteous, polite and or chivalrous. The name came with the Normans to Britain before 1066, and it was established after the Norman Conquest all over the country.⁵⁹ However, there was not any connection between Thornton and the Normans. And why it is called courteous. In my point of view, the name Curtis preserves a tradition. The tradition assumes that under the battle of Brunanburh it was the headquarters of none other than king Athelstan himself. It can be possible that the settlement was given the name Curtis in the Norman time to remind that the village was used once by a king. Egil's saga mentioned that the king lived near the heath, from the south, where the battle was fought.⁶⁰ We knew that in Barrow there was a grove, which means it was part of the heath. To the south of it, there was a huge forest, and this was not part of the heath. The forest possibly started at Thornton, which was the nearest settlement to the presumed battlefield. Athelstan possibly chose this settlement to examine his enemy. Hence it is highly probable, that the Normans knew exactly, where the battle was fought and gave the name Curtis to the village to remember it.

There is another settlement, which has to be mentioned here. There was a little village between Thornton and Wooton, Bodebi. However, the parish became extinct later, but it was conserved in the Domesday Book. The name of the village can be translated as Boothby, the village of the booths. We do not know why the settlement was given this name. My suggestion is that this place was occupied by Athelstan's soldiers. We know from Egil's saga that where the distance was the tiniest between the river and the forest, Athelstan's army made their camp.⁶¹ The camp possibly surrounded Athelstan's position, which was not far from him. It is presumable that the lost village's name preserved the camp, where Athelstan's soldiers lived.⁶² These pieces of evidence are probably attached to the battle of Brunanburh. I was strongly convinced that the battle was fought near, and the place names support that the battle was fought near Barrow upon Humber. Now we can turn back to our story, which remained unfinished in the first few pages. We can analyse the campaign and the battle itself, and also answer why Olaf finally lost the battle at Barrow.

Conclusion

In this study, I have tried not only to determine the exact location of Brunanburh but also to reveal some important details about the battle and contemporary warfare. First, from synthesising the different pieces of information, I possibly narrowed the

⁵⁸ *Wootton s. a.*

⁵⁹ *House of Names s. a.*

⁶⁰ *Egil's Saga.* In LIVINGSTON 2011: 73.

⁶¹ *Egil's Saga.* In LIVINGSTON 2011: 71.

⁶² *Bodebi s. a.*

different suggestions and theories into one location. To find Brunanburh (a large area near Barrow) I mainly relied on the chronicles and the place names. These helped find the huge forest, which surrounded the battlefield. Meanwhile, the place, where the king installed his court and the place of his army were probably also determined. I would like to underline Egil's saga because it has given us accurate information about the terrain of the battlefield and helped me find it. In my point of view, the saga tells us how the battle happened. It gives us essential insight into the motivation of the invasion, the battlefield and the fight itself. At some point, it makes mistakes, for example when it declares that the right flank of Olaf's forces contained mostly Scots. But it seems that the story preserved Egil's point of view when it discusses the battle. He could not see everything or sometimes he forgot something. But the saga kept his original insight about the battle.

We need to dedicate some sentences to the name debate of Brunanburh. I think that when the experts and researchers tried to find Brunanburh, they thought that the battle was named after an exact settlement. And this theory is wrong. The participants named the battle after some distinct geographical objects. These were a castle, Burgh, and a stream, which is in this case the Beck. Therefore, I agree with Michael Wood's translation, which means a castle at the stream. Moreover, the geography of the former battlefield was recreated in this study using the place names, which surround Barrow. These confirm that near Barrow, there was a huge forest, which lay between it and Wootton. And also strengthen Egil's claim that the battle was fought between a river (Humber), and a huge forest.

Let me write one paragraph about the battle itself. In the battle of Brunanburh all elements of traditional Viking warfare were used (shield wall, flying wedge), and they were used simultaneously. First Thorolf used the flying wedge against the forces of Constantine, but it was ineffective due to the dissolution of the formation, and the resistance of the Norsemen in Olaf's forces. However, his right flank was also dissolved, when it tried to destroy Athelstan's retreating left. Egil managed to chase off Olaf's right flank from the battlefield and invert the battle. This means that the opposing forces could dissolve easily, and Athelstan owes his victory to luck.

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