



**Egil's Saga's  
Battle of Vínheiðar  
at Brasside**

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# Introduction

Egil's Saga is a biography of Egill Skallagrimson, a 10th century Icelandic mercenary, pirate and farmer. He and his brother Thorolf spent some time in England fighting for King Æthelstan. Egil's Saga describes their participation in a major battle. It is usually assumed to be the Battle of Brunanburh in 937. We are among the dissenters who think it is describing a different battle, for which we have adopted Egil's Saga's name, the 'Battle of Vínheiðar'. In this paper, we explain why we think it was fought at Brasside near Durham in 927.



*Figure 1: Bas-relief of Egill Skallagrimson carrying his dead brother, Borganes, Iceland*

## Historical background

Æthelstan came to power in the mid-920s. His realm covered the whole of modern England below the Humber, bar Cornwall. There were four realms north of the Humber: 1) The Kingdom of York; 2) The Anglian kingdom of Bernicia; 3) The Brythonic kingdom of Strathclyde and Cumberland; 4) The Pictish-Gael kingdom of Alba. The Kingdom of York comprised the mainly Danish Viking region of Deira

in the east and the mainly Brythonic region of modern Lancashire in the west. It was ruled, along with north-western islands, peninsulas and coasts by a sect of ethnic Norse Vikings based in Dublin. David Griffiths, who wrote the definitive book about these people, refers to them as the 'Hiberno-Norse'. We will use his term.



Figure 2: British Isles in 924

In late 926 or early 927, Sihtric, Hiberno-Norse King of York, died. Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York. Sihtric's brother Guthfrith, King of the Hiberno-Norse at Dublin, was his heir. Some think that he raised an army and occupied Jorvik (the City of York), others think that he invaded England hoping to take Jorvik but did not get that far. Æthelstan evicted him, apparently without a fight. The same year, Æthelstan defeated King Constantine II of Alba (Scotland), King Owain of Strathclyde & Cumberland, and King Hywel Dda of Wales. They were forced to accept his overlordship, uniting most of modern



England under a single ruler for the first time and giving him hegemony over mainland Britain.

The subjugated northern kings rebelled in 934. Æthelstan led an army into Alba to quell the uprising. Later that year Guthfrith died. Guthfrith's son Olaf succeeded to the Hiberno-Norse throne in Dublin. In 937, this Olaf (Guthfrithson) formed a rebel alliance with Constantine and Owain. They invaded somewhere in what is now the north of England, before being defeated by Æthelstan at the Battle of Brunanburh.

## Egil's Saga's confusion with Brunanburh

At a glance, it seems that Egil's Saga's battle might be the Battle of Brunanburh:

- Egil's Saga describes Æthelstan's participation in a major battle at a place named 'Vínheiðar'. Brunanburh is the only major battle in which Æthelstan is known to have participated.
- Egil's Saga's battle was in the north of modern England. Brunanburh was in the north of modern England.
- Egil's Saga says that Æthelstan's adversaries were an alliance of invaders from the north. Brunanburh is the only documented conflict in which Æthelstan faced an alliance of invaders from the north.
- Egil's Saga says that the leader of the invaders was Olaf the Red, King of Scotland. Brunanburh is the only conflict in which Æthelstan is known to have faced anyone named Olaf.

Delving a little deeper, there are a bunch of inconsistencies between Egil's Saga's battle and Brunanburh:

- Egil's Saga says that the invaders were Scots and Britons. English accounts of Brunanburh say that the invaders were Hiberno-Norse, Scots and Britons. If any Hiberno-Norse were involved in its battle, it would be out of character for Egil's Saga not to have given them top billing.

- Egil's Saga says that the invaders were led by Olaf the Red, King of the Scotland, "*a Scot on his father's side, Danish on his mother's, being descended from Ragnar Hairy-Breeks*". English accounts of Brunanburh say that the invaders were led by Olaf Guthfrithson, King of the Hiberno-Norse, who was Norse on his father's side, being the grandson of Ímar, Norse founder of the Hiberno-Norse dynasty.
- Egil's Saga says that the invaders marched south from Scotland. English accounts of Brunanburh say that the Hiberno-Norse arrived and left by ship.
- Egil's Saga says that Æthelstan was quick to issue a formal challenge to the invaders after they defeated his Northumbrian militia. William of Malmesbury says that Æthelstan was slow to respond to the Brunanburh invasion, and only did so when shamed by their ongoing plundering of his realm.
- Egil's Saga says that its battle was arranged a week or more in advance on an agreed day at a demarcated field. William of Malmesbury says that the Brunanburh battle started with a surprise nocturnal raid on the English camp.
- Egil's Saga's battlefield was a symmetrical level plain bounded by hills on one side and a river on the other. William of Malmesbury says that the Brunanburh battlefield was on a road at or near a ford.
- Egil's Saga's battle was shield wall to shield wall, both sides having time to organise their deployment and their advance. William of Malmesbury describes Brunanburh as an opportunistic nocturnal raid on the English camp followed by an English counterattack.
- Egil's Saga says that three kings/earls were "*laid low*" – i.e. defeated - in its battle. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that five kings and seven earls were killed at Brunanburh, and that excludes at least three kings that escaped.
- Egil's Saga does not mention any horses participating in its battle and it implies that the invaders were chased on foot. William of Malmesbury says that the Brunanburh invaders had: "*Countless squadrons both of foot and horse*". The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that Æthelstan's men chased the fleeing invaders on horseback.

- Egil's Saga implies that the invaders returned to their homeland on foot. The English accounts emphasise that a large proportion of the Brunanburh invaders fled by ship.

Translator Alistair Campbell noted some of these inconsistencies back in the 1930s: *“it is evident that Egil's Saga must be treated with the greatest caution and that none of its statements relative to the battle on Vinheithr must be taken as true of the battle of Brunanburh unless they are confirmed by independent sources”*.

Delving deeper still, Egil's Saga timeline is fundamentally inconsistent with Brunanburh. Egil's Saga contains no dates, but the timeline can be calculated. At the start of Chapter 50, Egil's Saga (Fell) explains: *“When Æthelstan succeeded to the throne hostilities began among the chieftains who had lost their power to his ancestors ... Æthelstan gathered an army and gave pay to all men from home or abroad who were willing to earn such money. The brothers Thorolf and Egil were willing to earn such money.”* Æthelstan's succession was not straightforward because the barons of Mercia resisted. He was only crowned King of England in September 926. Later that year, he annexed the Kingdom of York in a bloodless coup after Sihtric's death<sup>1</sup>. This was the most likely trigger for the northern kings to rebel, and that was the trigger for Æthelstan to send his call for mercenaries. The hostilities ended with a peace accord agreed at Eamont Bridge in 927. It is unlikely to have taken more than a year for the news to arrive with Egill and Thorolf, and they could not have arrived after the peace treaty was agreed, so they arrived in England in the Autumn of 927. The rest of Egil's Saga's timeline can be calculated because it meticulously notes where Egill spends his winters:

- Egill was with Thorir Hroaldsson at Gaular two winters before Egil's Saga's battle. Thorir died in 925, so Egil's Saga's battle was no later than 927, at least ten years before Brunanburh.
- Egil's Saga mentions no winters between Egill's arrival in England

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<sup>1</sup> There is one year of uncertainty about many of the dates because English annals of the same events often differ by a year or two. This might be because receipt of the news was delayed, or the event was confused in the telling, or the chronicle's year started in September.



and its battle. Egill arrived in England no later than 927, so Egil's Saga's battle was at least ten years before Brunanburh.

- Egill's brother was killed in Egil's Saga's battle. Egill married Asgerd, his brother's widow, two years after Egil's Saga's battle. His marriage was before Eric Bloodaxe became King of Norway in 932, so Egil's Saga's battle was before 930, at least seven years before Brunanburh.
- Egill returned to Norway the year after Egil's Saga's battle, to discover that Thorir Hroaldsson had died. He died in 925. If Egil's Saga's battle was Brunanburh, Egill would be returning to Norway in 938, 13 years after Thorir's death. He was an important military leader, foster father to future king Eric Bloodaxe, best man at Thorolf's wedding, and his father's best friend. It is inconceivable that Egill would not have heard news of his death for 13 years, so Egil's Saga's battle must have been many years before Brunanburh.
- Egill spent 'several' years with his father in Iceland before his father died. His father died before Eric Bloodaxe killed his brothers which was one or two years before Haakon became King of Norway. Haakon became king in 934, so Egill's father died no later than 933. If 'several' meant at least two, Egill arrived in Iceland no later than 931. It was three winters after Egil's Saga's battle, so the battle was no later than 928, at least nine years before Brunanburh.
- Æthelstan died in 939. Egill visited Æthelstan at least eight winters after Egil's Saga's battle, so the battle was no later than 931, at least six years before Brunanburh.
- Egill returned to England to visit Æthelstan at least eight winters after Egil's Saga's battle. Æthelstan died three years after Brunanburh, so Egil's Saga's battle is not Brunanburh. Egill hears that all is well with Æthelstan's kingdom. The only period of relative peace and stability during Æthelstan's reign was between his invasion of Alba in 934 and Brunanburh in 937. Egil's Saga's battle was therefore no later than 929.
- Islendingabok shows that Egill's first child, Thorgerdr, was born in 939, Wikipedia reckons 935. Egill married Asgerd two years after Egil's Saga's battle. Even if Asgerd fell pregnant immediately, Egil's

Saga's battle was no later than 936 (or 932 if Wikipedia is right), at least a year before Brunanburh.

- Egil's Saga says that Egill was aged 13 when he left Iceland on his first overseas adventure. Egil's Saga says that he returned Iceland 12 winters after he left. This was also the year after he got married which was two years after Egil's Saga's battle. So, he was aged 22 at Egil's Saga's battle. Wikipedia and *Islendingabok* give Egill's year of birth as 904 and 910 respectively, meaning that Egil's Saga's battle was in 926/7 or 932/3, at least four years before Brunanburh.
- Egill was 22 at Egil's Saga's battle. If that battle was Brunanburh in 937, he would have been born in 915. *Islendingabok* gives his mother's year of birth as 870, so she would have to have been 45 when she gave birth to Egill. The oldest known medieval childbirth age is 42, so Egil's Saga's battle was not Brunanburh.

Egil's Saga translator Eric Eddison worked all this out in the 1930s: "*The better opinion inclines to-day to identify the two battles, correcting the whole chronological system of the saga accordingly.*" Hermann Pálsson elaborated in his 1975 Egil's Saga translation: "*The Battle of Vinheid in ESS [Egil's Saga] is usually identified with the Battle of Brunanburh, which was fought at an unknown place in 937, but such an identification makes a complete mess of the chronology of ESS*". Eddison devised a chronology of Egill's life which dated Egil's Saga's battle to 927. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir published a more detailed chronology in Scudder's 2004 Egil's Saga translation which dated the battle to 925.

We discuss the evidence in much greater detail in our paper 'Why Egil's Saga is not describing Brunanburh'.<sup>2</sup> It includes a revised chronology of Egill's life that confirms Egil's Saga's battle took place in 927 (Óskarsdóttir made a minor error which threw out her calculation by two years). English chronicles – translations below - record Æthelstan's involvement in military action in 927 against Kings

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/83623495/Why\\_Egils\\_Saga\\_is\\_not\\_describing\\_Brunanburh](https://www.academia.edu/83623495/Why_Egils_Saga_is_not_describing_Brunanburh)

Constantine, Owain and Guthfrith. They are consistent with all the Egil's Saga clues and match all but one of them.

The exception concerns Olaf. Egil's Saga says that the leader of the invaders at its battle was named Olaf the Red. Sihtric's son, Olaf Sihtricson, is said by some English accounts to have been evicted by Æthelstan, but they imply that he fled without a fight. The only Olaf that Æthelstan is known to have battled against is Olaf Guthfrithson at Brunanburh. This is the main evidence that Egil's Saga's battle is Brunanburh, but if that were so, it would create the 20 or so inconsistencies and anachronisms listed above. We are convinced that Egil's Saga's Olaf the Red referred to Constantine II, King of Scotland. Snorri Sturluson, Egil's Saga's skald, might have made a mistake, but we think it more likely that he deliberately gave Constantine a Norse name to make him more relevant to his Norse audience. This, after all, is what he did with Hring and Adils, leaders of the Britons in Egil's Saga, who would obviously not have had Norse names.

We are therefore confident that Egil's Saga is describing a battle that took place in Northumbria in 927 between Æthelstan and an alliance of Scots and Britons under Kings Constantine and Owain. The only other person to have worked this out is Adrian Grant, so it is interesting to check his theory.

## A battlefield north or south of Jorvik

Adrian Grant's theory was first published in his 2020 paper: "*The Battle of White Hill ('Vin Heath'), 927*". It explains why he believes that Egil's Saga's battle was fought in 927 against Guthfrith at White Hill near Doncaster. This is ninety miles away from where we think the battle was fought at Brasside, and against a different opponent. The discrepancy is down to an inconsistency in Egil's Saga.

Egil's Saga sets the scene by explaining that when Egill arrived in England (Green): "[Northumbria] was in Athelstan's dominions; he had set over it two earls, the one named Alfgeir, the other Gudrek". It was a

common practice in Norway for earls to hold land jointly, but not in Britain, so it is more likely that one was earl of Bernicia the other of Deira. The action starts in Chapter 52 (Paulsson): “*King Olaf of Scotland gathered a great army and led it south into England, plundering everywhere as soon as he came to Northumberland. When the earls in charge there got word of this, they mustered their force and went out to face the King. King Olaf won a fierce battle when they clashed. Earl Godrek was killed and Alfgeir had to make a run for it with most of the troops who had survived.*”

The narrative continues: “*Since Alfgeir could offer no resistance, King Olaf was able to take the whole of Northumberland.*” It sounds unequivocal: the invaders took the whole of Northumbria, so they must have taken its capital Jorvik (the city of York). Æthelstan was coming from the south. Grant reasons that the invaders would have defended their front line, so the battle probably happened close to Northumbria’s southern border. He works out that the most likely location is White Hill near Doncaster.

But here is the inconsistency. Egill writes a poem about this same battle (Paulsson): “*One earl [Alfgeir] fled from Olaf, life ended for the other [Gudrek]; The lusty war leader [Olaf] was lavish in blood gifts; England’s enemy conquered half Alfgeir’s earldom; While the great Godrek rambled on the gore plain.*” It says that the invaders only took half of Alfgeir’s earldom. The invaders could not have taken Deira without first taking Bernicia. They could not have taken the south without first taking the north. Therefore, Egill’s poem is probably saying that Alfgeir was earl of Bernicia and that the invaders took the northern half of his earldom. Even if Alfgeir was earl of all Northumbria, Egill’s poem would still be saying that he only lost the northern half, 75 miles from York.

We have discussed this with Adrian. He interprets the conflicting statements to mean that the initial battle was at Otterburn, at which point the invaders had indeed conquered the northern half of Bernicia, but that they then went on to conquer the rest of Northumbria before the main battle. We have no tangible evidence that he is wrong, but it

seems unlikely to us. Before giving some reasons, we should summarise what Egil's Saga says about events after Æthelstan gets news of Alfgeir's defeat through to the battle engagement.

Egil's Saga (Palsson): "... without wasting any time he [Æthelstan] set out with all the men he could muster to face the Scots." So, having received news of Alfgeir's defeat, Æthelstan immediately leads the men he has at hand, along with Egill and his 300 mercenaries, to attack the invaders. Egil's Saga continues: "The news [of Alfgeir's defeat] had reached Hring and Adils [leaders of the Strathclyde Britons], and they went over to the side of King Olaf with the large army they had assembled." So, the Strathclyde Britons join the enemy. Æthelstan decides that the combined enemy is too powerful for the men he has with him. He sends a challenge to the invaders while he returns south to levy more men. Egil's Saga: "The troops that had already gathered there were placed by the King under the command of Thorolf and Egil." His men at hand are put under Egill's command, and they continue north to intercept the invaders.

So, this is why we think the invaders did not take Jorvik.

- Æthelstan's employment contract with Egill and Thorolf was to guard England's borders. The rebellions were in the north, so they must have been in a northern town when Alfgeir arrived with news of his defeat. Jorvik and Lincoln were the only northern towns big enough to accommodate a king and his army. Æthelstan and Egill must have been on one or the other. It seems to us that Jorvik is by far the most likely because the latter was unfortified and was one of the ethnic Danish 'Five Boroughs' that were hostile towards Æthelstan. If Æthelstan and Egill were in Jorvik when news of Alfgeir's defeat arrive, the invaders could not have occupied Jorvik before Egil's Saga's battle.
- Even if Æthelstan was at Lincoln or Tamworth when he received news of Alfgeir's defeat, Alfgeir would have had to pass through Jorvik to get there. The garrison would have had at least a week to prepare for a siege. Indeed, he was on horseback while the invaders

were on foot, the invaders needed to forage for food as they went, and the invaders probably plundered passing towns. The garrison probably had a fortnight or more to prepare. It is inconceivable to us that Jorvik could have fallen before Æthelstan and/or Egill arrived.

- Even if Æthelstan was in Tamworth and Alfgeir forgot to warn Jorvik about his defeat, the chances of the invaders sacking it before Æthelstan arrived seem negligible. Æthelstan had annexed Jorvik at least nine months earlier. Presumably, he had had garrisoned Jorvik with loyal supporters and had evicted Hiberno-Norse inhabitants. Jorvik would surely have been able to hold out for a few weeks before Æthelstan and Egill arrived.
- We think that the battle between Alfgeir and the invaders was at Morebattle, 22 miles north of Otterburn, making it even less likely that the invaders got to Jorvik.
- The defeat and occupation of Jorvik by Scots invaders would have been big news, but no contemporary accounts mention it.
- If, as Grant believes, the battle was fought at White Hill, it was in the ethnic Danish 'Five Boroughs'. Adrian tells us that he thinks White Hill was close to the Five Boroughs but outside. It makes little difference. The Five Boroughs was hostile to Æthelstan. If Æthelstan was fighting in their land or nearby, they would surely have joined the invaders but there is no mention of it in Egil's Saga.

Guthfrith appears in Wikipedia's king-list for the Kings of York. If he was crowned, it would support Grant's theory, if not it would support ours. Clare Downham, who wrote the reference book on Norse kings of England and Ireland, says that the evidence is inconclusive. Guthfrith might be like Lady Jane Grey, in that he succeeded to the Kingdom of York on Sihtric's death but was never crowned. Malmesbury says that Guthfrith laid siege to Jorvik after Constantine and Æthelstan had agreed a peace treaty but got repulsed and returned to Dublin. No contemporary accounts mention that Jorvik was attacked, besieged or occupied before the peace treaty was agreed. Indeed, there is no evidence that Guthfrith participated in the 927 conflicts before the peace treaty was signed, let alone that he was crowned.

If we are right that the battle was fought north of the Tees, Egil's Saga's narrative about the invaders conquering the whole of Northumberland is either mistaken or mistranslated. We think the latter. All the translators have something similar to Pálsson. They are all viable translations, but this does not mean they are the only viable translations. The original Icelandic says: "*lagði Ólafur konungur þá allt Norðimbraland undir sig*". 'lagði' can mean 'laid' which translators interpret to mean 'subdued' but it is equally likely to mean 'thrust into'. This Icelandic phrase is equally likely to mean "*King Olaf thrust into all Northumbria below him*", or similar, meaning that he led his army south from the battle against Alfgeir and Gudrek into southern Bernicia. This would not infer that the invaders occupied Jorvik, or indeed that they got into Deira.

The remainder of our theory assumes that the invaders did not take Jorvik before Egil's Saga's battle. We have no proof. We are not even sure that our theory is significantly more likely than Grant's, but we are sure it is valid. Readers can make up their own minds, perhaps rejecting both. We are happy to debate the possibilities offline.

## The Battle of Vínheiðar

We are going to try to work out the Vínheiðar battlefield location from clues in Egil's Saga and the English accounts of 926 and 927. As we point out in the footnote on page 18, medieval chronicles are often report events in two or more different years, partly due to the time it took for news to disseminate and partly because some start their calendar year in September. Clare Downham calculates that the annals below refer to 927, albeit some start in September 926.

### English accounts of 926/927 military actions

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle D recension for 926 (Whitlock) says: "*In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky, and Sihtric died, and King Athelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians ; and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in*



*this island : first Hywel, king of the West Welsh, and Constantine, king of the Scots, and Owain, king of the people of Gwent, and Aldred, son of Eadwulf from Bamburgh. And they established peace with pledge and oaths in the place which is called Eamont, on 12 July, and renounced all idolatry and afterwards departed in peace.”*

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle E recension for 927 (Whitlock) says: *“In this year King Athelstan drove out King Guthfrith. And in this year Archbishop Wulf helm went to Rome.”*
- John of Worcester’s entry for 926 says: *“Fiery lights in the northern part of the heavens were visible throughout the whole of England. Shortly afterward, Sihtric, king of Northumbria, departed this life, and king Athelstan expelled Guthferth his son and successor, and united the kingdom to the others which were under his imperial sway, for he defeated in battle and put to flight all the kings throughout Albion; for instance, Howel, king of the West Britons (the Welsh), and afterwards Constantino, king of the Scots, and Wuer (Owen) king of the Wenti (q. Gwent). He also expelled Aldred, the son of Eadulf, from his royal town called by the English Bebbanbyrig (Bamborough). All these, finding that they could no longer resist his power, sued for peace, and assembling at a place called Eamot, on the fourth of the ides [the 12th] of July, ratified by their oaths a solemn treaty.”*
- The Irish annals of Ulster says that in April 927: *“The fleet of Linn Duachaill departed and Gothfrith abandoned Ath Cliath; and Gothfrith returned again within six months”.*
- Malmesbury says of Sihtric: *“dying after a year, Athelstan took that province under his own government, expelling one Aldulph, who resisted him”.* The year can be calculated as 926 from context. Presumably he means Guthfrith.
- Huntingdon says of Æthelstan after Sihtric’s death: *“For in the course of the year following, Guthfrith, king of the Danes, brother of Reginald, the king already named, having provoked him to war, was defeated and put to flight, and slain”.*
- Simeon’s second chronicle in History of the Kings for year 926 says: *“Sithric, king of the Northumbrians, departed this life; whose*

kingdom king Ethelstan added to his own dominion, driving out his son Guthferth, who had succeeded his father in the kingdom. He likewise conquered in battle, and put to flight, all the kings of the whole of Albion, namely, Huval, king of the West Britons, then Constantine, king of the Scots, and Wuer, king of the Wenti. All these, seeing they could not resist his might, begging from him peace, met him at the place called Eamotun, on the fourth of the ides of July [12th July], and made with him a treaty, which they confirmed with an oath.”

- Gaimar says: “His son Adelstan succeeded him. When he had reigned nearly four years, he fought a battle with the Danes, and discomfited king Gudfrid”. ‘Nearly four years’ means that this happened in 927 or 928.
- Roger of Wendover’s entry for 926 says: “Fiery rays were seen throughout the whole of England in the northern quarter of the heavens, portending the disgraceful death of the aforesaid king Sithric, who came to an evil end shortly afterwards ; on which king Ethelstan expelled Guthferth his son from his kingdom, which he annexed to his own dominions”.

## Egil’s Saga’s battlefield description

Egil’s Saga says that Olaf’s [Constantine’s] invading army was marching south from Scotland, and that the English army, purportedly under Egill Skallagrimsson and his brother Thorolf, was heading north to meet them. They faced off somewhere in Northumbria. Meanwhile, Æthelstan was in Wessex levying more men. Here is part of W C Green's 1893 translation:

1. After this they sent messengers to king Olaf [Constantine], giving out this as their errand, that king Athelstan would fain enhazel him a field and offer battle on Vinheiði by Vínuskóga; meanwhile he would have them forbear to harry his land; but of the twain he should rule England who should conquer in the battle.

2. He appointed a week hence for the conflict, and whichever first came on the ground should wait a week for the other. Now this was then the custom, that so soon as a king had enhazelled a field, it was a shameful act to harry before the battle was ended. Accordingly king Olaf [Constantine] halted and harried not, but waited till the appointed day, when he moved his army to Vínheiði. North of the heath stood a town. There in the town king Olaf [Constantine] quartered him, and there he had the greatest part of his force, because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed.

3. But he sent men of his own up to the heath where the battlefield was appointed; these were to take camping-ground, and make all ready before the army came. But when the men came to the place where the field was enhazelled, there were all the hazel-poles set up to mark the ground where the battle should be. The place ought to be chosen level, and whereon a large host might be set in array. And such was this; for in the place where the battle was to be the heath was level, with a river flowing on one side, on the other a large wood.

4. But where the distance between the wood and the river was least (though this was a good long stretch), there king Athelstan's men had pitched, and their tents quite filled the space between wood and river.

5. They had so pitched that in every third tent there were no men at all, and in one of every three but few. Yet when king Olaf's [Constantine's] men came to them, they had then numbers swarming before all the tents, and the others could not get to go inside. Athelstan's men said that their tents were all full, so full that their people had not nearly enough room. But the front line of tents stood so high that it could not be seen over them whether they stood many or few in depth.

*6. Olaf's [Constantine's] men imagined a vast host must be there. King Olaf's [Constantine's] men pitched north of the hazel-poles, toward which side the ground sloped a little.*

Egill stalls, presumably under instruction from Æthelstan, offering ever more generous bribes for the invaders to go home. Meanwhile, Æthelstan was in Wessex and Mercia recruiting more men:

*7. From day to day Athelstan's men said that the king would come, or was come, to the town that lay south of the heath. Meanwhile forces flocked to them both day and night.*

There is a skirmish at the battlefield on the day before the main battle. An army of Britons led by the brothers Hring and Adils fight an English scouting army led by Alfgeir, Egill and Thorolf. Alfgeir flees. Egill and Thorolf take command. They kill Hring and Adils and rout the invaders.

The main battle is the following day. The Norse mercenaries under Thorolf fight near the woodland, the main English division under Æthelstan fight towards the river. Æthelstan insists that Egill, against his wishes, fights with the English:

*8. After this they formed in the divisions as the king had arranged, and the standards were raised. The king's division stood on the plain towards the river; Thorolf's division moved on the higher ground beside the wood.*

Æthelstan is victorious, but Thorolf is killed by skirmishers who loop through woodland to get behind the mercenary shield wall. Constantine and the surviving invaders flee. Egill pursues them, killing any that he catches. When sated, he returns to the battlefield to bury his brother. Æthelstan returns to his billet south of the battlefield:

9. *While his men still pursued the fugitives, king Æthelstan left the battle-field, and rode back to the town.*

Egill writes a poem about Thorolf's death:

10. *Dauntless the doughty champion dashed on, the earl's bold slayer:  
In stormy stress of battle stout-hearted Thorolf fell; Green grows on  
soil of Vinu grass o'er my noble brother; But we our woe - a sorrow  
worse than death-pang must bear.*

Egill writes another poem about the aftermath of the main battle. Here he explains that he killed many invaders to the west of the hazelled battlefield, suggesting that they fled west.

11. *With warriors slain round standard the western field I burdened;  
Adils with my blue Adder assailed mid snow of war; Olaf [?????],  
young prince, encountered England in battle thunder; Hring stood not  
stour of weapons, starved not the ravens' maw.*

So, putting this together. The English had marked out the battlefield with hazel poles<sup>1</sup>. The place was named *Vínheiði*, meaning 'wine-heath'. It was next to a woodland named *Vínuskóga*, meaning 'wine-forest'<sup>1</sup>. There was a 'town' north of the battlefield, where Constantine and most of his army were billeted<sup>2</sup>. The battlefield was fairly level, bounded laterally by a river on one side and by woodland on the other<sup>3</sup>. It was a little higher near the woodland, and open to the north and south<sup>3</sup>. It was a little lower on the rebel side of the battlefield to the north<sup>6</sup>. The gap between the river and the woodland narrowed south of the battlefield, where the English had pitched their tents<sup>4</sup>. It was difficult to see beyond the front row of tents<sup>5</sup>. There was another 'town' to the south of the battlefield, where most of the English barons were billeted<sup>7</sup>. After the battle, the rebels fled to the west<sup>11</sup>. Thorolf was buried at a place named 'Vinu'<sup>10</sup>.

It is difficult to believe Æthelstan's alleged battle challenge. Egil's Saga

suggests that ‘Olaf’ was honour-bound to accept such a challenge by Norse custom. It is not a known Norse custom and Constantine would not have been bound by it anyway because he was not Norse. We suspect that the challenge was fabricated by Snorri to thrill his Norse audience. It seems likely to us that both sides garrisoned at defensively sound strongholds when they came within striking distance, such that neither army was strong enough to break through the enemy fortifications. Each would have dug in, hoping the other might try a suicidal attack. Perhaps, they did eventually agree to fight on a level battlefield between the camps, each thinking they would win a fair fight. In other words, the places and battle events were the same as described in Egil’s Saga but not because a challenge was issued and accepted.

If the rebels fled west, the river must have been to the east, with the wood to the west. The battlefield was perhaps 1000m wide, to encompass a shield wall of roughly 3000 men, and perhaps 1000m deep to allow them to manoeuvre. There was enough space north and south of the battlefield for perhaps 1000 tents on each side. Egil’s Saga says that English tents are on rising ground, making it difficult to see those at the back.

While we suspect that Æthelstan’s challenge was a literary device, there is no obvious reason why Snorri would invent the troop movements. Thus, the armies probably did billet at ‘borgs’. ‘borg’ and variations mean ‘stronghold’ or ‘town’. We interpret this to mean that there were substantial fortified settlements north and south of Egil’s Saga’s battlefield, one or both of which might have been towns, and that they were joined by a Roman road.

## The battlefield at Brasside

According to Egil’s Saga, Æthelstan realised that the combined Scots and Strathclyde Britons made a formidable foe. His immediate concern would have been to prevent Deira’s ethnic Danes from joining the

invaders. It appears that he succeeded because Egil's Saga does not report the involvement of any Danes in its battle, and it would surely have done if this were not so. Presumably, then, the invaders were blocked, and the battle was fought, somewhere in Bernicia. The border between Deira and Bernicia was at the River Tees.

Æthelstan resolved to head south to raise an extra levy in Mercia and Wessex. Meanwhile, he appointed Alfgeir, Egill and Thorolf to lead the men he had at hand. Assuming, as we think, that Æthelstan did not send a challenge to the invaders, he dispatched Algeir, Egill, Thorolf and his men at hand to block the invaders before they reached Deira, but not too far north that it would cause problems for Æthelstan to feed his levy.

There were two Roman roads between the Tyne and Humber, namely Dere Street and Cade's Road. They were roughly parallel and about 15 miles apart, Cade's Road to the east. It is usually assumed that Cade's Road was a relatively minor affair with just one Roman fortress (Concangis) compared to four on Dere Street (Isurium, Catteractonium, Vinovia and Vindomora) over the equivalent distance, but perhaps not.

Æthelstan passed through Beverley and Chester-le-Street, both on Cade's Road, on his way to invade Scotland in 934. St Cuthbert's relics, the most sacred in England at the time, were held at Chester-le-Street, so Cade's Road must have had a steady stream of pilgrims. A few years later, the relics were moved to Ripon and then Durham for safety, in part because Chester-le-Street was being raided from Scotland. It seems to us that Cade's Road was the major north-south route between the Tyne and Humber in the 10th century, especially for armies. We guess it was in a better state of repair and more suitable for carts, perhaps because the church paid for it to be maintained to help pilgrims.

There is a place named Brasside on Cades Rroad that uniquely matches Egil's Saga's battlefield description. It is an elevated plain inside a square meander in the River Wear (red rectangle on Figure 3).



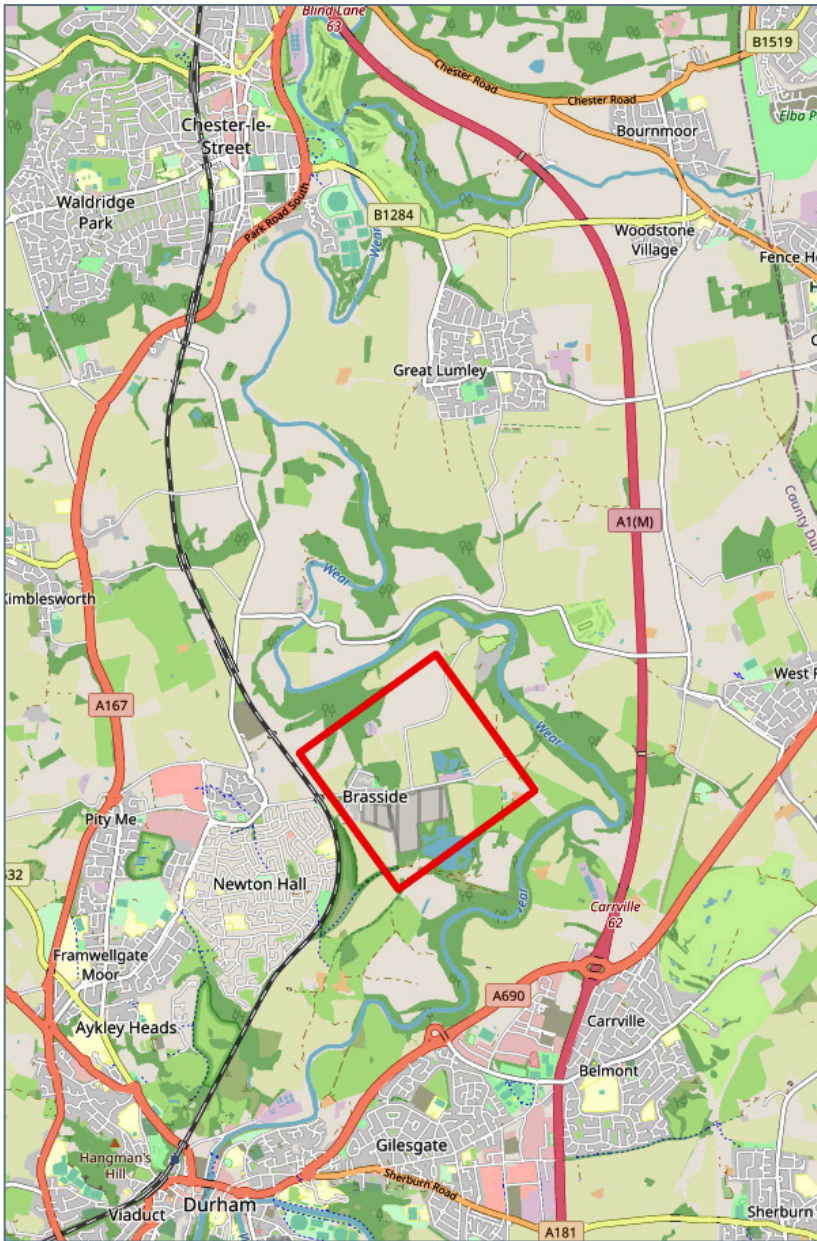


Figure 3: Geography at Brasside

Brasside is bounded by a hill to the west, now occupied by the settlement of Newton Hall, and by the River Wear on the other three sides. The railway between Durham and Chester-le-Street winds around the bottom of the hill, probably on the course of Cade's Road.

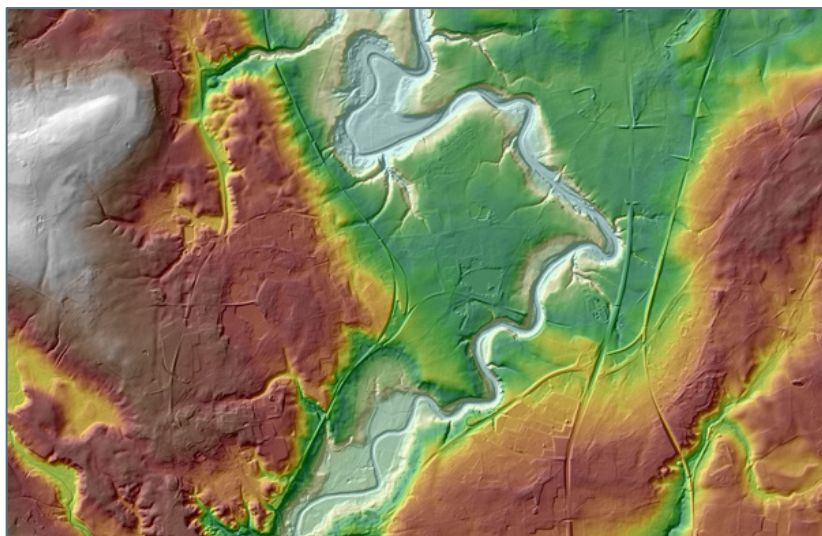


Figure 4: Terrain at Brasside

Figure 4 is a heat relief map of the Brasside area. It is at the western end of a 60m high plateau that extends northeast through West Rainton and beyond. The plateau is incised by the River Wear in a three-mile gorge. It exactly matches Egil's Saga's battlefield description: a level plain, bounded by woodland to one side and a river on the other, a little higher towards the woodland, sloping down slightly to the north, narrowing and rising to the south. It is also the right size for a battle between roughly 6000 men. The only inconsistency is that the woodland would have been to Thorolf's left, whereas Egil's Saga says that the woodland was to his right. Perhaps it is looking from in front of Thorolf's position, or perhaps it is simply mistaken.

Brasside is consistent with the camps too. Egil's Saga says that Olaf [Constantine] chooses his base: *"because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed"*. It also says that both armies were at a *'borg'* – city or stronghold – on the day before the Battle of Vinheiðar. The only city and the only Roman fortification (Concangis) on Cades Road was at modern Chester-le-Street. If both armies were at a *borg* on Cade's Road and the battlefield was at Brasside, the invaders camped at Chester-le-Street and the English presumably camped at Maiden Castle.

Egil's Saga says that the tented camps were north and south of the battlefield, and that the battlefield was bounded by a river on one side. The river must have bounded the battlefield to the east or west, which means its course must have been generally south to north. This is true of the River Wear at Brasside.

The only other non-geographic clues are Egil's Saga's name for the battlefield, '*Vinheiðar*', and the adjacent woodland '*Vínuskóga*'. *heiðar* and *skóga* are the Old Norse words for 'heath' and 'woodland'. '*vín*' is Old Norse for 'wine' and sometimes 'vine', but it seems unlikely to be associated with a heath or a woodland. We guess that the first syllable was originally '*vind*', Old Norse for 'wind' and 'windy'. Alas, if so, it is unhelpful locating the battlefield because this would have been true of all heaths and woodlands near the North Sea coast in late autumn.

Other candidates? The only other north-south stretch of river in central Northumbria is the River Team near its confluence with the Tyne, but it has no adjacent plains. Indeed, as far as we can see, there are no bounded level plains adjacent to a central Northumbrian river that are the right size to have been the battlefield.

It is difficult to imagine the medieval scene on a visit today. It is dotted with huge lakes that have filled in Victorian clay pits, the woodland was cleared to make way for Victorian coal mines, the entire area has been being built upon in the 20th century, and Franklin prison sprawls over much of it. Even so, from a map, Brasside is still instantly recognisable as the place described in Egil's Saga.

## Egil's Saga's battle, a revised narrative

Æthelstan was crowned in September 926. He had already married off his sister to Sihtric, Hiberno-Norse King of York. Sihtric mysteriously and suddenly died later that year. It is difficult not to suspect that Æthelstan's sister arranged to have him poisoned. Regardless, Æthelstan took the opportunity to occupy Jorvik by pretending that he

was there to defend his sister. The most likely opportunity was over Christmas at the end of 926, when the guards would be less attentive. Sihtric's son Olaf might have been in Jorvik when all this happened. If so, one account says that he was evicted. Another implies that he tried to retake the Kingdom of York but was repulsed. In effect, Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York in a bloodless coup. He appointed Algeir and Gudrek to run the Kingdom of York on his behalf.

Æthelstan probably faced rebellions in East Anglia and the Five Boroughs, the regions subjugated by his father and grandfather, as soon as he was crowned. Perhaps he sent out his call for mercenaries immediately. His annexation of the Kingdom of York threatened the Northern kings, so they rebelled. If he had not already sent his call for mercenaries, he would have done now.

Egill and Thorolf were freebooting off the coast of Denmark in spring 927. Gunnhild, Eric Bloodaxe's wife, sent her brother Eyvind to kill them. Egill killed Eyvind's men and took his ships with their cargo. Egill and Thorolf decide that it would be prudent to move elsewhere. They receive Æthelstan's call for mercenaries and arrive in England in the autumn, roughly a year after Æthelstan had been crowned.

Constantine II feared the loss of the Northumbrian buffer zone between his realm and Æthelstan's. He set about raising an army to take Northumbria. They invaded in the early autumn of 927, soon after Egill and Thorolf had arrived in England.

The invaders marched down Dere Street from Scotland, until they were opposed in Bernicia by Æthelstan's local militia under the earls Gudrek and Alfgeir. Constantine was victorious at the ensuing battle. Gudrek was killed. Alfgeir fled by horse to give the bad news to Æthelstan.

Alfgeir delivered the news to Æthelstan's court within a couple of days. Æthelstan assembled his men at hand to intercept the invaders. Then he heard that Hring and Adils had defected to the enemy with their army of Britons. Constantine's augmented army was too strong for the men that Æthelstan had at hand, so he dispatched his men at hand,

perhaps under Egill and Thorolf, to intercept and hold the invaders while he went to Wessex to levy more men.

The armies faced off somewhere between Bernicia and Jorvik. We think Constantine was at Chester-le-Street, the English at Maiden Castle. Each army was in too strong a defensive position for the other to defeat. The English delayed while Æthelstan raised more men. After a week or so of trying to goad the other side into a suicidal attack, they agree to meet in battle on level ground between the two camps. We think it was at Brasside. The result was a comprehensive victory for Æthelstan. Constantine returned to Alba. He went to Eamont in July, along with Owain and Hywel, to sign a peace treaty with Æthelstan. Guthfrith returned to Dublin in October, six months after he left.

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# Help Wanted

We believe that the Battle of Vínheiðar was fought at Brasside near Durham. Our evidence is circumstantial and speculative. If you unearth any bones or medieval military finds in or around Brasside, please contact us by email. Likewise, if you have any evidence the supports or rebuts any of our theories.

Our email address is [momentousbritain@outlook.com](mailto:momentousbritain@outlook.com).