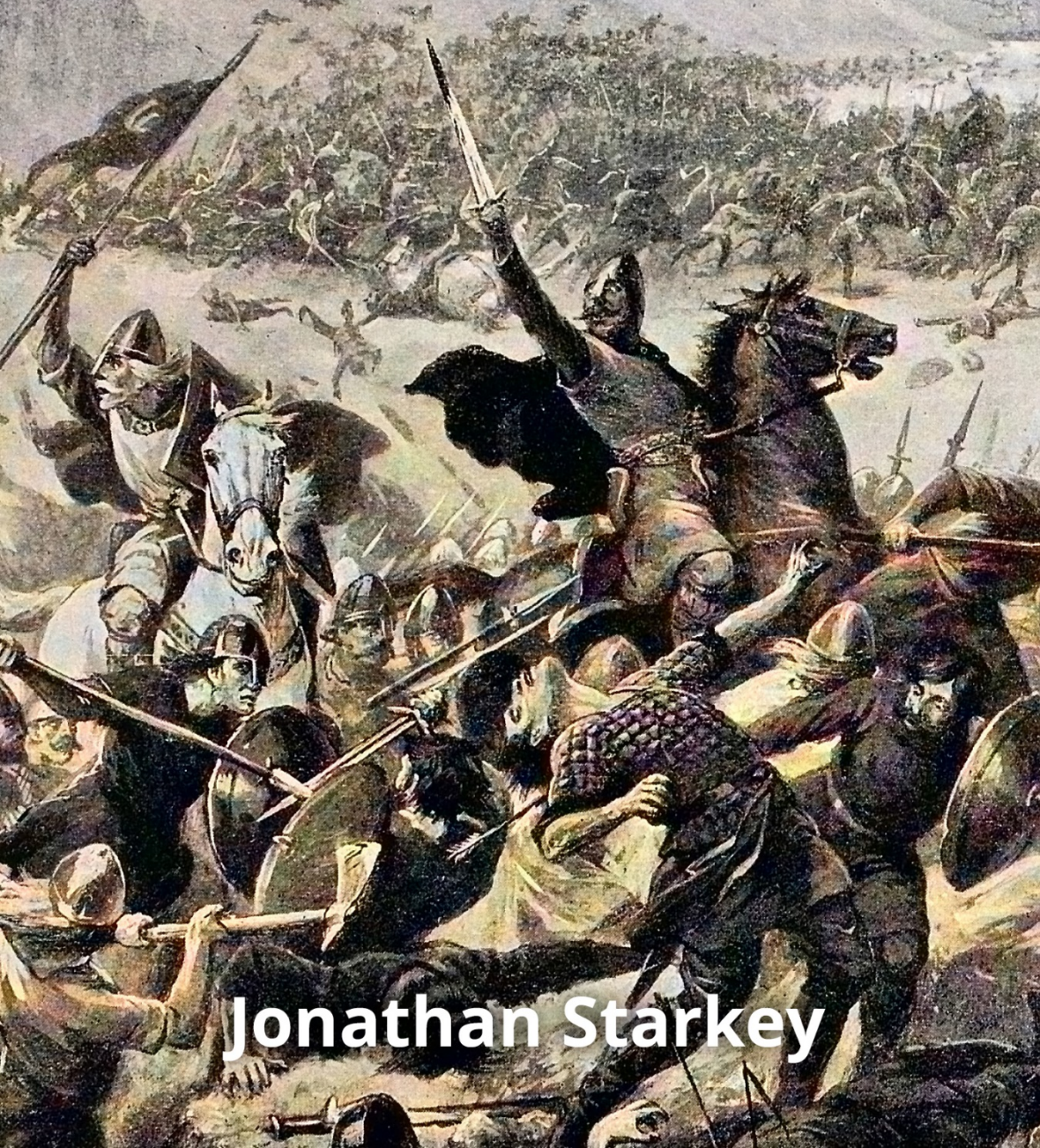


# The Battle of Brunanburh at Wigan



**Jonathan Starkey**

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# Introduction

The Battle of Brunanburh took place in 937 between a proto-English army led by King Æthelstan and an alliance of northerners led by Olaf Guthfrithson. It is famous as the bloodiest conflict of its age. Its outcome might have contributed to the English state today, not because Æthelstan won, but because of the possible consequences had he lost, his brother and heir Edmund being too young to fight.



No one is sure where the battle happened. Historians cannot even agree whether it was east or west of the Pennines, although this has not prevented them proposing more than 40 sites – listed in [Appendix B](#). We are not going to help by proposing another, Wigan in Lancashire.

## Historical background

Æthelstan came to power in 924. His realm covered the whole of modern England below the Humber, bar Cornwall. There were four realms north of the Humber: 1) The Hiberno-Norse Viking 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 the islands and peninsulas around the western fringes of Britain, by a sect of Norse Vikings based in Dublin. Its people are often referred to as the Hiberno-Norse.

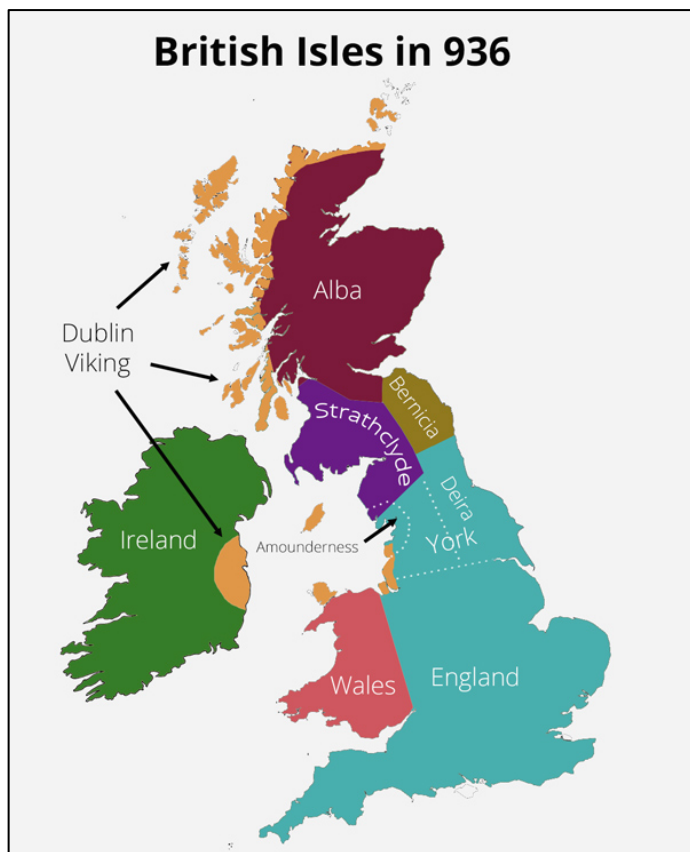


Figure 1: British Isles in 936

In 927, Sihtric, Hiberno-Norse King of York, died. King Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York and installed friendly earls to defend it. Later that year he defeated King Constantine II of Alba, King Owain of Strathclyde & Cumberland, Ealdred of Bamburgh, and King Hywel Dda of Wales, and forced them to accept his overlordship. It united most of modern England under a single ruler for the first time and gave

him hegemony over mainland Britain (Figure 1).

The subjugated northern kings rebelled in 934. Æthelstan led an army into Alba to quell the uprising. Constantine gave his son as hostage, in a deal to persuade Æthelstan to return to England. Later that year Guthfrith died. His son Olaf succeeded to the Hiberno-Norse throne.

In 937, Constantine formed a rebel alliance with Olaf Guthfrithson and Owain. He wanted to be released from fealty to Æthelstan and to re-establish a buffer state in Northumbria. Olaf was Sihtric's heir and thus thought himself the rightful ruler of the Kingdom of York. Olaf was the ideal person to lead the rebellion, an accomplished warrior, acceptable to the Northumbrian people and acceptable to Constantine through marriage to his daughter. Owain presumably wanted to be released from fealty to Æthelstan too, although he might have been coerced to participate by Constantine, to whom some say he was related.

Some historians reckon that Constantine had bigger ambitions, perhaps to conquer England. It is possible. William conquered England with less men, no local sympathisers and no land supply route. It impacts the battlefield search. If Constantine only wanted to restore Northumberland to Hiberno-Norse rule, the rebels had plenty of logistical incentives to remain near or within friendly territory and no incentive to leave. If, on the other hand, Constantine wanted to conquer England, the rebel army might have ventured far into England, hoping to sack Tamworth, Winchester or London. This is how some historians justify their proposed Brunanburh battlefields far south of the Humber.

During the autumn of 937, the northern rebel alliance invaded somewhere in what is now the north of England. They were defeated by Æthelstan at the Battle of Brunanburh, as discussed below.

In 939, just months after Æthelstan's death, Olaf Guthfrithson retook the Kingdom of York for the Hiberno-Norse. At least, most historians

think it was Olaf Guthfrithson. Kevin Halloran thinks it was his cousin Olaf Sihtricson. He could well be right, or perhaps they both participated in the 937 and/or the 939 invasions. It has no bearing on the Brunanburh battlefield search.



Figure 2: Green's pre-Brunanburh political map of British Isles in 937

Changing political dynamics confuse references to Northumbria and England in the contemporary accounts. Their meaning changed between Brunanburh and the recording of the ASC entry for it, even though the gap might have been less than ten years, and again before the other accounts were written. The authors might have been referring to the meaning at the time they were writing or to any of the earlier

meanings, or they might have repeated the meaning from an earlier account that they were using as a source.

The England inherited by Æthelstan was south of the Mersey and Humber. There was an Anglian affiliate in Bernicia. By the time of the battle, Æthelstan had annexed what is now Lancashire and Yorkshire into an expanded England. He had also subjugated the kingdoms of Strathclyde & Cumbria, Alba, Bernicia, Wales, and Cornwall. It seems that he thought of them as fiefs rather than as parts of an expanded England, because his charters and coins thereafter were marked '*rex totius Britanniae*', King of all Britain. By the 12th century, when most of the accounts were written, England had established its modern form, albeit with as yet unsettled borders.

Northumbria was founded in the 7th century from a union of the Anglian kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia. It expanded west during the 8th century, until it had absorbed all the mainland north of the Humber/Mersey up to the Scottish lowlands. It was divided in the 9th century when Danish Vikings took Deira, making it part of the Danelaw. The disruption allowed Brythonic kings to retake Strathclyde and Cumbria. At the start of the 10th century, the Hiberno-Norse took Deira and modern Lancashire, to form the Kingdom of York. Many Hiberno-Norse settled on the northwest coast of modern England. Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York in 927 to reunite Northumbria and reintegrate it with 'Lancashire'. It was divided again 12 years later when Olaf (Guthfrithson or Sihtricson) retook Deira, only to be permanently reunited under Edmund in 944.

Lancashire did not exist as a county until the end of the 12th century. Æthelstan annexed most of modern Lancashire after Sihtric's death in 927, then he purchased Amounderness. Most historians think it was absorbed into Northumbria at the time of Brunanburh – as shown on Green's political map (Figure 2) - not least because the ASC entry for 923 says that Manchester was in Northumbria. Modern Lancashire had transferred to Mercia by the time that the 12th century Brunanburh accounts were written.



If you are interested in more historical detail, Wikipedia is an obvious starting point. Michael Livingstone's *'The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook'* is the definitive battle reference guide. His narrative style follow up *'Never Greater Slaughter: Brunanburh and the Birth of England'* is an easier read. Sarah Foot's excellent biography *'Aethelstan: The First King of England'* is a rich and informative resource about the personalities and politics. Most of the other scholarly analysis either comes in short sections of books about the Anglo-Saxons, or in support of one or other of the battlefield candidates. Professor Michael Wood's presentation to the Society of Antiquaries - available on YouTube [here](#) - is a concise introduction, although he too finishes with speculation about the battlefield location.

## Brunanburh in the contemporary accounts

The only clues about the battle's events and location are in a dozen or so contemporary accounts:

*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; contemporary

*Chronicon Æthelweardi*; Æthelweard, c980

*Annales Cambriae*; c990

*Libellus de Exordio*; Simeon of Durham; c1110

*Chronicon ex Chronicis*; John of Worcester, c1125

*Historia Anglorum*; Henry of Huntingdon, c1129

*Gesta regum anglorum*; William of Malmesbury, c1135

*Historia Regum*; allegedly by Simeon of Durham; mid-12th century

*Crowland Chronicle*; Pseudo-Ingulf; allegedly before 1109, but  
perhaps forged later

*Chronicle of Melrose*; c1170

*Chronica magistri Rogeri de Hoveden*; Roger de Hoveden; c1201

*Chronica de Mailros, e Codice Unico*; c1270

*Annals of Ulster*; compiled 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Annals of the Four Masters*; compiled 17<sup>th</sup> century

*Annals of Clonmacnoise*; compiled 17th century

Most experts think that the best battlefield location clues are in Egil's Saga whose subject, Egill Skallagrimsson, is thought to have participated in the battle. Our paper 'Why Egil's Saga is not describing Brunanburh' – [here](#) - explains why Egil's Saga it is actually describing Æthelstan's 927 battle against King Constantine II of Alba. It is dispiriting to lose Egil's Saga's clues, but they were hinkypunks, leading the researcher astray. Happily, a reassessment of the other contemporary accounts, ignoring Egil's Saga, presents new battlefield candidates.

We provide basic translations of what we believe to be the important accounts in chronological order in [Appendix A](#). The Brunanburh Casebook has the most recent translations of all the contemporary accounts.

William of Malmesbury's account is the only source of important events in the battle, including Æthelstan's delayed response, Æthelstan's deliberate retreat, the *Bruneford* battlefield name, and thus the ford battlefield location, the battlefield location 'far into England', and Olaf's nocturnal surprise attack on the English camp. It is unfortunate, then, that many historians distrust it.

Malmesbury's account contains some seriously unreliable information, most notably the miraculous appearance of a sword by divine intervention. Its credibility is not helped by claiming that Olaf sneaked into the English camp disguised as a minstrel which is implausibly similar to his earlier story about Alfred doing exactly the same to scout Guthrum's camp. He claims that one of his sources was an early poem that he had just found – 200 years after the battle - then promptly re-lost. His other main source - from which his poems were reproduced, according to Lapidge - has never been seen since either.

Despite all this, we trust Malmesbury's engagement narrative because, as Michael Wood says, his source is critical of Æthelstan's slow response to Olaf's invasion. No one would dare to invent anything so seditious. If we trust Malmesbury's engagement narrative, we must also trust most of Ingulf's which is based on it.

# Brunanburh battlefield location clues

Considering the large number of contemporary Brunanburh accounts, there are discouragingly few useful clues to help find the battlefield. Just about the only certainty is that the battle was fought in modern northern England, although even this has some dissenters. Here are the other locational clues:

1. John of Worcester says that Olaf: “*entered the mouth of the Humber with a powerful fleet*”. Simeon adds the detail that there were 615 ships in his fleet. Both statements are corroborated (or repeated) in half a dozen other early accounts.
2. The nearest named place to the battlefield was probably known as Brunanburh, perhaps also or alternatively as *Brunanbyrig*, *Brunebirih*, *Brunnanburh*, *Brunnanwerc*, *Brunnanbyri*, *Brunford*, *Brunandune*, *Weondune*, *Wendune*, *Brune*, *Brunefeld*, *Plaines of Othlyn*, *Duinbrunde*, and/or *Cad Tybrunawc* (‘battle of Bruna’s house’ in Old Welsh).
3. The ASC says: “*Then the Norsemen, the sorry survivors from the spears, put out in their studded ships on to dinge’s mere, to make for Dublin across the deep water*”, so Olaf’s ships left from a place named something like ‘*dinges mere*’ (spelled ‘*dynges mere*’ and ‘*dinnesmere*’ in other ASC recensions).
4. The ASC says: “*The whole day long the West Saxons with mounted companies kept in pursuit of the hostile peoples*”, then: “*There the prince of the Norsemen was put to flight, driven perforce to the prow of his ship with a small company*”; John of Worcester: “*the conquerors retired in triumph, having driven the kings Anlaf and Constantine to their ships*”. Cavill questions the ‘mounted’ translation and whether the escape ships were the same as those on which they arrived. John of Worcester implies they fled to the ships on which they arrived, and it seems unlikely they would randomly find dozens of empty ships. The fact that Olaf and Constantine arrived at their ship and left with no crew implies they outran their men, which is only likely if they were on horseback. The rest of the invaders were chased for

most of the day back to their ships. It means that the rebel camp was within running distance of the battlefield, and that Olaf's camp and ships were moored beside a navigable stretch of a river, estuary or inlet.

5. Medieval armies usually moved on Roman roads. The battlefield was beside a fort and ford, both of which imply the presence of a good road. Pseudo-Ingulf says that the battle was beside a road: "*Constantine, the king of the Scots, being thus slain, his people retreated, and so left the road open to Turketul and his soldiers*". Malmesbury says: "*Anlaf advancing, well prepared, at night, ...*". Pseudo-Ingulf says: "*Accordingly, during the night, he made an attack upon the English, ...*". It seems unlikely that Olaf could have attempted a night attack on the English camp unless the camps were joined by a good road. It is likely then that both camps were beside a Roman road.
6. Olaf's camp and fleet were therefore where a Roman road crossed or met a navigable part of a river.
7. Simeon says of Æthelstan: "*But trusting in the protection of St. Cuthbert, he slew a countless multitude of these people, and drove those kings out of his realm*". St Cuthbert was patron saint of Northumbria. His relics were at Chester-le-Street. Simeon is implying that the battlefield was in Northumbria.
8. Pseudo-Ingulf says that Olaf: "*went forth to engage with king Athelstan at Brunford in Northumbria*", confirming that the battle was in Northumbria.
9. Malmesbury says that Olaf had: "*proceeded far into England, when he was opposed at Bruneford*".
10. Malmesbury's poem says that Æthelstan allowed the invaders to plunder at will until he was shamed into a response.
11. Malmesbury's poem, at least in Wood's translation, says that the Northumbrians "*give willing assent*" to be invaded by Olaf and then submit: "*the whole province gives in to the proud*".

Even these clues are not as helpful as they seem. None of the battlefield place names survive, nor *dinges mere*. The most useful sounding clue -



because it is the only one that categorically points to somewhere recognisable today - is the first, that the invaders entered the Humber estuary. It is corroborated by other contemporary chroniclers. It fits Clues 7, 8 and 11, because the Humber basin was in Northumbria. It fits Clue 9 because the Humber basin was far into England. Many historians accept it must be right. A H Burne points out, for example, that Simeon and Roger of Hoveden, both of whom lived in Northumbria, repeated it unqualified in their accounts. Unfortunately, it might refer to Olaf's second invasion in 939 rather than to Brunanburh in 937. We will return to this in the next section.

Clue 4 means that the invaders established a camp near where they landed and did not move until the day of battle. It adds perspective to Malmesbury's statement that the battlefield was "*far into England*". Some historians interpret this to mean they were heading for Tamworth or London. They were not. The battlefield was within running distance of the rebel camp which was adjacent to the fleet. The invaders could not have landed below navigable parts of the Humber or Mersey, so the battlefield cannot be more than, say, 20 miles south of that.

The most specific clue, and the only one supporting many of the battlefield candidates, is its name. First, as we always note, medieval battles were seldom fought at settlements. Their names typically refer to the nearest settlement that others would recognise. It could be several miles from the actual battlefield, more in sparsely populated areas. Few places were as sparsely populated as the Lancashire Plain away from the coast, where Domesday lists only five settlements with 87 households between the Lune and the Mersey, an area of over 1000km<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, ASC-D says that the battle was '*ymbe Brunan-burh*', 'around Brunanburh' rather than 'at Brunanburh', so perhaps further still. It remains the best clue and should at least narrow down the possibilities.

It is a shame then that the contemporary accounts have so many stabs at Brunanburh's spelling. They are discussed in expert detail in Paul Cavill's chapter of the Brunanburh Casebook. A summary should suffice here. Most of the names start '*Brun*', an Old English word

usually meaning ‘brown’ but which Cavill thinks more likely to be a personal name ‘Bruna’. Perhaps they are linked. Hardwick speculates that *Bruna* and his followers, the *Bruningas*, were so-named because they had swarthy brown skin. Some of the battlefield names start ‘*Brunnan*’, double-n, an Old English word that is said to mean ‘spring’ or ‘well’. ‘*burh*’ means ‘fortification’ or ‘stronghold’. ‘*dune*’ can mean ‘hill’ or can mean ‘fortification’. ‘*ford*’ means ‘ford’. ‘*werc*’ usually means ‘earthwork fortification’.

So, if its name is anything to go by, the battlefield was beside a ford near an elevated fortification at a place named ‘*Brune*’ or ‘*Brunan*’, or it might have been at a spring beside a fortification or hill at a place known as ‘*Wen*’ or ‘*Weon*’, or all of these.

## A Humber landing?

The long list of 40 or more proposed Brunanburh battlefields falls roughly evenly into two cohorts: those that believe Olaf entered the Humber estuary and those that do not. The main evidence comes from John of Worcester, who specifically says that Olaf entered the Humber estuary. Michael Wood summarises the other supporting evidence in his 2013 paper “*Searching for Brunanburh: The Yorkshire Context of the ‘Great War’ of 937*” for the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal. This is our interpretation of what he says:

1. A Humber landing is specified by John of Worcester and corroborated by a bunch of Yorkshire chroniclers: “*Liber de Exordio [Simeon], Roger of Howden, the Chronicle of Melrose, Ailred of Beverley, the Chester annalist Higden, and the Bridlington chronicler Langtoft*”. As locals, they should have known if John of Worcester was right about a Humber landing through local lore, and/or they might have shared a common northern source, now lost.
2. The 938 entry in the Annals of the Four Masters starts by saying that Olaf Guthfrithson went to York before the battle: “*Amhlaeibh Cuaran [Olaf Guthfrithson] went to Cair-Abroc [York]*”. It ends: “*A victory was gained by the king of the Saxons over Constantine, son of*

*Acdh; Anlaf, or Amhlaeibh, son of Sitric; and the Britons.*”, with a tentative implication that the two statements are linked.

3. There was a well-established sea trade route between Dublin and York, formerly the two main Hiberno-Norse dominions, so the risk of the sea journey to the Humber might not be as great as some assume.
4. Jorvik was the capital of Northumbria and by far its most important town. The rest of Deira immediately submitted when Jorvik was taken by Ivar in 866, again when taken by Æthelstan in 927. If Olaf could occupy Jorvik in 937, perhaps aided by supporters within the walls, the rest of Northumbria would probably have submitted without a fight. Wood’s translation of Malmesbury’s poem suggests this might have happened in 937 and it is exactly what happened just two years later following Olaf Guthfrithson’s invasion.
5. Olaf would get more local support for a Humber landing than anywhere else. Even though Olaf was ethnic Norse and pagan whereas Deira was mostly ethnic Danish and Christian, they would have overwhelmingly preferred him as leader to an Anglo-Saxon. This was shown by their welcome for him in 939. The other possible landing sites were either lightly populated or had a relatively small proportion of ethnic Vikings.
6. It would have been easier to defend a bridgehead in Deira than the west coast. Deira was only accessible by land via Ermine Street and the Roman roads to Manchester and Ribchester. To engage the invaders in Deira, Æthelstan would have had to pass through 30 miles of hostile enemy territory, either through the Danish Viking region of Five Boroughs or through the Pennines. The west coast was relatively benign towards Æthelstan.
7. Two accounts say that local Danes joined Olaf’s campaign. The Annals of Clonmacnoise say that Guthfrithson gave battle: “*with the help of the Danes of that kingdom*”, Huntingdon’s *Historia Anglorum* says that Anlaf: “*augmented his army with . . . Danes living in England*”. The Humber basin was populated by ethnic Danes. There were few, if any, ethnic Danes on England’s west coast.

These clues, especially the first, are good evidence for a Humber landing, but not necessarily in 937. Just two years later, Olaf Guthfrithson landed in the Humber basin when the Northumbrians invited him to be their new king following Æthelstan's death. Medieval chronicle entries are often a year or two out, not least because news took a long time to get around, and many started their year in September instead of January. A chronicle entry might refer to when the event happened, when the news was received, or some guess at when it happened. With such a short gap and with the same invaders both led by an Olaf, there is obvious room for confusion.

John of Worcester does not mention Olaf Guthfrithson's 939 invasion. We suspect that he read an undated or incorrectly dated account of Olaf entering the Humber estuary in 939 and assumed it referred to 937, thereby causing him to conflate the two invasions into one entry. Perhaps this is why he posted the entry with the median date of 938. It would be an easy mistake. Roger of Wendover, for example, says: "*In these days Anlaf, of Norwegian descent, who in the time of king Ethelstan had been expelled the kingdom of Northumberland, came this year to York with a very great fleet*". He was referring to Olaf's 939 invasion but from the text alone it would not be possible to know. John of Worcester could easily have read something equally equivocal and drawn the wrong conclusion.

The Annals of the Four Masters says that Olaf Guthfrithson went to *Cair-Abroc*, the Irish name for Jorvik, in 938, then that Constantine and Olaf Sihtricson were defeated at Brunanburh later in that year. It hints at a Humber landing in 937 but seems confused to us. It says that Olaf Sihtricson was defeated at Brunanburh whereas all the other accounts reckon it was Olaf Guthfrithson. Other events are described between Guthfrithson's visit to Jorvik and Brunanburh, as if there was a six-month gap. Perhaps, then, Guthfrithson paid a pre-invasion visit to Jorvik to sound out the locals about a coordinated uprising. Perhaps, there was a two-pronged invasion, with Guthfrithson attacking Jorvik and Sihtricson attacking somewhere else, before they joined forces to be defeated at Brunanburh. More likely, we think, it has inadvertently



conflated the two invasions and posted them on the median date because, like John of Worcester, it does not mention Olaf's successful 939 invasion and it posts the Brunanburh entry for the year 938.

So, the most specific Humber landing evidence is far from unequivocal. The rest of Wood's supporting evidence is conjecture. Olaf would have been welcomed by most of the locals in 937 but not by the nobles and landowners, all of whom were in thrall to Æthelstan. Even though Olaf might well have wanted to land in the Humber basin for the last four reasons that Wood suggests, it would have been risky without a local uprising, which could not be guaranteed and for which there is no evidence. Conversely, there are plenty of reasons to doubt a Humber landing in 937.

Dissenters always note that it would have been pointlessly risky for Olaf to have sailed around the north of Scotland at that time of year whereas it would have been quick, safe and easy to land on England's northwest coast. They might be right, although we think this was not a major factor. Vikings were master sailors. They did avoid sailing in the North Sea during winter, but Brunanburh was no later than early autumn. There are better reasons to dissent.

Most notably, Æthelstan had spent ten years preparing Deira for defence against local uprisings. He had installed loyal barons and loyal garrisons. These would have been just as effective against an outside invasion as they would against an internal uprising.

A muster would have been difficult for the invaders in the Humber basin. The only contemporary account to mention Owain's Britons suggests that they arrived at the rendezvous on foot. It sounds like some, perhaps all, of Constantine's men and the local Danes arrived on foot too. It seems unlikely that Æthelstan's earls would allow them to march through Northumbria unmolested.

Supply lines would have been problematic too. Olaf needed to feed 10000 men, or more. The local landowners, all in Æthelstan's thrall, would not have been cooperative and Æthelstan probably issued

instructions to burn grain stores and slaughter livestock upon news of an invasion. If they were not supplied locally, it is difficult to believe that the invaders could drive dozens of cattle and a hundred sheep through more than 200 miles of enemy territory every day. It would have been more difficult still to deliver them by ship.

Malmesbury's poem laments that the invaders plundered wherever they went. It seems unlikely to us that Olaf would have plundered Deira or the Five Boroughs, north and south of the Humber, respectively, because both had ethnic Danish populations that would otherwise support his invasion.

Wood's translation of Malmesbury's poem – reproduced in Appendix A - is used as evidence that Olaf landed on the east coast. His translation is viable, and more credible than any other we have seen, but it is misleading. It seems implausible to us that Æthelstan's vassals in Jorvik would have welcomed Olaf's arrival or would have submitted to him without a fight, especially if Heimskringla is right that Eirik Bloodaxe was sub-king at the time. The original Latin - "*Bacchanti furiae, Scottorum rege volente, Commodat assensum borealis terra serenum : Et jam grande tument, jam terrent aera verbis ; Cedunt indigenae, cedit plaga tota superbis.*" - is more likely to mean 'north men' than 'Northumbrians', and 'region' than 'province'. It seems more likely to us that it is referring to modern Lancashire where the local population was mostly Hiberno-Norse 'north men' and Britons. They would have welcomed their liegeman Olaf. Anyone else living in the region would have submitted meekly.

In summary, Olaf might have landed in the Humber basin, but there are good reasons for doubt. The possibility that the conjecture is wrong should not be used against a good case for a battlefield in or near the Humber basin. Equally, if a good case can be made for a battlefield elsewhere, in our opinion, the Humber basin landing evidence should not be used against it.

## A Wirral landing and battlefield?

Most Humber landing dissenters think that Olaf landed on England's northwest coast. If so, there is a credible interpretation for other clues. Modern Lancashire was in Northumbria at the time. Pseudo-Ingulf was therefore right that *Brunford* was in Northumbria, Simeon was right that the battlefield was under St Cuthbert's protection, Malmesbury was right that the invaders were far into England. He was also right, as we say above, that the local 'north men' would welcome the invaders and that anyone else in the region would have meekly submitted.



Figure 3: Heat relief map of in Lancashire and the Wirral with RRRA's Roman roads

A northwest coast landing would have been quick and easy for Olaf, immediately opposite Dublin on the prevailing wind, and safe: Cumbria was in the realm of Olaf's ally King Owain, and the Wirral and the Lancashire coasts were occupied by Olaf's Hiberno-Norse liegemen. It would also be consistent with Clonmacnoise's reference

that the battle was on the “*Plaines of Othlyn*” because Lancashire has the only coastal plain in northwest Britain.

Historians are coalescing around a landing on the Wirral and a battlefield at Bromborough. It is not a new idea. Gibson recognised in the 17th century that Bromborough’s name might derive from a place earlier known as Brunanburh, and that it might therefore be the location of the battle. Indeed, according to toponymy expert Paul Cavill, Bromborough is the only place in England for which there are attested records of previously having been known as Brunanburh.

Bromborough fits some of our battlefield clues too. It was near a Roman stronghold, namely Ince. It was on a navigable stretch of the Mersey. The RRRA think there was probably a Roman road from Warrington to Chester which might have had a spur to Meols, and that either the road or the spur might have had a spur to Ince. If so, Bromborough could have been near where a Roman road meets a navigable stretch of the Mersey. And it was a Hiberno-Norse colony. The Fragmentary Annals of Ireland record that Alfred’s daughter Lady Æthelflæd, acting queen of the Mercians when her husband Æthelred was terminally ill, gave some land near Chester to Ingimund of the Hiberno-Norse in 907. Local placenames suggest that Ingimund’s settlement spread south from an original base near the coast until it reached Dibbinsdale and Raby, thereby incorporating Bromborough.

Wirral Archaeological Society have made some medieval finds nearby. Results from the analysis are due soon. If there proves to be a significant number of 10th century human remains with signs of violent death, there will be a strong argument in favour of a Bromborough battlefield. We anticipate close to none. David Gregg says that they found evidence of a huge 10th century weapons recycling centre, near to where he lives. We are unconvinced that it is evidence of a battle. Presumably, the perfidious Hiberno-Norse were evicted from the Wirral and Lancashire coast following Brunanburh. Their possessions would have been redistributed or recycled close to where they lived, and a bunch of them lived on the Wirral.



We tend to agree with Kevin Halloran who reckons that Bromborough is an example of “*academic gravitational accretion*”, by which he means that academics tend to support the most popular academic theory because it avoids sticking their neck out, even if there is negligible supporting evidence. Over time, this can develop into a specious consensus.

In the absence of better evidence, the Wirral is an unlikely landing place. It was not in Northumbria, contradicting Clues 7, 8 and 11. Its Hiberno-Norse colony was an enclave within Mercia. Dibbinsdale and Raby formed the southern border - the latter’s name means ‘farmstead on the border’. The only land access was the Roman road through the nearby Mercian stronghold of Chester. Several contemporary accounts imply that Constantine’s troops returned to Alba on foot. One account implies that Owain’s Britons arrived and left on foot, another that the invaders were augmented by local Danes who probably arrived on foot. But none of the invaders could have arrived or left the Wirral on foot because they would have had to pass near the Mercian burhs of Thelwall and Runcorn, and through the Mercian stronghold at Chester.

Malmesbury reckons that the invaders had to wait weeks for Æthelstan to arrive in the battle theatre. The Wirral was barren. Ingimund complained to Æthelflaed that it was too barren for his people to subsist. Eventually, he attacked Chester, hoping to annex better land, but got repulsed. If the Wirral could barely support a hundred families, it could not sustain Olaf’s army. They could only have been resupplied by ship, but Æthelstan would surely have blockaded the Dee and Mersey to starve them into a quick surrender. If the invaders did muster on the Wirral, they would surely have besieged Chester, hoping to plunder the surrounding abundant farmland, but there is no mention of either eventuality in the contemporary accounts.

Bromborough is an even less likely camp or battlefield. As Halloran says, its only significant supporting evidence – i.e., the evolution of ‘Bruna’ to ‘Brom’ – is probably bogus. It was pancake flat, only 10m above sea level, and it backed onto mudflats and a stream. If the

invaders camped on the Wirral, Olaf would surely have made for Thurstaston Hill, the only significant elevation on the Wirral with its only natural defence, but that would be inconsistent with all the Bromborough battlefield clues.

The engagement sounds wrong too. Malmesbury and Pseudo-Ingulf say that it starts with a night attack on the English camp. There is reason for scepticism about some parts of Malmesbury's account – see above – but not this one we think. If the invaders camped on the Wirral, the English army could only have been in Chester, but Malmesbury and Pseudo-Ingulf imply that the English were on open ground by a river, not in a fortified town. And if the English were in Chester, Olaf would have had to affect a siege rather than a nocturnal sneak attack.

The flight is also inconsistent. ASC says that Æthelstan's horsemen pursued the invaders '*ondlongne daeg*', 'the whole day long'. Yet the furthest point on the Wirral from Bromborough – Meols – is less than ten miles away. It took us just over four hours to walk, and we stopped for lunch at the Lady Lever Art Gallery. Olaf's men were young, fit and running for their lives. Even without paths, they would have travelled at twice our pace. Moreover, Wirral battlefield supporters think that Olaf's fleet was moored near Thingwall, less than seven miles from their proposed battlefield. It seems implausible that it took them all day to get seven miles.

In our opinion, the Wirral was too small, too barren and too siege prone for Olaf to have risked landing, mustering or camping there. Plus, it does not match the leaders' tactics, at least as reported in the contemporary accounts, it does not match the geographical descriptions in the contemporary accounts, it makes no military sense, and it contradicts more than half the battlefield clues.

## A Lancashire landing?

If Olaf did not land in the Humber basin and did not land on the Wirral, he must have landed north of the Mersey, somewhere that was clearly in Northumbria. Cumbria was clearly not in Northumbria at the

time, and Margary 70 diverged from the coast as it passed through Cumbria. By a process of elimination, he probably landed in modern Lancashire.

Clue 5 says that Olaf's camp and the battlefield were joined by a Roman road and that his camp and ships were beside a navigable stretch of estuary or river. The only Lancashire rivers navigable up to Margary 70 were the Lune, Ribble and Mersey. Each had a Roman stronghold at the junction of river and road. According to Tacitus, Agricola himself "*surveyed and fixed the stations*" at their heads of tide: Galacum near Lancaster on the Lune, Walton-le-Dale near Preston on the Ribble, and Wilderspool near Warrington on the Mersey. Olaf's camp was probably at one of these strongholds.



Figure 4: Roman roads in Lancashire

Malmesbury says that Æthelstan deliberately retreated to draw Olaf further into England, presumably south of wherever he landed and camped. Yet Olaf was not drawn more than running distance from his ships. If Malmesbury is right, Æthelstan must have taken his army close to Olaf's camp, then retreated no further than running distance. Perhaps then, he originally intended to attack Olaf's camp based on

intelligence coming back from his scouts, but decided it was too well defended when he saw it for himself.

Æthelstan would not have camped in an unfortified location near to Olaf's camp, so he would have retreated back to the first defensible location to the south. If Olaf was at Lancaster, this would probably have been Walton-le-Dale; if Walton-le-Dale, then Wigan or Burnley; if Wilderspool, then Chester. But Æthelstan was camped on open ground when attacked, so Olaf could not have been camped at Wilderspool, which leaves Lancaster and Walton-le-Dale.

According to Malmesbury and Pseudo-Ingulf, Olaf sortied from his camp to attack the English camp at night. The attack started not long before dawn and lasted until a couple of hours after dawn. Olaf and his barons fled on horseback and left on ship before any men arrived to crew. The rest of his men must have fled on foot. ASC says that Æthelstan's horsemen pursued them 'the whole day long', so there was perhaps 15 to 25 miles between the battlefield and Olaf's camp.

If Olaf camped at Lancaster, there is a promising battlefield candidate 10 miles south at Bruna Hill near Bowgreave. As far as we know, Tim Clarkson, author of 'Strathclyde and the Anglo-Saxons in the Viking Age', was the first to postulate that Bruna Hill might be the battlefield and it is credible. It is at the junction of the Roman road and the River Calder, so it was beside a defensible ford. It is a hill, so it might have been known as a '*dune*'. Many hills had hillforts, so it might have been known as a '*burh*' or '*werc*' too. On the other hand, it is below the lower end of what we consider to be all-day running distance from Olaf's ships, and it is only 25m above the surrounding plain. It barely counts as a hill and it was probably too low to have had a hillfort. It is a plausible Brunanburh battlefield, but we think we can do better.

Charles Hardwick worked through a similar line of reasoning 140 years ago, deciding that Olaf camped at Walton-le-Dale. He points out that lack of standardised spelling meant that the 'Brun' from Brunanburh might have been corrupted to (or from) Burn, Brom, Brum, Broom, Bran, Ban, Bourne, Brink or Brin. He adds that the Lancashire dialect



also allows for ‘r’ to be switched with an adjacent vowel, referring to a ‘bird’ as a ‘brid’, for example. With all these possibilities, he reckons that virtually anywhere in the country could have local placenames that might match Brunanburh, but that Walton-le-Dale has more than most. Brindle, Brinscall, Burnicroft and Browndale are all nearby with names that might once have started ‘Brun’. But it is the Cuerdale Hoard that most attracted him to Walton-le-Dale: *“I maintain that the discovery of the long buried treasure at Cuerdale, in 1840, has furnished the key by which we may probably unlock the mystery.”*

Cuerdale is just upstream of Walton-le-Dale. The hoard was found a mile northeast of the Roman settlement. It is the second largest hoard of Viking silver found anywhere in the world, four times bigger than anything else found in Britain. The immense value of the hoard and the source of the coins and trinkets inside make it likely that the hoard belonged to a king. As Hardwick says, it seems likely that its burial: *“was caused by some signal discomfiture or military defeat, in order to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy. Its non-recovery afterwards would naturally result from the slaughter of the parties acquainted with the precise locality of its deposit.”* This would match Olaf’s circumstances alone, as far as we know.

The hoard has 45 coins stamped ‘Eadweard’ (reigned 901 to 925), so it cannot have been buried earlier than 902. The consensus is between 905 and 910, to match when King Ivar II and his Hiberno-Norse Vikings settled on the Fylde coast after being evicted from Dublin. One theory is that Ivar wanted to use the hoard to fund the reconquest of Dublin. Odd then that it was still there in the 19th century, because Ivar’s son Sihtric retook Dublin in 917. Eadweard’s coins could have been struck any time before 925, 34 others stamped ‘Ludovicus’ could have been struck up to 928. And, of course, the latest coins in the hoard only define the earliest date the hoard could have been buried. One possibility is that it languished in the Dublin treasury for 10 years or more, before being brought to England and buried by Olaf, hoping to use it to reward his troops for defeating Æthelstan.

Hardwick comes unstuck, in our opinion, by going on to suggest that the battle was fought at or near Cuerdale. This assumes that Malmesbury was wrong that Olaf tried a sneak attack, and that the ASC was wrong that it took most of the day for Olaf's men to flee to their ships. Perhaps both accounts are wrong, but we think a better case can be made if they are right.

## A Burnley battlefield?

Burnley was first proposed as the Brunanburh battlefield location by local historian and teacher T T Wilkinson in the 1850s. It is the only established 'west-coast' battlefield candidate other than Bromborough. It is still being actively promoted, by Damian Bullen, among others. Livingstone lists the three main supporting arguments:

*A. Not only is Burnley in the "battle zone" between north and south, it sits on the Dublin-to-York land route known to be used by the Vikings.*

*B. There is good reason to think a medieval, perhaps even a late Anglo-Saxon battle was fought near Burnley.*

*C. Burnley sits on the River Brun, and the letters brun are in Brunanburh. Therefore Burnley is Brunanburh.*

We are unconvinced that any of these are valid.

A. The Dublin to York land route used the Margary 703 and 72 Roman roads. It went from Walton-le-Dale to York via Ribchester, Elslack and Ilkley. It did not pass within ten miles of Burnley.

B. The "good reasons to think that a medieval, perhaps even a late Anglo-Saxon battle was fought near Burnley" are unexceptional. Wilkinson thinks the battlefield was at a Burnley suburb named Saxifield, where Saxon era human bones were allegedly unearthed, and where there was a nearby place known as 'Battle Field'. It is the same sort of anecdotal evidence that supports many of the other 40-plus battlefield candidates.

C. Burnley takes its name from the River Burn, which runs through the town centre and was once known as the River Brun. It could therefore

be the source of the 'Brun\*' battlefield names: Brunanburh, in all its spellings, Bruneford, Brunefeld, Bruneshurh, Brunandune and Brune. Etymology expert Paul Cavill disagrees. He reckons that the 'Brunan' part of Brunanburh can only derive from 'Bruna', or less likely, 'Brune'. If he is right, Brunanburh cannot derive from the 'River Brun' or 'River Burn'.

Damien Bullen has updated the 'Brunanburh at Burnley' theory. He has a large section on etymology, none of which is pertinent if Cavill is right that Brunanburh cannot derive from Brun. He has a bunch of evidence related to Egil's Saga, none of which is pertinent either because, in our opinion, Egil's Saga is not describing the Battle of the Brunanburh. He makes three new points:

1. Huntingdon's poem contains the lines: "*The hills resounded / There many men born in Denmark lay / Pierced by spears, stabbed under their shields*". As Bullen says, hardly anywhere could better fit this description than Burnley, which is surrounded 300° by steep hills.

2. A Saxon burh might have been at Castle Hill in Burnley. If Cavill is wrong, it might have been named Brunanburh. There is only anecdotal evidence of such a burh, but Bullen reckons that Burnley would have been an ideal location for one: "*placed at a great crossroads of so many Dark Age thoroughfares*". He describes them: "*Burnley sits at the confluence of three valleys; the plains of West Lancashire & the seacoast can be accessed to the west; to the east lies the rugged vale of Calderdale – leading to Yorkshire & the Humber – while to the north lies Colne & its old Roman road rolling east & west. To the south a road over the moors takes you to the vales of Bacup & Rawtenstall, then on to Manchester & the south of England.*"

3. Bullen reckons that the 'Plaines of Othlynn' – the location of the battlefield according to the Annals of Clonmacnoise - referred to the route taken by St Ethedreda between Altham, near Burnley, and Bradford. Liber Eliensis says: "*The Queen [Etheldreda] and her two companions travelled as far as the Humber, over which they were safely conveyed to Winteringham; from thence they diverted about ten stadiis*

[roughly a mile] to a small village named Alftham which was almost surrounded by marsh". From Alftham she continued her journey to Ely. On the way she got tired and slept at a place named Stow. A huge ash tree grew where she planted her staff. The Welsh name for ash trees is 'ynn'. Bullen associates Alftham with Altham near Burnley and Othlynn with Etheldreda's 'ynn', so he believes that 'Plaines of Othlynn' referred to the land between Altham and Bradford.

In our opinion, all Bullen's extra evidence is unreliable.

1. The stanza comes from an English translation of Huntingdon's Latin translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle poem. Huntingdon's translation must be either figurative or faulty because the ASC poem says nothing of the sort.

2a. The evidence for Castle Hill burh is anecdotal, from Rev Thomas Whitaker's 1876 book 'An History of the Original Parish of Whalley'. He found "*obscure trenches*" beside a farmhouse at Castle Hill, just south of Towneley Park. He explains that they came from: "*the residence, unquestionably, of one of those independent lords before the Conquest*". He might not have questioned it, but we do because he is prone to unjustified jumps of reasoning. Even if it was a building, there is no evidence it was a major residence, and if it was, there is no evidence that it was Saxon, and if it was, there is no evidence it might have been a burh. The only reason to think it might have been anything significant is the name Castle Hill. It sounds post-Conquest to us and if it was Saxon, it would have been a weird place to locate a burh, surrounded by higher ground, apart from to the north, and 3km from the River Burn, which was hidden from view by the south bank bluff.

2b. Burnley did have a nearby 'road' and rivers, but it was not some sort of Saxon era transport hub. It was near the confluence of the Burn, Don and Calder, but they were not navigable, their sources were less than five miles upstream, and there is no reason they would have had any local traffic with no upstream settlements and no natural resources. Burnley was probably at the junction of the Manchester to Elslack ridgeway with a cross-Pennine ridgeway to Halifax. These were major

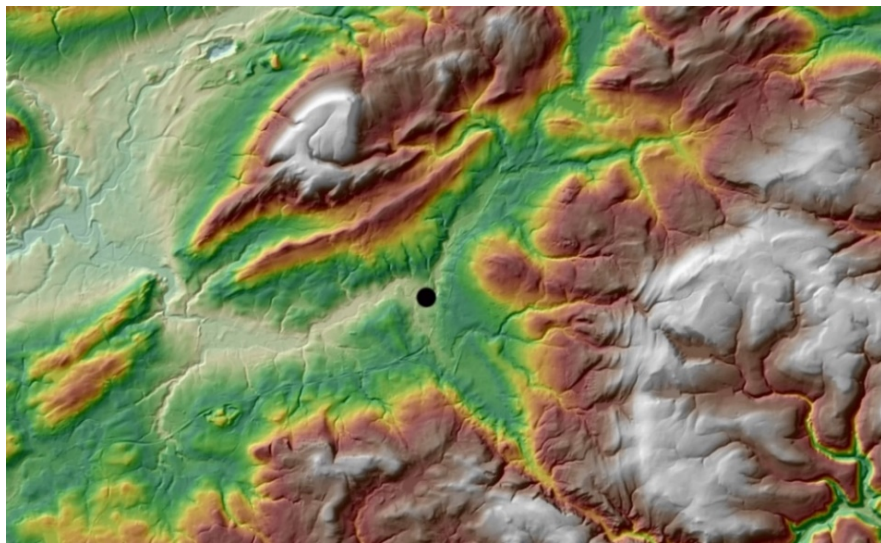
pre-Roman packhorse routes but most of the post-Roman cross-Pennine military and freight traffic would have been carried on the Margary 72 and 712 Roman highways from York to Ribchester and York to Manchester. Barrett reckons that the Saxon era west Pennine population was isolated farmsteads and Archiuk shows no evidence of Roman or Saxon era occupation, so the ridgeways are unlikely to have had much local traffic either. Nor were these 'roads' as we understand the term. They were too steep in places for loaded carts, there is no evidence of them being paved before the 12th century, and then only one slab wide like a garden path. If there was no paved road to Burnley and/or no local population centre and/or no natural resources, there was nothing to defend, so no likelihood that Burnley had a burh and no rational reason why Æthelstan would take his army within 10 miles of it before Brunanburh.

3. Liber Eliensis says that Altham is less than a mile from Winteringham, Lincs. Nowhere survives with that name in that vicinity, which prompts Bullen to believe it referred to Altham near Burnley. It seems incredibly unlikely. She would not have crossed the Humber if she was heading to Altham or anywhere else westwards. It would have been an 85-mile detour out of her way. There are no indications that she ever stepped foot west of the Pennines. 'ynn' is plural, meaning multiple ash trees, so it is unlikely to be represent Etheldreda's magic tree. And all the land between Altham and Bradford is the Pennines, which is about as un-plain like as anywhere in England.

To summarise, in our opinion, all the Burnley Brunanburh evidence is equivocal or untrustworthy, apart from that it was in Northumbria and just about within fleeing distance of a rebel camp at Walton-le-Dale. This is not specific enough to make it a good battlefield candidate.

We have some other problems with Burnley's bona fides. It is almost surrounded by steep hills (Figure 5), which makes it look too siege-prone for the English camp. Also, if there was no Saxon era local population centre at Burnley and no paved Roman road within 10 miles: 1) It contradicts Pseudo-Ingulf who says that the battle was

fought on a road; 2) It contradicts Malmesbury and Pseudo-Ingulf because the invaders could not have affected a nocturnal attack; 3) There is no reason for it to have had a named ford, in which case it could not have been Bruneford; and 4) It is unlikely to have had a name.



*Figure 5: Pendle hills heat relief, Burnley shown as black dot*

We agree that Burnley is a more credible battlefield candidate than anywhere on the Wirral, but we think a better case can be made for Wigan.

## The Battle of Brunanburh at Wigan

Hardwick reckons that Olaf camped at Walton-le-Dale, based mainly on the Cuerdale Hoard. As we say above, Lancaster and Wilderspool (Warrington) are the only other credible candidates. They were at the heads of tide of Lancashire's three major rivers: the Ribble, Lune and Mersey respectively. Walton-le-Dale seems by far the most likely camp to us because it was at the western end of the Roman road across the Pennines to York. It had the best communications, the easiest way for local sympathisers to join and the best port on the northwest coast.

If Olaf camped at Walton-le-Dale, we think that Æthelstan must have

camped at Wigan. In this section we will check how Wigan matches the other clues.

It has to be said that every clue is equivocal, unreliable, or open to interpretation but, in our opinion, using the most straightforward interpretation of each clue, Wigan matches all but one. The exception being a Humber basin landing, which is among the least reliable.

## Wigan and place name clues

Wigan's name might be a memorial to Brunanburh. Rev John Whitaker, as far as we know, was the first to point it out: "*Wig signifies a fight in Saxon, and Wig-en is only the plural of it.*" This is mostly verified by Bosworth-Toller, which says 'wig' is Old English for 'war' or 'battle', 'wigan' for 'to fight, make war' (see below). The term 'wig' is used three times in the Brunanburh poem, always meaning 'battle' or 'war'.

**wīg** I. n. *strife, contest, war; battle*, Æ, AO, CP

II. (wīh, wēoh) † n. *idol, image*.

**wiga** m. *warrior; fighter; man*.

**wīgan**<sup>1</sup> *to fight, make war*, Æ.

**wīgār** m. *spear, lance*.

Local toponymy experts are divided. Henry Harrison agrees with Whitaker, Henry Wyld dissents. He is stumped about the origin of Wigan's name but says: "*Harrison's identification with O. E. wig, 'war', or wiga, 'warrior', seems to me an absurdity. First, places are not named in this way; secondly, these O. E. words are poetical words, and would not be used in place names, even if such designations were used; thirdly, the Mod. form absolutely prohibits such an etymology.*" We are no experts, but his first point is contradicted by the similar and contemporary place name Battle, and by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 851 which names a battle location in Devon 'Wicganbeorge'; his second by the phrase "Wīges on wenum" - 'expectation of battle' - from the unpoetic Old English translation of Exodus; his second and third by 15 Old English proper



nouns – 13 personal names, two places - listed by Sweet that take exactly this form.

Wikipedia dissents too. It reckons that Wigan’s name: “*probably originally meant a ‘village’ or ‘settlement’*. *It has also been suggested that the name is Celtic, named after a person called Wigan*”. Both are feasible. ‘Wic’ is Old English for ‘dwelling place’. ‘A Dictionary of British Place Names’ reckons that the names Wigan, Wiggonby and others derive from the Celtic personal name ‘Wigan’. But both seem unlikely to us. We don’t know of any other examples of substantial Roman settlements taking such a humble English name and there are hardly any other places in this region that take their names from Celts.

Ambiguity and other difficulties interpreting the battlefield location clues mean that the most widely used battlefield location clue is its name. Even this is fraught with difficulty because the contemporary accounts have nine stabs at it, and they suggest three alternative names.

Source	Date	Battlefield name
ASC-A	~955	Brun <sup>n</sup> anburh
ASC-B	Early	Brunnanburh
ASC-C	Early	Brunnanburh
ASC-D	Early	Brunanburh
ASC-E	Early	Brunanbyrig
ASC-F	Early	Brunanbyri
Sawyer 443	Early	Bruninga feld
Chronicle of Æthelweard	~ 980	Brunandune
Annales Cambriae	~ 990	Brune
Simeon - Libellus de Exordio	~ 1110	Weondune, Brunnanbyrig, Brunnanwerc[h]
John of Worcester	~ 1120	Brunanburh
William of Malmesbury	~ 1125	Brunefeld, Bruneford

Henry of Huntingdon	~ 1125	Brunesburh
Simeon - Historia Regum	~ 1150	Wendune, Brunanburh
Chronicle of Melrose	~ 1170	Brunanburch
Scottish Chronicle	~ 1350	Duinbrunde
Pseudo-Ingulf	~ 1350	Bruneford
Annals of Clonmacnoise	~ 1625	Plaines of Othlyn

Not quite as bad as it seems. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has four spellings among the six recensions, but the suffixes - *'burh'*, *'byrig'* and *'byri'* - are cognates. There are only two spellings of the first two syllables, three with a single 'n', two with a double 'n', and one that has been converted from single 'n' to double 'n'. The Cambridge manuscript of Simeon's *Libellus de Exordio* has an 'h' on *Brunnanwerch*, whereas the Faustina manuscript does not, but they mean the same. So how do the names match Wigan?

It is widely accepted that the Roman military station of *Coccium* was at modern Wigan. *'burh'* means 'stronghold' or 'fortress'. *Coccium* was not a fortress but would probably have been fortified enough to warrant a *'burh'* name.

*'Brun'* is an Old English word, usually meaning 'brown'. Wigan lies within the 'Pennine Coal Measures' outcrop. According to Historic England's 'Merseyside Stone Building Atlas', the local sandstones used for building "*weather to yellow, buff and brown*", so the name could apply to the colour of the buildings. More likely, as Paul Cavill proposes, *Bruna* was a Saxon personal name. There is a place named Brownlow four miles southwest of Wigan. A 'low' suffix usually derives from *'hlaw'*, Old English for a round hill or tumulus. There are some thirty places in England with a 'low' suffix, nearly half of which take the first part of their name from a Saxon personal name, presumably the person interred therein: Tæppa at Taplow (our home), Bassa at Baslow, Hucca at Hucklow, and so on. It follows then that Brownlow was once *'Bruna's Hlaw'*, or Brunlow, named after a local chieftain *Bruna*. It seems likely that there was a chieftain named *Bruna* on the Lancashire Plain, because

of the aforementioned Bruna's Hill as well as Brown Edge, Burnicroft, Bryn, Brindle and Brinscall all nearby.

If it follows the pattern elsewhere, *Bruna's* tribe and their land would have been known as the '*Bruningas*'. It is analogous with the Hastings Peninsula, for instance, known as '*Hæstingas*' in Saxon times, named after a tribal chieftain *Hæsta*. Local features take the name: the Roman fortress was known as '*Hæstingaceastre*', the port as '*Hæstingaport*'. '*dune*' usually means 'hill', '*werc*' means 'earthwork', '*feld*' means 'open uncultivated land', '*ford*' means 'ford'. So, for example, 'Brunanburh' would be the 'burh' in 'Bruningas'. It means that the Brunanburh battlefield was close to a stronghold (Brunanburh), a ford (Bruneford), a hill (Brunandune), and open uncultivated land (Bruningafeld), all of which would apply to Wigan, located as it is between the hills of Scholes and Brownlow, and beside the lowest ford on the River Douglas.

The B and C recensions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, as well as John of Worcester, use the alternative spelling '*Brunnanburh*'. Simeon refers to the battlefield as '*Brunnanbyrig*', which means the same. '*brunnan*' with double-n is said to be Old English for 'spring' or 'well'. It is news to us, but the word '*brunnen*' means 'spring' or 'well' in modern German which has similar roots. Michael Wood uses this interpretation of the battle's name to support his theory that the battlefield is near Doncaster. It would apply equally to Wigan, which is surrounded by freshwater springs. One of its wards is named New Springs. It implies that there were 'old springs' and we were reminded by Bill Aldridge that there were ancient springs and wells in Wigan town centre. As he said to us, it was a spa town in the 18th century and the recently discovered Roman bath house must have been fed by a spring.

Simeon says that the battlefield was also known as '*Weondune*', later spelled '*Wendune*'. Victoria Koivisto-Kokko, an expert in Old English pronunciation, explains that a 'g' before or after 'i' or 'o' was a velar fricative, pronounced as a guttural gurgle that has no parallel in Latin. Old English 'Wigan' would therefore have been transliterated into Latin

as 'Weon'. This is perhaps the strongest etymological evidence that the Battle of Brunanburh was fought at Wigan.

Adrian Grant has an alternative theory. He believes that the 'Weon/Wen' part of 'Weondune/Wendune' was the Latin transliteration of Brythonic 'gwyn', meaning 'white' or 'blessed'. He thinks 'dune' probably referred to a hill, supporting his theory that the battle was fought at White Hill. Alternatively, 'dune' might have been Brythonic, meaning 'stronghold' or 'fortress'. So, perhaps *Weondune* meant 'white stronghold' or 'blessed stronghold'. The full entry in the 'Merseyside Stone Building Atlas' for 'Pennine Coal Measures' is that the local sandstones are: "*recorded as being white and grey when fresh, weathering to yellow, buff and brown*". Perhaps, then, the stone was new and white in pre-Saxon times, then weathered to brown. Wigan had a nearby stronghold and nearby hills, so it could have been 'white hill' or 'white stronghold'.

Most experts think that the 'dune' part of *Weondune* and *Brunandune* is a variation of Old English 'dun', meaning 'hill'. If so, it could be referring to Scholes, Upholland or Brownlow, either side of Wigan. They are among only a handful of places on the Lancashire plain that could be called a hill. The latter two form a ridge with the highest elevation above the Lancashire plain.

We are unconvinced that 'dune' did mean hill in the case of *Weondune* and *Brunandune*. Places with a 'dun' prefix are almost always hills, but not those with a 'dun' suffix. Medieval *Fearndun* (Faringdon) is on a ridge, although not on a raised part of that ridge. All the others that appear in Bede or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and whose modern derivative name is known - *Abbandun* (Abingdon) *Assundun* (Ashingdon), *Beandun* (Bampton) *Ethandun* (Edington), *Hreopandune* (Repton), *Huntandun* (Huntingdon) and *Hybberadune* (Hebburn) - are in valleys, often where they are crossed by Roman roads. As we say above, 'dun' can derive from Brythonic 'dunum' meaning 'stronghold' or 'fortress'. This is the case with *Sinodun* in Berkshire, the only place in England that has kept its 'dun' suffix. We suspect that most 'dun' suffix Old English placenames, including *Weondune* and *Brunandune*, derive

from a nearby stronghold. If so, *Brunandune* is a cognate of Brunanburh, which matches Wigan through the Roman military station of *Coccium*.

The Irish Annals of Clonmacnoise say that the battle was on the '*Plaines of Othlyn*'. Breeze reckons it means 'place of slaughter' and should therefore be ignored. Nicholas Higham reckons, rightly we think, that *Othlyn* means 'up to the Lyme', referring to woodland known as 'The Lymes' that once blanketed the western Pennines in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire. As John Ward explained back in 1843, its western boundary is marked by a string of towns on the 400' contour, many of which have Lyme related names: Lyme Handley, Chesterton-under-Lyme, Bure-wardes-Lyme (now Burslem), Newcastle-under-Lyme, Madeley-under-Lyme, Whitmore-under-Lyme, Betton-under-Lyme and Old Lyme (now Audlem). The n/m switch between Lyme and Lyn is quite plausible in the days before standard spelling; after all, Ashton-under-Line is presumably another of these Lyme boundary towns. If Higham is right, the *Plaines of Othlyn* was the coastal plain bounded by the Forest of Lyme to the south and southeast, by the Pennines to the east and northeast, and by the River Lune to the north. Wigan is roughly in the middle of it.

## Wigan and Reverend Whitaker's clues

We believe that Wigan best fits the geographic and onomastic clues among all the battlefield candidates, but we accept that most of the clues are general, equivocal or ambiguous. The only exceptions – Old English '*wigan*' meaning 'battles', Brownlow being derived from *Brunhlaw*, and *Weon* being transliterated from Old English 'Wigan' – are intangible. Rev. John Whitaker inadvertently provides some solid evidence in his 1785 book '*The History of Manchester*'.

It has to be said right away that Whitaker is a less than reliable source. He had many idiosyncratic convictions, not least that Britons converted to Christianity during the Roman occupation. He did himself no favours by associating most of Lancashire's battles with King Arthur.

Edward Baines said of him: *“the public is indebted more to the vigorous imagination of the author than to historical evidence.”* No less a man than Horace Walpole, then Prime Minister, waded in to say that History of Manchester was *“more an account of Babel than Manchester”*. We will concentrate on his reports of physical evidence. It is possible that some or all of it was fabricated, but we think not, for reasons we explain below.

Whitaker reports what could be the crucial evidence that Brunanburh referred to Wigan. He says that a mass grave of horses and men was found during 1741 canal works at Poolbridge in Wigan: *“All along the course of the channel, from the termination of the dock to the point at Poolbridge, from forty to fifty roods in length, and seven or eight yards in breadth, they found the ground everywhere containing the remains of men and horses.”* He says ‘roods in length’ but we guess he meant ‘rods’, each being 5m. If so, this mass grave covered an area at least 200m by 7m, spacious enough for more than a thousand bodies.

A thousand bodies are an enormous amount for the time. Domesday’s section on modern Lancashire is damaged but, as a guide, it lists less than 1000 people on the entire Lancashire plain away from the coast. Assuming it was not an invention, Whitaker’s mass grave can only have been caused by a major battle. The Battle of Wigan Lane is known to have been fought near Wigan during the Civil War, but it was more of a skirmish than battle, with too few casualties to match Whitaker’s evidence. Brunanburh is the only battle big enough to have been responsible for more than 1000 fatalities.

According to Whitaker, there was more fighting 6km from Wigan town centre at Hasty Knoll near Blackrod: *“Closely adjoining to the site is a considerable barrow; and tradition speaks of a remarkable battle near it, in which a great officer was slain, many of the soldiers were cut to pieces, and the Douglas ran crimsoned with the blood to Wigan.”* It is quite plausible that this is where Æthelstan’s horsemen caught up with one bunch of fleeing rebels.

Whitaker’s mass grave is not independently corroborated, and he has a

reputation as an unreliable source. He might have fabricated it. But 1741 was just 34 years before his book was published. It would be incredibly inept for someone of his intellect, and risky for someone in his profession, to fabricate something that could so easily be disproved. Everyone in the town would have known about the canal construction. Many of the men would have been involved. In our opinion, if Whitaker wanted to fabricate physical evidence, he would have backdated it by 100 years.

Whitaker reports that a horseman's spur was found in the mass grave, with a four or five-inch stem and a rowel as big as a half-crown coin. It has been pointed out to us that rowels were not used before the 12th century, implying that the casualties were too late for Brunanburh. But the spur could easily have been buried centuries after the bodies.

It has also been pointed out to us that the mass grave is north of the River Douglas whereas the initial engagement was at the English camp which would have been south of the river. It sounds inconsistent. But the Brunanburh poem is clear that the main battle was shield wall to shield wall. We guess that the initial engagement was an opportunist raid, hoping to catch Æthelstan asleep in his tent. Once Olaf realised it had failed, he would have fallen back over the river to defend the crossing, so most of the casualties would have been north of the river.

## Wigan and William of Malmesbury's clues

William of Malmesbury and Pseudo-Ingulf provide some logistical and geographical clues about the engagement. As we explain above, there is reason to doubt Malmesbury's provenance, and therefore Pseudo-Ingulf's, but there is no harm correlating their engagement narratives against a Wigan battlefield.

To summarise, they say that the invaders attack Æthelstan's camp during the night where they kill a Bishop who was camped on level turf; that Æthelstan and many of his men were more than a mile away; that Æthelstan hears the commotion and arrives at dawn to turn the

battle; and that one reason for Æthelstan's victory is that the invaders were exhausted.

1. Is it likely that Olaf would have tried a nocturnal attack on Æthelstan's camp at Wigan? We think so. The Brunanburh Poem says: "*The whole day long the West Saxons with mounted companies kept in pursuit of the hostile peoples.*" It sounds like Æthelstan had a lot of horses. The poem also says: "*There the prince of the Norsemen was put to flight, driven perforce to the prow of his ship with a small company*". It sounds like Olaf and some barons arrived at a ship and crewed it themselves, which suggests to us that they were on horseback while their men were on foot. If so, Olaf had relatively few horses. One possibility then is that Olaf was trying to nullify Æthelstan's superior cavalry. Another is that Olaf could not risk Æthelstan retreating any further south because the English army would leave a barren swathe with no food for Olaf's men.
2. Is it likely that Æthelstan was a mile away from the initial night attack? If Æthelstan was at Wigan, we think so. He would have posted a guard south of the ford. He and his barons would have been at a safe distance behind the guard, probably on the nearby hill at Scholes, 1km or so northeast of the ford.
3. Is it likely that Olaf's men were too exhausted to continue the fight? Olaf's men would have marched five or six hours in the night to get to Wigan, then they would have had to fight their way across the ford on unfavourable ground. They may well have been exhausted when Æthelstan arrived at the battlefield soon after dawn.

## Wigan and logistical clues

Finally, it is worth checking the logistics. Malmesbury says that: "*Æthelstan purposely retreating, that he might derive greater honour from vanquishing his furious assailants*". If Olaf was at Walton-le-Dale (or Lancaster, for that matter), a tactical retreat would be no surprise. We guess Æthelstan's original plan was an immediate attack on Olaf's camp. But the Roman road approach to Walton-le-Dale (and Lancaster)



ran along the base of an escarpment to the east. It looks like perfect ambush territory. We guess that Æthelstan got spooked, then decided to gather more intelligence before mounting an attack. He could not risk camping on open ground near the enemy camp, so he retreated.

Is it likely that Æthelstan would have camped at Wigan? If Olaf was camped at Walton-le-Dale, there were only two places that Æthelstan is likely to have camped: Chorley and Wigan. Each provided the natural protection of a river: the Yarrow at Chorley, the Douglas at Wigan. Chorley is closer, six miles from Walton-le-Dale whereas Wigan is 15 miles away. Chorley would have provided faster intelligence. Wigan would have given more time to respond to an enemy sortie. Wigan also had the advantage of terrain, its southern riverbank being overlooked by the only hills over 150m on the Lancashire plain, whereas south Chorley is on a flat plateau.

Wigan is also a better match for the Brunanburh poem's description of the rebel flight: *"The whole day long the West Saxons with mounted companies kept in pursuit of the hostile peoples"*. So, the fighting was over in the morning and Æthelstan's horsemen harried the invaders all the way back to their ships, which took them into the late afternoon. It sounds like Olaf's ships must have been a four-to-six-hour flight from the battlefield. Chorley, at six miles away, would have been too close. If the battle was fought at Wigan, the rebel ships were 15 miles to the north along Margary 70. Those fleeing would probably have split, some going direct, some heading east then north, some west then north, some heading for untrodden wastes where horses might fear to follow. The detours might have extended the flight to perhaps 20 miles. People were fit in those days, but they were not athletes, and they would have needed to hide from their chasers. Four-to-six hours sounds about right for a flight from Wigan.

The Brunanburh poem says that Olaf and Constantine disembark from *'dinges mere'* on their way home. It is spelled *'dynges mere'* and *'dyniges mere'* in other recensions. Dodgson and Cavill think it might derive from the River Dee. Thorpe and followers think *'dynges'* is cognate of

‘*dines*’, Old English for ‘noisy’, referring to a ‘noisy sea’. Kirby analyses fluid dynamics to show this could refer to Morcambe Bay, just on the other side of the Fylde coast from Walton-le-Dale. ‘*dyngre mere*’ is Old English for ‘dung water’ or ‘dung lake’. Campbell translates as “*estuary of dark water*”. We suspect it was the local name for Martin Mere which was a huge low-lying bog that drained into the Ribble estuary. Its water would have been dung coloured, and it may well have smelled putrid.

## Summary

Wigan matches all the clues we can find about the Battle of Brunanburh battlefield, bar one, albeit that the clues are too equivocal to prove anything beyond reasonable doubt. In absolute terms, none of the candidates is compelling. But they do not have to be. The battle was fought somewhere. In cases like this, the most likely is the least unlikely. Wigan’s only dependencies are that John of Worcester was wrong about Olaf landing in the Humber basin in 937, and that Olaf camped at Walton-le Dale. The other candidates have many more dependencies. Wigan has the Cuerdale Hoard and Whitaker’s mass grave. It is true that no one else reported the mass grave and that Whitaker is a less than ideal source, but none of the other battlefield candidates has anything near as compelling. In our opinion, Wigan is by far the best battlefield candidate.

## Brunanburh, a revised narrative

Olaf crossed the Irish Sea to land in the Hiberno-Norse controlled Ribble estuary. He moored most of his fleet where Martin Mere meets the Ribble estuary. He made camp at Walton-le-Dale, now a suburb of Preston south of the river. Owain’s troops probably marched down to Walton-le-Dale from Strathclyde and Cumbria on Margary 70, bringing horses, livestock and grain. Constantine’s army might have arrived by ship, or via Strathclyde and Cumbria by land, or some combination.

Æthelstan marched his troops north from Mercia on Margary 70, crossing into Northumbria at Warrington. He planned an immediate

attack on Olaf's camp at Walton-le-Dale but got spooked when he saw how ambush prone it was. He retreated to Wigan to devise a plan of attack, dispatching his scouts and spies to gather intelligence.

Olaf was worried about fighting in the open with a cavalry deficit, and that Æthelstan might retreat further to Wilderspool, dangerously close to his Mercian power base, so he tried a nocturnal surprise attack. There was an initial clash with Æthelstan's river guard, which raised the alarm in the rest of his camp. Æthelstan's troops arrived from their main camp to overwhelm the invaders. Olaf initially fell back across the river and made a stand on the north riverbank. A classic shield wall battle ensued, Æthelstan's men coming out on top.

Olaf, Constantine and the other barons fled on horseback to the nearest ships, which were in Martin Mere. He did not wait for a crew but left as soon as possible. The rest of his men were harried back to their ships, many dying enroute.

## Appendix A – Contemporary account translations

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Whitlock translation here) takes the form of a poem:

*In this year King Athelstan, lord of nobles, dispenser of treasure to men, and his brother also, Edmund atheling, won by the sword's edge undying glory in battle around Brunanburh. Edward's sons clove the shield-wall, hewed the linden-wood shields with hammered swords, for it was natural to men of their lineage to defend their land, their treasure, and their homes, in frequent battle against every foe. Their enemies perished; the people of the Scots and the pirates fell doomed. The field grew dark with the blood of men, from the time when the sun, that glorious luminary, the bright candle of God, of the Lord Eternal, moved over the earth in the hours of morning, until that noble creation sank at its setting. There lay many a man destroyed by the spears, many a northern warrior shot over his shield; and likewise many a Scot lay weary, sated with battle.*

*The whole day long the West Saxons with mounted companies kept in pursuit of the hostile peoples, grievously they cut down the fugitives from behind with their whetted swords. The Mercians refused not hard conflict to any men who with Olaf had sought this land in the bosom of a ship over the tumult of waters, coming doomed to the fight. Five young kings lay on that field of battle, slain by the swords, and also seven of Olaf's earls, and a countless host of seamen and Scots. There the prince of the Norsemen was put to flight, driven perforce to the prow of his ship with a small company; the vessel pressed on in the water, the king set out over the fallow flood and saved his life.*

*There also the aged Constantine, the hoary-haired warrior, came north to his own land by flight. He had no cause to exult in that crossing of swords. He was shorn of his kinsmen and deprived of his friends at that meeting-place, bereaved in the battle, and he left his young son on the field of slaughter, brought low by wounds in the battle. The grey-haired warrior,*

*the old and wily one, had no cause to vaunt of that sword-clash; no more had Olaf. They had no need to gloat with the remnants of their armies, that they were superior in warlike deeds on the field of battle, in the clash of standards, the meeting of spears, the encounter of men, and the crossing of weapons, after they had contended on the field of slaughter with the sons of Edward.*

*Then the Norsemen, the sorry survivors from the spears, put out in their studded ships on to Ding's mere, to make for Dublin across the deep water, back to Ireland humbled at heart. Also the two brothers, king and atheling, returned together to their own country, the land of the West Saxons, exulting in the battle. They left behind them the dusky-coated one, the black raven with its homed beak, to share the corpses, and the dim-coated, white-tailed eagle, the greedy war-hawk, to enjoy the carrion, and that grey beast, the wolf of the forest.*

*Never yet in this island before this, by what books tell us and our ancient sages, was a greater slaughter of a host made by the edge of the sword, since the Angles and Saxons came hither from the east, invading Britain over the broad seas, and the proud assailants, warriors eager for glory, overcame the Britons and won a country.*

*Æthelweard's Chronicle says:*

*In the year in which the very mighty king Æthelstan enjoyed the crown of empire, 926 years were passed from the glorious incarnation of our Saviour. After thirteen years a huge battle was fought against the barbarians at Brunandun, wherefore it is still called the 'great battle' by the common people. Then the barbarian forces were overcome on all sides, and held the superiority no more. Afterwards he drove them off from the shores of the ocean, and the Scots and Picts both submitted. The fields of Britain were consolidated into one, there was peace everywhere, and abundance of all things, and [since then] no fleet has remained here, having advanced against these shores, except under treaty with the English.*

John of Worcester's 'Chronicon ex Chronicis' for the year 938 says:

*Anlaf, the Pagan king of Ireland and many other isles, at the instigation of his father-in-law Constantine, King of the Scots, entered the mouth of the Humber with a powerful fleet. King Athelstan, and his brother Edmund the etheling, encountered him at the head of their army at a place called Brunanburgh, and the battle, in which five tributary kings and seven earls were slain, having lasted from daybreak until evening, and been more sanguinary than any that was ever fought before in England, the conquerors retired in triumph, having driven the kings Anlaf and Constantine to their ships; who, overwhelmed with sorrow at the destruction of their army, returned to their own countries with very few followers.*

Henry of Huntingdon's 'Historia Anglorum' says:

*In the year of grace 945, and in the fourth year of his reign, King Athelstan fought at Brunnesburh one of the greatest battles on record against Anlaf, king of Ireland, who had united his forces to those of the Scots and Danes settled in England. Of the grandeur of this conflict, English writers have expatiated in a sort of poetical description, in which they have employed both foreign words and metaphors. I therefore give a faithful version of it, in order that, by translating their recital almost word for word, the majesty of the language may exhibit the majestic achievements and the heroism of the English nation. Then follows his Latin translation of the Brunanburgh Poem from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (above).*

Simeon's 'Libellus de Exordio Ecclesiae Dunelmensis' says:

*In the fourth year after this, that is to say, in the year nine hundred and thirty-seven of our Lord's nativity, Ethelstan fought at Weondune (which is called by another name Aet-Brunnanwerc, or Brunnanbyrig) against Onlaf the son of Guthred, the late king, who had arrived with a fleet of six hundred and fifteen ships, supported by the auxiliaries of the kings recently spoken of, that is to say, of the Scots and Cumbrians. But trusting in the protection of St. Cuthbert, he slew a countless multitude of these*

people, and drove those kings out of his realm; earning for his own soldiers a glorious victory.

William of Malmesbury says that all the information about Æthelstan in his 'Gesta Regum Anglorum' came from a poem he had recently found:

*His last contest was with Anlaf, the son of Sihtric, who, with the before-named Constantine, again in a state of rebellion, had entered his territories under the hope of gaining the kingdom. Athelstan purposely retreating, that he might derive greater honour from vanquishing his furious assailants, this bold youth, meditating unlawful conquests, had now proceeded far into England, when he was opposed at Bruneford by the most experienced generals, and most valiant forces. There follows a passage about Anlaf pretending to be a minstrel, then: Anlaf advancing, well prepared, at night, put to death, together with the whole of his followers, a certain bishop, who had joined the army only the evening before, and, ignorant of what had passed, had pitched his tent there on account of the level turf. Proceeding farther, he found the king himself equally unprepared; who, little expecting his enemy capable of such an attack, had indulged in profound repose. But, when roused from his sleep by the excessive tumult, and urging his people, as much as the darkness of the night would permit, to the conflict, his sword fell by chance from the sheath ; upon which, while all things were filled with dread and blind confusion, he invoked the protection of God and of St. Aldhelm, who was distantly related to him ; and replacing his hand upon the scabbard, he there found a sword, which is kept to this day, on account of the miracle, in the treasury of the kings. Moreover, it is, as they say, chased in one part, but can never be inlaid either with gold or silver. Confiding in this divine present, and at the same time, as it began to dawn, attacking the Norwegian, he continued the battle unwearied through the day, and put him to flight with his whole army. There fell Constantine, king of the Scots, a man of treacherous energy and vigorous old age; five other kings, twelve earls, and almost the whole assemblage of barbarians. The few who escaped were preserved to embrace the faith of Christ.*

Malmesbury reproduces an extract from his source poem (Giles

translation):

*His subjects governing with justest sway,  
Tyrants o'eraw'd, twelve years had passed away,  
When Europe's noxious pestilence stalk'd forth.  
And poured the barbarous legions from the north.  
The pirate Anlaf now the briny surge  
Forsakes, while deeds of desperation urge.  
Her king consenting, Scotia's land receives  
The frantic madman, and his host of thieves :  
Now flush'd with insolence they shout and boast,  
And drive the harmless natives from the coast.  
Thus, while the king, secure in youthful pride,  
Bade the soft hours in gentle pleasures glide,  
Though erst he stemmed the battle's furious tide,  
With ceaseless plunder sped the daring horde,  
And wasted districts with then- fire and sword.  
The verdant crops lay withering on the fields  
The glebe no promise to the rustic yields.  
Immense the numbers of barbarian force.  
Countless the squadrons both of foot and horse.  
At length fame's rueful moan alarmed the king,  
And bade him shun this ignominious sting,  
That arms like his to ruffian bands should bend :  
'Tis done : delays and hesitations end.  
High in the air the threatening banners fly,  
And call his eager troops to victory.  
His hardy force, a hundred thousand strong  
Whom standards hasten to the fight along.  
The martial clamour scares the plund'ring band,  
And drives them bootless tow'rds their native land.  
The vulgar mass a dreadful carnage share,  
And shed contagion on the ambient air,  
While Anlaf, only, out of all the crew  
Escapes the meed of death, so justly due.  
Reserved by fortune's favour, once again  
When Athelstan was dead, to claim our strain.*



Michael Wood's translation of the first part of this poem might be more pertinent to the battle location:

*Now barbarian savagery descends on Northumbria  
Now quitting the ocean the pirate Anlaf camps on land  
Mouthing forbidden and savage threats  
To this Bacchant fury, at the will of the king of the Scots,  
The Northumbrians give willing ascent  
And now puffed up with pride they frighten the air with words;  
The natives submit, the whole province gives up the to the proud.*

Giles is kind about Æthelstan's response to Olaf's invasion. Mynors, et al, more accurately, we think, are blunt in their Oxford Medieval Texts translation. It seems that Æthelstan allowed the invaders to plunder at will until he was shamed into a response:

*The people of the entire region yield to their arrogance,  
For because our king, bold and spirited in his youth,  
Had retired from war long ago and languished in sluggish leisure,  
They defiled everything in their relentless plundering,  
Afflicting the wretched fields with spreading fires.  
Verdant grass had withered on all the plains;  
Diseased grain had mocked the prayers of farmers;  
So great was the barbaric force of the footmen and riders,  
The charge of galloping steeds,  
Rumour's complaint finally roused the king,  
Lest he allow himself to be branded with the mark  
that his armed men had submitted to the barbarian ax.*

Simeon's first chronicle in 'Historia Regum' for the year 937 says:

*King Ethelstan fought at Wendune and put to flight king Onlaf, with six hundred and fifteen ships; also Constantine king of the Scots and the king of the Cumbrians, with all their host.*

Simeon's second chronicle in 'Historia Regum' – based on John of Worcester - for the year 937 says:

*Anlaf the pagan, king of the Irishmen and of many of the islands, stirred up by his father-in-law Constantine, king of the Scots, entered the mouth of the river Humber with a powerful fleet. King Ethelstan and his brother Eadmund Atheling encountered them with an army in the place called Brunanburgh, and in a battle, lasting from morning till evening, they slew five kings and seven dukes, whom their adversaries had brought as auxiliaries, and shed more blood than had been shed up to that time in any war in England; and having compelled the kings Anlaf and Constantine to fly to their vessels, they returned with much joy; but the enemy, suffering the greatest distress, on account of the loss of their army, returned to their own country with a few followers.*

Pseudo-Ingulf's 'Historia Monasterii Croylandensis' seems to be embellished from Malmesbury, or perhaps they have a common lost source, both 'uniquely' stating that the battlefield was at 'Bruneford' and both mistaken that Constantine died on the battlefield. It says:

*The renowned king Edward having filled the measure of his days, his son Athelstan succeeded him. Anlaf, the son of Sitric, the former king of Northumbria, having risen in rebellion against him, and a most fierce war being carried on, Constantine, king of the Scots, and Eugenius, king of the Cumbrians, and an infinite multitude of other barbarian kings and earls entered into a strict confederacy with the said Anlaf; upon which, all of these, with the nations subject to them, went forth to engage with king Athelstan at Brunford in Northumbria. When, however, the said king of the English approached with his army, although the barbarian before-named had collected together an infinite multitude of the Danes, Norwegians, Scots, and Picts, either through distrust of conquering, or in accordance with the usual craftiness of his nation, he preferred to resort to stratagem, when protected by the shades of night, rather than engage in open combat.*

*Accordingly, during the night, he made an attack upon the English, and slew a certain bishop, who the evening before had joined the army of king*

Athelstan. The cries of the dying being heard at a considerable distance, that king, who was encamped more than a mile from the place of attack, was, together with all his army, awoke from slumber while lying in their tents beneath the canopy of heaven; and on learning the particulars, they quickly aroused themselves. The dawn was just breaking, when they arrived at the place of slaughter; the king's troops coming up fresh and prepared for the onset against the barbarians, while they, on the other hand, had been toiling throughout the whole night, and were quite weary and worn out with fatigue. King Athelstan, who was in command of all the men of Wessex, charged the troops of Anlaf, while his chancellor, Turketul, who led on the Londoners and all the Mercians, engaged the forces of Constantine. The discharge of light arms being quickly put an end to, the battle was now fought foot to foot, spear to spear, and shield to shield. Numbers of men were slain, and, amid indiscriminate confusion, the bodies of kings and of common men were strewed upon the ground. After they had now fought for a long time with the most determined courage, and neither side would give way, (so vast was the multitude of the Pagans), the chancellor Turketul, taking with him a few of the Londoners, whom he knew to be most distinguished for valour, and a certain captain of the Wiccii, Singin by name, who was remarkable for his undaunted bravery, (being taller in stature than any of the rest, firm and brawny in bone and muscle, and excelling in strength and robustness any one of the London heroes), flew at their head to the charge against the foe, and, penetrating the hostile ranks, struck them down on the right and on the left.

He had now pierced the ranks of the men of Orkney and the Picts, and, bearing around him a whole forest of darts and javelins, which he had received upon his right trusty cuirass, with his followers had penetrated the dense masses of the Cumbrians and Scots. At last, amid torrents of blood, he reached the king himself, and unhorsed him; and when thus thrown to the ground, made redoubled efforts to take him alive. But the Scots, crowding around their king, used every possible exertion to save him; and, whole multitudes pressing on against a few, they all made Turketul their especial object of attack; who, as he was often in the habit

of confessing in after-times, was beginning to repent of the rashness of which he had been guilty.

He was now on the very point of being overwhelmed by the Scots, and their king was just about to be snatched from his grasp, when, at that instant, the captain, Singin, pierced him with his sword. Constantine, the king of the Scots, being thus slain, his people retreated, and so left the road open to Turketul and his soldiers. The death of Constantine becoming known throughout the whole army, Anlaf took to flight; on which they all followed his example. On this occasion there fell of the Pagans an unheard-of multitude. Turketul frequently made it his boast, that in this hazardous combat he had been preserved by the Lord, and that he esteemed himself most happy and fortunate, in that he had never slain a man, and had not even wounded anyone, though at the same time everyone may lawfully fight for his country, and especially against the Pagans.

The 'Chronica de Mailros' (Chronicle of Melrose) says:

*Anlaf, King of Ireland, entered the Humber with his fleet. King Athelstan and his brother Edmund repelled the invasion and killed the leaders of the west at Brunanburch.*

The 'Irish Annals of Ulster' entry for 937.6 says:

*A great, lamentable and horrible battle was cruelly fought between the Saxons and the Norsemen, in which several thousands of Norsemen, who are uncounted, fell, but their king, Amlaíb, escaped with a few followers. A large number of Saxons fell on the other side, but Athelstan, king of the Saxons, enjoyed a great victory.*

The 'Irish Annals of Clonmacnoise' entry for 931 says:

*The Danes of Loghrie, arrived at Dublin. Awley with all the Danes of Dublin and north part of Ireland departed and went over seas. The Danes that departed from Dublin arrived in England, & by the help of the Danes of that kingdom, they gave battle to the Saxons on the plaines of othlyn, where there was a great slaughter of Normans and Danes, among which*

*these ensuing captaines were slaine, Sithfrey and Oisle, 2 sones of Sithrick, Galey, Awley ffroit, and Moylemorrey the sonn of Cosse Warce, Moyle Isa, Gebeachan king of the Islands, Ceallagh prince of Scotland with 30000 together with 800 captives about Awley m'Godfrey, and abbot of Arick m'Brith, Iloa Deck, Imar, the king of Denmarks owen son with 4000 souldiers in his guard were all slaine.*

The 'Annals of the Four Masters' entry for 938 says:

*Amhlaeibh Cuaran went to Cair-Abroc; and Blacaire, son of Godfrey, came to Ath-cliath. Depredations were committed by the Leinstermen in Leath-Chuinn ; namely, by Braen in Meath, Lorcan in Breagh, and Muircheartach in Cuulann ; and they carried great preys from these places. Cairbre Ua Cinaeidh, lord of Ui-Aitheachda, died. A victory was gained by the king of the Saxons over Constantine, sou of Acdh; Anlaf, or Amhlaeibh, son of Sitric; and the Britons.*

## Appendix B – Brunanburh Location Theories

During the development of our Brunanburh-Wigan theory we researched dozens of other Brunanburh battlefield location theories. As far as we know, until now there has been no comprehensive list. It might help others in their research, and to verify/debunk our theory, if we list them. There are forty-six different locations, including Wigan. Eight of them are listed separately, either because we cannot find the battlefield place name, or because they are referenced indirectly and we cannot find the original paper. Lastly, we list five Brunanburh battlefield analyses that we have not seen. They might propose more battlefields or contain information on those we cannot find. If you spot any errors in these lists, or if you can help with the lost references, please feel free to contact us: [momentousbritain@outlook.com](mailto:momentousbritain@outlook.com).

### Verified Brunanburh battlefield candidates

**Aldborough (on the Ouse)** - William Forbes Skene, Celtic Scotland (Vol 1), 1886

**Axminster, Devon** - (1) John Leland, Itineraries Vol 1, 1540; (2) Daniel Lysons, Magna Britannia, 1822

**Bamber Bridge / Browndge (near Preston)** - Charles Hardwick, History of the Borough of Preston and Its Environs, 1857

**Bamford (near Rochdale)** - Charles Hardwick, History of the Borough of Preston and Its Environs, 1857

**Barton-upon-Humber** - (1) William Smith Hesleden (later Hesledon), Account of the ancient earthworks at Barton-upon-Humber and conjectures relating to the site of the Battle of Brunanburh, Transactions of the British Archeological Association, London, 1846; (2) Robert Brown Jnr, Notes on the Earlier History of Barton-on-Humber, 1906

**Bourne, Lincs** – (1) Sir James Ramsay, Foundations of England, 1898; (2) Cyril Hart, Danelaw, 1992

**Bourne, Lancashire** - Edward Baines, History of the palatine and duchy of Lancaster, 1836

**Boroughbridge (near Ripon)** - Rev S Baring Gould, Yorkshire Archaeological Journal Vol. 22, 1908

**Bramham Moor, Yorkshire** - Pearson, Bramham Moor and the Red, White and Brown Battles, Yorkshire Archaeological Journal (Vol. 67), 1995

**Brancepeth** - Bosworth Toller, An Anglo-Saxon dictionary ("on the plain between the river Tyne and the Browney, 5 miles southwest of Durham". Presumably means between Wear and Browney), 1848

**Breandown (Brean Down), Somerset** - C. Bulleid, Battle of Brunanburh at Breandune, Notes and Queries Somerset and Dorset (Vol 5), 1888

**Brinkburn** - Francis Grose, The Beauties of England and Wales Vol XII, Part 1 Northumbria, 1813

**Brinsworth (Rotherham)**, referred to as Bruneshurh by Cockburn - (1) Armitage Goodall, Place-names of South-west Yorkshire, 1913; (2) J H Cockburn, Brunanburh Elucidated by Place-Names, 1938; (3) A. H. Burne, The Battlefields of England, 1950; (4) Michael Wood, In search of England : journeys into the English past; 2000



**Bromborough** - (1) Edmund Gibson; Chronicon Saxonicum; 1692; (2) Thomas Baines, Lancashire and Cheshire, past and present, 1867; (3)

Ordnance Survey (above), 1872; (4) David P Gregg, *The Battlefield of Brunanburh*, 2021

**Bromeridge, Northumbria** - (1) William Camden, *Britannia* ("Brumridg near Brumeford in Northumbria"), 1600; (2) James Tyrrell, *The General History of England*, 1700

**Bromswold** - Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin*, 1979

**Brompton (near Northallerton)** - Where was the battlefield of Brunanburh really; Kirsten Møller; 2022

**Broomfield/Bromfield (five miles north of Taunton)** - Walter de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1885

**Brough** - Adrian C Grant, *Locating the site of the Battle of Brunanburh* (937), 2019

**Brown Hill, Dumbartonshire** - O G S Crawford, *Antiquity*, 1934

**Brumby, Lincs** - (1) Rev J Ingram, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* translation, 1823; (2) John Allen Giles, *Old English Chronicles*, 1912; (3) John Allen Giles, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Translation*, 1914

**Bruna Hill (near Preston)** - Tim Clarkson, *Strathclyde and the Anglo-Saxons in the Viking Age*, 2005

**Bruneswald (Northamptonshire)** - Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York & Dublin, the History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*. Vol. 2, 1979

**Brunton** - Sharon Turner, *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (explains that Camden thought it was at Ford near Bromeridge), 1820

**Burghwallis** - Michael Wood, *Searching for Brunanburh: The Yorkshire Context of the 'Great War' of 937*, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* (Vol 85/1), 2013

**Burnby (between Market Weighton and Pocklington)** - H F Napper, *The Battle of Brunanburh, A.D. 938, Notes and Queries Somerset and Dorset* (Vol 5), 1888



**Burnham, North Lincs** - Rev Alfred Hunt, Saga-Book of the Viking Club, 1905

**Burnley** - (1) T T Wilkinson, On the Battle of Brunanburh and its site; Transactions of the Historic Society of Manchester, 1856; (2) Jas. T. Marquis, Brunanburh, Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society (XXII), 1909; (3) S W Partington, The Danes in Lancashire and Yorkshire, 1909; (4) Damien Bullen, The Burnley Brunanburh, Academia

**Burn Naze (Fylde)** - John R. Kirby, Identifying Brúnanburh: ón dyngesmere – the sea of noise, 2019

**Burnswark** - (1) George Neilson, Annals of the Solway Until A.D. 1300, & Brunanburh and Burnswark; The Scottish Historical Review (vol. 7, no. 25); 1899; (2) Thomas Hodgkin, The History of England Vol 1; 1906, first printed in The Political History of England edited by William Hunt, 1905

**Elslack (Broughton)** - James Wilson, The Scottish Historical Review, 1910

**Harrogate** - J H Turner, On the Northumbrian Names of Brunanburh and Berwick, Notes and Queries (Vol 8 Issue 192), 1871

**Hunwick (near Bishop Aukland)** - Stefán Björnsson, Björn Vernharðsson, Brunanburh located through Egil's Saga, 2020

**Kirkburn (near Driffield), Yorkshire** – Mr Holderness, Bulmer's History and Directory of East Yorkshire, 1892

**Lanchester (Longovicium)** - Andrew Breeze, British Battles 493 – 937, 2020

**Londesborough** - Sally A England, The Battle of Brunanburh, The Archaeological Forum Journal CBA Yorkshire, 2013

**Little Weighton** - C Staniland Wake, The Battle of Brunaburh, The Antiquary (Vol 12), 1885

**Wigan** - Jonathan Starkey, The Battle of Brunanburh at Wigan, 2022

## Unverified Brunanburh battlefields candidates

**Browney** – quoted by Kirby, Edwin Guest; 1838 History of English Rhythms. Vol II London, Will. Pickering. Guest chose Browney.

**Bromfield, Cumberland** - quoted by Armitage Goodall in Place-names of South-west Yorkshire

**Dunbar** - quoted by Paul Hill in Age of Athelstan as seen in John Henry Cockburn's 1931 book, 'The Battle of Brunanburh and its Period elucidated by Place-Names'

**Brumford, Northumbria** - quoted by Paul Hill in Age of Athelstan as seen in John Henry Cockburn's 1931 book, 'The Battle of Brunanburh and its Period elucidated by Place-Names'

**Bamburgh** - quoted by Paul Hill in Age of Athelstan as seen in John Henry Cockburn's 1931 book, 'The Battle of Brunanburh and its Period elucidated by Place-Names'

**Kilminster and Warlington, Devon** - quoted by Notes & Queries for Somerset and Dorset; 1888

**Brunanbeorh, near Beverley** - C H Pearson, pre-1885

**Brunesburh-on-Humber** - Peter Langtoft, pre-1885

## Unseen Brunanburh battlefield analyses

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Todd Charles Spilman; The Battle of Brunanburgh: its cause, history and site; Hull; 1875

Bryant H E; A lost battlefield: the site of the battle of Brunanburh; Lincolnshire magazine 1

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*Annales Cambriae*; c990  
*Libellus de Exordio*; Simeon of Durham; c1110; Stevenson translation  
*Chronicon ex Chronicis*; John of Worcester, c1125; Stevenson translation  
*Historia Anglorum*; Henry of Huntingdon, c1129; Forester translation  
*Gesta regum anglorum*; William of Malmesbury, c1135; Giles translation  
*Historia Regum*; allegedly by Simeon of Durham; mid to late-12th century; Stevenson translation  
*Crowland Chronicle*; Pseudo-Ingulf; allegedly before 1109, but perhaps forged later; Stevenson translation  
*Chronicle of Melrose*; c1170;  
*Chronica magistri Rogeri de Hoveden*; Roger de Hoveden; c1201  
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# Help Wanted

We believe that the Battle of Brunanburh was fought in and around Wigan. Our evidence is circumstantial and speculative. It has to be said that the same applies to all the other candidates, but we think there is physical proof nearby. If you know anything about a tumulus near Wigan, or about bones or medieval military finds in or around Wigan, please contact us by email. Likewise, if you have any evidence that supports or rebuts any of our theories.

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