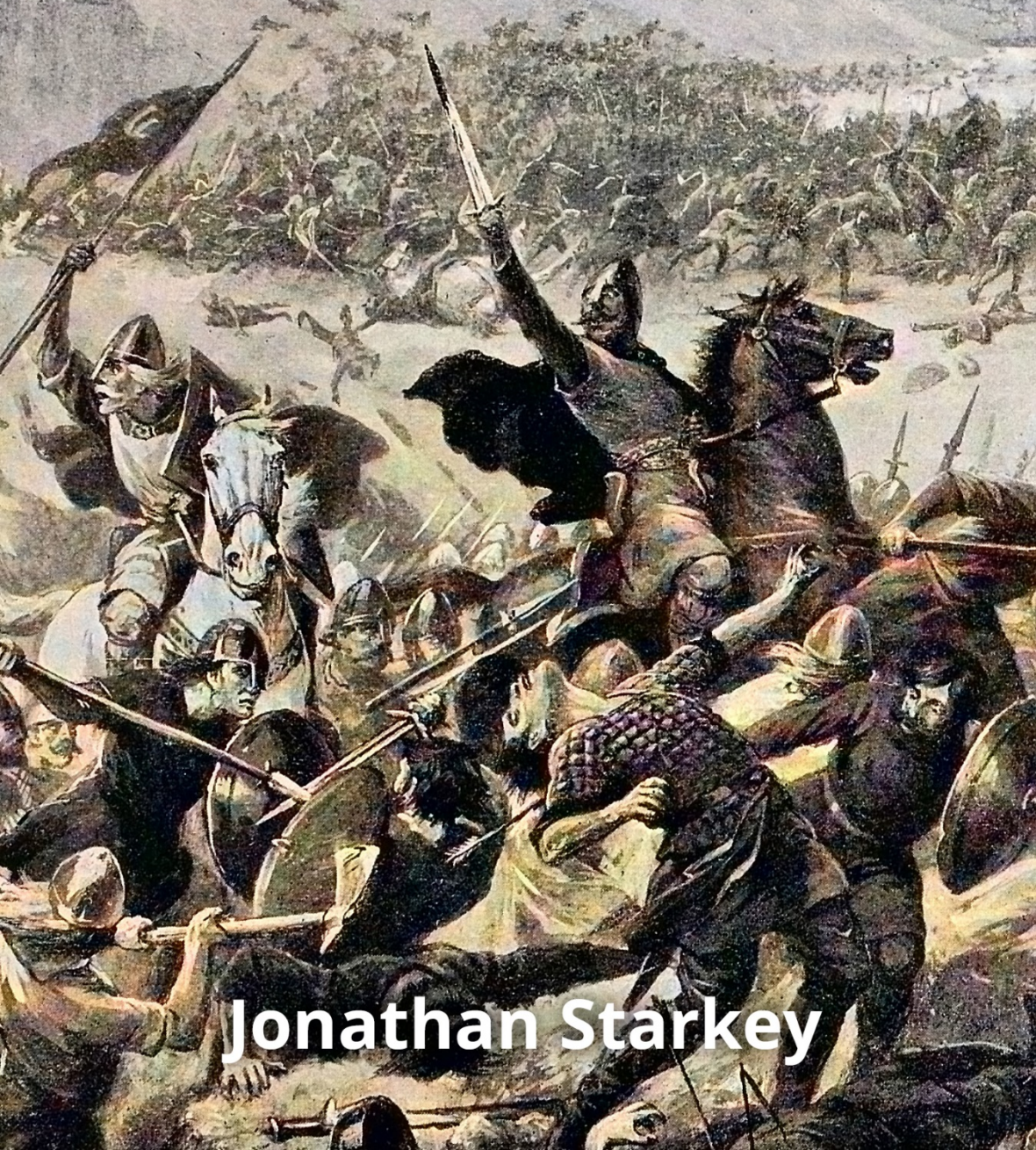


# The Battle of Brunanburh at Wigan



Jonathan Starkey

The Battle of Brunanburh  
at  
Wigan

By  
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 if he had lost, his heir Edmund being too young to fight.



No one is sure where the battle took place. Historians cannot even agree whether it happened east or west of the Pennines, although most agree it was in northern England. There is no shortage of candidates. Wiki reports that over 40 battlefields have been proposed, so we are not going to help matters by proposing another, Wigan.

Our plan was to apply much the same technique to the Battle of Brunanburh that we used to resolve the location of the Battle of Stamford Bridge, basing our analysis predominantly on a Norse saga, whereas proper historians prefer the English, Irish and Anglo-Norman accounts. Our impetus is the same: the Norse saga that covers Æthelstan's reign, namely Egil's Saga, has more details about the

battlefield than all other contemporary accounts combined. Egil's Saga's hero is the 10th century Icelandic farmer and mercenary Egill Skallagrímsson (depicted below on a bas-relief at Borganes, Iceland).



Why then do proper historians prefer the local accounts? One problem is that Norse sagas are often tarted up, or part fabricated, to glorify Norse culture and Norse heroes. They also have an air of Tolkienesque fantasy, with heroes capable of sorcery, shape-shifting and divination. They have a lot of confusion about English names and English history. And they were handed down by word of mouth for centuries, leading to inevitable Chinese Whisper errors about dates, names, and sequences. This led Professor Freeman to lament that they were: *“hardly more worthy of belief than a battle-piece in the Iliad”*. Egil's Saga is no better than average with any of these faults. But, like the other Norse sagas, it is clearly based on historical events. Its skald had no reason to invent geographical features or place names. We will persevere trying to form a narrative around Egil's Saga, taking care to separate what is probably based on fact from what is probably not.

# Background

Æthelstan came to power in 924. His father and grandfather had subjugated the southern Danelaw and the 'Five Boroughs', to bequeath him a realm covering the whole of modern England below the Humber. North of the Humber was the ethnic Danish Viking Kingdom of York, roughly equivalent to Deira (aka south Northumbria), the mainly Norse Viking region of Bernicia (aka north Northumbria), the Brythonic Kingdom of Strathclyde and Cumberland, and the Pictish-Gael Kingdom of Alba. The islands and peninsulas around the western fringes of Britain were controlled by the Viking enclave around Dublin.



Figure 1: Britain in 924

In 927, Sihtric, King of York died. Guthfrith, King of Dublin, was Sihtric's brother and heir apparent. Some say that he raised an army

and occupied York, others that he tried to. Æthelstan drove him out. Later that year Æthelstan forced King Constantine II of Alba, King Owain of Strathclyde & Cumberland, Ealdred of Bamburgh, and King Hywel Dda of Wales to accept his overlordship, giving him hegemony over the north. It united all of modern England and most of modern Britain under a single ruler for the first time.

The subjugated northern kings rebelled in 934. Æthelstan led an army into Alba and Strathclyde to quell the rebels. 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 Dublin throne. In 937, Olaf formed a rebel alliance with Constantine and Owain. They invaded somewhere in what is now the north of England, before being defeated by Æthelstan at the Battle of Brunanburh.

The key dates to remember are 927, 934 and 937. If you are interested in more detail, Wikipedia is an obvious starting point. Michael Livingstone's *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook* is perhaps the definitive guide, if somewhat formal. 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.

## Egil's Saga's battlefield description

Egil's Saga says that the invading army, purportedly under King Olaf, was heading south from Scotland, and that the English army, purportedly under Egill Skallagrimsson and his brother Thorolf, was heading north. The adversaries faced off somewhere in Northumbria. Meanwhile, Æthelstan was in Wessex levying more men. Here is part of W C Green's 1893 translation, following our standard practice of using the original untranslated place names.

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

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

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

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

5. They had so pitched that in every third tent there were no men at all, and in one of every three but few. Yet when king Olaf's men came to them, they had then numbers swarming before all

*the tents, and the others could not get to go inside. Athelstan's men said that their tents were all full, so full that their people had not nearly enough room. But the front line of tents stood so high that it could not be seen over them whether they stood many or few in depth.*

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

Egill stalls, presumably under instruction from Æthelstan, offering ever more generous bribes for the invaders to go home, while Æthelstan recruits more men:

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

There is a skirmish at the battlefield on the day before the main battle. A rebel force led by the brothers Hring and Adil fight an English force led by Alfgeir, Egill and Thorolf. Alfgeir flees. Egill and Thorolf take command. They kill Hring and Adil, and rout the rebels.

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

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

Æthelstan is victorious. Seven earls and five princes are amongst the rebel casualties. Thorolf is killed by skirmishers who loop through woodland to get behind the mercenary shield wall. Olaf and the



surviving rebels flee. After the battle, Æthelstan returns to his billet south of the battlefield:

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

Egill writes a poem about Thorolf's death in the main battle:

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

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

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

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

If the rebels fled west, the river must have been to the east, the wood to the west. The battlefield was at least 1000m wide, to encompass a shield wall of at least 3000 men, and perhaps 1000m deep to allow them to manoeuvre. There was also enough space north and south of the battlefield for perhaps 1000 tents on each side.

The statement about the rear tents being difficult to see might mean that the front row of tents was on an earthwork, it might mean that the ground fell away to the rear, or it might mean that the English put big tents at the front to block the view.

Green and Scudder translate *'borg'* and variations as 'town', but it usually means a stronghold. We interpret this to mean that there were substantial fortified settlements north and south of the Egil's Saga battlefield and that they were joined by a Roman road.

## Is Egil's Saga describing the Battle of Brunanburh?

Egil's Saga contains a lot of detail about the battlefield, but exactly as historians say, it contradicts all the other Brunanburh accounts.

Pseudo-Ingulf has the only other detailed Brunanburh account. It explains that Olaf – the *'barbarian before-named'* - tries a surprise night attack on the English camp: *“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*". It sounds like a completely different battle to that described in Egil's Saga.

There are no battlefield descriptions in the local contemporary accounts, but seven locational clues are inferred and widely accepted:

1. The invaders might have arrived in a large fleet on the Humber estuary (at least four accounts)
2. The battle happened somewhere near a place known as Brunanburh or something similar (most of the accounts)
3. The survivors left in their ships from a place known as something like '*Dinges mere*', which must have been nearby (ASC)
4. The battle might have happened somewhere near '*Weondune*' or '*Wendune*' (Simeon), which one historian (Stevenson) thinks referred to the River Wear
5. The battle might have happened near St Cuthbert's relics (Simeon), which were at Chester-le-Street
6. Æthelstan stopped at Beverley Minster on his way to the Battle of Brunanburh to pray for success in the forthcoming battle (William Ketell)
7. The survivors fled west after the battle (ASC)

The first contradicts Egil's Saga. The next five might be consistent with Egil's Saga, but they are not corroborated by it. Only the last is consistent with Egil's Saga and corroborated by it, although there is a 25% chance it is just a coincidence. Considering that Egil's Saga has more locational information than all the others combined, this is not encouraging.

Clue 1 might be faulty. John of Worcester, Simeon, the Chronicles of Melrose and Roger of Hovenden unequivocally say that Olaf's army arrived in the Humber estuary, but there is reason to suspect they are wrong. Most obviously, it would have been risky for Olaf to sail around the north of Scotland in autumn to get to the Humber. A Humber landing is not mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the only major

early account. Kevin Halloran has written two recent papers (Brunanburh: Some Implications of a Humber Landing and Brunanburh: Humber Entry Postscript, Kevin Halloran, December 2021) with a bunch more reasons why he thinks that Olaf did not land in the Humber, all of which seem valid to us. We can only add that it would have been unsafe. Æthelstan had controlled Deira for seven years. He had probably garrisoned the most vulnerable landing areas, and he would have removed any nearby horses, livestock and grain stores to prevent an invader getting easy access to food and transport.

Every historian that supports the consensus Wirral battlefield thinks the Humber landing accounts are faulty. We agree and think we know why. They were all written at least 150 years after the battle. The Chronicles of Melrose and Hovenden were based on Simeon. Simeon's Humber landing statements were based on John of Worcester. If John of Worcester made a mistake, the others would have retweeted it. And just such a mistake is easy to imagine because when Olaf invaded for a second time in 939, he almost certainly did arrive in a fleet and land in the Humber basin. Considering it was common for chronicle calendars to be a year or two awry, John of Worcester's unknown source could easily have read that Olaf arrived with his fleet in the Humber estuary in 939 and thought it meant before Brunanburh.

Clue 6 might be faulty too. Susan E Wilson argues, persuasively in our opinion, that Æthelstan stopped at Beverley on route to his 934 invasion of Alba, so it should not be used as a clue to the 937 Brunanburh battlefield.

Even if these two clues are faulty, Egil's Saga still fundamentally contradicts Pseudo-Ingulf and fails to corroborate four of the other five locational clues. It might simply be mistaken. Sagas are not history books. It is perfectly feasible that the skald was not familiar with the real battle or battlefield, so he fabricated a heroic narrative around a place that was well known to him. But it seems to us that the narrative, especially about Thorolf's death, is not heroic enough to have been invented. We suspect the problem lies elsewhere.

The last paragraph of Chapter 55 describes Egill's return to Norway from England, having been richly rewarded for his service by Æthelstan. He arrives to discover that his father's friend Thorir has died. But Thorir died in 925. If Egill was returning after the Battle of Brunanburh, it would have been 938. Thorir was an important man, the King's best friend and foster father to Eric Bloodaxe, heir to the Norway throne. It is inconceivable that it took 13 years for news of his death to arrive. Moreover, Egill's brother Thorolf married Thorir's niece roughly two years before they set off for England, and Thorir was his best man. If Egill and Thorolf came to England for the Battle of Brunanburh, Thorolf would have got married in 933 or 934, so Thorir could not have been there, already eight years dead.

There are lots of other anachronisms in Egil's Saga. Chapter 47, for example, reckons that Harald 'Bluetooth' Gormsson, whose runic initial is famously used as the Bluetooth symbol, had just come to power before Egill arrives in England, but Bluetooth did not come to power until 958, at least 20 years after Egill left. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 70, Egill receives news that Æthelstan and Eric Bloodaxe have both died, but Bloodaxe died in 954. Again, it is inconceivable that it took 15 years for news of the death of King Æthelstan to arrive. These stories have been corrupted. We suspect that the skald got confused between Æthelstan and his half-brother Eadred, and between Gorm the Old and some other Gorm.

It is possible then that the Chapter 55 account of Egill's return to Norway is similarly confused, but we think there is a more rational explanation. Chapter 50 starts: *"... It was at this time of our story that Athelstan took the kingdom after his father. There were several brothers, sons of Edward. But when Athelstan had taken the kingdom, then those chieftains who had before lost their power to his forefathers rose in rebellion; now they thought was the easiest time to claim back their own, when a young king ruled the realm. These were Britons, Scots, and Irish. King Athelstan therefore gathered him an army, and gave pay to all such as wished to enrich themselves, both foreigners*

*and natives. The brothers Thorolf and Egil were standing southwards along Saxony and Flanders, when they heard that the king of England wanted men, and that there was in his service hope of much gain. So they resolved to take their force thither."*

It is clearly saying that the disenfranchised kings rebelled soon after Æthelstan came to power, and that he immediately levied an army that was augmented by foreign mercenaries. He came to power in 924. Most likely then, Egill and Thorolf were recruited in 925 or 926, rather than when usually assumed in 935 or 936. Between leaving Norway and coming to England, they had spent a year or so plundering along the Dutch and Danish coasts. This would be consistent with them leaving Norway in 924, when Thorir was still alive and available to be best man at Thorolf's wedding.

Egill and Thorolf could have arrived in England in 925 or 926, left in 928 and returned in 936 to fight in the Battle of Brunanburh, but Egil's Saga suggests not. It mentions no events between their arrival and the battle, which would be 12 years if that battle were Brunanburh. On the other hand, it mentions several events that could not have happened if that battle was Brunanburh. For instance, Egill marries Thorolf's widow before Eric Bloodaxe becomes King of Norway, so Thorolf must have died before 934, yet he was killed in the Egil's Saga battle. After the battle, Egill over winters with Æthelstan, then sails for Norway, promising to return. He spends one winter with Arinbjorn, one winter with his new wife, 'several winters' with his father, another winter with his wife, and two winters in Borg after his father dies. Then he visits Æthelstan. It is at least eight years after the Egil's Saga battle, but Æthelstan died in 939, two years after Brunanburh.

The inescapable conclusion is that the battle described in Egil's Saga is that against Guthfrith in 927 rather than Brunanburh in 937, If so, Egill and Thorolf came to England in 926 to quell local rebellions, participated in the battle against Guthfrith in 927, then left in 928. This is consistent with all the major events on the main timeline:

- Thorir being best man at Thorolf's wedding in 924
- Egill getting news of Thorir's death on his return to Norway in 928
- Egill marrying Thorolf's widow in 929
- Egill returning to visit Æthelstan in 938. Indeed, Egil's Saga says that when Egill lands in England: *"they learnt these tidings, which Egil thought good, that with king Athelstan all was well and with his kingdom"*, which can only have been between Brunanburh in 937 and Æthelstan's death in 939.
- Eric Bloodaxe's known historicity, acceding in 933 and killing his brothers soon after. Egil's Saga says that he slayed his brothers just before Egill's father dies (Chapter 59). It is at least six winters after the battle described in Egil's Saga. If that battle was against Guthfrith in 927, it would be at least 933.
- The rebel kings. Egil's Saga says: *"But when Athelstan had taken the kingdom, then those chieftains who had before lost their power to his forefathers rose in rebellion"*, but the rebel kings that participated in the Battle of Brunanburh - those of Dublin, Alba and Strathclyde - had not lost their power to Æthelstan's forefathers. Rather, it was the kings of Mercia, southern Danelaw, and the 'Five Boroughs' who had lost their power and it was them that incited the uprisings soon after Æthelstan's accession. They were the reason he raised a mercenary army, recruiting people like Egill, and it was in 925 or 926.
- The omission of the name Brunanburh or similar, referring to the battlefield as *'Vinheiðar'* instead.
- The omission of King Constantine or King Owain, two of the three rebel leaders in 937.

Why then does anyone think that Egil's Saga is describing the Battle of Brunanburh? Because it repeatedly names the leader of the invaders as Olaf, and Olaf Guthfrithson was the leader of the invaders in the Battle of Brunanburh, whereas no one named Olaf played a significant part in his father's 927 invasion. It is not as persuasive as it sounds though, because Egil's Saga refers to him as Olaf, King of the Scots, whereas he

was King of the Dublin Vikings. Some Roman documents referred to Ireland as *Scotia*, but when Æthelstan “*begs Olaf rather to go home to Scotland*” it uses the Icelandic word *Skotland*, meaning go home to Scotland not to *Scotia*. Olaf’s father is described as *skoskur*, Scottish, which would not apply to Hiberno-Norse Olaf. It seems then that the skald either deliberately substituted Olaf for Constantine and Guthfrith, or he confused the leaders of the 927 and 937 invasions.

Without Olaf, there is no significant corroboration between Egil’s Saga and the Battle of Brunanburh accounts. They are describing different battles. It is possible that Egil’s Saga is describing some sort of fictional battle, to entertain perhaps, but we think not. It seems to be consistent with the other accounts of Guthfrith’s expulsion in 927, albeit they are scant and equivocal.

The Irish annals of Ulster says that in April 927: “*The fleet of Linn Duachail departed and Gothfrith abandoned Áth Cliath; and Gothfrith returned again within six months*”. Malmesbury says of Sihtric: “*dying after a year, Athelstan took that province under his own government, expelling one Aldulph, who resisted him*”. Gaimar says of Edward the Elder: “*His son Adelstan succeeded him. When he had reigned nearly four years, he fought a battle with the Danes, and discomfited king Gudfrid*”. Huntingdon says of Æthelstan: “*For in the course of the year following, Guthfrith, king of the Danes, brother of Reginald, the king already named, having provoked him to war, was defeated and put to flight, and slain*”. Roger of Wendover says: “*Fiery rays were seen throughout the whole of England in the northern quarter of the heavens, portending the disgraceful death of the aforesaid king Sithric, who came to an evil end shortly afterwards ; on which king Ethelstan expelled Guthferth his son from his kingdom, which he annexed to his own dominions*”. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle simply says: “*Sihtric died; Æthelstan took to Northumbria*”.

We think Egil’s Saga is almost certainly describing the battle between Æthelstan and Guthfrith in 927. We will refer to it as the Battle of Wen Heath, for reasons we will return to momentarily.



# The Battle of Wen Heath at Brasside



Figure 2: Momentous Britain investigates Brasside

Egil's Saga says: *“Olaf king of Scots, drew together a mighty host, and marched upon England. When he came to Northumberland, he advanced with shield of war”*. So, the rebel army was marching south from Scotland on Dere Street or Cade's Road.

Guthfrith's army defeat Æthelstan's Northumbrian outpost under the Alfgier and Gudrek: *“... And when they met there was a great battle, whereof the issue was that king Olaf won the victory, but earl Gudrek fell, and Alfgier fled away, as did the greater part of the force that had followed them and escaped from the field. And now king Olaf found no further resistance but subdued all Northumberland.”*

Egill writes a poem about Guthfrith's victory (Green translation, remembering that it refers to Guthfrith as Olaf): *“Olaf one earl by furious onslaught in flight hath driven; The other slain: a sovereign stubborn in fight is he; Upon the field fared Gudrek false path to his undoing; He holds, this foe of England, Northumbria's humbled soil.”*

The narrative and Green's translation of the poem give the impression that Guthfrith subdued the whole of Northumbria. But poem ends: *“jörð spenr Engla skerðir Álfgiers und sik halfa”* which Scudder

accurately translates as: “*the scourge of the English subdues half of Alfgeir’s realm*”. So, the poem is saying that Guthfrith only subdued half of Northumbria, presumably Bernicia, the northern half. This is important because Guthfrith would have marched south to occupy York, the capital of Northumbria, if he had subdued all of Northumbria, in which case the Egil’s Saga battle would have been south of York. If he only subdued half of Northumbria, the battle would have been somewhere near the junction of Bernicia and Deira, to the north of York.

Either the poem or the narrative, or the translation of one or the other, must be faulty. The poem is very simple and seems unequivocal to us, so we suspect the narrative. The Old Norse says: “*Fékk Álfgæir þá enga viðstöðu; lagði Ólafur konungur þá allt Norðimbraland undir sig*”. Its literal meaning is: “*Alfgeir then offered no further resistance; King Guthfrith thrust into all Northumbria under him*”. If it is trying to say that Guthfrith subdued the whole of Northumbria, it is an odd and unclear use of words, certainly less clear than the poem. If one or the other is faulty, we think it must be the narrative. We guess that it uses to the term ‘*undir sig*’ to mean ‘geographically under him’. In other words, it is trying to say: “*King Guthfrith thrust south into the rest of Northumbria*”. If this is what it is trying to say and Æthelstan immediately dispatched Egill to intercept, Guthfrith might only have advanced 10 or 20 miles before the armies met.

There were two Roman roads between the Humber and the Tyne, namely Dere Street and Cade’s Road. They were roughly parallel and about 15 miles apart, Cade’s Road to the east. It is usually assumed that Cade’s Road was a relatively minor affair with just one Roman fortress (Concangis) compared to four on Dere Street (Isurium, Catteractonium, Vinovia and Vindomora) over the equivalent distance, but that was in Roman times.

Æthelstan passed through Beverley and Chester-le-Street, both on Cade’s Road, on his way to invade Scotland in 934. St Cuthbert’s relics,

the most sacred in England at the time, were at Chester-le-Street, so Cade's Road must have had a stream of pilgrims. At the end of the 10th century, they were moved to Ripon and then to Durham for safety, in part because Chester-le-Street was being raided from Scotland. It seems to us that Cade's Road was the major north-south route between the Tyne and Humber in the 10th century, especially for armies. The most likely reason is that they were provisioned by sea. Cades Road crossed navigable parts of the Tees, Wear and Tyne, whereas Dere Street did not cross any navigable estuaries between the Humber and Tyne.

Egil's Saga says that Olaf (Guthfrith) chooses his *borg* "because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed". If, as seems likely, some of those provisions were being brought by sea, he must have been on Cade's Road. Egil's Saga says that both armies were at strongholds – '*borgs*' – on the day before the Battle of Wen Heath. The only Roman fortification on Cade's Road was Concangis at Chester-le-Street, whose name means 'Roman fortification on a Roman road'. It was on a navigable part of the River Wear. If the armies were at strongholds on Cade's Road, one or other was surely at Chester-le-Street.

If one of the armies was at Chester-le-Street and both were at some sort of fortification, either Guthfrith was at Pons Aelius on the Tyne or the English were at Durham. We think the latter far more likely. Egil's Saga says that the battlefield was bounded on one side by a river. The camps were north and south of the battlefield, so the river must have bounded the battlefield to the east or west, which means its course must have been generally north-south. The River Team almost fits the bill, flowing north-south near its confluence with the Tyne, but it has a steep sided valley, with no level banks fitting Egil's Saga's battlefield description. Therefore, we think that Guthfrith was at Chester-le-Street, the English at Durham. Durham was not a Roman fortification nor a major Saxon fortification in the 10th century, but its topography suggests it had a medieval hill-fort where the cathedral now stands, or the English might have been at the nearby medieval hill-fort at Maiden Castle.

Amazingly, the first place we looked for the battlefield, exactly matched what we were looking for. It is a place named Brasside, an elevated plain inside an unusual square meander in the River Wear (map below). It is bounded to the west by a hill now occupied by the settlement of Newton Hall, and by the River Wear on the other three sides. The railway between Durham and Chester-le-Street winds around the bottom of the hill, perhaps on the course of Cade's Road.

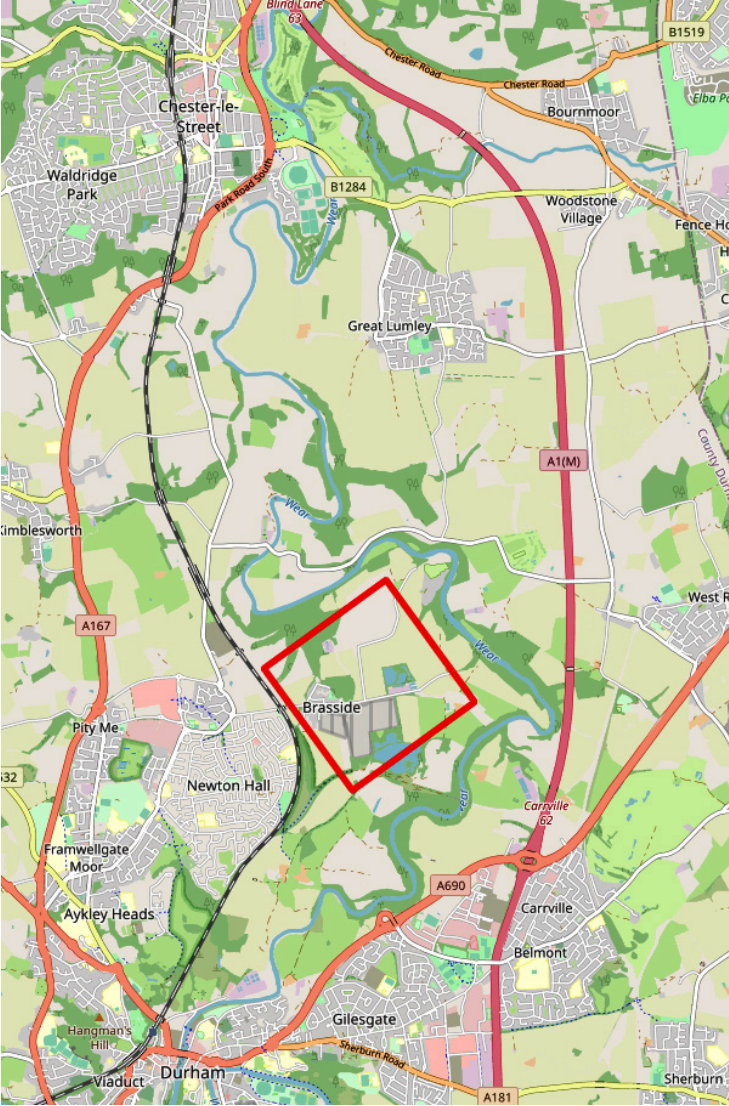
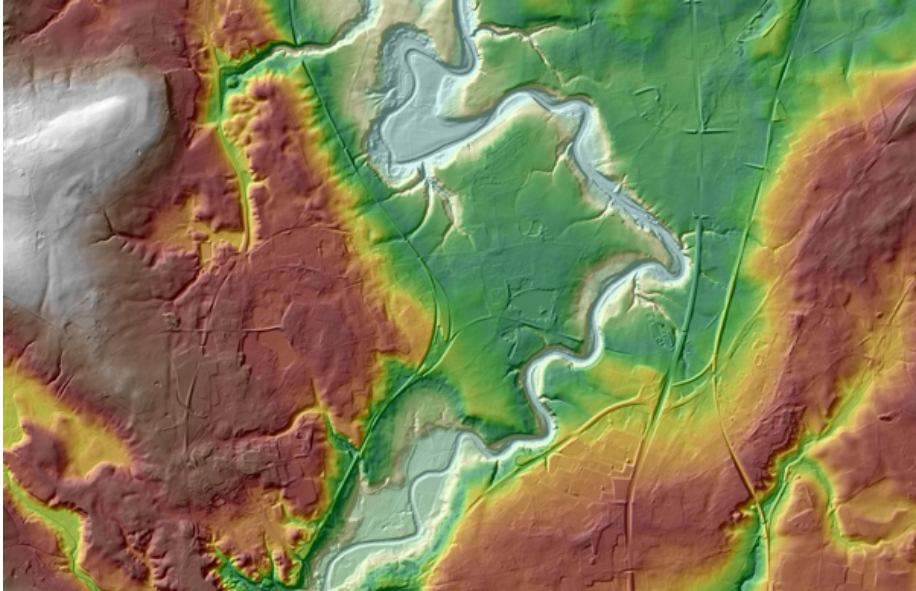


Figure 3: Geography at Brasside

A heat relief map of the Brasside area is shown below. It is at the western end of a 60m high plateau that extends northeast through West Rainton and beyond. The plateau is incised by the River Wear in a three-mile gorge. It exactly matches the battlefield description in Egil's Saga: a fairly level rectangular plain on the west bank of a river, bounded to the west by woodland, a little higher towards the woodland, sloping down slightly to the north, narrowing to the south.



*Figure 4: Heat relief map around Brasside*

Unable to believe our luck, we spent weeks following rivers throughout Northumbria without finding anywhere else that comes close to matching this battlefield description. It is difficult to imagine the medieval scene, with Franklin prison sprawling over the middle of the battlefield, huge lakes marking where clay has been excavated, the woodland having been cleared to make way for coal mines in the 18th century, then being built upon in the 20th century. Even so, Brasside is still instantly recognisable as the place described in Egil's Saga.

## Alternative interpretations of the Egil's Saga battle

Upon researching our hypothesis that Egil's Saga describes the 927 battle against Guthfrith rather than the 937 Battle of Brunanburh, we discovered that others were there first. Eddison pointed out some problems with Egil's Saga's chronology in the 1930s, concluding: "*The better opinion inclines to-day to identify the two battles, correcting the whole chronological system of the saga accordingly.*" He published this chronology derived from Egil's Saga, where he names the 927 conflict against Guthfrith as the 'Battle of Winaheath', based on his belief that 'Vin' referred to the River Wina. It does not mention the Battle of Brunanburh because Egill was not there.

- Egil born 901
- Eric Bloodaxe in Biarmaland 918
- Battle of Winaheath 927?
- Death of King Harald Hairfair 933
- Hakon Athelstane's-fosterling taken for King 935
- Egil in York 936
- Egil comes home to Iceland (for 16 years) 936

Icelandic scholar Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir also created a chronicle of Egill's life based on Egil's Saga. She refers to the 927 battle against Guthfrith as the 'Battle of Wen Heath', which we adopt because we think is more accurate than 'Winaheath'. Here are the relevant entries:

- Athelstan becomes King of Wessex 924
- The Battle at Wen Heath: Thorolf killed 925
- Egil marries Asgerd 926
- Establishment of the Althing 930
- Egil's second journey abroad 933–4
- Dispute at the Gula Assembly 934
- King Hakon takes power in Norway 934

- Egil's third journey abroad 936–8
- Egil meets King Eirik at York 936
- Battle of Brunanburh 937
- Egil kills Atli the Short 938
- Death of King Athelstan 939

She had an elegant way to work this out, using the known date of King Haakon's accession in 934 as an anchor. She then worked backwards and forwards through events in Egil's Saga to calculate the other dates. We think she has made a minor error which has caused the Battle of Wen Heath to be two years early, but she clearly shows that Egil and Thorolf participated in it, that it was where Thorolf was killed, and that Egill could not have participated in the Battle of Brunanburh.

Adrian C Grant has been working on a similar theory to our own, starting long before we published anything. His 2020 paper, "*The Battle of White Hill ('Vin Heath'), 927*", describes his theory that the battle against Guthfrith was fought at White Hill near Doncaster. He believes that one of Simeon's chronicles is confused, with the 927 entry wrongly posted against 937, meaning that Simeon's '*Wendune*' was another name for the *Vinheiðar* battlefield. Grant worked out that Old Norse '*vindo*' can mean 'white' and that '*wen*' could derive from the Brythonic '*gwyn*' also meaning 'white'. So, with a couple of minor spelling mistakes, he reckons that both terms could mean 'White Hill'.

Grant's argument seems flawed to us: *heiðar* means 'heath' not 'hill', and Simeon – or whoever compiled 'History of the Kings', because there is some doubt - was not confused. Rollason and the translation editorials explain that it deliberately contains two chronicles, the first based on Simeon's earlier 'History of the Church of Durham', the second based on John of Worcester's 'Chronicon ex Chronicis'. The 937 entry in the first chronicle, which contains the reference to *Wendune*, is simply an abbreviation of the Brunanburh account from 'History of the Church of Durham'. *Wendune* therefore referred to the 937 Brunanburh battlefield, not the 927 *Vinheiðar* battlefield. It is

incidental. The bigger issue here is that Grant thinks that the Egil's Saga battlefield was 30 miles south of York, while we think it was 60 miles north of York.

As Adrian said to us, the difference between our theories is that he believes Guthfrith occupied the City of York after defeating Alfgeir, whereas we think that Æthelstan had occupied York as soon as Sihtric died, so he dispatched Egill from York to intercept Guthfrith. If Grant is right, the battle must have happened somewhere between York and Mercia, to the south of York. If we are right, the battle happened somewhere between York and Bernicia, to the north of York.

Grant's main evidence is the statement mentioned above: "*And now king Olaf [Guthfrith] found no further resistance but subdued all Northumberland.*" If he subdued all of Northumbria, he would have occupied York, capital of Northumbria. The other translators agree with Green. Palsson: "*Since Alfgeir could offer no resistance, King Olaf was able to take the whole of Northumberland*", Scudder as: "*King Olaf conquered the whole of Northumbria*", Eddison as: "*King Olaf laid then all Northumberland under him*". It is no wonder that Grant feels confident in his theory, yet either the poem or the narrative is mistaken, and we think that the narrative is open to interpretation whereas the poem is not.

There is hardly any other evidence for or against either theory. The Irish Annals of Ulster say that Guthfrith left Dublin in 927 and returned six months later, which would support our theory, but Grant notes that its entries are often a year late, which would support his. Guthfrith appears in Wikipedia's king-list for the Kings of York, but Clare Downham who wrote the definitive reference book on Norse kings of England and Ireland says that it is inconclusive. He might be like Lady Jane Grey, for instance, in that he inherited the crown on Sihtric's death, but never got to York and was never crowned. If he was crowned, it would support Grant's theory, if not it would support ours.



We cannot discount Grant's theory that Guthfrith was in the City of York when attacked by Æthelstan and Egill, thereby leading to a battle south of York. It is credible. In effect, Grant's argument is based on his interpretation of one equivocal statement in one contemporary account. Ours is based on a different interpretation of that same statement. Why then do we favour ours?

1. Either the poem or the narrative is faulty, and we think that the narrative is ambiguous whereas the poem is not.
2. Æthelstan seemed unnaturally enthusiastic to marry off his sister to Sihtric.
3. Sihtric's premature death six months later is suspicious.
4. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle simply says: "*Sihtric died; Æthelstan took to Northumbria*". Wendover says that Sihtric came to an evil end: "*on which king Ethelstan expelled Guthferth his son from his kingdom, which he annexed to his own dominions.*" They both imply that Æthelstan annexed Northumbria in a bloodless coup as soon as Sihtric died.
5. At the time of Guthfrith's invasion in 927, Egil's Saga says that Northumbria: "*was in Athelstan's dominions; he had set over it two earls, the one named Alfgeir, the other Gudrek*". Guthfrith defeats these stooge earls. Alfgeir takes the news of his defeat to Æthelstan. Egil's Saga says: "*as soon as king Athelstan heard that so mighty a host was come into his land, he despatched men and summoned forces*". So, before Guthfrith's invasion, he was able to appoint earls and station troops in Northumbria, he thought of Northumbria as his land, and it was in his dominion. None of this would have been so when Æthelstan came to power in 924. It sounds like he had annexed Northumbria in the meantime, and the only opportunity was when Sihtric died.
6. If Æthelstan annexed Northumbria when Sihtric died, he would have garrisoned the City of York. Guthfrith would not have been able to take it without a long siege and no contemporary accounts mention Guthfrith taking or besieging the City of York.

If Egil's Saga is referring to Guthfrith's invasion of 927, as suggested by Eddison, Óskarsdóttir and others, and to which we subscribe, there are only two possibilities: either he advanced to occupy York, or he didn't. Our evidence that he didn't is flimsy and circumstantial, but we think that Grant's evidence that he did is flimsier still.

We mentioned all this to Adrian Grant. He rejected it, explaining that he thinks that Rollason and the translation editorials are wrong to think that the two chronicles in 'History of the Kings' derive from 'History of the Church of Durham' and 'Chronicon ex Chronicis', and that all our evidence is insubstantial. He remains committed to his theory ... and we have no proof that he is wrong.

Grant is certainly right, in our opinion, to point out to anyone that will listen that Egil's Saga should not be used as evidence to locate the Battle of Brunanburh battlefield, and that any Brunanburh battlefield candidates that use Egil's Saga for key evidence should be re-assessed. That is pretty much all of them, so it is an open field.

## Revised narrative from Egil's Saga

Early medieval histories and chronicles tend to be pretty woolly with dates. It took months or years for news to disseminate. Events might be cited in the year the news was received, the year the event happened, or some approximation. Several accounts of the same event can therefore be inconsistent by a year or two. The Annals of Clonmacnoise seems to be especially woolly with dates, as likely to be four years early as three years late. Even so, given some slack with dating, we think we can build a credible narrative that fits them all with no inconsistencies.

Sihtric died towards the end of 926. Æthelstan invaded York days later, probably before the end of 926. He garrisoned the City of York, expelled Sihtric's son, Guthfrith, and appointed some stooge earls named Gudrek and Alfgeir as overlords of Northumbria. Another Guthfrith, this one King of Dublin and Sihtric's brother, thought

himself to be Sihtric's rightful heir. He decided to retake York by force. After raising an army, his fleet left Dublin in April 927.

Perhaps Guthfrith had intelligence that Æthelstan had garrisoned York or perhaps he sailed there to discover it for himself. Either way, he realised that his army alone was not strong enough to assail York, so he went to Scotland to raise more men. Ethnic Norsemen and Danes from Northumbria rallied to his cause, as did some of the northern Britons, Picts and Scots.

Strengthening his army delayed Guthfrith's invasion until the start of Autumn 927. They marched down Dere Street from Scotland, until they were opposed in Bernicia by Æthelstan's men under the earls Gudrek and Alfgeir. Guthfrith was victorious at the ensuing battle. Gudrek was killed and Alfgeir fled. Æthelstan sent those troops he had immediately available, led by Egill and Thorolf, to intercept the invaders, while he went to Mercia and Wessex to raise more men.

The armies faced off somewhere between Bernicia and York. We think Guthfrith was at Chester-le-Street, Egill at Durham. Egill stalled for time, to give Æthelstan more opportunity to raise an overwhelming force. When the battle came, it was a comprehensive victory for Æthelstan. Guthfrith returned to Dublin in October, six months after he left.

It can never be proved, but we guess that Æthelstan planned the entire sequence of events. It is interesting to speculate on his thinking.

There had been generations of conflict between the predominantly Danish and Norse peoples to the northeast and east of modern England, and the predominantly Anglo-Saxon peoples to the south and west. Æthelstan's father had succeeded in pacifying the Danes in East Anglia and the Five Boroughs, to take control of everywhere south of the Humber, but the people north of the Humber were more hostile, a volatile mix of Danes, Norse, Britons, Picts, Gaels, and Hiberno-Norse. None of them were likely to submit to Anglo-Saxon rule and any of them could raid or destabilise Æthelstan's realm.

Æthelstan was probably powerful enough to invade Northumbria and defeat Sihtric, but he would have lost a lot of men if they chose to resist, so it could have been a pyrrhic victory. Most of his depleted troops would have had to stay in Northumbria to keep it subjugated. The defence of Mercia and Wessex would be stretched thin enough to make them susceptible to overseas invasion. Æthelstan stood to temporarily gain Northumbria, then to lose everything soon after.

But King Sihtric's circumstances gave him a sniff at a permanent solution. Northumbria was a pious place, the land of Bede, St Cuthbert, 53 other saints, and Lindisfarne, cradle of Christianity in mainland Britain. Sihtric was a pagan. If Æthelstan could legitimately depose the Dublin royal family, he could gift Northumbria to the Church and let them administer it. If he installed a moderate Bishop and acted as its protector, everyone might be happy.

Then, according to Henry of Huntingdon, Sihtric solicited marriage to one of Æthelstan's sisters. Æthelstan insisted that he convert to Christianity first. We think it was a clever ruse. If and when Sihtric relapsed into paganism, thereby insulting Northumbrian Christians, Æthelstan would have a perfect excuse to invade on behalf of the Lord. Better still, Sihtric's son was too young to take the crown. His heir, Guthfrith, was in Dublin. By the time Guthfrith heard about Æthelstan's invasion and raised an army to do something about it, Æthelstan would have had time to prepare his defences.

If this was Æthelstan's plan, it soon went awry. Roger of Wendover says that not long after Sihtric's marriage: *"he repudiated the blessed virgin, and, abjuring Christianity, restored the worship of idols"*. He got his comeuppance, dead by the end of 926. Wendover says that he: *"came to an evil end"*, which sounds like he was murdered. It is difficult not to suspect that Æthelstan was behind it, because according to Wendover, *"Ethelstan expelled Guthferth his son from his kingdom, which he annexed to his own dominions"*. It sounds like Æthelstan knew that Sihtric's demise was imminent – most obviously because he

had arranged it – and that his army was waiting at Tamworth for word of Sihtric’s death, so that they could invade immediately.

Note that Wendover’s Guthfrith that was expelled from York is not the same as Egil’s Saga’s Guthfrith (under his erroneous name Olaf) that led the 927 invasion. The first was Guthfrith mac Sitriuk, Sihtric’s son, the second Guthfrith ua Ímair, Sihtric’s brother. Presumably, Guthfrith mac Sitriuk was too young to take Sihtric’s crown, because he should have been next in line. The fact that Æthelstan expelled Guthfrith mac Sitriuk indicates to us that Guthfrith ua Ímair never occupied York.

Later in 927, Æthelstan forced the Kings of Strathclyde, Wales and Bernicia to accept his overlordship. Then, between 930 and 934, he purchased the vast region of Amounderness from a pagan and gifted it to the Church. We think this was part of his plan to pacify Northumbria. Deliberate or not, it bought seven years of peace, until Æthelstan was forced to send an army into Scotland to quell local uprisings. Then, in 934, Guthfrith died. His son and successor, Olaf, raised a coalition to retake York, which culminated in the Battle of Brunanburh.

According to Egil’s Saga, Æthelstan tried to solve the problem of Northumbrian insurrections by making Eric Bloodaxe client king in Northumbria after his eviction from Norway. Egil’s Saga has half a chapter about Egill’s visit to Bloodaxe in York, probably in 938. His reign in Northumbria is corroborated by other Norse sagas, but he does not appear in English kinglists until 947. If he did reign in 938, he was evicted by Olaf in 939.

## The Battle of Brunanburh

Our initial plan was to locate the Battle of Brunanburh battlefield by using a Norse saga as the primary contemporary account, just as we did with the Battle of Stamford Bridge. It failed. The Norse sagas have nothing useful to say about the Battle of Brunanburh and the battlefield clues in Egil's Saga must not be used in the search for the Battle of Brunanburh battlefield. A monumental challenge that has eluded Britain's greatest historians for centuries is tougher still. On the other hand, most of them were misled by clues in Egil's Saga. Perhaps a reassessment of the other contemporary accounts, ignoring Egil's Saga, will present new battlefield candidates.

The earliest and most trusted Battle of Brunanburh reference is a poem in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937 (Whitlock translation):

*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.*

John of Worcester's entry for 938 says:

*Anlaf, the Pagan king of Ireland and many other isles, at the instigation of his lather-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 says:

*In the year of grace 945, and in the fourth year of his reign, King Athelstan fought at Brunnesburih 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 a Latin translation of the Brunanburgh Poem from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Pseudo-Ingulf 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 better-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 any one, though at the same time every one may lawfully fight for his country, and especially against the Pagans.*

Simeon's History of the Church of Durham 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 Weardune (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.*

Simeon's first chronicle in History of the Kings 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 History of the Kings 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.*

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 ensueing captaines were slaine, Sithfrey and Oisle, 2 sones of Sithrick, Galey, Awley ffoit, 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 Denmark's own son with 4000 souldiers in his guard were all slaine.*

The 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.*

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.*

## Olaf's invasion

There are a lot of medieval Brunanburh accounts, but only a handful of useful clues to help find the battlefield (all listed above). We accept that the battle was fought somewhere sounding like Brunanburh, and that the invaders fled over a body of water that was known as something like 'Dinges mere', but no one knows where they were. A Humber basin landing is disputed. Susan Wilson's argument that Æthelstan passed through Beverley in 934, rather than on his way to Brunanburh, sounds compelling to us. We disagree with Stevenson's theory that *Weondune* referred to the River Wear. Where Simeon says that Æthelstan trusted "*in the protection of St. Cuthbert*" and Pseudo-Ingulf says that the battle was fought at "*Brunford in Northumbria*", we think they meant that the battle was fought north of a dividing line between

the Humber and the Mersey rather than that it was in the Danelaw province of Northumbria. In short, all the clues are unreliable or equivocal.

Battlefield seekers fall roughly evenly into one of two camps depending on whether they believe the first of the clues, that the invaders arrived in the Humber estuary. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that the surviving invaders flee to their ships and some escape, so their ships were within running distance of the battlefield. 'Humber believers' propose battlefields within running distance of the Humber estuary or one of its navigable tributaries, while 'Humber dissenters' propose battlefields within running distance of some other estuary. There are so few other geographical clues that dozens of plausible battlefields have been proposed for each category; 40 or more, according to Wiki.

We are 'Humber dissenters'. We explain above how we think John of Worcester was misled, and that he was the source of the other Humber landing accounts, so they are all wrong.

If Olaf did not land in the Humber, then where? In 902, the Norse Vikings were evicted from Ireland. Some of them settled on the Lancashire coast opposite Dublin. It seems likely to us that Olaf landed in friendly territory in a Lancashire estuary.

Olaf and his confederates must have had a rendezvous point because they were together at Brunanburh. They probably staggered their arrival at the rendezvous point, so that the ground could be prepared for the next batch. They probably waited at the rendezvous point for a week or more in the hope that opportunist Britons, Welsh, Northumbrians and foreign mercenaries would join their ranks. They might have waited indefinitely in the hope that Æthelstan would make himself vulnerable by coming to attack them. In any of these eventualities, the rebels needed a camp at the rendezvous point.

Olaf and the Dublin Norse arrived by ship. It would have been idiotic for Owain's Cumbrian Britons to march 100 miles up to the Clyde, then load themselves and their supplies onto ships to sail a dozen or so

miles from where they started. We think that Owain marched his army down a Roman road from Strathclyde picking up troops as they went. Constantine and his Pictish-Gaels might have sailed or marched or both. With some rebels arriving by sea and some by land, the rendezvous point was probably at the junction of a west coast estuary with a Roman road.

The Lancashire coast only has two estuaries big enough to take Olaf's fleet: the Mersey and the Ribble. Wirral Archaeology, among many, conclude that Olaf's fleet entered the Mersey estuary and landed on the Wirral. In our opinion, Olaf would not have deliberately landed that close to Mercia or on a peninsula, for fear of getting trapped or besieged. Therefore, we think he landed in the Ribble estuary.

The invaders' camp would probably be at a substantial settlement surrounded by rich farmland, to provide food, shelter, and security. There are only two candidates on the Ribble: Walton-le-Dale and Ribchester. The latter was a Roman fortress, the former was a Roman military distribution point. The latter probably offered better security, the former easier access, more provisions, and better accommodation. We guess Olaf felt safe enough in friendly territory to camp at Walton-le-Dale.

## The Battle of Brunanburh at Wigan

Here is a map of Roman Roads in Lancashire based on the Roman Roads Research Association. Both armies would have moved around on these roads. The camps and the battle would have been on one of these roads. Pseudo-Ingulf confirms it: "*Constantine, the king of the Scots, being thus slain, his people retreated, and so left the road open to Turketul and his soldiers*". Walton-le-Dale is near Preston. Ribchester is six miles upstream to the ENE. Both are on major north-south Roman roads, namely Margary 70 and 7. These roads both extended south into the Mercia. There are only three possibilities that might have led to the Battle of Brunanburh: Olaf led his army south towards Mercia, or Æthelstan led his army north from Mercia, or both.



Most historians assume that Olaf was the aggressor, entering Æthelstan's lands and harrying his people, but this is based solely on Egil's Saga, which should be discounted for Brunanburh. There are only two useful clues among the other contemporary accounts, both mentioned above. One is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which says that the invaders were driven back to their ships, which means the battle was no more than running distance from where they landed. The other is that Pseudo-Ingulf and Simeon say that the battlefield was in Northumbria, which we interpret to mean north of a line between the Humber and Mersey. If so, Æthelstan marched north out of Mercia. It sounds like Olaf did not move until Æthelstan entered the battle theatre. Why would he? If Olaf's scouts told him that Æthelstan was coming, he had no incentive to move. Staying put made it easier to feed his men, more difficult for Æthelstan to feed his, less likely for his men to be ambushed or trapped, more likely that he could ambush or trap Æthelstan.

If Olaf was at Walton-le-Dale, then Æthelstan must have been on Margary 70 heading north from Warrington. The only significant Saxon era settlement between was at Wigan. And Wigan means 'battles' or 'wars'. Rev John Whitaker spotted this long ago. In his 'History of

Manchester' written in the 1770s he notes: *"the appellation of Wigan is a standing memorial of more than one engagement at the town. Wig signifies a fight in Saxon, and Wig-en is only the plural of it."* He also reports a local lore, heard from four ancient Wigan inhabitants, that Wigan was the site of at least one important historical battle.

Whitaker reports physical evidence of a major battle at Wigan. He says that a mass grave of horses and men was found during 1735 canal works at Poolbridge, which was near modern Wigan Pier. Hardwick elaborates in 'Ancient Battlefields of Lancashire': *"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 a rood is a measure of area. We guess he meant 'rods', each being 5m. Thus, this mass grave covered an area at least 200m by 7m. A number of bodies that can only have come from a battle.

There was more fighting nearby. Whitaker says: *"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."* Some 400 weapons were found in this barrow near Blackrod, roughly 5km northeast of Wigan.

The Battle of Wigan Lane is known to have been fought near Wigan during the Civil War, but it is unlikely to account for either of these sites. Its battlefield was known until recently as the 'Bloody Mountains'. It is now in Botling Wood, 2km north of the town centre and 3m south of Blackrod, too far to drag corpses. And it was more of a skirmish than battle, with too few casualties to match either of these descriptions.

With all this physical evidence, it is amazing that no one has previously considered Wigan as a likely site for the Brunanburh battlefield. Unfortunately, Whitaker associated the battles with King Arthur, so the site has never been taken seriously by historians. Excluding legend,



Brunanburh is the only battle likely to have created the number of casualties Whitaker found in Wigan's mass graves and barrows.

Moreover, Wigan is a reasonable fit for the battle's various names. Most commonly, it is spelled 'Brunanburh'. *'burh'* refers to a stronghold. Whitaker discovered that Roman Coccium was in the crook of the River Douglas at modern Wigan. It was a Roman military supply centre rather than a fortress, but probably fortified enough to warrant the Old English *'burh'* name. It grew in importance through medieval times, becoming one of just four boroughs in Lancashire with a Royal Charter. Road names like Wallgate, Standishgate and Hallgate suggest it was surrounded by a stone wall, which would be easily enough to earn a *'burh'* name. *'Brunan'* usually means 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*". Wigan therefore deserves the name 'Brunanburh' as much as anywhere.

The B and C versions 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 means 'spring' or 'well'. 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. Indeed, one of its wards is named New Springs.

Pseudo-Ingulf refers to the battlefield as *'Brunford'*. Wigan was at the lowest ford on the River Douglas. *'Brun'* means 'brown', which might apply to the colour of the building stone or to some local name for the River Douglas which is brown. Perhaps this is also the source of the name *'Dinges mere'*, the place where the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that the invaders disembark on their way home. *Dinges mere* literally means 'dung water'. We suspect it was the local name of the Ribble estuary downstream of its confluence with the Douglas, because of the water's colour.

Simeon says that an alternative name for the battlefield is *Wendune* or *Weondune*. Most experts think that the *dune* part of the name is a misspelling of Old English *dun*, meaning 'hill'. It would be unusual. Every place in England with *dun* in its name, bar one, has it at the start. The only exception is Sinodun in Berkshire, where the *dun* derives from Brythonic *dunum* meaning 'fortress' or 'stronghold'. If the *dun* in *Wendune* is Brythonic, so probably is the *Wen*. If so, it is probably an alternative spelling of *gwyn*, Brythonic for 'white' or 'blessed'. We think *Wendune* means 'white stronghold' and that it was an early name for Wigan. Why does its colour change? 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*". Therefore, in pre-Saxon times, the stone was new and white, then it weathered to brown.

The invader's ships were at Walton-le-Dale, 15 miles north of Wigan along Margary 70. The fleeing rebels would probably have left the main road, to head for softer ground less favourable for horses. The Brunanburh poem suggests they flee west, presumably along the newly discovered 702a Roman road. Some must have fled east and north too, if 400 or more were killed near Blackrod. Even with these detours, Walton-le-Dale would only have been 18 miles away, within running distance for someone fit that is fleeing for their lives.

That leaves the series of clues in Pseudo-Ingulf's engagement account. To summarise, he says that the invaders attack Æthelstan's camp during the night where they kill a Bishop, 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, that one reason for Æthelstan's victory is that the invaders were exhausted. Many accounts say that the battle went on all day. If Pseudo-Ingulf is right, the main battle was probably over by mid-morning, but Æthelstan's horsemen harried the invaders all the way back to their ships, which took them into the late afternoon. This leads to a string of questions.

1. Is it likely that Æthelstan would have camped at Wigan? We think so. If he came into Northumbria, his plan was to assault the enemy camp. He would have camped within striking distance of Olaf's camp, to rest his men before an assault the following day. The camp would ideally be at a substantial settlement that could provide food and shelter. Wigan was the only substantial settlement that was within striking distance of Walton-le-Dale.
2. Is it likely that Olaf would have tried a nocturnal attack on Æthelstan's camp at Wigan? We think so. Olaf's best hope would be to ambush Æthelstan at a river crossing, but Æthelstan was an experienced commander, probably too wily to make such a basic error. If Olaf had more horses, he would have tried to catch the English infantry on the open road as they approached his camp, but 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 and a lot more than Olaf. The obvious explanation is that Olaf was trying to nullify Æthelstan's cavalry by a surprise nocturnal attack on the English camp.
3. Æthelweard says that the invaders lost superiority during the battle, yet Æthelstan must have thought that his army was at least as strong as Olaf's, or he would not have entered the battle theatre. It implies to us that Olaf had more men but Æthelstan had more horses. In this case, Olaf might well have reasoned that a surprise night attack on the English camp was his best chance of negating Æthelstan's superior cavalry, and it would make sense of Æthelweard's account.
4. Is it likely that Æthelstan was a mile away from the initial night attack, or that Olaf's men would be too exhausted to fight?



One interesting factor is that the River Douglas has been redirected. The church and town centre are now north of the river. In medieval times, they were south of the river, as Mather's 1827 map shows. The medieval farm strips leading north to the river are clearly visible.

Pseudo-Ingulf's narrative seems to match. Æthelstan would have posted a guard south of the ford. Æthelstan and his barons would have been at a safe distance behind the guard, probably on the hill at Orrell. It is over a mile away, but within earshot of a commotion at the river. Olaf's men would have marched five or six hours in the night to get to Wigan, then would have had to fight their way across the ford on unfavourable ground. They probably were exhausted when Æthelstan arrived at the battlefield soon after dawn.

Wigan matches all the clues we can find about the Battle of Brunanburh battlefield, albeit that there are not many clues, and none of them are unequivocal. The best evidence would be DNA and dating analysis of the remains found in the Wigan Pier mass grave. We are still trying to find where, if anywhere, they are stored. If anyone can help, please contact us.

## Brunanburh Revised Narrative

Olaf crossed the Irish Sea to land in the Hiberno-Norse controlled Ribble estuary. He made camp at Walton-le-Dale, now a suburb south of modern Preston. 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 camped at Wigan, within striking distance of Olaf's camp, to rest his men before the assault. Olaf attacked Æthelstan's river guard during the night. Æthelstan's troops arrived from their main camp to overwhelm the invaders. Olaf's army was driven back to Walton-le-Dale, whence they returned home.

For any sceptics, it might be worth considering these points.

1. There are only two serious candidates for where Olaf landed: the Humber estuary or a Lancashire estuary. The former would need a treacherous sail around the north of Scotland to land in enemy controlled territory with no land supply route. The latter had no such drawbacks.
2. There are only two Lancashire estuaries which could accommodate Olaf's fleet: the Mersey and the Ribble. The former was a siege-prone peninsula, and dangerously close to Mercia. The latter had no such drawbacks.
3. There were only two navigable places on Roman roads in the Ribble estuary where Olaf might have camped: Walton-le-Dale and Ribchester. The latter was smaller and further from the sea, making Walton-le-Dale the more likely camp location.
4. If Olaf was camped at Walton-le-Dale, Æthelstan had to enter the battle theatre on Margary 70, crossing into Northumbria at Warrington.
5. Pseudo-Ingulf says that Olaf attacked Æthelstan's camp and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says it was within running distance of Olaf's fleet. Wigan was the only settlement between Walton-le-

Dale and Warrington, and it was within running distance of Olaf's fleet.

In our opinion, Wigan is by far the best candidate for the Brunanburh battlefield. Its name means 'battles'. A mass grave has been found there which contained victims of a major battle. Wigan fits all the contemporary accounts bar one. That exception is John of Worcester, who says that Olaf's fleet entered the Humber estuary. We think this statement is a misinterpretation of a now lost account of Olaf's 939 invasion.

## Help Wanted

We believe that the Battle of Brunanburh was fought in and around Wigan. Our evidence is circumstantial and speculative, but the same applies to all the Brunanburh battlefield theories, bar one. The possible exception is the Wirral, where some medieval military archaeology has been found. If it proves to be early 10th century, perhaps we are wrong. If not, there is at least as good a case for Wigan being the battlefield location as anywhere.

Egil's Saga, which has long been thought to describe the Battle of Brunanburh, is actually describing Guthfrith's invasion in 927. It culminated in a battle against Æthelstan that Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir refers to as the 'Battle of Wen Heath'. We believe it was fought at Brasside between Chester-le-Street and Durham. Once again, our evidence is circumstantial and speculative.

We are always pleased to hear from anyone interested in lost battles. If you can provide any evidence that supports (or rebuts) either of these battlefield theories, please contact us via email to [momentousbritain@outlook.com](mailto:momentousbritain@outlook.com).