

# THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

They take the rustic rumour of their bourg  
For the great wave that echoes round the world.

*Idylls of the King*  
Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

We will probably never know where the Battle of Brunanburh was fought; but there are many theories. Some of these rely on geography and topography, but one, which located the Battle in Brinsworth near Rotherham, relied almost wholly on the supposed derivation of place-names. This is an unreliable methodology; but it was popular (and apparently unquestioned) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia Regum Britanniae* ('History of the Kings of Britain'). Geoffrey tells us that our island took its name from Brutus, Prince of the Trojans, in the same way that (according to early Scottish historians) Scotland took its name from the daughter of an ancient Pharaoh, Scota. One would not have expected a 20<sup>th</sup> century audience to be so gullible.

## The Problem

For 400 years after the first Germanic settlers arrived on our shores, 'England' was not even a geographical expression. The southern parts of the old Roman province of *Britannia* were occupied by a number of tribes whom we have come to call 'the Anglo-Saxons'. They were ruled by a large number of petty kings, though eventually there were only seven kingdoms which mattered. According to Bede, the Anglo-Saxons sometimes recognised one of them as 'Bretwalda', or 'leader of the Britons' (which may have implied lordship over Celtic Britons as well as Teutonic kinsmen).

During the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, these kingdoms came under attack from Danish Vikings, who overran large parts of northern and eastern England while, in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Norse Vikings settled in the North and the West, briefly creating a

kingdom based on York. However, Alfred the Great (871-899) managed to preserve the independence of Wessex, and then claimed lordship over all England; but, as that great student of Anglo-Saxon law, Patrick Wormald, put it, 'while there is evidence that Alfred came to see himself in some sense as a king of all Englishmen, there is almost no evidence that Englishmen beyond Wessex and perhaps the West Midlands would have agreed'.

Alfred's son Edward the Elder (899-924) succeeded in liberating a large part of Mercia, with the help of his sister Aethelflaed, the so-called 'Lady of the Mercians.' (911-918); and Alfred's grandson Athelstan retained strong connections there. The latter's coinage styled him 'King of all Britain'; but England was still only a 'fledgling' kingdom, whose survival remained precarious.

Despite his great victory at Brunanburh in 937, Athelstan is an unsung hero, who (unlike his grandfather) was never called 'Great'. H.E. Marshall (author of *Our Island Story*, first published in 1905) mentions him only once, and then only in passing:

When Edward the Elder and Ethelfleda both died, Edward's son, Athelstane, came to the throne. He, too, was a good king, and he, too, had to fight with the Danes.

There was a little more to it than this! For a start, more legal texts survive from Æthelstan's reign than from any other 10<sup>th</sup> century English king; and Athelstan's preoccupation with the maintenance of law and order has invited the anachronistic comment that he was 'tough on theft, and tough on the causes of theft'. In addition, Athelstan's success in battle enabled him to assume a new role in Anglo-Saxon England and indeed throughout these Islands. He gave generously to the Church, founded new monasteries, and did his best to revive a kingdom which had been badly damaged by Viking depredations.

Athelstan travelled a good deal around his kingdom. According to the evidence of charters, he visited Nottingham, Tamworth and Whittlebury (near Northampton) – all of which had at one time been part of the 'Danelaw' - as well as Colchester, London and Exeter. At Eamont in the Lake District, he was recognised as overlord by King Constantine of Alba in Scotland, Hywel Dda of Deheubarth in Wales, Ealdred ruler of Bamburgh, and Owain of Strathclyde. He summoned the Welsh kings to Hereford, imposed an annual tribute on them and fixed the border between England and Wales in the Hereford area at the River Wye. Welsh kings also attended his court between 928 and 935. The alliance produced peace between Wales and England, though some of the Welsh undoubtedly resented English supremacy. According to William of Malmesbury, Athelstan went on to expel the Cornish from Exeter and fix the Cornish boundary at the River Tamar. He had a good claim to be the new 'Bretwalda'.

Meanwhile, relations between Athelstan and Constantine of Scotland had broken down; and further fighting resulted in a meeting at Cirencester in 935 which

Michael Wood has characterised as a 'Durbar'; but, beneath the ceremonial veneer, there was seething resentment in Scotland of the recently imposed English hegemony; and Constantine organised a grand coalition of Athelstan's opponents. The Scots were joined by Norse Vikings from Dublin, Gaels from the rest of Ireland, Britons from Strathclyde, Northumbrian rebels and Icelanders, and the allied army marched South.

What were their objectives? In *Land of My Fathers* (1974) Gwynfor Evans was in no doubt that they wanted to drive the Anglo-Saxons back into the sea, whence they had come; and in *The Story of A Scotland* (2009) Neil Oliver wrote this:

Everyone has heard of Hastings, of 1066. But who has heard of Brunanburh? And yet this more than anything that happened in Sussex a century and more later was what determined the shape of the Britain we live in today.

The two armies met at Brunanburh; and no one knows how many men fought and died there, nor are we ever likely to know. The estimates are almost wholly fantastic; and the debate is unlikely to advance much further, in the absence of relevant battlefield archaeology. For this to be useful, the archaeologist has to have reliable information as to approximately where a battle was fought; and in the case of Brunanburh, this is absent. Yet many historians are not content to leave it at that. Driven by antiquarian enthusiasm and local patriotism, they give estimates of the number of troops involved on each side which are based on guesswork; and purport to know where the battle was fought.

J.H.Cockburn thought that 30,000 men were involved in the coalition army, on the basis of an ancient account which tells us that 615 ships entered the Humber, but all we can confidently say is that comparatively large forces must have been involved, given the number of different parties who took part in the battle, and the importance to all concerned of the struggle. As for the location, some writers opt for Brunanburh in Wirral, others for Brinsworth or Burghwallis in SouthYorkshire; and some prefer Burnley in Lancashire, or Lanchester or Hunwick in County Durham.

Is there anything in any of these theories? The geography provides a very rough guide. In the time of Alfred the Great, Danish Vikings had overrun all the old English kingdoms except Wessex while the hold which the King of England had over the former Danelaw was questionable, and his control of Yorkshire was non-existent, even in Athelstan's reign. It is therefore likely that the coalition forces invaded and met Athelstan's somewhere in the North of England. Further, the two most likely candidates for the location of Brunanburh are Wirral and South Yorkshire.

There is no shortage of primary sources for the battle, but they are both difficult (because written in Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Latin, Old Norse, Middle English and Anglo-Norman). First is the vernacular poem entered into manuscript A of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century, but probably composed in Winchester, the capital of Wessex, soon after the battle. This tells us simply that the enemy

invaded 'our land' (meaning the English kingdom). It also tells us that Æthelstan left Wessex and won a great victory, and that Constantine of Scotland returned to his land after that. So the fighting must have taken place somewhere between the borders of Wessex and Scotland, which does not take us very far.

Æthelweard (d.c. 998) tells us little more:

[N]ine hundred years plus twenty-six more had passed from the glorious Incarnation of our Saviour when the all-powerful King Athelstan assumed the crown of empire. Thirteen years later there was a massive battle against barbarians at Brunandun [sic] which is still called 'the great war' to the present day by the common folk. The barbarian hordes were then overcome on all sides and they held sway no longer. Afterwards he drove them from the shores of the sea and Scots and Picts alike bent their necks. The fields of Britain were joined as one; everywhere there was peace and abundance in all things. No fleet has since moved against these shores and remained without the consent of the English.

The Anglo-Norman chronicler Geoffrey Gaimar tells us about Brunanburh in his *History of the English* (fl. 1130s) but again gives only the vaguest of details:

After that reigned Edward's son Athelstan. When he had reigned to the fourth year, he waged a battle against the Danes; and he defeated Guthfrith the king. After that he assembled a great army and into the sea issued a great fleet. Directly to Scotland he went; he harried that country well. One year later, no less no more, at Brunanburh he had the upper hand over the Scots, and over the men of Cumberland, over the Welsh, and over the Picts. There were so many slain I think it will be told forever.

Some accounts written after 1066 are more helpful. In particular, around 1122, John of Worcester based himself on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle poem, but gave additional information, in particular that the enemy were led by Anlaf, 'a pagan king of Ireland and many islands', encouraged by his father-in-law Constantine. Crucially, he says that the invasion fleet entered the river Humber; and this statement is repeated verbatim by several other 12<sup>th</sup> century writers.

The lengthiest account in any historical source is in the *Gesta Regum* ('Deeds of the Kings') of William of Malmesbury. William includes several pages from a 10<sup>th</sup> century poem which is reproduced in the Appendix hereto; but the crucially important line is the one which refers to the 'northern land; which 'gave willing assent' to Anlaf's invasion, following his arrangement with the King of Scots. According to Wood, 'the Northern land' does not mean Scotland (as one might assume) but Northumbria, which in turn gives credence to the idea of that the coalition's army landed in the Humber estuary.

---

With so little to go on, one might think that scholars would tread carefully, and not give definite opinions as to the location of the battle. Indeed, 75 years ago Alistair Campbell ended his study of the problem with the conclusion that ‘unless new evidence can be produced... all hope of localising Brunanburh is lost... and an honest *nescio* [‘I don’t know’] is greatly to be preferred to ambitious localisations built upon sand’; but not everyone has been so cautious. Several writers have preferred to adopt Fluellen’s broad-brush approach, when examining toographical evidence. In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, the Welsh captain compares the town of Monmouth with Ancient Macedon, birthplace of Alexander the Great:

FLUELLEN:

I think it is in Macedon where Alexander is born. I  
tell you, captain, if you look in the maps of the  
'orld, I warrant you shall find, in the comparisons  
between Macedon and Monmouth, that the situations,  
look you, is both alike. There is a river in  
Macedon; and there is also moreover a river at  
Monmouth...and there is salmons in both.

## Solutions

### Northampton?

In 1996 the normally skeptical Eric John expressed a view as to where Brunanburh might have been fought:

Olaf's army was composed of Irish Norwegians, Scotsmen and so on, and men tend to fight as far from their homeland as they can. The English casualties show that the battle was a close one and suggests that the English choice of strategy was limited. Their enemies would never have fought so far north from choice. The most convincing arguments about the site of the battle seem to me those of Dr Alf Smyth. Smyth thinks it was probably very near Northampton.<sup>1</sup>

As we can tell from his tone, John was not really committed to Northampton; and his (and Smyth’s) theory has not found favour with other historians.

### Bromborough?

---

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester University Press, 1996

The argument for Bromborough (on Merseyside) was put forward in a 40 page pamphlet published by W.T. Tudsbury in 1907; and it is still being urged upon us today, not least in *The Battle of Brunanburh, A Casebook*. This is a remarkable compendium, containing a very wide range of source material, and the editor's commentary appears to be neutral at various points; but the map which appears at page xvi focusses on Wirral. At page 19, Livingston even goes so far as to write that:

The case for Bromborough is currently the standard against which all other theories are measured. Put simply, it is currently so firm that many scholars are engaged not with the question of whether Bromborough occurred on [the] Wirral, but where on the peninsula it took place.

We shall see whether this claim is fully justified; but it is certainly true that the case for Wirral has wide support, and some evidential basis. The Anglo-Saxon *Chronicle* describes the battle as taking place "around Brunanburh", and numerous locations nearby have been proposed, including the Brackenwood Golf Course in Bebington. Charters from the 13<sup>th</sup> century suggest that Bromborough was originally named *Brunanburh* (which could mean "Bruna's fort"). Recent research by local historians has identified a possible landing site for the Norse and Scots, which is Wallasey Pool, near the River Mersey. Not long ago the *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* claimed corroborative, indeed clinching, evidence with the interpretation of an elusive phrase in an Old English poem on the battle, *ondingemere*, as a place-name in Wirral; and in December 2004 *The Times* announced that 'the battle which decided the destiny of Britain has been located', while the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 trumpeted the discovery of the 'birthplace of Englishness'.

Yet the popular TV historian Michael Wood (b.1948) has advanced several cogent objections to the Wirral theory. He points out that there is no tradition in Chester or Cheshire of the battle taking place so close to home, and that even the chronicler Ranulf Higden (c. 1280-1364), who was an ardent Cheshire patriot, repeated the story that the Viking army in 937 invaded via the Humber in 937, not via the Mersey or Dee.

As for place-name evidence, 'Bromborough' appears as a place-name only in the first half of the twelfth century, and the manor is not called Bromborough in Domesday Book (compiled in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century), but *Estham* (Eastham). The Bruna who allegedly gave his name to the site may well have lived in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. In that case, the suffix 'burh' would not refer to a Viking fortification but rather to the enclosure of a twelfth-century manorial house. Small wonder that the first historian of Cheshire, George Ormerod, wrote in 1819 that:

It is acknowledged by all writers that the fleet of the invaders was placed in the Humber, and although the battle took place at such a distance from the

point of landing, that the pursuit and slaughter of the Danes and islanders lasted two days. It is impossible to trust sufficiently to the similarity of names, as to believe any circumstances could bring the conflicting armies to the distance of Bromborough.

### **Brinsworth, South Yorkshire?**

There had long been a tradition in South Yorkshire that 'Brunanburh' was to be identified with Brinsworth (now a suburb of Rotherham); but in 1931 a local solicitor, John Henry Cockburn, purported to provide massive documentary proof of the theory. He evidently thought that his legal qualification would lend weight to his arguments, but the full title of his work - *The Battle of Brunanburh and its Period as elucidated by PLACE NAMES* - is enough to start alarm bells ringing; and the suspicion is confirmed as soon as one starts reading the tome.

There are fundamental problems with Cockburn's methodology. He admits that he is aware that the connection between any single modern place-name and the ancient one in documentary or literary records may be tenuous; but he claims that, where there is a clear connection between such names in very many cases, this 'cannot be ignored'. Well, why not? Surely, a large number of dubious propositions does not constitute a single convincing argument.

Cockburn had no such doubts. For example, he lists dozens, if not hundreds, of similarities between place names and the names of warriors who fell, or fought, at Brunanburh, according to the medieval sources; but some of the alleged similarities are not very close; and many places must have been named long before Brunanburh was fought, though the earliest evidence for them is often in Domesday Book (c.1086). Further, the derivation of many place names is already well established, and the battle of Brunanburh is simply not relevant to the process. Lastly, it is well established that some place names derive from geographical features, rather than personal names.

Places often take their name from settlers rather than warriors (e.g. Kettlewell and Hubberholme in the Yorkshire Dales); but Cockburn seems to have thought that anyone present at Brunanburh might have given his name to a local place. Thus, he lists place-names said to derive from warriors who fought for the coalition, that is against Athelstan's English army; but it is very difficult to see why local people would have named places after enemy soldiers. Finally, Cockburn even lists places which are relatively far away from the supposed site of the battle (e.g. Thorpe Hesley, which is over six miles from Brinsworth); and it is difficult to see why these should have had any connection with it.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Cockburn seems to have assumed that very large numbers of men were involved at Brunanburh. At one point he makes a comparison with Scutari, in the Crimea! But it was impossible for medieval

One could go on; but the main point has been made, and indeed it was made by the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* in reviews published on 9 July and in the *Hull Daily Mail* on 18 July 1931. The most the *Telegraph* could find to say in the book's favour was this:

We can at least say of it that we should be very glad to believe that things were as Mr. Cockburn describes, for it would give a new importance to this district in English history, and a new interest to many of the names that trip so lightly off our tongues, but of which we know very little regarding their origin, meaning, or historical value.

Faint praise indeed; and this helps to explain why Cockburn's work failed to gain much credence even in the West Riding of Yorkshire. It has certainly been ignored by subsequent scholars, even in a painstaking symposium like Livingston's.

Though he did have many scholarly doubts, Michael Wood did at one time argue that Brinsworth was the most likely location for the battle. In chapter 11 of his book *In search of England*, Wood told how he had visited Brinsworth as a schoolboy in the early 1960s, and then again in the 1970s, 1981 and 1999, and how the schoolboy in him became convinced that Brunanburh had been fought there, specifically in or near Tinsley Wood (see illustration). He was almost lyrical in his descriptions of this (though it had largely disappeared by the time of his last visit, and is now difficult to find). He mourned the destruction of the environment brought about by agriculture, industrialization and de-industrialisation. He was clearly inspired by local stories and traditions about a great battle fought nearby at an unknown date by unknown armies, which could have given rise to the idea that Athelstan's greatest victory was won near here; but he also read up on the background, studied the maps, did the fieldwork, and spoke to archaeologists who had excavated local sites.

Wood did not rely on the work of John Henry Cockburn. He was sceptical about the value of place-name evidence and, in particular, about the alleged similarity between 'Brinsworth' and 'Brunanburh'. He pointed out that the former meant 'Bryi's ford', whereas the latter meant 'the fort by the Bruna'. He relied instead on geography and topography. He realized that, strategically, the battle was always likely to have taken place near the Roman road through Castleford and Doncaster to Nottingham and Derby. He also knew that, not far from Brinsworth, and also on the Don, there was another place which was important during the Saxon period, which was Conisbrough - the King's town (the centre of what the Rotherham Alderman John Guest called 'Ivanhoe Land' (see chapter 2 below).

Wood noticed how the layout of Brinsworth and nearby Tinsley wood, in particular the proximity of the river Don, Tinsley Wood and White Hill, resembled

---

commanders to concentrate their forces in the same numbers as the Romans had done, or the Victorians were able to do again.



the description of the battlefield in *Egil's Saga*. He also noticed the proximity of the chapel of St Laurence, which had received a royal stipend in the middle ages, and which might have originated in a royal grant for the saying of masses for the souls of the dead (see illustration). Could these have been the souls of men who fell that day in 937, whilst fighting in royal service? All these features might be at the base of the local tradition that Brinsworth had a special place in the history of the kingdom of England.

However, Wood became more sceptical as he grew older and wiser. He retained his original enthusiasm for Athelstan but lost faith in the idea that the King's greatest victory was fought near Brinsworth:

Going back to the mystery of Brunanburh, I have to say that I no longer think the site can be located with any certainty. Of course, I don't deny that something might turn up....I am still sure that the general area is right - it can hardly have been much further south, otherwise how would southern and Midlands annalists have failed to record where it was? But, for the moment at least, I've come round to agreeing with what Alistair Campbell wrote in 1938, that by now 'all hope of localising Brunanburh is lost'.

### **Barnsdale Bar?**

In 2013 Wood wrote an article for the *Yorksire Archaeological Journal* entitled *Searching for Brunanburh: The Yorkshire Context of the 'Great War' of 937*, in which he theorised that Brunanburh may have been fought near Barnsdale Bar on the Great North Road, north of Doncaster. He rehearsed the argument that a Yorkshire, rather than a Cheshire, location is more likely, pointing out once again that the 'Great War' of 937 was in fact only one campaign, in a prolonged period of fighting between Anglo-Saxons and Viking for control of the North of England. More specifically, the Viking kingdom of *Yorvik* was only established in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, a period when the Northumbrians were still proudly independent. Any battle with Athelstan's Wessex was therefore almost bound to take place on or near 'the Great North Road'.

Wood also pointed out that no surviving *bruna*- name has yet proved of any help in the search for the site, but that the form 'Wendun' appears in a set of 10<sup>th</sup> century annals, written in Chester-le-Street from between the 890s and 954, while a later source (using John of Worcester, and compiled by Symeon of Durham) also tells us that:

King Æthelstan fought at Wendun and drove into flight King Anlaf with 615 ships, and Constantine King of the Scots, and the King of the Cumbrians, with all their host.

---

Finally, Wood now argued that the topography points to a location near the River Went, between the Don and the Aire, and that 'Went Hill' fits very well with the name 'Wendun':

It is worth also drawing attention to another very prominent hill south of the Went in a vital strategic position astride the Roman road to York. This is the imposing rounded hill of Barnsdale Bar which rises steeply 150 feet above the important Roman site at Burghwallis, where the Great North Road is met by the Roman road from Templeborough.

In addition:

Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, the area around the Roman fort at Burghwallis, Robin Hood's Well, and the great hill at Barnsdale Bar, was viewed as the customary assembly place for the Northumbrians, where they met the southern kings for 'adventus' ceremonies of greeting and submission, and also, crucially, where they made their military assemblies.

## **Hunwick?**

In *Brunanburh Located through Egil's Saga* (CreateSpace, 2018), Stefán Björnsson and Björn Vernhardsson claim that the great battle took place somewhere else entirely. They argue:

The battlefield is near Vinovia on the Roman Road, Dere Street, in the county of Durham. And the battle was fought in a field close to and north of Hunwick. In the saga we have description of a field big enough with river on the east side and wood on the west side. Hunwick is only one kilometer northwest from the bridge over the river Wear from Vinovia. The saga tells of two towns in intermediate distance and we assume Durham to be the one in the north and Darlington in the south.

My inclination, on reading Egil's Saga for the first time, was to think that it was literature rather than chronicle or history, more like Homer's *Iliad* than Froissart's *Chronicles*, especially since it was written in Iceland in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, about events which had taken place some 300 years earlier. My doubts were reinforced when I read A.Keith Kelly's essay *Truth and a Good Story*, which is included in Michael Livingston's *Casebook on Brunanburh* (2011). Kelly explains that Old Norse literature of this kind was intended to be both 'truthful' and a 'good story', while explaining that the Icelandic author(s) or composer(s) would not have understood the distinction. He concludes that *Egil's Saga* 'is not intended to be taken as an authentic record of history: there are simply too many red flags in the way',

starting with the fact that the King of Scotland according to the Saga was Olaf (old Norse for Anlaf), whereas the historical King was Constantine.

There are two further points which can be made about the Saga. First, the composer tells us that messengers were sent by Athelstan from the place where he had decided to give battle, to see the King of Scotland; and that they rode back and forth no less than three times, during the course of protracted negotiations:

Athelstan's men sent messengers to King Olaf to tell him that their king was ready to do battle and had a great army with him, but that he wanted to avoid inflicting casualties on the scale that seemed likely. Instead, he told them to return to Scotland, offering to give them a shilling of silver for every plough in all his realm, as a pledge of friendship between them. King Olaf began preparing his army for battle when the messengers arrived, and intended to set off. But when they had delivered their message, he called a halt for the day and discussed it with the leaders of his army. They were divided over what to do. Some were eager to accept the offer, claiming that it would earn them great renown to return after exacting such a payment from Athelstan. Others discouraged him, saying that Athelstan would offer much more the second time if they turned this gesture down. This was what they decided to do.

The negotiations were fruitless; but the narrative strongly suggests that the messengers could complete the journey between the rival camps in a day. If we take this seriously it surely rules out a location in South Yorkshire (which is 240 miles by road from Gretna Green, and 193 to Berwick on Tweed) and argues in favour of Durham, not Yorkshire.<sup>3</sup>

The second point relates to the description of the battlefield itself. *Egil's Saga* contains these lines:

There was a fortress north of the heath where King Olaf stayed and kept the greater part of his army, because beyond it lay a large stretch of countryside which he considered well suited for transporting provisions for his army. He sent his men up to the heath which had been appointed as the battlefield, to camp there and prepare themselves before the other army arrived. When they reached the place chosen for the battlefield, hazel rods had already been put up to mark where it would be fought. The site had to be chosen carefully, since it had to be level and big enough for large armies to gather. At the site of the battlefield there was a level moor with a river on one side and a large forest on the other.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Though Dick Turpin is supposed to have ridden from London to York (on Black Bess in 1735), in 15 hours - a distance of just over 200 miles.

<sup>4</sup> *Egil's Saga* (Penguin Classics, 2004).

So, there is a fortress, a heath, a level moor with a river on one side and a large forest on the other. However, the lines in question might refer to a dozen, or even a hundred locations in the North of England, especially in medieval times, when there was more forest, more uncultivated land than now, and a legion of old fortresses surviving. So far from indicating a location in or near Hunwick, the passage is surely evidence of the inherent difficulty in locating a battle by reference to a poem which was composed over 300 years after the event.

## **The Forgetting of Brunanburh**

At the time, Brunanburh was hailed as a great English victory, and Athelstan as the hero of the hour; but by 1300 the battle and the man were relegated to the backwaters of English culture, a position which they continued to occupy for centuries. How this came about, and why, is explained by Robert Rouse in his contribution to Livingston's *Casebook* (2011).

The background to the relegation is the Norman Conquest of England, which saw the replacement of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy by French-speaking Normans and their allies. These new men brought fundamental changes in Church and State. The system of landholding was overhauled, in favour of a centralised and royal kind of feudalism. Vast new forests were established, with their own laws and jurisdiction. A separate system of Church courts was introduced. Almost all the existing Cathedrals and Abbeys were pulled down and replaced. French became the language of government, law and literature for around 300 years.

All this meant that the history of England and the English was gradually rewritten, and from a Norman point of view; and the Normans tended to look on their predecessors as uncultured barbarians. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century there were still chroniclers (notably Eadmer of Canterbury, John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury) who told the story of Athelstan and his heroic triumph at Brunanburh; but, in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, which appeared around 1300, the invading Danes has become Saracens, and Athelstan have been replaced by Sir Guy of Warwick, who defeats the invader by killing the African Giant Colbrund, in single combat at Winchester. There is no mention of Brunanburh, while Athelstan has become a cowardly tyrant, instead of a paragon of Christian kingship.

This is a startling and puzzling development, but one of the effects of the Norman Conquest was to weaken English connections with Scandinavia, and strengthen those with Western Europe - and more specifically, with France. Moreover, the four centuries between 900 and 1300 saw the 'making of the Middle Ages',<sup>5</sup> as Western European civilisation expanded into Spain, Southern Italy, the Balkans and even the Holy Land, while Germany expanded to the East, and the Normans expanded in Southern Italy and the Holy Land, as well as England, Wales

---

<sup>5</sup> The title of Sir Richard Southern's first book, published in 1953.

and Ireland. Athelstan's great war in northern England must have seemed distant and parochial, by comparison.

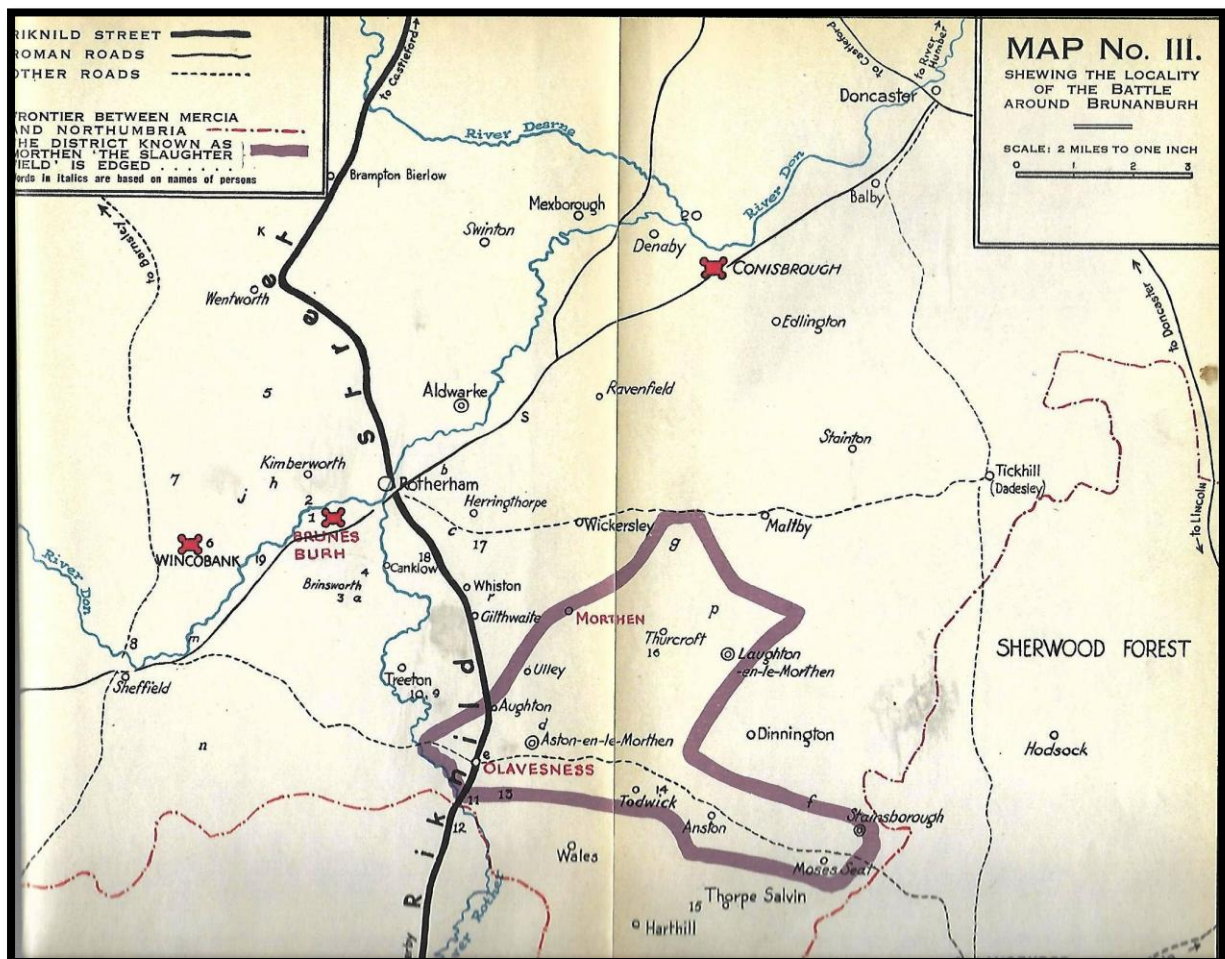
At the same time, taste and fashion changed. People became interested in Romantic, rather than Epic literature, and above all in the 'Matters' of Rome, France and Britain. In particular, Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1095-c.1155) wrote about the deeds of the mythical King Arthur, and his Knights of the Round Table, who were of particular interest to the English, although (if they had existed at all) they had been British. The emphasis now was on the daring deeds performed by individuals, rather than the fate of nations; and this helps to further explain how Athelstan was eventually replaced by Sir Guy of Warwick, who did battle with a Saracenic monster, rather than with the Welsh, the Scots and the Norse. Athelstan was of little interest, compared with Arthur and Lancelot.

The forgetting of Athelstan may also owe something to the infant medieval tourist industry, since the monks of Winchester clearly had an interest in promoting the new story, just as they promoted the cult of St Swithun; and Winchester was a far more important place than anywhere in the North of England (except perhaps York). The North-South divide undoubtedly existed, even in the Middle Ages.

Lastly, a change in the popular perception of monarchy may also have been important. In Anglo-Saxon times, Kings had been revered as heroes and demi-gods: Alfred was called 'Great', while St Edmund of East Anglia (d.860) was both a saint and a martyr for the Christian Faith; but, after the Conquest, the Gregorian Reform of the Church brought a stricter division between Church and State, between clergy and laity, and the political and the sacred. There were also unfortunate arguments in England, between Henry II and Becket, and between King John and Pope Innocent III, which caused some to think the less of kings. No post-Conquest English king was ever made a saint, as Louis IX of France was (though it should also be noted that there was only ever one English pope). This made it easier to downgrade the great Athelstan; and he eventually came to be regarded as both weak and tyrannical. It was only in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, when William Camden moved the study of English history out of the realm of myth and into the groves of academe, that the King's rehabilitation could begin, and it was not completed until the Victorian era. Even then, it was his grandfather Alfred the Great who was hailed by English historians as 'the highest type of Englishman' and 'the greatest of English kings.'<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Joanne Parker, in Livingston, 385-6.



Map of Brunanburh and district (Cockburn, 1931)





**Tinsley Wood, 2018**





**St Lawrence Church, Brinsworth**