BRUN AND BRUNANBURH: BURNLEY AND HEYSHAM

Christopher Robson

Christopher Robson was educated at Cheltenham and at Oxford (Wadham College), where he read Modern History. He then studied for an MA in British History at Leeds University (1981-2). He worked as a Secondary School teacher and was Head of History from 1982-2004, at Our Lady’s Catholic College, Lancaster. Since 2007 Christopher has undertaken the teaching of Local History with the Lancaster Adult College. He has worked since 2004 as a fundraiser with the registered charity Aid to the Church in Need.

The location of Brunanburh, the battle site where Athelstan’s victory over his northern enemies took place during the fourth decade of the 10th century, is something which historians still debate to this day.¹ The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook, published in 2011, is one of the most recent and comprehensive surveys of the available sources on this debate. In line with convention, the thrust of this book’s argument identifies the site of Brunanburh as the Wirral village of Bromborough, because, as Paul Cavill argues, it fits ‘the philological, topographical, and sociological... descriptors in a way that none of the other proposed sites do’.² This article, however, considers not only where the site of this battle may lie, but also suggests that Brun and Brunanburh were two separate battles which occurred at different times; an idea which has largely been overlooked by existing work on this subject.

Figure 1: Heysham Harbour, completed in 1902. This is a natural deep water anchorage, and ships can be floated here at low tide. It is very close to the site of the Rock of Brunanburh. Photograph reproduced by permission of Heysham Port Authority, Peel Ports Limited.

To evaluate Cavill’s assertion in the Casebook, it is necessary to outline the story of the Brunanburh campaign. Athelstan, the son of Edward the Elder, became King of Wessex on the death of his half-brother Aelfweard. Ruling from the mid-920s until his death in October 939, Athelstan’s contribution to the development of the English state in political, legal, and administrative terms, is now being better appreciated.3

Central to this achievement was King Athelstan’s victory at Brunanburh over a coalition army of Hiberno-Norse, Scots, and Strathclyde Welsh, in 937. In 934, the events which would culminate in Brunanburh began to unfold. From his base at Chester-le-Street in Durham, Athelstan led an expedition against Scotland and defeated

---

Constantine Mac Aed, King of Scots, at Dunblane. Constantine, in diplomatic retaliation, then formed an alliance with the King of Dublin, Olav, (generally given in its Irish form of Anlaf), and planned a counter-offensive. This alliance between Constantine and Anlaf, joined subsequently by Owain of Strathclyde, must have aimed at the tripartite division of Northumbria.

From a reading of Welsh sources, it is plausible to assert that these Allies would have launched their invasion of the north of England in 935, and that they did so by land from the Lothians. It is clear from Icelandic sources that the Reeve of Bamborough, heir to the Bernician Kings, put up a poor defence against the Scoto-Norse force and was defeated when they entered Northumberland.4

What also emerges is that the army (under the command of Anlaf) was on land, and was not carried in a fleet down the Northumbrian coast. This suggests that Haakon, King of Norway, supported the West Saxon government, and would prevent any moves by the expatriate Norse leaders against the power of Wessex. Haakon, brought up at the Winchester court, was the adopted son of Athelstan who provided him with ships and men to return to Norway and take his throne in 934. Henceforward, the Norse colonists in Ireland and Mann were to find opposition not just from the West Saxon Crown but from the Norwegian one as well.

As the Allied army moved southwards in 935, they met resistance from pro-Athelstan forces which contained Norwegian mercenaries. The Welsh source material suggests that it was at a place called Brun, where a battle was waged (also in 935), in which pro-Haakon Norsemen fought against their Hiberno-Norse kinsmen, under Anlaf. In Brut Y Tywysogion, (The Chronicle of the Princes), the entry for 935 reads, ‘[a]nd the battle of Brun took place’.5 The allocation of the date 935 to Brun in these Welsh sources, forms part of what can be seen as

a secure chronology, and ought not to be dismissed lightly. The movement of Anlaf’s forces had as its primary aim the capture of York but the West Saxon military reaction needed to be contained first. To get to within reach of the Hiberno-Norse zone of settlement on the west coast, it made sense for Anlaf to follow the York-Tadcaster-Ribchester Roman road. His army’s most likely destination would have been Burnley, named as ‘Brunlaia’ in a document from 1124; a town equidistant between York and the Irish Sea coast. Hence the 935 Battle of Brun was probably fought near Burnley on an open moor, fringed with forest, and in the vicinity of the River Brun. In the Icelandic *Egil’s Saga*, the Battle of Brun is referred to in Old Norse as *Vinheidar* ‘Vin Heath’, the battlefield being ‘a flat moor with a river flowing on one side and a large wood on the other’. This source, however, does not contain any reference to the sea and therefore precludes the possibility of a maritime interpretation of the battle, or of flight from the battlefield in ships. At Brun, it was Norwegians loyal to Haakon I, who were the dominant element in Athelstan’s forces, and the key players in defeating their Hiberno-Norse kinsmen. The fact that Athelstan invested Egil and Thorolf with command under himself suggests that loyalist Norse had disproportionate influence in the nominally English army in the Burnley district, while the strong Norse influence in the West Saxon force is again reiterated with reference to an army under Thorfinn the Strong. Brun was therefore a victory for metropolitan Norway against Anlaf’s force, which comprised dissident anti-Haakon Norse colonists from Ireland and Mann.

Brun was, moreover, an engagement planned and premeditated by both sides. It had an overarching judicial concept, and aimed at a legally binding outcome that would give the victor control of the region. Anlaf examined the field: ‘When they came to the place selected for the battle, the hazel-rods to fix the boundaries were

---

8 Ibid, pp. 119-120.
9 Ibid, p. 119.
already set up, and the battlefield itself fully marked out'.

There was some plea bargaining, and a bid for a peaceful settlement by the two sides, but Anlaf made an out of court settlement impossible when he ‘said that he would take the offer as long as Athelstan would let him have Northumbria as well, along with all its dues and tributes’. The Battle of Brun was a defeat for Anlaf and his northern allies, and it is possible that Athelstan commemorated this achievement by ordering the realignment of Anglian crosses in the graveyards of Burnley and of Whalley, the historic parochial centre. Despite the adverse outcome of Brun, Anlaf and Constantine emerged with their forces intact. We can assume that Athelstan honoured the terms of the agreement, which included a pledge by the victor that the vanquished could withdraw unmolested.

The Scoto-Norse leaders had in effect been fooled over Brun in 935. It is almost certain that a generation earlier, Anlaf had returned to Ireland to recruit troops and recuperate in the light of Ragnall’s ubiquity in the Irish Sea region. According to Irish sources for this period, Anlaf of Dublin, ‘did not sail for England to fight the Battle of Brunanburh until after early August 937’.

In arguing that Brun and Brunanburh were not the same battle, but rather two distinctive conflicts which took place on different dates and in different places, we need to consider why The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle remains silent on the former battle. One explanation is that Brun failed to eliminate the threat of Anlaf, and although Athelstan had swept the board in east-central Lancashire, the density of the Hiberno-Norse presence on the western seaboard meant that he had to wait for sufficient naval power before he could mount a challenge to the Dublin Viking kingdom in the area. Another reason for the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers’ silence on the 935 battle, can also be attributed to the West Saxon victory at Brun, which owed a disproportionate amount to loyalist Norwegian troops, whose contribution eclipsed that of ‘indigenous’ English troops. The Anglo-

10 Ibid, p. 119.
11 Ibid, p. 121.
Saxon Chronicle was created to celebrate the achievements of Anglo-Saxons, not those of later Scandinavian arrivals.

These recent immigrants were Norse settlers whose major concentrations and influence were on the coasts of what in the 12th century were to become the counties of Cumberland and Lancashire. Hence Athelstan’s victory in the vicinity of Burnley in 935, secured West Saxon control of the Lancashire interior, but did not win him control over the coastal strip. One area which had strong links with the Isle of Man and Ireland was Heysham, where it is highly probable that there were Hiberno-Norse families with pro-Anlaf loyalties.

Heysham is crucial in our understanding of the events of 937, which culminated in the Battle of Brunanburh, because Brunanburh is located within a mile of the centre of the village of Heysham. The work of amateur historians and enthusiasts offer useful insights into pinpointing the site of Brunanburh in relation to Heysham. David Flaxington has written, ‘some believe Brunenburh [sic] to have taken place in the vicinity of Heysham’s present-day nuclear power station’. ‘Brunenberh’ was ‘…a boundary marker probably the ‘Big Stone’ which marked the coastal boundary’ between the Manors of Heysham and Middleton’.¹⁴

Eileen Dent argues that Brunanburh was, ‘the Brown Rock, later known as Red Nab, now part of the Heysham harbour complex...’ and ‘marked the boundary ‘between the Manors of Heysham and Middleton’.

That is, it was a conspicuous landmark, overlooking Middleton Sands. From the information we have, it is possible to suggest that the exact position of Brunanburh was on the landward side of the Port and the nuclear power station, which, since the early 1970s, has shared its site.

The rock was one of the few places on Morecambe Bay within easy access of deep water at low tide, a fact which accounted for its maritime importance. Hence this location was chosen by the Midland Railway Company in 1897 as a new port, with its access to Ireland.

---

16 See the (1:50 000) OS Landranger map for Kendal and Morecambe (Sheet 97), map reference: 403603 (it is very near the border with Sheet 102). Also note, on OS map for Preston and Blackpool (Sheet 102), Heysham Lake (an area of Morecambe Bay that is navigable at low tide), Middleton Sands, and Red Nab, at references: 380580, 395585, and 402591.
and the Isle of Man.\textsuperscript{17} Between 1898 and 1902, when the Port of Heysham and its concomitant railway terminus were opened, an entire cliff was blasted into oblivion during their construction and, Dent tells us, Brunanburh was dynamited away in the process.\textsuperscript{18}

Evidence of the name ‘Brunanburh’ at Heysham includes a mid-thirteenth century document, held in the National Archives, in the Duchy of Lancaster collection.\textsuperscript{19} Dated 1253, it is a grant from Laurence Travers to his son Thomas Travers of all his demesnes in Heysham, to hold the grantor during his life, and after his death, Roger de Heysham and his heirs. It is important to stress the fact that ‘Brunanburh’ is mentioned in this document, although, as one would expect, the spelling is not that employed in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The relevant extract from the 1875 translation of the Deputy Keeper’s Records reads as follows: ‘Grant in perpetuity from Roger de Hesaim son of Vivian de Hesaym to Thomas Travers of all that land and meadow which adjoin his culture or plough land (cultura) del Quytecroft on the south described by bounds beginning seawards at the extremity of a certain rock which is called Le Bronneberh, and so following over the summit of the said rock as far as his culture del Hallestede, &c. with all liberties and easements in all places and so much land pertaining in the vill of Heysham and without’.\textsuperscript{20}

There is a further reference to Brunanburh, dated only a few years later, which can be fixed at some time between c. 1261 to 1272.\textsuperscript{21} It is a grant by Master Laurence Travers to Thomas Travers his son. The key sentence reads: ‘Moreover, I have given to the said Thomas and his heirs two acres of land which I bought from Adam son of Robert de Kellet in the territory of Hesaym [Heysham], namely, one in Le Midilrigge and half an acre above/on/at Le Bruneberh...’ In further support of this, the Victoria County History for Lancaster, states that

\begin{itemize}
\item[17] David Flaxington, \textit{History of Heysham}, p. 16.
\item[19] National Archives (Kew): DL 25/358, Grant of land by Laurence Travers to his son Thomas Travers, 1253 (Duchy of Lancaster Collection).
\item[20] National Archives (Kew): DL 25/358, Grant of land by Laurence Travers to Thomas Travers, 1253 (Duchy of Lancaster Collection).
\item[21] National Archives (Kew): DL 25/358 Further grant by Laurence Travers to Thomas Travers, 1261-1272 (Duchy of Lancaster Collection).
\end{itemize}
‘Bronneberh or Bruneberh was a rock’.\textsuperscript{22} It is possible that their Heysham contacts would have gleaned this information from the local shrimping community, which only disappeared in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century.

Figure 3: The Heysham site in 1970, when the Power Station was being built, points to a clear explanation of why this location was chosen as a port for the Midland Railway Company at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The harbour on the right has naturally considerable depth at low tide. Photograph reproduced by permission of EDF Energy Nuclear Generation Limited.

In relation to seaborne communications in the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, the rock of Brunanburh must have been a landmark for navigation. Manx and Irish ships would have made for it because boats could be beached there, and set afloat quite easily, even when the tide was out. Its prominence would have risen with the conquest of the Isle of Man in 577 by Baetan mac Cairill King of Ulster and again by Aedan mac

Gabrain of Dal Riata in 582. It is highly probable that Irish Christian missionaries came via Mann to Heysham to build the original precursor of Saint Patrick’s Chapel, and were familiar with both the sea-routes there and the Brunanburh anchorage. Of course, the Norse settlers operating in the Irish Sea would have inherited and then expanded this connection with Mann and the entire Irish network of sea-lanes from the late ninth century, as their commercial and related seafaring activities in the region testify. From a seafaring viewpoint, the rock of Brunanburh marked a port facility.

Figure 4: Saint Patrick’s Chapel, Heysham, dating from the 9th century. Its ground-plan follows the pattern of Hiberno-Manx small chapels known as ‘keeills’. Photograph reproduced by permission of Richard Martin.

It is argued here that ‘Le Bronneberh’ is, in an onomastic perspective, an almost perfect fit for Brunanburh, the battle at which Athelstan was victorious. No alternative name offers a match to the same

---

degree and alternative suggestions phonetically have less plausibility. Yet there are other indicators of the unique importance of Heysham in the story, and archaeological evidence connected with Heysham helps to further substantiate claims that Le Bronneberh has an association with the battle.

Firstly, at Heysham lie the remains of a chapel dedicated to Saint Patrick, which shares the elongated rectangular form of the Manx ‘keeill’ churches, and is flanked by Manx-style rock-cut graves.24 That Saint Patrick preached here may be no more than a confabulation, but it is not impossible. It can be surmised that in the late 6th century, after conquering Mann and superimposing a Goidelic Celtic aristocracy on a Brythonic Celtic population, the Irish at the height of the expeditions of Fiachnae mac Baetan of Dal nAraidi, may have exercised a shadowy sovereignty over parts of the coast of the North West, and planted settlers and missionaries in a number of outposts, including Heysham.25

These Irish connections, which were largely ecclesiastical, would have been reinvigorated by the arrival in Heysham of Norwegian colonists, themselves on the cusp of conversion to Christianity in the Irish and Manx ports from the 870s. It is worth noting that St Helen’s Church in Overton, only two miles from Heysham, was nominated in honour of Saint Patrick until the 1770s.26

---

25 Daibhi O’Cróinin, *Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 51-52
Figure 5: The Viking hogback stone in the south chancel of Saint Peter’s, Heysham. The subject matter decorating it is drawn both from Norse mythology and from Biblical themes, indicating that the Hiberno-Norse community was in a transitional stage in terms of its beliefs. Photograph reproduced by permission of Richard Martin.

The coincidence of the name ‘Le Bronneberh’ with the village of Heysham, a settlement with strong Irish and Norse associations, endorsed by archaeological evidence, makes it by no means impossible that the Battle of Brunanburh took place here in 937. Certainly it was an ideal meeting place for the main protagonists in this conflict. Anlaf Gothfrithson could reach Heysham by sea from Ireland, via the Isle of Man. Constantine Mac Aed, the King of Alba, could proceed southwards by land through Cumbria, finally taking the sands route over Morecambe Bay to reach Heysham. Archaeologists have established that Heysham was the starting point
of a northward route across the sands from at least the Mesolithic era, and hence also its southern terminus. It is relevant to the case for Heysham as the site of Brunanburh, that from the point of view of the Scoto-Norse army gathering there, it was strategically positioned for an advance on York. It is very likely that from the summer of 928 Athelstan had defences in place which would prevent a landing on the Ribble estuary. With this in mind, Heysham, with its Hiberno-Norse culture and affiliations, offered a viable alternative to the Allies. Thence an army could ford the Lune at Halton, and proceed to Quernmore in the Conder Valley, moving southwards through the Trough of Bowland along what the Anglo-Saxons would have called a heerepaeth, an inter-regional track meaning literally an ‘army path’, to take the Roman road already alluded to, from Ribchester to York.

The regrouping of a Scoto-Norse force at Heysham (a mere two years after Brun), would have caused Athelstan to reactivate his military establishment in the north. His fleet, which patrolled the estuary of the Ribble, could transport men to mount an attack on Anlaf’s Brunanburh stronghold once the Irish-Norse had disembarked and taken up their Heysham station.

In contrast to Brun, the personnel in Athelstan’s army at Brunanburh were not Norwegians, but were instead composed of the native English population in the Midlands and South. Some English troops in the description of Brunanburh are referred to as West Seaxe, West Saxons, while others are from Mercia, ‘the Mercians did not refuse hard hand-play to any warrior who came with Anlaf over the seasurge’. ‘Angle and Saxon’ are specifically mentioned: ‘Never was there more slaughter on this island... since from the east Angles and Saxons came up over the broad sea’. The Chronicle celebrates English proto-nationalism. Conspicuously silent on Brun, where Norwegian mercenaries played the key role in securing the day for

---

29 Ibid, p. 110.
Athelstan, it is voluble in its praises of an exclusively Anglo-Saxon army that triumphed at Brunanburh.

Having assembled the *Fyrd* in the south, however, Athelstan had to get it to Morecambe Bay. We can assume a fortnight’s march, and waves of military units proceeding northwards in relays. Once this had been done, the strategic requirement was for the Wessex high command to encircle Anlaf’s Scoto-Norse army at Brunanburh. This would mean penning his troops into the Overton Peninsula, on which Heysham is situated. One would guess that most of the English army moved across the Lune at Halton, and pressed westwards on to Brunanburh. Yet it is conceivable that Athelstan had a fleet in the mouth of the Ribble, and there embarked sections of his force to deposit them at high tide to the north of Heysham in the Poulton-Morecambe district. Whatever his disposition, it is clear that Athelstan’s army immediately adopted an offensive posture and mounted an assault on the Scandinavian fort at Brunanburh, with the result that Anlaf and Constantine were put on the defensive. The reason for this may have been that they had already lost many men at Brun in 935. Notwithstanding this, the celebrated verse-account of Brunanburh in the *Chronicle* outlines an amphibious operation absolutely compatible with the maritime landscape and topography of Heysham, and quite different from the inland battlefield of Brun. In the vicinity of the rock, near the top of the cliff, there would have been a fort where the Allied army made a last stand against the English attackers, as the *Chronicle* informs us: ‘Her Aethelstan cyning… ealdor-langetir geslogen aet saecce sweords ecgun ymbe Brunanburh..Bord-weall clufon’, which translates as, ‘Here King Athelstan… struck life-long glory in strife round Brunanburh, clove the shield-wall’.30 In the wake of these hostilities, the defeated were magnanimously given licence to escape the battlefield by the victor, Athelstan of Wessex.

There is specific detail on the Hiberno-Norse survivors rowing, (via Mann no doubt), to Ireland, ‘the Northmen, bloody survivors of darts, disgraced in spirit... departed on Ding’s Mere (Morecambe

---

Bay) in nailed boats over deep water to seek Dublin’ and ‘Olaf, over the mingling of waves, doomed in fight, sought out land in the bosom of a ship’.

Constantine of Scots got away across the Sands and walked with his companions back to Alba. It should be added that a maritime environment and naval activity are corroborated by Aethelweard, who wrote of ‘Brunandune’, the suffix ‘dune’ implying sands on a shore, present below the ‘Le Bronneberh’ cliff and called ‘Middleton Sands’. He recorded that ‘the barbarian tribes are driven beyond the ocean’; a detail which gives further weight to the idea of a link between Brunanburh and Heysham, as outlined above.

Figure 6: The rock-cut Manx-style tombs outside Saint Patrick’s Chapel, Heysham. They date from the 11th and 12th centuries. Photograph reproduced by permission of Richard Martin.

In *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the date for Brunanburh is given as 937. The *Annals of Ulster* verifies *The Chronicle’s* dating of 937, that ‘a

---

great... battle was cruelly fought between the Saxons and Norsemen, in which several thousands of Norsemen, who were uncounted, fell, but their King Anlaib [sic] 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’. Yet if we accept 937 as the date for Brunanburh, the sources make no sense, unless we accept 935 as the date for the earlier, inland battle of Brun, therefore supporting the argument presented by this article, that they were indeed two separate battles.

In conclusion, this article has attempted to unscramble the names of two battlefields which are almost homophonic. References to ‘Brunefeld’ and Brunadun’ are only one example of many almost identical names. When the Scoto-Norse invasion began in 935, the first battle was at Bamborough, the seat of the Reeve of Bernicia, who was defeated by Anlaf. The second, months later in the same year, was on Vin Heath near the River Brun in the Burnley district. The third was at Brunanburh outside Heysham in 937. Bamborough, Brun and Brunanburh are clearly similar, which accounts for the fact that William of Malmesbury, writing in the 13th century, conflated them. Livingston’s recent book favours Bromborough as the site for the battle, although this article has suggested that it does not belong in this historical sequence. Bromborough is derived from the early medieval Brunburg, ‘stronghold of a man called Brun’. The crucial second syllable of Brunanburh is absent, and this detail is more important than it may at first appear. Bromborough is an inland location, and the 937 battle in The Chronicle is fought near the sea shore. Indeed, an offensive on the Wirral by Anlaf would have made little sense. As the Mersey marshes were impenetrable during this period, Bromborough could not have served as a springboard for an assault on York in an area where there was dense Scandinavian settlement. It only gave access to north-east Mercia, where, south of the Wirral, Norse colonies were non-existent. Although Constantine’s Scottish army had no line of retreat from the Wirral, it did in

Heysham, via the sands route across Morecambe Bay to Cumbria. It should be also be remembered that Heysham was a point of entry to lines of communication which led to York, and to the prospect of restoring Ragnall’s Dublin-York kingdom, the vision which informed Anlaf’s campaigns. So it is arguably to Heysham, rather than to Bromborough, that this celebrated stanza from the Winchester manuscript of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* applies:

Here King Athelstan, leader of warriors,  
ring-giver of men, and also his brother,  
the aetheling Edmund, struck life-long glory  
in strife round Brunanburh.37

Figure 7: The Anglian cross-shaft in the graveyard of Saint Peter’s, Heysham, a church which was by tradition consecrated in 954, but was on the site of a much earlier building. Photograph reproduced by permission of Richard Martin.

**Bibliography**


---

Farrer, W. & Brownbill, J. *Victoria County History, County Of Lancaster, Vol. 8* (Constable)
Flaxington, D. *History of Heysham* (Heysham Heritage Association, 2001)
Foot, S. *Aethelstan: the first King of England* (Yale University Press, 2011)
Giles, J.A. *Six Old English Chronicles (Ethelweard’s)* (Henry G Bohn, 1848)
Hall, R.A. *Viking Age York and the North* (Council for Br.Archaeology, 1978)
Williams, J., *Brut Y Tywysogion, the Chronicle of the Princes* (Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1860)