

Identifying Brúnanburh: *ón dyngesmere* – the sea of noise

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Dedicated to my father and mother

After the battle a Christian warrior skáld could have replied thus to his friend King Æthelstan

*“Sól gengr i aegi
hjarta mitt var runnit sundr í sigi
segja leið, gjálfr-stoð
Segjanda er allt vin sinum
sóma-maðr*

*“The sun sinks into the sea
My heart was molten into drops
Lead the way, steeds of the sea
All can be said of a friend
An honourable, respectable man”*

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Abbreviations

AClon	Annals of Clonmacnoise
AngloDan	Anglo-Danish
adj.	adjective
AFM	Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters
AIIn	Annals of Innisfalen
ARF	Annals Regni Francorum
ASax	Anglo-Saxon
ASC	Anglo-Saxon Chronicles
AU	Annals of Ulster
B&T	Bosworth & Toller
Com Scand	Common Scandinavian
CVC	Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie
DAMTP	Dept., of Applied Mathematics & Theoretical Physics (Cambridge)
DB	Domesday Book
EE	Eilert Ekwall
ESA	European Space Agency
Gk	Greek
HH	Henry of Huntingdon
HM	Her Majesty
L&S	Liddle & Scott
Mod Eng	Modern English
MS	Manuscript
n	noun
ODan	Old Danish
OE	Old English
ME	Middle English
OIc	Old Icelandic
OIrish	Old Irish
ON	Old Norse
OScot	Old Scottish
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
PIE	Proto Indo-European
PN	Place Name
RN	Royal Navy
R&S	Rivet & Smith
RW	Roger of Wendover
VLf	Very Low Frequency
WW	F.T.Wainwright

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INTRODUCTION

Few events of the Early Medieval Age have created such controversy amongst scholars as the Battle of *Brúnanburh* for the kingdom of England (AD 937). The location of this battle, undiscovered in the mists of time, almost epitomizes the spurious term ‘Dark Ages’¹.

Evidence is at the heart of this problem. The methodology of this article gathers evidence for the identification of this battle from scientific, literary, archaeological, historical and genealogical disciplines. This analysis of the MSS offers a new approach for detecting the *Brúnanburh* site through verifiable appraisal from these domains. Verification of climatic maritime phrases in the MSS eventually identifying the coastal landscape is possible, for crucially it should be stated that **‘manuscript evidence is material culture’**. Phrases within the poem highlight a loud noise from the sea which has been regarded by some scholars as a ‘red herring’ - this must be investigated. Could this noise hold the key to the locale? Described as *‘ón dyngesmere’* in the poem, this noise can be found in one unique locale – Morecambe Bay. Comparison of scientific with historical analysis offers a paradigm which can **verify** the actual site.

Various sites have been proposed for *Æthelstan’s* battle against the Hiberno-Norse alliance. The author noticed that for over two centuries scholars have chosen different positions (the latest are: P. Cavill², S. Harding & M. Jobling³, C. Hart⁴, A. P. Smyth⁵, M. Wood⁶, A. Breeze⁷ etc). There is no point in reiterating their arguments that state their selected place-name for *Brúnanburh*; these became their starting point for their individual theories but this author will advance a valid case from maritime and landscape phrases in the poem. For there are a plethora of similar place-names for *Brúnanburh* in the north of England. Consequently, this has only created confusion. Bromborough is the latest theory but again this is very doubtful as there are many inaccuracies.

¹ A term first coined by Petrarch circa 1350. Theodore E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'" *Speculum* 17.2 (April 1942: 226–242). See also, Eisner, M. 2014 *Renaissance Quarterly* 67 755–90.

² For the Bromborough (Cheshire) argument see: Cavill, Paul, Harding, Stephen & Jesch, Judith 2004 *Revisiting Dingesmere*. *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* xxxvi pp25–38. See also Cavill, Paul 2008 *The site of the Battle of Brunanburh: manuscripts and maps, grammar and geography*. In *A Commodity of Good Names: Essays in honour of Margaret Gelling* (eds.) Padel, O.J. & Parsons, D.N., Shaun Tyas,

³ Also for the Bromborough argument see: Harding, S., Jobling, M. 2008 *Vikings*. *British Archaeology*. (Nov–Dec). Wood, M. 2013 p143 makes the point “It is unlikely to have been in the heartland of Mercia.”

⁴ For the Bourn (Lincolnshire) argument: Hart, Cyril. 1992 *The Danelaw*. The Hambleton Press, London.

⁵ For the Bruneswald (Northamptonshire) argument: Smyth, Alfred P. 1979 *Scandinavian York & Dublin, the History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*. Vol. 2, Humanities Press: New Jersey & Templekieran Press: Dublin.

⁶ For the Brinsworth (South Yorkshire) argument: Wood, Michael 1980 *Brunanburh Revisited*. *Saga Book of the Viking Society* xx.3 pp200–17. See, Wood, M. 2013 *Yorks. Arch. Journ.* 85 pp138–59, this Humber argument of *Anlaf (Óláfr)* travelling over the Pentland Firth or the Firth of Forth from climatic and maritime aspects become untenable. Wood maintains that the River Went was a derivation of Wendun where the battle was fought, but again there is no valid evidence and the confusion of place-names continues.

⁷ Breeze, Andrew. 1999 *The Battle of Brunanburh and Welsh Tradition*. *Neophilologus* 83: 479–482. Notice the interesting development of the Welsh *kattybrudawt* / O Brythonic *cattybrunawc*. However, Breeze has a different outcome though for the locale of *Brúnanburh*.

EXPLANATION OF CLIMATIC PHRASES IN THE POEM

Challenging these inaccuracies proved thought-provoking. The *Brúnanburh* poem revealed three phrases that appear to represent a locale and point to climatic conditions – qualification of the physical type, the result created, and the transient sound, for one naturally leads to the other. The phrase ‘*ón dyngesmere*’ (line 55) in the Anglo-Saxon poem was analysed by Thorpe in 1834⁸, Garnett in 1889⁹ and Cockburn in 1931¹⁰ who proposed that *dynges* was *dines* (MS Cotton Otho B. xi.)¹¹ meaning ‘noise’ giving rise to ‘the noisy sea’, or ‘sea of noise’ and they all agree on this interpretation. [ASax. *dyngge, dynige, es, m?* A noise, dashing, storm; sonus, strepitus, procella, *Ón dynges mere, on the sea of noise*]¹²(see note 12 below: *ding, e; f.* A dungeon, prison. Possibly the two forms represent a literary device - a kenning,). Magoun in 1933¹³ reviewed Cockburn, he followed Guest’s argument of 1838¹⁴ and called *dyngesmere* ‘the resounding sea’, but Guest chose the Browney, Durham area which cannot be correct. In 1938 Campbell¹⁵ equated these phrases, *ón dyngesmere* and *ón fealene flod*, with an estuary of dark water and sand. However, none were able to identify the locale, although most describe *dyngesmere* as variations of a sea of noise. Could tangible evidence confirm the historical MS? The following five points highlight topographical references in the poem.

The first point: that climatic maritime appraisal has been largely ignored in the hunt for the locale of *Brúnanburh*. A loud rumbling noise from the sea around Morecambe Bay has been regarded by some scholars as a ‘red herring’, yet such a noise exists. As this ‘sea of noise’ was a distinct localized feature it may also be the ‘estuary of dark water’ highlighted by Campbell. There are three phrases in the poem that describe climatic features and correlation with *Brúnanburh* becomes significant. These three couplets represent a specific event, whereas many scholars have taken the last couplet only. See lines 27-28, 36-37, and 55-56 below,

<p>“<i>þae mid anlafe ofer æra gebland</i> <i>ón lides bosme land gesohtun</i>”</p>	<p>who came with Anlaf over the sea-surge in the bosom of a ship, those who sought land,</p>	<p>Thorpe: <i>O’er the waves mingling</i></p>
<p>“<i>cread cnearen flot cyning ut gewat</i> <i>ón fealene flod feorh generede</i>”</p>	<p>he pressed the ship afloat, the king went out on the dusky flood-tide, he saved his life.</p>	<p>Thorpe: <i>on the fallow flood</i></p>
<p>“<i>dreorig daroða laf ón dyngesmere</i> <i>ofer deop wæter difel in secan</i>”</p>	<p>dejected survivors of battle, on the sea of noise over waters deep sought Dublin,</p>	<p>Thorpe: <i>on the roaring sea</i></p>

⁸ Thorpe’s translation is remarkably close to a modern Fluid Dynamic sense especially lines 27-8; Thorpe, Benjamin 1861 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles Ed Benjamin Thorpe Vol II*, London, pp86-88. But see *Florence of Worcester* (ed.) Thorpe, B. 1848. *Óláfr* enters York at a later time. (see *Historia Regum in Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae Symeonis Opera.*, ii, 93).

⁹ Garnett, James M. 1889, ed. 1901 *Elene; Judith; Athelstan, or the fight at Brunanburh; Byrhtnoth, or the fight at Maldon; and the Dream of the Rood: Anglo-Saxon Poems*. Boston, Ginn & Co. Athenaeum Press, 57-59.

¹⁰ Cockburn, John H. 1931 *The battle of Brunanburgh and its period elucidated by place-names*. London & Sheffield. Cockburn pursued Armitage Goodall’s (1914, 312-313) Brinsworth argument (see M. Wood 2013).

¹¹ British Library MS Cotton Otho B. xi, London.

¹² Bosworth & Toller revised Toller 1898, *Anglo Saxon Dictionary*. O.U.P. (Main Volume p221). See also p.205 *ding, e; f.* A dungeon, prison; carcer :-- *Com hæleða þreat to ðære dimman ding - the troop of heroes came to the dark dungeon, Andr. Kmbl. 2541. This suggests trapping the remnants of the army in the mere, possibly a play of the words which the Anglo-Saxons loved.*

¹³ Magoun, F. P. 1933 *Cockburn: the battle of Brunanburh and its period elucidated by place-names*. 86 n.1.

¹⁴ Guest, Edwin. 1838 *History of English Rhythms*. Vol II London, Will. Pickering. Guest chose Browney.

¹⁵ Campbell, Alistair 1938 *The Battle of Brunanburh*, London.

Halloran's argument in 2005¹⁶ for *dyngesmere* cannot be sustained. These three couplets emphasize the device of alliteration, employed to create a rhythmical sound especially in the last couplet and place stress on the word *dyngesmere*, - clearly it is 'd' not 'þ' mentioned by Cavill et al, in 2004 p.29¹⁷; 2008¹⁸. Placing 'þ' instead of 'd' for *dynges* 'storm', would change the intention of the word to *þing* 'assembly, a meeting, a court'. Such a change would destroy not only the alliteration but the sense of the couplet. As *dynges* is employed in a maritime context it must be regarded as a specific word relevant to an estuary. This seems to have been forgotten for more 'land based' words, personal-names, and the use of 'þ' which lacks conviction. The 'þ' / 't' (cf *Thingwall*) represents a later Anglo-Norman pronunciation occurring later than AD 937. Note the first letter 'd' in '*difel*' the MSS is lower case and alliterates with '*dyngesmere*', also the three couplets show end rhyme. Yet, although both Dodgson and Cavill suggest '*dyngesmere*' might be derived from the river-name Dee, Dodgson's remark in 1972 (PNCh, 4. 240)¹⁹ and his addition in *Addenda and Corrigenda* 1997 (PNCh, 5:2 xxi)²⁰, citing the similarity of *gē* 'district' and *ingas* 'the people of'; **Gē-ing-*formation has contracted to **Gēng-* and **Gīng-*; while this appears to be true to this name, it is a big jump to say that *dinges*, *dynges*, reacts in the same way especially as a surrogate name *dyngesmere*. *Ge-ingas mere*, 'the district of the people of the mere'. This would mean the marshy area below Heswall was the locale but it does not constitute a Plain. (The poem states: *gefylde plus wælfelda* - 'the plain of the slain' - see page 15). Yet, if Dodgson's argument was correct then the name of the battle would be *Heswall* not *Brúnanburh*. We are actually left with 'the sound from the *mere*/noisy storm'; the idea of which scholars seem reluctant to entertain not understanding the fluid dynamics of severe sea surge conditions. Because Cavill (2004 p26) cannot understand the physical aspects of fluid dynamics he dismisses it with this sentence, "*the Sea of Noise does not make overmuch sense as a name at all.*"

The science of fluid dynamics demonstrates the specific use of *dynges* meaning 'sound from the *mere*/noisy storm' which indicates an area of severe maritime danger for those that use this coastal area. The battle was fought in Northumbria, (Camden 1607 emphasized a Northumbrian connection), therefore above the Mercia / Northumbria border i.e. the river Ribble. From this analysis, Morecambe Bay appears to be the '*mere*' that is described in the poem. Can a maritime analysis of Morecambe Bay (Figure 1 p8) confirm this theory?

16. Halloran, Kevin, 2005 *The Brunanburh Campaign: A Reappraisal*, Scottish Historical Review Vol. LXXXIV, 2: No.218 (October), 146. Halloran's *Brúnanburh*/*Burnswark* argument was already disproved by General W. Roy. See Christison, D. 1899 Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 198-218, (1898).

17. Cavill et al, 2004 Journal of the English Place-Names Society "*Revisiting dingesmere*" xxxvi 25-38. The graphic description of the poem can enthusiastically misdirect one, overlooking the simple phrases.

18. Cavill Paul 2008 *The site of the Battle of Brunanburh: manuscripts and maps, grammar and geography*. In *A Commodity of Good Names: Essays in honour of Margaret Gelling* (eds.) Padel, O.J. & Parsons, D.N.

19. Dodgson, John McN. 1972 *Place-Names of Cheshire*, 4. 240. Wood, M. 2013 states, "For the historian of the tenth century, however, to place Brunanburh on the shore of the Mersey raises many intractable problems with the sources, none of which (as Dodgson himself saw) supports a location in the Wirral."

20. Dodgson, John McN. 1997 *Addenda and Corrigenda Place-Names of Cheshire*, 5:2 xxi.