

The Battle of Brunanburh

Two of the seven extant versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (see p. 61) have the following brief entry for the year 937: 'In this year Athelstan and Edmund his brother led levies to Brunanburh and there fought with Olaf, and with the help of Christ they had the victory'. It was one episode out of many in an unceasing struggle between Wessex and its northern and western enemies during the tenth century and might have gone unremarked. But the other five versions of the *Chronicle* expand on the entry with an ardently nationalistic poem of seventy-three lines which celebrates the battle at Brunanburh as a decisive English triumph. There King Athelstan and his brother Edmund, leading the armies of Wessex and Mercia, overcame a combined force of Norsemen from Dublin led by Olaf (*Anlāf* in the text), Scots under King Constantine III, and Britons from Strathclyde. Although the main events of the battle are corroborated in various later annals and histories, and in a much later Norse saga, the location of Brunanburh is not known for certain. It must have been quite near the English west coast, however, at some point between Chester and the Scottish border, and a plausible case has been made for Bromborough in the Wirral, Cheshire, in which case the 'Dingesmere' mentioned in the poem is likely to be the River Dee.

Some critics have suggested that the poet of *Brunanburh* was influenced by Latin or Norse panegyrics (laudatory verses about aristocrats or heroes), but the poem's emphasis is on English nationalism in an historical perspective, rather than on individual heroics, and nothing specific is said about Athelstan's feats (cf. the treatment of ealdorman Byrthnoth in *The Battle of Maldon*, Text 30). *Brunanburh* concludes with an historical allusion which links the present victors to the conquering ancestral Anglo-Saxons of the fifth century. From this continuity the poet builds a sense of national destiny, using the style, diction and imagery of heroic poetry. Thus the king of Wessex is 'lord of men' (*eorla drihten*, 1), which is varied with 'ring-giver of warriors' (*becoma beahgifa*, 2), and the original Anglo-Saxons themselves are 'proud war-smiths' (*wlance wigsmiþas*, 72) and 'glory-eager men' (*eorlas arhwate*, 73). Several of the poet's stock phrases are shared with *Beowulf* (as noted below) and the 'beasts of battle' motif is used to full effect (60–5). We do not know whether the poem about Brunanburh was written specifically for inclusion in the *Chronicle*, or indeed how long after the battle it was written. It is interesting to compare the poet's perception of the

fifth-century invasions as an Anglo-Saxon triumph with Bede's representation of them as a disaster for the native British, being retribution from God for their moral backsliding (Text 9a). Although there is a formulaic mention of the sun as 'God's candle' in the poem (15), the poet shows no interest in giving his poem a Christian perspective.

The text below is printed from the 'Parker' manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 173), the oldest surviving version of the *Chronicle*, begun in the last years of the ninth century and continued at intervals, in Winchester, throughout the tenth; the annal for 937 was presumably written around mid-century. Various early WS spellings are preserved among later ones. Notably, the preterite plural verb-ending occurs as *-un* six times (10, 22, 27, 28, 47 and 48), but the ending is *-on* four times (4, 9, 24 and 58) and occurs eleven times in the later 'levelled' form, *-an* (5, 6, 12, etc); similarly, *o* occurs for *a* before nasal consonants three times (*condel*, 15, *ondlongne*, 21, and *hondplegan*, 25), but elsewhere the vowel is *a* (*land*, 9, 27 and 59, *campstede*, 29 and 49, etc). The dative ending *-um* is weakened four times, in *lāfan* (6), *mācan* and *gemānan* (40; see note) and *wundun* (43). The form *gīeta* (66) is early WS in its diphthong (cf. later *gīȝ*); the final *-a* is characteristic of poetical use. Several corrections have been made in the edited text below, mostly with reference to an eleventh-century copy of the *Chronicle* in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. i.

Further reading

- R. Flower and H. Smith, eds., *The Parker Chronicle and Laws*, EETS 208 (London, 1941)
- A. Campbell, ed., *The Battle of Brunanburh* (London, 1938)
- B. J. Muir, *Leod: Six Old English Poems: a Handbook* (New York, 1989)
- J. McN. Dodgson, 'The Background of Brunanburh', *Saga Book of the Viking Society* 14 (1953/7), 303–16
- A. S. Colman, 'The Rhetoric of *Brunanburh*', *PQ* 48 (1969), 166–77
- J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire IV*, English Place-Name Society 47 (Cambridge, 1972)
- J. D. Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in *Brunanburh*', *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987), 356–66
- P. Orton, 'On the Transmission and Phonology of *The Battle of Brunanburh*', *LSE n.s.* 24 (1994), 1–28
- J. Thormann, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Poems and the Making of the English Nation', in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. A. J. Frantzen and J. D. Niles (Gainesville, FL, 1997), pp. 60–85
- N. J. Higham, 'The Context of Brunanburh', in *Names, Places and People: an Onomastic Miscellany in Memory of John McNeal Dodgson*, ed. A. R. Rumble and A. D. Mills (Stamford, 1997), pp. 144–56

- 5 **Hēr** **Æþelstān** **cyning**¹ **eorla**² **dryhten**,
beorma³ **bēahgifa**⁴ **and his brōþor** **ēac**,
Ēadmund **æþeling**, **ealdorlangne**⁵ **tīr**⁶
geslōgon⁷ **æt sæcce**⁸ **ƿsweorda ecgum**⁹
ymbē¹⁰ **Brūnanburh**. **Bordweal**¹¹ **clufan**,
hēowan¹² **heapolinde**¹³ **hamora lāfan**,
afaran¹⁴ **Ēadweardes**, **swā**¹⁵ **him**¹⁶ **geæþele**¹⁷ **wæs**
ƿfrom cneomægum¹⁸ **þæt hi** **æt campe**¹⁹ **oft**
wip²⁰ **lābra**²¹ **gehwan**²² **land ealgodon**,
hord²³ **and hāmas**²⁴. **Hettend**²⁵ **crungun**,
ƿscotta lōoda **ond scipflotan**²⁶
fræge²⁷ **fēollan**, **feld**²⁸ **ƿdæne**²⁹
ƿsega swāte³⁰ **ƿsiðþan sunne** **ūþ**
on morgentūd, **mære**³¹ **tungol**,
on glād ofer grundas, **Godes condel**³² **beorht**,
ƿeces³³ **Drihtnes**, **od**³⁴ **sio æþele**³⁵ **gesceaft**³⁶
sāh³⁷ **tō setle**³⁸. **þēr læg**³⁹ **secg**⁴⁰ **mænig**
gārum⁴¹ **āgæted**, **guma norþerna**⁴²

1 **Hēr** 'Here', the characteristic introduction to entries in the *Chronicle* (see Text 8). It is metrically redundant and presumably was not part of the original poem. **Æþelstān** As the poet notes in 3, Athelstan (924–39) was brother to Edmund, who succeeded him as king (939–46) and was sixteen at the time of the battle. We learn in 7 that their father was Edward the Elder (899–924).

4 **sweorda ecgum** dat. of instrument: 'by the edges of swords'. The poet uses many dat. expressions: see next note and 13 (*swāte*), 18 (*gārum*), 24 (*mēcum*), 30 (*sweordum*), 43 (*wundun*), etc.

6 **hamora lāfan** 'with the leavings [dat. pl.] of hammers'; i.e. swords forged by the blacksmith's hammer. This was a popular figure among OE poets: see 35a7 and *Beowulf*, 2829.

8 **from cneomægum** Their most illustrious forebear was their grandfather, Alfred (871–99).

11 **Scotta lēoda ond scipflotan** 'People of the Scots and seamen (i.e. Vikings)'. These formed the two major elements of the attacking force. The poet does not mention the Strathclyde Britons, whom we know about from other sources.

12 **dæne** 'flowed'. A vb. *dennian*, 'flow' or 'stream', is conjectured here; in the manuscript a second *n* has been added above the line. Some editors emend to *dunnode*, pret. of *dunnian* 'darken'.

13 **seega swāte** dat. of manner: 'with the blood of men'. This is the most satisfactory emendation of the manuscript's *seegas hwate*.

13–15 **siðþan sunne up . . . glād ofer grundas** 'from when . . . the sun glided aloft (*ūþ*) over the earth [lit. "grounds"]'. The battle lasted from sunrise to sunset.

16 **eces Drihtnes** Parallel with *Godes* in 15.

18 **guma norþerna** To be construed with *menig* in 17: 'many a north man (i.e. Norseman)'. The same must be done with *Scitisc* in 19.

- 20 **ofer**¹ **scild scoten**, **swilce**² **Scitisc**³ **ēac**, **above** **hit** **likewise** **Scots(men)**
wērig, **wīges**⁴ **sæd**. **ƿWesseaxe**⁵ **ford**⁶ **battle** **gs** **sated** **(with +g)** **onwards**
ƿondlongne dæg⁷ **ēorodcistum**⁸ **in** **(their) troops**
ƿon lāst legdun **lāþum þēodum**,
hēowan **herefēman**⁹ **hinnan**¹⁰ **þearle**¹¹ **fugitives** **ap** **from behind** **violently**
ƿmēcum mylenscearpan. **Myrce**¹² **ƿne wyrndon** **Mercians**
 25 **heardes hondplegan** **hæþeþa nānum** **of waves** **turmoil**
þæra þe¹³ **mid**¹⁴ **ƿAnlāfe**¹⁵ **ofer** **æra**¹⁶ **gebland**¹⁷ **ship's bosom** **invaded**
on lides¹⁸ **bōsme**¹⁹ **land gesōhtun**, **ship's** **bosom** **invaded**
fræge²⁰ **tō gefeohte**. **Fife lāegun**²¹ **fated** **(men)** **lay** **(dead)**
on þām campstede²² **cyningas giunge**, **battlefield** **young**
 30 **sweordum** **āswefede**, **swilce** **seofene** **ēac** **'put to sleep'**
eorlas **Anlāfes**, **unrīm**²³ **heriges**²⁴ **(and)** **a countless number** **the army** **gs**
ƿflotan²⁵ **ond** **Scotta**. **þær geflēmēd**²⁶ **weard**²⁷ **put to flight** **was**
Norðmanna bregu, **nēde**²⁸ **gebēde**, **chief** **by necessity** **forced**
tō lides stefne²⁹ **ƿTitle weorode**; **prow** **ds**
 35 **crēad**³⁰ **cnear**³¹ **on flot**, **cyning** **ūt gewāl**³² **hastened** **boat** **sea** **went**
on fealene³³ **flood**, **feorh**³⁴ **generede**. **grey** **tide** **life** **saved**
Swilce þær **ēac** **se frōda**³⁵ **mid**³⁶ **ƿfēame**³⁷ **cōm**³⁸ **wise** **(man)** **in** **flight** **went**
on his cýþþe³⁹ **ƿnorð**, **ƿCostontūnus**; **native** **land**
hār⁴⁰ **hilderinc**⁴¹ **hrēman**⁴² **ne þorfte**⁴³ **hoary** **warrior** **to exult** **had** **cause**
 40 **ƿmæcan gemānan**. **Hē** **wæs** **his mæga**⁴⁴ **sceard**, **kinsmen** **gp** **bereft** **of**

20 **Wesseaxe** Assimilated form of *Westsaxa*: 'the West Saxons'.

21 **ondlongne dæg** acc. of duration of time: 'for the entire day'.

22 **on lāst legdun lāþum þēodum** Unique idiom using *lægan* ('lie') and poss. dat.: 'followed in the track (or pursued the trail) of the hostile peoples'.

24 **mēcum mylenscearpan** instr. dat.: 'with swords mill-sharp', i.e. 'sharpened by the grindstone'.

24–6 **ne wyrndon . . . nānum þæra þe** The vb. takes a gen. obj.: 'did not withhold hard hand-to-hand combat from any [lit. "none"] of the warriors who . . .'. **Anlāfe** 'Olaf' was leader of the Vikings from Dublin.

32 **flotan** We would expect gen. pl., *flotena*, parallel with *Scotta*: '(the army) of sailors (Vikings)'.

34 **litle weorode** instr. of accompaniment: 'with little company'.

38 **norð** adv.: '(went) north'. **Costontūnus** Constantine III was king of the united Picts and Scots.

40 **mæcan gemānan** '(about) the shared swords', i.e. about the battle, taking *-an* as the dat. pl. inflection *-um* on both noun and adj. The vb. *hrēman* usually governs the gen., and two other manuscripts indeed have *mēc(e)la gemānan*, '(about) the meeting of swords' (treating *gemānan* as a noun).

- 'fréonda gefylled' on folcstede°
 beslagen° æt sæcce and his sunu° forlēt°
 on wælstōwe° wundun forgrunden°,
 giungne° æt gūde. Gelpan° ne porfte
 beom° blandenfeax° bilgeslehtes°,
 eald inwidda°, 'ne Anlāf þȳ mā'.
 45 Mid° heora herelāfum° hlehhān° ne
 þorfutun
 þæt hēo° 'beaduweorca beteran wurdun'
 on campstede cumbolgehnāstes°,
 50 gārmittinge°, gumena gemōtes°,
 wæpenege-wrixles°, 'þæs' hī on wælfelda°
 wip Eadweardes afaran plegodan°.
 Gewitan° 'him' þā Norþmen næglednearrum°, Departed in (their) nailed ships
 drēorig° 'darada lāf', on 'Dinges-Mere'
 55 ofer deop wæter Difelin° sēcan°
 eft° Íreland, æwisemōde°.
 Swilce þā gebroþer° bēgen° ætsamne°,
 cyning ond æþeling, cȳþpe sōhton,
 Wesseaxena land, wiges hrēmige°.
 60 Lētan° him behindan hræ° bryttan°
 saluwigpādan°, þone sweartan° 'hræfn',
 hƳmednebban°, ond þane hasewanpādan°
 'earn æftan hwīt', æses° 'brūcan°',
 grædigne° gūðhafoc° ond þæt græge° dēor°,
 (They) left corpses *ap* to divide out
 dark-plumaged black
 horny-beaked dusky-coated
 carrion to enjoy +*g*
 greedy war-hawk grey beast
- 41 **fréondia gefylled** The noun is parallel with *māga* as a complement of *sceard*: '(bereft of kinsmen,) of friends felled . . .'.
 46 **ne Anlāf þȳ mā** 'nor Olaf the more (instr. *þȳ*)', i.e. 'and no more did Olaf'.
 48 **beaduweorca beteran wurdun** 'were (or had been) superior in battle-deeds': The gen. of comparison is continued in the next three lines: *beteran*. . . *cumbolgehnastes*, *garmittinge*, etc.
 51 **þæs** Best trans. as the conj. 'after' or 'because'.
 53 **him** Reflex. dat. pron. with vb. of motion, best left untranslated.
 54 **darada lāf** 'the . . . remnant of spears'; i.e. those left untouched by the spears. **Dinges-Mere** Apparently the name of an estuary somewhere on the west coast of England, opposite Ireland; perhaps the River Dee (see headnote).
 61 **hræfn** The 'raven' (the first of three 'beasts of battle' to be introduced) is the acc. obj. of *lētan* and has been left behind to divide up the corpses: *saluwigpādan*, *sweartan* and *hƳmednebban* all describe it.
 63 **earn æftan hwīt** 'the eagle white from behind', i.e. with white tail. **brūcan** Like *bryttan* in 60. *brūcan* is governed by *lētan*.

- 65 wulf on° wealde°. 'Ne wearð wæl mære
 on þis eīglande æfre grēta°
 folces gefylled' beforan þissum
 sweordes eegum, 'þæs þe' ūs secgað bēc°,
 ealde ūðwitan°, 'sippān' ēastan hider
 70 Engle ond Seaxe ūp° becōman°
 ofer brād brimū° Brytene sōhtan°,
 wlanca° wīgsniþpas° Wēalas° ofercōman,
 eorlas ārhwate° eard begēatan°. proud 'war-smiths' Welshmen
 eager for glory acquired
- 65–7 **Ne wearð . . . folces gefylled** *folces* is best treated as dependent on *wæl*: 'Never yet . . . had there been a greater slaughter of people killed . . .'.
 68 **þæs þe** 'according to what'.
 69 **sippān** 'since . . .'. The poet refers back to the events of the fifth century, as recorded by the British historian Gildas – and noted by Bede (9a/*passim*) and Wulfstan (25/146–54), when the Angles, Saxons and other continental tribes began to settle at the expense of the native Britons.