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The Battle of Brunanburh: The Yorkshire Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

Disputes about where the battle of Brunanburh in 937 was fought continue, but in recent years one particular area, Yorkshire, has been proposed by Michael Wood. This article re-examines some of the strategic detail underlying assumptions about York as the goal of the invading forces and the Humber as their place of arrival and departure. It is demonstrated that lines of Castleford's *Chronicle* suggested by Wood to refer to the Brunanburh campaign refer to Athelstan's expedition of 934. The lack of interest of northern sources in the battle suggests that it was not fought in the north-east. The paper then analyses the evidence proposed to support the identifications of Burghwallis as *Brunanburh* and Went Hill as *We(o)ndun* and demonstrates that these identifications are implausible. It is concluded that the "Yorkshire context" of the battle argued for by Wood is not supported by the evidence he deploys.

KEYWORDS


The battle of Brunanburh 937; Burghwallis; Went Hill; York Yorkshire; topography; Wendun; Castleford's *Chronicle*

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Introduction

The location of the battle of *Brunanburh* of 937 has been widely disputed, and new theories are launched in academic literature and on internet sites with notable frequency. The essential details of the battle are well known: King Athelstan, his brother Edmund and the forces of Wessex and Mercia, fought a day-long climactic battle against Anlaf, the Scandinavian king of Dublin and his main ally, Constantine of Alba, and Owain of Strathclyde. After a bloody encounter, the Hiberno-Norse and Scots fled.¹ The purpose of the present article is to respond to the theory that the battle took place in Yorkshire, the principal proponent of which is Michael Wood. The main point here is to examine the evidence which is advanced in support of the Yorkshire theory, in the light of recent scholarship and a range of analytical techniques from historical and onomastic disciplines. If the battle is to be located in Yorkshire, or indeed anywhere, the available evidence needs to be given and subjected to close scrutiny to ascertain whether it supports the hypotheses that are based upon it. This article will not only critique the Wood hypothesis, but will also bring forward evidence that has been sidelined or omitted from consideration in previous work.

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¹The earliest source for the battle is the poem in the A, B, C, and D manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, edited by Campbell. The major texts which refer to the battle are given in Livingston, *Casebook*. In what follows, translations of Latin and Old and Middle English sources are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

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Wood's most recent articles, "Searching for Brunanburh: the Yorkshire Context of the 'Great War' of 937", and "The Spelling of Brunanburh", restate some of the arguments of his 1980 article, "Brunanburh Revisited", that the battle must be located in Yorkshire, largely on the basis of John of Worcester's "Humber entry" account and supposed similarity of place-names, but with some changes and elaboration. The proposal of a south Yorkshire site for the battle was repeated in a London *Times* newspaper article, "By 'eck! England's destiny was decided at a Doncaster lay-by",² "Brunanburh: Where did the Battle that Saved England Take Place?" on the BBC website,³ and the ideas were once more rehearsed in Wood's London Society of Antiquaries lecture, "The Battle of Brunanburh: New Light on the "Great War" of the Tenth Century" in November 2020 and released on YouTube.⁴

Wood's work, which is often accepted at face value, has significant implausibilities and inaccuracies. The propositions of Wood's argument are not easily reduced to simple terms that can be enumerated but for clarity that is here attempted. They are, first, that rule of York was the goal of the coalition,⁵ and that much of the fighting in the early tenth century was focused around York.⁶ Second, John of Worcester's account that the Scandinavian forces from Ireland landed in the Humber is from a contemporary York source⁷ and supports the idea that York was their focus,⁸ and their departure from the Humber⁹ is confirmed by the information that Anlaf returned only in 938 to Ireland.¹⁰ Third, the place-name evidence brought forward to support Bromborough as the battle-site is obscure and unreliable.¹¹ Fourth, several double reverse coins struck in Athelstan's time suggest that the allegiance of East Mercia (and Northumbria) was equivocal.¹² Fifth, the place of the battle was forgotten, so it could not have been in Mercia,¹³ and the idea that it was near York is supported by Thomas of Castleford and *Egils saga*.¹⁴ Sixth, there was a submission by the Northumbrians to Anlaf in 937, so York must have been near where the battle took place.¹⁵ Seventh, a very early and reliable source, the *Historia Regum*,¹⁶ gives the name *Wendun* which, with most of the other place-name evidence, leads to a location for Brunanburh on the river Went and near Burghwallis in south Yorkshire.¹⁷

²Simon de Bruxelles, "By 'eck! England's destiny was decided at a Doncaster lay-by", *The Times*, Nov. 21, 2017.

³Anglo-Saxon-History Extra, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/anglo-saxon/where-did-brunanburh-battle-take-place-location-england-michael-wood/>, accessed March 2021.

⁴Society of Antiquaries of London, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0usa9f4M88>, accessed March 2021.

⁵Wood, "Searching", 140, 142, Constantine's and Anlaf's "goal at the very least was presumably ... the restoration of the kingdom of the Northumbrians in York".

⁶*Ibid.*, 151, "in this warfare [between the 920s and the 950s] the focus was the city of York", 152.

⁷*Ibid.*, "Searching", 147, "The tale of the Humber landing cannot be John's own invention. ... [He] transmitted a set of tenth-century northern annals from York", 148 and n. 54, 149, "a good source from pre-Conquest York".

⁸*Ibid.*, 147, 149.

⁹*Ibid.*, 149–50, "If the invaders landed in the Humber they cannot have left from the Dee. When Anlaf set off on the journey back to Dublin ... he did so from the place where he had left his ships at the start of the campaign", 154.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 144, 146, 149, "Guthfrithson escaped with his ships from the Humber northwards, perhaps wintering in Scotland, hence his return noted in spring 938".

¹¹*Ibid.*, 143, and n. 15, 144 and n. 16, 146 and n. 43, 154, "Any attempt to defend [Bromborough] will rest entirely on uncertain and overstated onomastic evidence". This case is made at greater length in "Spelling".

¹²*Ibid.*, 154, "numismatic evidence ... hints at the collapse of Æthelstan's authority in the East Midlands at some point late in the reign".

¹³*Ibid.*, 143, "the battle is unlikely to have been in the heartland of English Mercia ... otherwise how could the site of so momentous a battle have been so completely forgotten?"

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 152 n. 73, 153–4, 158 n. 96.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 146, 149, 152–4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 141, "a tenth-century annal from Chester-le-Street", 146, "near-contemporary", 147–8 and n. 14, 149, 155 and n. 89.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 155–7, Wood, "Spelling", 368, 369 n. 26.

Many of these propositions (having been advanced before in Wood's 1980 article, "Brunanburh Revisited") were countered in the *Livingston Casebook*, but Wood has argued the case further and more detailed counter-arguments have been added since. Michael Livingston's *Never Greater Slaughter* briefly and helpfully debunks several objections to the Bromborough hypothesis in an appendix, including some of those listed above.¹⁸ Wood's proposition that York was the focus of the coalition's attention has been disputed already,¹⁹ but more significant evidence is given below. The second argument, that John of Worcester derived his information from an early York source and should be believed implicitly,²⁰ and that Anlaf's 938 arrival in Dublin supports the Humber arrival and departure²¹ is also discussed further below. Third, the evidence relating to the place-name elements in *Brunanburh* and *Dingesmere* is largely misunderstood by Wood, and is in fact more consistent and reliable than he suggests.²² The numismatic argument, fourth, is briefly countered by Livingston.²³ But if the coins did indicate the equivocal allegiance of East Mercia and Northumbria for a brief time, that, as Blunt puts it, "there may have been an occasion when, both at York and Nottingham, the moneyers deemed it prudent to avoid showing allegiance to the English king without committing themselves to the other side" possibly in 937,²⁴ that in no way supports a particular view of the place of the battle.²⁵ These four arguments have largely been shown to be insecure.

The remaining three arguments receive more thorough attention here. It is true, as Wood argues on the fifth count, that no early source convincingly suggests a site for the battle in Mercia. But this is paralleled by the fact that no early source mentions York as being near the battle, and as demonstrated below, neither does Thomas of Castleford. The sixth point, the idea that there was a formal Northumbrian submission at York mentioned in William of Malmesbury, is examined further here. And the final, seventh, argument that *We(o)ndun* is probably Went Hill in south Yorkshire is also subjected to critical scrutiny below.

The larger features of Wood's interpretation are examined first, namely, whether John of Worcester's statement about the "Humber entry" is plausible from a strategic point of view, and whether there is any evidence that York was the goal and focus of the coalition forces, or that the Great North Road was the route used by them. Then the question of

¹⁸Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 193–202.

¹⁹For example, in Cavill, "Escaping", 903–4; Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, objection 4, 194, succinctly notes that "a predominance of fighting on one front doesn't preclude fighting on another".

²⁰Downham, "Wirral Location", argues that John did, in fact, make the story up, and that the numerous sources containing the story got it from John. Cavill, "Escaping", 913–14, shows how frequent the formula "*ostium* (mouth) of river name + verb of motion/entry" is in John's work for what invading fleets did.

²¹See for example Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", in Livingston, *Casebook*, 337–9, "Escaping", 909–16; the latter article makes the case that John of Worcester does not claim that the fleeing Scandinavians returned to their ships, 915–16.

²²Some of Wood's views are discussed and countered in detail in Cavill, "Spellings of Brunanburh Revisited", but there is much information in Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", that Wood does not discuss or use. And Cavill, "Spellings", gives evidence that the spellings *Brunanburh* and *Brunnanburh* are variants and do not refer to different places, and that the name *Brunnanburh* does not derive from ON *brunnr* and refer to Burghwallis. See further below.

²³Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, objection 6, 196–7, where Livingston suggests that the most likely explanation is simple error. As Livingston notes, Blunt, "The Coinage of Athelstan", 92, says "the possibility of error cannot be ruled out".

²⁴Blunt, "The Coinage of Athelstan", 92.

²⁵Many sources suggest that the Anglo-Scandinavian areas supported the coalition, as Wood notes. Pseudo-Ingulf specifies in addition that the men of Norfolk joined in, *cum Dani de Northumbria, Norfolkchia ...*, Livingston, *Casebook*, 134–5.

whether William of Malmesbury's poem can be understood to describe a submission of Northumbria in 937 is considered. The later parts of this article move on to detailed onomastic examination of the validity of Wood's arguments for the identification of Burghwallis as the site of the battle and Went Hill as the *Wendun* found in the works associated with Symeon of Durham, the *Historia Regum*²⁶ and *Libellus de Exordio*.²⁷ Wood's theories invite the reader to re-examine the evidence: whether his conclusions can reasonably be drawn from the evidence he presents, and whether these modern places can reasonably be identified with those named in the historical record.

Strategy

The *prima facie* argument for a Yorkshire site of the battle depends very substantially on the account that records the Hiberno-Norse forces landing in the Humber, originating in John of Worcester's *Chronicle*, 937, 392–3.²⁸ There are many reasons why John of Worcester's "Humber entry" account of Brunanburh is suspect. It is, for example, just one theory of many advanced by early writers as to where the battle might have taken place,²⁹ but given much more prominence than any of these, partly because John was an influential historian and his work was used by others. In addition, it has been shown that the formulaic features of John's writing might suggest that he resorted to assumption based on parallels elsewhere in his history to fill a puzzling gap in his (and others') knowledge: the Humber entry story in 937, for example, is very similar in expression to the Humber entry of Tostig in 1066, 602–3.³⁰

Various writers have considered the question of the number of men who might have travelled in ships with Anlaf. The figure of 615 ships recorded in the *Historia Regum* 937, 93 and Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio*, ii. 18, 138–9 is hardly to be believed: it would be nearly twice as big as any other fleet noted in the Anglo-Saxon period and taken literally would suggest a Hiberno-Norse army somewhere around 20,000 men with a (smallish) complement of thirty men per ship, without the men of Alba and the Cumbrians.³¹ Whatever the actual number, all the sources report the slaughter as very great and the numbers, even if they do not reach to the 30,000 Scots, the 800 captives around Anlaf and the 4,000 Danish men mentioned in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*,³² or the 100,000 men under Athelstan's command mentioned by William of

²⁶The title *Historia Regum* is that used by most writers when citing Arnold's edition. The work is now referred to as *Historia de Regibus Anglorum et Dacorum*, the title in the manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139, see Rollason, "Historia de regibus". Michael Lapidge has edited the early sections of the work, including the "Annals 888–957", in *Byrhtferth of Ramsey Historia Regum*, appendix 1, 171–82, and the work is quoted from this edition by year and page number.

²⁷References to Symeon of Durham, *Libellus* give the book and chapter notations followed by the page numbers in Rollason's edition.

²⁸References to John of Worcester's *Chronicle* give the year followed by the page numbers in Darlington and McGurk edition.

²⁹The fourteenth-century *Eulogium Historiarum*, for example, locates the battle at *Donelew in Wilthschire* (Dunley in Wiltshire), Livingston, *Casebook*, 132–3 and 339 n. 45.

³⁰See Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", 337–9 and see further "Escaping", 913–4. Lendinara, "Brunanburh in Later Histories and Romances", 206, writes, "John of Worcester was simply transferring the motif of crossing the Humber (frequent in Wace and other writers) to the momentous battle of Brunanburh".

³¹Downham, "How big was the Battle of Brunanburh?"; Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 142, suggests an average of "around 50 men each" for ships, but regards the 615 number as "off by an order of magnitude".

³²*Annals of Clonmacnoise*, Livingston, *Casebook*, 152–4.

Malmesbury,³³ must have been considerable. The captives mentioned in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* were the supporters of Anlaf Cennceirech whom Anlaf Guthfrithsson defeated in a battle on Lough Ree in August 937 and then press-ganged into his own army.

Anlaf's forces from Ireland, with good grounds for resenting each other (having just fought each other), were then, John of Worcester and Wood after him ask us to believe, crammed into ships for a 1,200-mile sailing trip around the north of Scotland for two or three weeks (or so) as autumn was wearing on, before landing in the Humber. Wood suggests the battle took place in mid-autumn, "after September 24th due to the dating of the Parker Chronicle",³⁴ and as Athelstan was probably "on the south coast of England on August 21st, making contact with Louis d'Outremer".³⁵ In his "Searching" article, Wood surmises, "[I]f the fleet sailed via the Western Isles round the north of Scotland, the journey of two or three weeks might suggest that Anlaf landed in Northumbria in September and that the battle could have been fought in late October, in November, or even early December."³⁶ Men are a peculiarly awkward and hungry cargo, even if they are in ships mostly under sail; more so if they have to row in high seas, winds and contrary currents. Provisioning for thousands of fighting men is a major logistical difficulty at the best of times. In autumnal seas few realistic preliminary arrangements for provisioning could be made at stopping-off points, and much of the coastline between the embarkation point and the Humber is inhospitable.³⁷ Any date of arrival would be very approximate.

Wood does not take the implications of his arguments relating to the Humber entry seriously. He makes no distinction between "an easy sail in the summer" for a trading expedition with heavy or bulky cargo,³⁸ twelve hundred miles that "would take two weeks sailing at an easy pace, more if time is allowed for stopovers",³⁹ and the "two or three weeks" of sailing and provisioning for thousands of men in unpredictable weather in open ships on an autumnal expedition.⁴⁰ Any of the sites of the battle proposed by Wood would be within reach of a mobile land force landing in the west after a short sail from Ireland: five days at most, living off the recently-harvested and vulnerable English lands as several sources suggest the coalition forces did in preliminary raiding.⁴¹

³³References to *William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum* give the book, chapter and section notations followed by the page numbers in Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom's edition. William is here quoting a *uersificus* "versifier", *cruda uirum uirtus decies bis milia quina* (the raw valour of his troops, one hundred thousand men ...), ii. 135. 9, 220–1.

³⁴Wood, "Brunanburh Revisited", 202, citing Vaughan, "Chronology", 60: "the fact that the Parker chronicle recorded the battle of Brunanburh *sub anno* DCCCCXXXVIII may be accounted for by its use of the indictional year". This is not widely accepted now, and the complex process of copying mistakes, correction and restoration of the annal-numbers is summarised in Batley, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, xcvi–ix.

³⁵Wood, "Brunanburh Revisited", 202.

³⁶Wood, "Searching", 146.

³⁷Capener, "A Long Walk South", <https://independent.academia.edu/DaveCe>, has calculated the average weight of provisions and the speed at which men could march and laden ships sail. The figure of 120 miles a day for sailing with thousands of passengers would be optimistic for a voyage around the north of Scotland in autumn.

³⁸Such trading happened, even if Wood improves the evidence for it in York: "[t]he Viking age sea route from Dublin to York is well attested: 'Dublin Stones' was long a riverside quay in York for unloading wares of ships from Ireland", Wood, "Searching", 149 n. 58, citing Smith, *Place-Names of the East Riding*, 285–6. Smith only notes that "Dublin Stones" was first recorded in 1256, and is a "lost lane north of North Street"; the district north of North Street is about a kilometre inland from the riverside docks.

³⁹Wood, "Searching", 149.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 146.

⁴¹*William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum*, ii. 131. 4, 206–7, *multum in Angliam processerat iuuenis audacissimus et illicita spirans animo* ... ([Anlaf,] a most audacious youth with a criminal-bent mind, had advanced far into England ...). Also the Scottish writer, Walter Bower, in his *Scotichronicon: Constantinus, Analafus et Godefridus grandi nimis exercitu*

From the Ribble or the Mersey, York and the proposed Yorkshire battle sites are no more than eighty miles away; the cross-Pennine routes were well-known and established at this time. In view of all this, John of Worcester's sailing expedition would have been an utterly pointless and impractical venture for a large body of men and a large number of ships. Of course, if the battle took place in the north-west of English territory, such overland travel or lengthy voyage would not be necessary for Anlaf. Such an expedition to north-west England would be no more difficult than the supposed eastern route for the men of Alba; and it would be very considerably easier for the Cumbrians.

York and the Northumbrian "submission" in 937

The goal of the invaders, Wood tells us, was "the restoration of the kingdom of the Northumbrians in York", and the whole argument for the Great North Road, Burghwallis and Went Hill, depends on York being the objective and focus of the campaign, the "Yorkshire context" of his main article title.⁴² In his lecture, he suggests that there was a "Submission of the Northumbrians at York" in early September of 937 before the battle. Wood claims that the poem in *William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum*, ii. 135, 7–9, 220–23, "gives important details of the campaign", but that "it has been largely ignored or dismissed".⁴³ Wood's argument for a formal submission based on this poem crumbles as soon as it is examined closely. Livingston notes that Wood's translation of William of Malmesbury's poem is idiosyncratic at one point,⁴⁴ but at other points it is tendentious and the supporting evidence he gives will not in fact sustain the conclusions drawn.

The poem about the battle opens with reference to the twelfth year of the Athelstan's reign when the Viking threat returns:

Iam cubat in terris fera barbaries aquilonis ...

Bacchanti furiae, Scottorum rege uolente,

commodat assensum borealis terra serenum.

Wood translates:

Now the barbarian monster lies on the northern lands (*in terris aquilonis*) *hellip*;

To this Bacchant fury, at the will of the king of the Scots,

The northern land (*borealis terra*) gives willing assent.

He asserts,

In its references to "the northern land" – *aquilonis terris*, *borealis terra* (*plaga*, *regnum*) – it means Northumbria. ... When Æthelstan invaded Scotland in 934, for example, he came out

collecto, partes Angliam australes invadunt, cuncta vastando per que transiebant (Constantine, Anlaf and Godefrith gathered together an extremely large army and invaded the southern regions of the English, laying waste all the land through which they passed), Livingston, *Casebook*, 142–3.

⁴²Wood, "Searching", 142.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 152. It has certainly been dismissed: Lapidge, "Some Latin Poems", 59, expressed the view that "under examination, the poem may be seen not to contain a single scrap of information which is not known from other sources or is not manifestly a flight of poetic fancy".

⁴⁴Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, objection 5, 195.

of southern England and crossed *adversus aquilonarem plagam* to get to Chester-le-Street. When A[n]laf Guthfrithson conquered Northumbria in 940, he took the rule of the *borealem plagam*, or, as the *Historia Regum* says, the *aquilonalem regnum*.⁴⁵

The first thing to observe is that in the first line quoted, the singular adjective *aquilonis* logically qualifies the singular *fera barbaries* (barbarian beast), rather than the ablative plural *in terris* (on the lands): so the translations provided by, for example, Whitelock (“the fierce savagery of the North couches on our land”),⁴⁶ Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom (“the fierce barbarians of the North now sleep on land”),⁴⁷ and Smith (“the savage barbarity of the north now comes to ground”),⁴⁸ see this line as a reference to the northern, Scandinavian, origin of Anlaf and his men, and nothing specifically to do with Northumbria. The second two lines logically refer to the land of the Scots. The *borealis terra*, the northern land of the Scots, with the agreement or consent (*uolente*) of Constantine, gave enthusiastic support to the enterprise. Constantine could not determine the response of the Northumbrians, and the phrase *Scottorum rege uolente* would be redundant if it referred to Northumbria since Constantine had no jurisdiction there. It is worth noting that this account of the motives of the participants contradicts John of Worcester: John says, 937, 392, that Constantine incited Anlaf, *Anlafus, a socero suo rege Scottorum Constantino incitatus* (Anlaf, incited by his father-in-law King Constantine). But William’s poem and the northern tradition adopted by Hector Boece report that Anlaf was the prime mover: [*Anlafus*] *pollicitatione corruptum obtinuit vt violato foedere cum Danis adversus Anglos in aciem descenderet* ([Anlaf] (by promising vast riches) inveigled him [Constantine] into breaking his treaty, and to stoop to going into battle with the Danes against the English).⁴⁹

The supporting sources that Wood offers for the supposition that *aquilonis terris, borealis terra (plaga, regnum)* “means Northumbria” actually contradict it.⁵⁰ The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, chapter 26, 64,⁵¹ mentions Athelstan’s expedition in 934: *Igitur Æthelstanus [sic] rex magnum exercituum de australi parte eduxit et uersus aquilonalem plagam in Scotiam illum secum trahens, ad oratorium sancti Cuthberti diuertit* (When King Athelstan led a great army from the southern area against the northern region in Scotland, he made a diversion to the church of St Cuthbert). The source implies that Chester-le-Street (in Northumbria) was on the way to, not in, the “northern region” in *Scotiam* against which Athelstan intended to fight. And the other passage Wood claims supports his identification of the land with Northumbria: “When A[n]laf conquered Northumbria in 940, he took the rule of the *borealem plagam*, or, as the *Historia Regum* says, the *aquilonalem regnum*”, merely refers to land north of a line. Both Roger of Wendover and the *Historia Regum* whom Wood cites, refer to the division of the land, *totam Angliæ insulam* (the whole island of England),⁵² between Edmund and Anlaf, along Watling Street,

⁴⁵Wood, “Searching”, 153.

⁴⁶Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 309.

⁴⁷William of Malmesbury *Gesta Regum*, ii. 135, 221.

⁴⁸Translation of William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum* in Livingston, *Casebook*, 59.

⁴⁹Boece, *Historiae*, in Livingston, *Casebook*, 148.

⁵⁰Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 195, thinks it “unlikely” that the references here are not to Northumbria; but it becomes clear on examination that it is very likely that the references are not to Northumbria, but rather are very general, “the north, northern” regions, lands, etc.

⁵¹The reference is not supplied by Wood, and the source is misquoted. The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* is referred to by chapter number, followed by page numbers from South’s edition.

⁵²Rogeri de Wendover *Chronica*, i, 395.

Edmundus ad australem plagam, Onlaf ad aquilonalem regnum tenuerunt (Edmund held the the region to the south [of Watling Street], Anlaf the kingdom to the north [of Watling Street]).⁵³ So Wood's "Northumbria" in this case would include Northampton, Tamworth and Leicester, the areas where there was fighting in this year according to this source, and presumably land as far south as Essex to the (north-) east of Watling Street.

Wood's other main point is drawn from the line *cedunt indigenae, cedit plaga tota superbis*, which he translates "The natives submit, the whole province (*plaga tota*) gives in to the proud",⁵⁴ reading *plaga tota* as Northumbria. It is true that the line twice uses the verb *cedere* (withdraw, retreat, comply, yield, and indeed, submit), but the "whole region" that yielded or retreated before the coalition forces is not specified. The advance of the coalition armies into English territory is implied, possibly but not certainly including parts of Northumbria, since Athelstan's delay in responding to the threat led to ravaging and destruction in the wake of the coalition armies, and news of this finally caused him to stir himself.

We are left, then, with nothing to suggest a formal submission of Northumbria.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Wood is firmly of the opinion that the focus of the coalition strategy was York. This opinion is shared by precisely none of the fifty-three medieval and early Modern sources given in the *Livingston Casebook*, not even John of Worcester. John of Worcester dumps Anlaf's fleet without ceremony in the Humber and without further detail, and then immediately moves on to the conflict at *Brunanburh*. No source mentions York in relation to the *Brunanburh* campaign. The idea that the episode in *Egils Saga* relates the battle to an area near York has been shown to be mistaken.⁵⁶ No army marched to or from York; no Scots or Cumbrians marched past or around York on the Great North Road, so far as the historical record is concerned. There was no recorded submission of the Northumbrians at York or anywhere else as Wood proposes in September of 937.⁵⁷

York and castleford's *chronicle*

Wood offers only one source in support of his claims about York, *Castleford's Chronicle*. Twice Wood claims *Castleford's Chronicle* as supporting the location of the *Brunanburh* campaign in Yorkshire. *William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum* records "Constantine and Anlaf ravaging southwards" in 937, Wood remarks; these devastations in 937,

may be echoed in a hitherto unnoticed later source from south Yorkshire, the *Chronicle of Thomas of Castleford*, which describes the Scottish army marching into Yorkshire, the devastation of the land to the south, and Æthelstan's "knights" fleeing the area down to the Trent.⁵⁸

⁵³Byrhtferth of Ramsey *Historia Regum*, 180.

⁵⁴Wood, "Searching", 153.

⁵⁵Blunt, "The Coinage of Athelstan", remarks, 89, "It has been suggested that Anlaf recovered York for a short time in 937, but this has been disputed ... Certainly there is no identifiable break in Athelstan's coinage there and no coins in the name of Anlaf that can be associated with such a capture". See also above for the question of the double reverse coinage.

⁵⁶Wood, "Searching", 158 n. 96. Cavill, "Scandinavian *Vína*", 357–61.

⁵⁷In his lecture, Society of Antiquaries of London, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0usa9f4M88>.

⁵⁸Wood, "Searching", 153–4; see also 152 n. 73.

However, the campaign thus described was that of the Scottish king “Girge”⁵⁹ in 934 into England (*Castleford’s Chronicle*, ll. 29566–87⁶⁰) and is followed by Athelstan’s visit to Beverley, his punitive campaign north (ll. 29588–671), and the subjection of the Scots in 934. Describing the advance of Girge, Castleford writes,

He felde in feldes þe Englisse osten,
 So entrede wiȝin Englandes costes.
 Sone in Englande he slas and brinnes,
 Northumbrelande to him he winnes,
 Of þase contres he made conqueste,
 In his subgeccion he þam feste.
 So he paste ouer into Yorkschire,
 Þe contres sette in flame and fire.
 Of northhalf Trent, þe contre knightes
 Þe felde hade lefte and tane to flightes. (ll. 29578–87)

([Girge] killed in battles the English hosts and so entered within the boundaries of England; soon in England he slays and burns and wins Northumberland over to him. Those lands he made conquest of he made subject to him. So he passed over into Yorkshire and set the lands in flame and fire. From the northern part of the Trent, the nobles [“knights”] of the land had left the battlefield and taken to flight.)

Athelstan musters an army in response and marches north. He meets men from Beverley: “Fra Beuerleie we cum halle and sunde” (From Beverley we, all and sundry, have come, l. 29603), and decides to petition St John for help.

Kyng Adelstane light of his palfraie
 On fote to seke forth to Beuerleie.
 To Eborwik his curt he sent,
 Quiles he peregrim to Saint Iohan went. (ll. 29601–4)

(King Athelstan got off his horse to go on foot to Beverley. He sent his court to York while he went as a pilgrim to St John.)

St John appears to him in a dream and promises that he will defeat the Scots. Athelstan then raises St John’s standard and heads towards York where he fights the Scots.

Þe Scottisse kyng so hard was stedde
 He lefte þe felde, northwarde he fledde,

⁵⁹The likelihood is that this is a reference to the (Gaelic, i.e. Scottish?) king of Pictland, Giric. There is a good deal of obscurity about him, see Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, 119–221, 123–5. In the late Scottish sources, Bower’s *Scotichronicon* and Boece’s *Historiae*, he is called *Gregorius*, Livingston, *Casebook*, 143–4 and 146–7 respectively. He is apparently confused with Constantine by Castleford.

⁶⁰Cited and quoted by line numbers from *Castleford’s Chronicle*, ed. Eckhardt, vol. 2; translations mine.

And alle his folk, sum fledde, sum slane ...

Kyng Adelstane lefte þam noht sua,

Euer he ensuede, ...

Kyng Girge and alle his princes tane,

He sent þam unto Eborwik,

For faute broken oþer trespas slik.

Kyng Adelstane þan Scotelande he rade,

...

Euer þar north he helde him stille,

þe lande he tok vnto his wille. (ll. 29638–63)

(The Scottish king was so hard pressed he left the battlefield and all his army, some fled, some slain, and fled north. King Athelstan did not leave him thus, but followed [him] ... Having captured King Girge and all his princes, he sent them to York for broken promises or suchlike crimes. King Athelstan then rode to Scotland. ... Ever, constantly, northward he held his course, and took the land into his control.)

King Athelstan names St Johnstone (Perth) in honour of the saint of Beverley, takes homage from the Scots, and imposes tribute, “Be weght twenti ponde of golde/ Of siluer thre vndred ponde and nighien” (By weight three hundred and nine pounds of gold, ll. 29685–6). Castleford then goes on to recount the attacks of the Welsh and Athelstan’s subjection of them and imposition of tribute.

In this long episode relating to 934, York plays a central part, and Castleford gives full traditional details. His account of Athelstan’s reign closes with a council in York where Athelstan restored their kingdoms to “Constantin” and “þe prince of Wales”. The same events are recorded in *William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum*, 131. 3, 3, 207; Langtoft, who also mentions Athelstan’s visit to St Cuthbert at Durham afterwards,⁶¹ Robert Mannyng who translates Langtoft,⁶² the Pseudo-Ingulf *Chronicle of Crowland*,⁶³ and Walter Bower’s *Scotichronicon*.⁶⁴ Castleford appears to have had before him many traditions to do with York, and as a good local historian, he presents them fully. However, Castleford makes no mention whatever of the *Brunanburh* campaign and no mention of Anlaf. So far as Castleford was concerned, *Brunanburh* had nothing to do with York, and he appears to have known no tradition that connected the battle to his locality. Castleford’s complete lack of interest in *Brunanburh* strongly suggests that the battle did not take place in south Yorkshire.

The idea that the battle at *Brunanburh* was about York is a widely-held assumption that has been insufficiently examined, and it is based largely on John of Worcester’s Humber entry story. Wood makes a great deal of the activities of the West Saxon kings in East Mercia in the 930s to 950s recorded in various sources, but these were

⁶¹Langtoft, *Chronicle*, under the year 924, ll. 25–41, in Livingston, *Casebook*, 92–3.

⁶²Mannyng, *Chronicle*, ll. 613–32, in Livingston, *Casebook*, 128–9.

⁶³In *ibid.*, 134–5.

⁶⁴In *ibid.*, 144–5. See Wilson, “King Athelstan and St John of Beverley”, for further details.

for the most part aggressive campaigns initiated by the West Saxon kings in their attempts to control the whole of England and particularly York, since York persistently favoured the Scandinavian kings. If the *Brunanburh* campaign was entirely in Yorkshire and East Mercia, as Wood and others contend, Anlaf and the Hiberno-Norse contingent of the coalition armies would have travelled 1,200 miles by sea in autumn in order to raid, or at least distract upon, the territories of their allies – Northumbria and “the Danes in England” having joined the coalition early on, as Wood argues.⁶⁵ A location for *Brunanburh* in the north-west of England – omitting from consideration for the moment all evidence apart from the geographical and historical – at least places some part of the coalition’s campaign and activity in the territory of their enemy.

Scots and cumbrians

Wood largely ignores the Scottish and Cumbrian contingents of the coalition, whose strategic goals in the campaign might have been rather different from the secure establishment of Anlaf as king in York. Verifiable details about the movements of the Scots and Cumbrians are hard to come by, but they apparently travelled by land,⁶⁶ and if their destination was York or East Mercia, their journey south (and retreat north) would have passed through the patrimony of the community of St Cuthbert. The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* specifically mentions the main route north, Dere Street, as a boundary of lands granted the community by King Guthred: “a Cuncaeceastre usque ad Dyrwente fluuium, et inde usque ad Werram uersus austrum, et inde usque ad uiam quae uocatur Deorstrete in occidentali et australi parte” (from Chester-le-Street as far as the River Derwent, and from there as far as the Wear toward the south, and from there as far as the road which is called Dere Street to the west and the south, ch. 23, 62–3).⁶⁷

The community of St Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street was one of the larger landholders in Northumbria at this time.⁶⁸ Before his successful campaign against the Northumbrians and Scots in 934, Athelstan visited the shrine of St Cuthbert and gave land and treasures to the community; according to *Symeon of Durham, Libellus de Exordio*, ii. 18, 138–41, Edmund did the same in 944 or 945. According to local tradition, Kings Alfred, Edward and Athelstan attributed some of their victories to St Cuthbert (*Symeon of Durham, Libellus*, ii. 17, 132–5). In 970, we know that the West Saxon authorities engaged the services of Bishop Ælfsige and Prior Aldred of the community in escorting Kenneth of Scotland to Wessex on a diplomatic and religious mission.⁶⁹ These traditions are carefully recounted by the community in their records, and the mutual regard between the community and

⁶⁵Wood, “Searching”, 152–4. We might add to Henry of Huntingdon *Historia Anglorum*, in Livingston, *Casebook*, 60–5, and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* in *ibid.*, 152–3, the support of Bartholomew of Cotton, *Historia Anglicana* in *ibid.*, 82–3, *auxilium Scotorum et Dacorum conuersantium in Anglia* (with the aid of the Scots and the Danes living in England (quoting Henry of Huntingdon)), and Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon: Northumbri ... statim Constantino juncti totis viribus impugnabant Athelstanum* (The Northumbrians immediately joined Constantine and attacked Athelstan with their whole strength), in *ibid.*, 142–3.

⁶⁶See the point made in Cavill, “Place-Name Debate”, 338 n. 39, where it is noted that *fleam* in Old English texts consistently refers to land-based flight. Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 139–43, proposes that all the invaders came by sea, but Cavill, “Escaping”, 906–9, presents arguments against this.

⁶⁷South’s translation, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*. See also *Symeon of Durham, Libellus*, ii. 13, 124–5.

⁶⁸For the rather chequered history of the monastery’s holdings, see Craster, “The Patrimony”, 177–99.

⁶⁹Brown, “A Good Woman’s Son”, 32, discusses the implications of the mission.

the kings of Wessex is obvious and repeatedly detailed.⁷⁰ Athelstan's honouring of St Cuthbert in 934 before his depredations in Scotland, and this persistent south English connection, would have made the community of Chester-le-Street justifiably nervous of an army marching south from Dunottar in eastern Scotland for York. It was not unprecedented for a Scottish army to ravage the monastery, as one did in the reign of King Guthred, some forty years earlier.⁷¹

The direct route of the Roman road to York from the far north via Edinburgh, Margary 8, crossed Hadrian's Wall at Corbridge and, as Dere Street, passed through the extensive lands of the community and within half a dozen miles of the community's complex at Chester-le-Street.⁷² Yet the community of St Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street, and later at Durham, which recorded and managed its landholdings with the greatest care, apparently failed to notice armies passing south and then north along the road in 937. "Evidence for the historical interests of the Benedictine monks who constituted the chapter of Durham ... is exceptionally plentiful. The corpus of historical writing they produced was considerable, and, so far as is known, survives in its entirety", writes A. J. Piper.⁷³ In particular, the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, which has extensive details of the community's dealings with the English kings in the decades either side of Brunanburh, records nothing of the battle or those involved. If York were the objective of the campaign then the silence of the records of the community at Chester-le-Street and later Durham about the invading men of Alba is extraordinary.

The retreat of the coalition forces is another major and unacknowledged difficulty in the York and Yorkshire theory. The sources generally reflect the account of the poem in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in stating that the battle and the rout of the coalition forces lasted a day. None of the places suggested by Wood is within realistic reach of the Humber after a day's battle and the retreat which followed: Went Hill and nearby Burghwallis are around twenty miles from the Humber, Brinsworth and White Hill much more. But more significantly, if the retreat of the Scottish and Cumbrian forces followed the route of the Roman road, Margary 28b, north from Burghwallis to Tadcaster, and thence north on Dere Street to Hadrian's Wall, then the retreat would have passed within ten miles of York. The Northumbrians having joined the coalition at an early stage, as Wood repeatedly argues,⁷⁴ and which is clearly evident in the sources, York would be an obvious place for all the coalition forces to go to regroup after the retreat, and an easy place to defend against a depleted English army. This would be even more obviously the case if the Northumbrians had submitted formally to Anlaf. But Anlaf escaped by sea, and the Hiberno-Norse contingent followed, when apparently even in defeat their purported objective in the campaign was easily within their grasp. Anlaf could have taken a ship or any number of ships in the Humber up to York.

The corollaries of the posited Humber entry are thus that Anlaf was an utterly deplorable strategist, wasting enormous amounts of time and resources and risking

⁷⁰Craster, "Red Book of Durham", 525–6, notes the respect in which St Cuthbert and his church was held by Edward the Elder, Athelstan and Edmund, as does *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, chs 25–28, 64–67, and the *Symeon of Durham, Libellus de Exordio* adds King Alfred, ii. 13, 124–5, to the others in ii. 15–18, 128–39.

⁷¹*Symeon of Durham, Libellus de Exordio*, ii. 13, 126–7, *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, ch. 33, 68–71. In northern sources, Guthred is the name of Anlaf's father Guthfrith,

⁷²Margary, *Roman Roads*, 427.

⁷³Piper, "Historical Interests", 310.

⁷⁴Wood, "Searching", 152–4.

lives on a lengthy sea-journey, and then failing to take opportunities to gain his objective that were immediately available to him whether he won or lost the climactic battle. Alongside that, the fact that no extant medieval source mentions York in an account of the lead-up to the battle or its immediate aftermath is completely inexplicable when at this time York and the land north of it was so well known, documented and fiercely contested.

Finally, on the question of strategy, Wood in a comment on the case made for Bromborough on the Wirral as the site of the battle in the *Livingston Casebook* and elsewhere, writes:

Any attempt to defend [Bromborough] will rest entirely on uncertain and overstated onomastic evidence, unless a good explanation can be found as to how a land invasion of Northumbria from Scotland ended up in a climactic battle at the water's edge of the Mersey – a very difficult situation to envisage, as Plummer long ago pointed out.⁷⁵

Wood's argument for "a land invasion of Northumbria" has been shown not to be based on any clear evidence, and is fundamentally unlikely from the point of view of strategy. It should also be noted that Plummer did not think that there was "a land invasion of Northumbria": he writes,

The battle of Brunanburh was the defeat of a confederacy which had for its object the destruction of the power of Wessex ... The site of the battle must be looked for in a locality which would serve as a rendezvous for the Scots, the Strathclyde Welsh, and the Dublin Danes. It is obvious that such a spot must be sought in the west of England, and that Fl. Wig's [John of Worcester's] statement that Anlaf [...] entered the mouth of the Humber must be an error.⁷⁶

Plummer's objection, that "it is hard to see how the other members of the league may have got to [Bromborough]", is not difficult to answer: by Roman road it is about 200 miles. Carlisle to Chester, following Margary 7 or Margary 70 after Ribchester, is about the same distance as Carlisle to Burghwallis.⁷⁷ The route north of Hadrian's Wall along Margary 7 is about the same distance as that on Margary 8 to Edinburgh.⁷⁸ For the coalition forces the western route had the significant advantage of running through the territory of the Cumbrians for the most part, making provisioning for the army simpler and making the rendezvous between the forces easy. We may speculate about how the forces ended up there; but it is undeniable that a rendezvous on the Wirral would be convenient for the Dublin, Cumbrian and Scots forces, open to good roads (Margary 6, 41, and 43) from Chester through English territory to the centre of West Saxon power at Winchester, and more threatening to Athelstan. This much is entirely independent of the place-name evidence.

Burghwallis and water

Wood's argument concerning Burghwallis and Went Hill as the site of the battle depends on his identifying those names with the historical *Brunanburh* or *Brunnanburh* and

⁷⁵Wood, "Searching", 154.

⁷⁶Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles*, II, 139–40.

⁷⁷See the map in Margary, *Roman Roads*, 359.

⁷⁸See the map in *ibid.*, 454.

Wendun. Regarding Burghwallis, two salient observations need to be made. The first and most obvious is that there is no evidence that Burghwallis was ever called anything like *Brun(n)anburh*. The second is more complex, but can be summarised in the observation that to function as a fort, any *burh* would need its water supply, and thus there are many that could be named “fort at the spring” if this were a real meaning of the name.⁷⁹

The recorded names of Burghwallis are reflexes of Old English *burh* “fort” from 1086 Domesday Book, but with sporadic addition of the family name *Wallis* “from the twelfth century and after”.⁸⁰ There are simplex names with a reflex of *burh* in Domesday Book in Devon (Berry), North Yorkshire (Brough), Lincolnshire (x2, Burgh), Norfolk (x2, Burgh), Suffolk (x2, Burgh), West Yorkshire (Burghwallis), Leicestershire (Burrough), Lancashire (Burrow), Sussex (Bury) and Northamptonshire (Peterborough). Others are mentioned in earlier documents but not in Domesday Book (for example, Bury St Edmunds in a charter from 1035–40).⁸¹ Others still are recorded later with the simplex *burh* and related forms. None of these has a recorded form like *Brun(n)anburh*. If we are to depend on the term *burh* to find this *Brun(n)anburh*, as Wood apparently does, we have over two dozen to choose from attested by 1086 and many more later recorded. One of the reasons he selects Burghwallis is that there is a spring nearby, “a famous and copious spring, St Helens Well, later known as Robin Hood’s Well”; hence, he asks, “Was the Burghwallis fort in the Anglo-Saxon period “the burh at the spring”?”.⁸² It is to be noted that the names of the spring that Wood singles out derive from the Old English term *wella* “spring”. There is no indication of a Norse-influenced *burna* in the form **brunna* “spring”, in the spellings and forms of Burghwallis attested, if the sense ever existed.⁸³

And then, as mentioned above, a fort needs a water supply. It would be, and apparently was, redundant to add a generic water feature element to the name of a fortification. The water-source for a *burh* is generally unremarked. One looks in vain for *burh* names compounded with general water terms such as *æwylm* “copious spring”, Scandinavian *bekkr* “stream”, *brōc* “brook, stream”,⁸⁴ *burna* “stream”, *ēa* “river”, *flēot* “creek, tributary”, *funta* “spring”, Scandinavian *kelda* “spring”, *lacu* “small stream”, *læcc*, *læce* “stream, bog”, *mere* “pool”, *pōl* “pool”, *wæter* “water”, *wella* “spring”.⁸⁵

A few examples will illustrate the pervasiveness of the need for water. Peterborough (*Burg* 1086 DB) was earlier called *Medeshamstede* (“Medi’s homestead”), and was so called “because there was a spring here called *Medeswæl* (Old English **wella**) or ‘pool’ (Old English **wæl** ‘well, pool’) ‘Medi’s spring’”;⁸⁶ Peterborough is also on the River Nene. Bury in Salford Hundred, Lancashire (*Biri* 1194), is situated “in the tongue of land between the [Rivers] Roch and Irwell”; Burrow in Lonsdale Hundred, Lancashire (*Borch* 1086) is “on the [River] Lune”.⁸⁷ Burgh St Margaret in Norfolk (*Burc*, *Burh*

⁷⁹See Cavill, “Spellings”, for a detailed linguistic argument that this is not the real meaning of the name.

⁸⁰Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding*, 2, 35–6.

⁸¹All cited from Parsons and Styles, *Vocabulary* 2, 81.

⁸²Wood, “Spelling”, 369 n. 26.

⁸³See further the detailed discussion of the orthographical and manuscript evidence in Cavill, “Spellings”.

⁸⁴Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary*, 90, under Brobury Herefordshire, rightly dismisses the etymology with *brōc* “stream”, since the watercourse is the River Wye (not a *brōc* “stream” but a significant river), and suggests *brocc* “badger” or a personal name for the first element.

⁸⁵The main entries for “rivers and springs: ponds and lakes”, Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, 1–35.

⁸⁶Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary*, 469–70.

⁸⁷Ekwall, *Place-Names of Lancashire*, 61 and 184 respectively.

1086) is in a wetland area with many water names, but there is a lost *Brightwells* 1596 “bright springs” recorded locally.⁸⁸ Often enough, a *burh* name will indicate its situation by combining with the specific river-name: Parsons and Styles mention Blithbury Staffordshire (River Blithe), Blythburgh Suffolk (River Blyth), Clunbury Shropshire (River Clun), Ellenborough Cumberland (River Ellen), Kenbury Devon (River Kenn), Kintbury Berkshire (River Kennet), Ledbury Herefordshire (River Leadon), Tenbury Worcestershire (River Teme).⁸⁹

A striking example of an early compound *burh* name is Chirbury (Old English *cirice* “church”, *burh* in the dative, “[place at the] church fort”), invested in 915 by Æthelflæd as part of her Mercian defence network, with records (*æt*) *Cyricbyrig* 915 (c.1000, c.1050) Anglo-Saxon Chronicle B, C, *Cireberie* 1086 Domesday Book. The Welsh name for Chirbury is Llanffynhonwen, Llanffynnonwen, with spellings from the sixteenth century, “church at a white or holy spring”, Welsh *llan* “church”, *ffynnon* “spring, well”, *gwyn* feminine adjective *gwen* “white”. The spring may be “The Spout”, about which a late writer commented “[a]ll the villagers to this day know well, and are grateful for, the bountiful supply of excellent water, which now goes by the name of ‘the Spout’”.⁹⁰

There is no evidence that Burghwallis was called anything like *Brun(n)anburh*. It was called *Burg* and similar reflexes of Old English *burh*, as were two dozen other places in early sources, and many another later. It has, or had, a copious spring named with a reflex of Old English *wella*, a type of water supply found near several other *burhs*. *Burhs* needed a water supply and this is a characteristic geographical feature of the places so named; but generic water-feature name elements do not combine with and so distinguish *burh* names. In view of all this, *Brun(n)anburh* interpreted as “fort at the spring” would be formally unexampled, hence intrinsically implausible, as well as having no demonstrable connection with Burghwallis. The fact is simply that Burghwallis was not called “the fort at the spring”, nor was any other known place. Burghwallis was a *burh* and it had a water supply, but those features are found in many similar places. The only claim that Burghwallis has to being more plausible than Wood’s earlier guess at the name *Brunanburh*, Brinsworth, is that it has one of the elements of the battle name (*burh*) instead of none.

Wendun and went hill

The alternative name for the battle of Brunanburh, occurring as we have seen in *Symeon of Durham Libellus, de Exordio* and the *Historia Regum*, is *We(o)ndun*.⁹¹ Wood settles on this name as giving the best indication of where the battle took place and locates it at Went Hill in Yorkshire. There are three salient observations to be made about this

⁸⁸Sandred, *Place-Names of Norfolk* 2, 47–9.

⁸⁹Parsons and Styles, *Vocabulary* 2, 83.

⁹⁰Cavill, *Place-Names of Shropshire*, 9, 11 and 14.

⁹¹Wood’s assertions that the source from which these attestations come is “tenth-century”, especially “reliable” and “from Chester-le-Street”, part of the seventh argument noted above and n. 16, are entirely disputable. The manuscript of the *Historia Regum*, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139, was compiled at Durham c. 1170, using a manuscript collection at the point of this entry relating to 937 dating from after 1042, since it refers to Edward the Confessor in the last entry. The sources of the collection include a version or versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but apparently several others. The accuracy of the entries is often in doubt. See Lapidge, *Byrhtferth of Ramsey Historia Regum*, xvii–xx, appendix 1, introduction and notes, 171–82. There is no indication in either the *Historia Regum* or *Symeon of Durham, Libellus* that either of them conceived of the battle as having taken place in Yorkshire.

theory. The first is that there is no evidence that Went Hill was ever known by the name *Wendun*. The second is that the identification of the first element of *Wendun* with the name of the River Went is linguistically problematic. And the third is that the second element of *Wendun* used by Wood to identify Went Hill is topographically problematic in that Went Hill was not a *dūn*. Wood opines that “[t]he spelling of *Wendun*, and its possible derivation, is surprisingly ignored in the *Livingston Casebook*, 334–5”,⁹² but some of the argument below is presented at greater length in the *Casebook* 333–4 and especially 338, which Wood has failed to notice.

Wood writes,

the most obvious interpretation of the name *Wendun* would be a hill by a river with a first element “Wen”. If this is so, then the evidence of name and topography fits only one river, the Went, between the Don and the Aire. ... No pre-Conquest forms have survived, but the Went appears from the twelfth century onwards as *Wenet* (1154 × 89 until the thirteenth century), *Wente* (1190 and onwards till [the] sixteenth century) and *Went* from the thirteenth century ... On this reading, *Wendun* would simply mean “the dun by the Went” – “Went Hill” ...⁹³

In “Spelling” he further writes, “the *Historia Regum*’s name for the battle site, *Wendun*, simply means the “dun by the Went”, i.e. Went Hill, one of the most prominent features on the Great North Road”.⁹⁴

Apart from the details of the name-spellings from Watts, most of the assertions here are loose and impressionistic. There is nothing obvious about the idea that the name “would be a hill by a river with a first element ‘Wen’”. There are literally hundreds of names with the element *dūn* but very few of them, perhaps as few as two, are combined with a river name: Brandon (Lincolnshire, River Brant), Laindon (Essex River Lea, the modern Crouch at Laindon).⁹⁵ The spellings of the river name Went are shared by Went Bridge, which has forms *pontem de Wente* 1190, *ponte(m) de Wenet* 1190 × 1210, *Wentbrig(g)* 1302 onwards.⁹⁶ The etymology of the river name given by Watts is “Pr[imitive] W[elsh] **wīnet* or **wīnēd*”, ultimately referring to pleasant characteristics.⁹⁷ The “first element” of the name Went is thus not *Wen* but a disyllabic *Wenet* in the earliest forms, later also disyllabic *Wente*; the monosyllabic *Went* only appears from the thirteenth century. There is no sign of the characteristic disyllabic element in *Wendun*. Further, Wood entirely ignores the spelling *Weondun* in *Symeon of Durham, Libellus* which would make even less sense as a reflex of *Wenet* or *Wente* in the first element. This spelling, *Weondun*, has been reasonably interpreted as the weak oblique singular of the adjective **weoh* “holy”, so *Weondun* and *Wendun* would be “(place at) a holy hill”.⁹⁸

What Wood presents as “obvious” and “simple” is anything but obvious and simple, and the identification of *Wendun* with the River Went can only be made by ignoring the historical spellings of both. Went Hill itself is recorded as *Weneteshil*

⁹²Wood, “Spelling”, 367 n. 13.

⁹³Wood, “Searching”, 156.

⁹⁴Wood, “Spelling”, 369 n. 26.

⁹⁵Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, 164–73. Brandon and Laindon are the only examples of river names in the reference section, names “with an earlier hill-name or river-name”, 169.

⁹⁶Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding* 2, 51.

⁹⁷Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary*, 663.

⁹⁸Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, II, 254, under **wēoh*².

1180–1200, *Wenteshill* c.1200,⁹⁹ These spellings of the river name follow the pattern observed earlier in Went Bridge. The river name here has a (strong) genitive form to indicate the relationship of the hill to the river. There is little reason to suppose that *Weneshil* would have struck a twelfth-century reader or hearer as remotely confusable with *We(o)ndun*.

Wood writes, “[t]he name Wendun indicates that the *burh* was situated near a prominent hill or landmark massif”. He goes on:

On the northern side of the river, Went Hill has name forms going back to the twelfth century. Dominating the Roman and medieval crossings, this ridge is a major landmark to travellers coming from the north-east Midlands to the plain of York, rising precipitously to an escarpment 150 feet above the river in what Smith aptly calls a “steep-sided lofty ridge”. In its shape and elevation it certainly meets the requirements for a late OE “dun”. Went Hill is the obvious candidate for Wendun, but 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. No early name is recorded for Barnsdale Bar, but it too matches all the requirements of an OE “dun” and it is perhaps the key strategic position controlling the southern frontier of the Northumbrians and the route to York from the south.¹⁰⁰

For the discussion of the *dūn*, Wood makes reference to the work of Margaret Gelling, “the *doyenne* of place-name studies” in his lecture, though he avoids such attribution in the printed work. This may be because Gelling’s supreme achievement in place-name studies was to show that the plethora of terms used in English place-names for such features as hills, watercourses, and woods, have particular, distinct meanings that have been lost in our present-day vocabulary. The element *dūn* in place-names, Gelling demonstrates, is used “for a low hill with a fairly level and fairly extensive summit which provided a good settlement-site in open country”.¹⁰¹ In other words, a *dūn* is characteristically not a “prominent hill or landmark massif”, not “steep-sided”, not “an escarpment”, not a “lofty ridge”, nor one that rises “precipitously”. For the very unspectacular profile of several typical *dūns*, the reader could do no better than glance at Ann Cole’s illustrations in Watts’s *Cambridge Dictionary*, fig. 4, xlv.

The fact that Went Hill was termed a *hyll* and not a *dūn* is obvious from the record, but Gelling specifically states that Old English *hyll* “appears to be used for hills which do not have the clearly defined characteristics of those called **beorg** or **dūn**”. She further suggests that *hyll* “may, on the whole, belong to the later stages of Old English name-formation, coming into more frequent use as the precision of the earlier topographical vocabulary weakened”.¹⁰² Wood twice asserts that his chosen sites meet “the requirements for a late OE ‘dun’”. In her discussion, Margaret Gelling observes that *dūn* as an element forming settlement names “may not have been much employed after A.D. 800, though

⁹⁹Smith, *Place-Names of the West Riding*, 2, 64. There is a certain irony in the fact that having dismissed Bromborough as a candidate for the site of the battle because it is chronologically late in attestation, as it “first appears as a place-name in the first half of the twelfth century”, “Spelling”, 149, Wood then settles on a name not plausibly to be identified with *Wendun*, and one which is first attested in the second half of the twelfth century, as a better option.

¹⁰⁰Wood, “Spelling”, 155–6.

¹⁰¹Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, 141; Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, 164; for the wider applicability of Gelling’s definition, see Cavill, “Manuscripts and Maps”, 316.

¹⁰²Gelling and Cole, *Landscape of Place-Names*, 192.

it remained in use for field name and minor name formation and for purely landscape features”.¹⁰³ This raises the question of what “a late OE ‘dun’” might look like or be described as, and indeed what Wood thinks those “requirements” might be; certainly it merits explanation.

There is, then, no indication in the record that Went Hill was ever (until Wood) thought of as a *dūn*. Went Hill is very unlike a *dūn* in shape and conformation. The name of Went Hill is late attested and differs radically in the form and grammar of the river name from the name *We(o)ndun*, as well as in not having the generic element *dūn*.

Conclusion

Some of the argument here is detailed, and it is worth summarising for the sake of clarity. The facts of the evidence relating to the Yorkshire hypothesis are these. There is no reference in the medieval sources relating to the Brunanburh campaign that mentions York or the Great North Road, even obliquely. There is no form, no actual record, in the series of the names of Burghwallis that identifies it as *Brunanburh* or *Brunnanburh*. There is no form, no actual record, of the name Went Hill that identifies it as *Wendun*. These are facts, and in themselves are fundamentally damaging, if not fatal, to Wood’s hypothesis.

The analysis above has further reinforced this. It has been argued that John of Worcester was mistaken in having Anlaf’s fleet land in the Humber. There was no “submission” of the Northumbrians in York in 937. *Castleford’s Chronicle* refers to Athelstan’s 934 Scottish expedition, but not to the *Brunanburh* campaign. There is no reference to York in any extant account of the battle. The specification of a *burh* by reference to a general water feature is unexampled, and Burghwallis has no record of a **brunna*. There is no evidence or plausible basis for the idea that the name of the River Went is the first element of *Wendun*, or that Went Hill could have been called a *dūn*.

Discussion of the battle of *Brunanburh* has been peculiarly afflicted by a version of the “I-spy” game, where the place is identified because a modern form, or even an early form, has the same initial letters or looks a bit like *Brunanburh* or *Wendun*. This has resulted in dozens of speculative identifications of the battle site, the majority of which do not bear a moment’s examination. Wood pursues the same path and in the process he contradicts his own earlier work, where he identified Brinsworth with *Brunanburh*, and White Hill with *Wendun*, without changing the erroneous assumptions on which those identifications were based. Despite his views being promulgated repeatedly and in various media, and no doubt being accepted by some, Wood produces no reliable evidence and no credible argument that there was a “Yorkshire context” for the battle of Brunanburh.

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¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 164.

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