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Published online: 28 Apr 2022.

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ABSTRACT

The battle around Brunanburh in 937 has aroused debate particularly about where it was fought. Many locations have been suggested and a serious contender, Bromborough on the Wirral, has often been too easily dismissed. The article examines some of the assumptions underlying current theories about where the battle took place and particularly how the defeated armies fled, with a view to assessing their accuracy in terms of the evidence available in the sources. It is demonstrated that some theories are based on mistaken assumptions about what the sources say and about the proposals advanced for the Wirral location. The paper then analyses the evidence from John of Worcester in some detail to show that the formulaic character of his writing casts doubt on the reliability of his Humber entry story and highlights the fact that he, and other writers, do not assert that the Humber was the site of the flight of the fugitives.

Introduction

The battle of 937 between King Athelstan and a force of Scandinavians from Ireland under Anlaf Guthfrithsson, men of Alba under Constantine and Strathclyders under Owain[1] has attracted the attention of writers ever since it happened, and the interest shows no signs of diminishing.[2] There are dozens of medieval sources which deal with the battle, sometimes very briefly, sometimes at great length, and most of these have been edited and translated in Livingston's *Casebook*. It is generally accepted that the battle was of very great significance, a view supported by the interest expressed in English, Welsh, Irish, Scottish, Norse and French sources, in Latin and vernacular languages. Athelstan was the victor in the conflict, but the

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[1]These names and terms for the various personnel are unsatisfactory: see, for example, Woolf, 152–7. Generally I have adopted the terms that the English sources and academic discourse use, and hope that this simplifies somewhat. So the Hiberno-Norse are Scandinavians or Norsemen, or Northmen and their king is Anlaf rather than *Ólafr*; the men of Alba are Scots, their king is Constantine; and the kingdom of the north-west is Strathclyde or Cumbria, and its king is Owain rather than *Eugenius*.

[2]Recent works include Livingston, *Casebook*, from which some of the texts used below are quoted; Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*; Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh"; Breeze, "*Brunanburh* Located"; Downham, "How Big was Brunanburh?"; Downham, "Wirral Location"; Cavill, "Ships and *Brunanburh*"; Cavill, "Battlefield Despatches". Capener, "A Long Walk South" and *Brunanburh and the Routes to Dingesmere* has added useful information on the logistics of feeding an army and marching them to battles. The list is by no means exhaustive: several of the authors have produced online lectures and newspaper reports.

different sources give varying accounts of the battle and its aftermath; some focus on details unknown to or omitted by others. It cannot always be asserted that details recorded are factual,[3] and the rhetorical aspects of the sources have been little considered; but a coherent picture of the campaign and the battle emerges as the different accounts are weighed and the range of evidence is brought to bear on questions of interpretation.

One of the perennial problems with interpretating the location of the battle is that in much of the early historiography, there is little concern about where it happened, and Brunanburh was more an idea of Englishness than a place.[4] In recent years focus has shifted to identifying where the battle took place from the rather scattered and sometimes contradictory information in the sources. Some accounts and theories about the battle work with the place-name, or parts of it, to suggest locations. Many such interpretations depend on naive linguistic assumptions that ignore the grammar and semantics of the name evidence in the sources, and focus on two or three letters in the name that can be arranged to support a claim that a given place was Brunanburh.[5] These large assumptions about the language have been the focus of much discussion, and will continue to be so, since the linguistic and onomastic evidence remains fundamental to the argument: if anywhere beginning with *B*, and having a *u* and an *r* in it could be Brunanburh, and the resultant syllables could mean whatever supports a given theory, we are reduced to trading mere opinions.[6]

There is much to be said about the linguistic and onomastic evidence. But the debate about the location of Brunanburh has been clogged by many other large assumptions. Commentators write about the sources in a fashion which shows deep-seated assumptions about what information they give and sometimes pays little attention to the detail. Excellent scholars from Campbell,[7] through Whitelock to Hart have built castles in the air, partly through not having the evidence available to them that we now have (and hence not of their own making),[8] but also partly because they assumed things about the battle that the sources, accurately interpreted, do not in fact support. When these things are added together, interpretations are accepted as final and conclusive which relate only to the preconceptions of the writers and not the evidence with which the sources present us. This article works on the basis (indeed, makes the assumption) that the detail of the sources, accurately considered, will help us to arrive at reasonable conclusions, and that effort should be made to interrogate theories using scholarly resources.

The overall focus of this article is on the flight of the defeated forces from Brunanburh, which is one of the features of the topic less considered in the present debate. The present work does not attempt to counter the claims repeatedly made for a battle-site in Yorkshire[9]

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[3]The early hagiographical accounts of the restoration of Athelstan's lost or broken sword in Eadmer of Canterbury's *Lives* of Oda and Oswald, *Casebook*, 50–1, 54–5, and William of Malmesbury's repurposing of the story of King Alfred's disguising himself as a minstrel to infiltrate the enemy camp to apply to Athelstan, *Casebook*, 56–7, might be mentioned; others are discussed below.

[4]A point made well by Thormann, 9.

[5]Page, 344, comments, "[i]t is hardly enough to look round for the nearest modern name beginning *Br*- and identify that as *Brunanburh*."

[6]See further the discussion of the elements in Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", *Casebook*, 331–9.

[7]Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, is the edition used for the text of the Old English poem. It is flawed, and some of its shortcomings are analysed in Cavill, "Spellings of *Brunanburh*".

[8]Principal among modern resources are the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, and the *Dictionary of Old English*.

[9]Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh" largely repeats the argument of his earlier article, "Brunanburh Revisited", but substitutes Burhwallis for Brinsworth as the candidate for Brunanburh, and Went Hill for White Hill as the candidate for *Wendun*. See further Cavill, "Spellings of Brunanburh" and "Yorkshire Hypothesis".

or Lanchester in County Durham,[10] nor indeed more recent claims that Bromborough and *Dingesmere* do not mean what place-name scholars have claimed.[11] These claims will be the focus of a series of future articles. Neither does this present work repeat the arguments that have been made in detail and at some length in the Livingston *Casebook* and elsewhere for a location of Brunanburh at Bromborough on the Wirral. Rather, this article directs attention to objections to the Wirral hypothesis, some more serious than others, some more directly and specifically articulated than others.[12] The first part analyses some assumptions in recent writing, and suggests ways in which interpretations might be modified by consideration of the sources. The second part deals in more detail with the flight of the Scandinavians back to Ireland by ship, and highlights a peculiar fact hitherto entirely ignored from the sources, examining evidence from John of Worcester.

Some Earlier Assumptions

By way of an example of interpretations dogged by confident but misplaced assumptions, we might consider Cyril Hart's rejection of Bromswold as the site of the battle. Alfred Smyth suggested that Bromswold in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire might be Brunanburh, assuming that the invading Norsemen landed in the Humber.[13] While Hart agreed with the latter assumption, he preferred Bourne in Cambridgeshire or Lincolnshire as the site of Brunanburh. Hart writes, "Smyth's location for the battle is weakened […] by the statement in the Old English poem that the West Saxons pursued Olaf on horseback to his ship, which is said later in the poem to have been moored on *Dingesmere*".[14] In actual fact, the poem says none of this.

In lines from 20b, there is the general statement that:

> Wesseaxe forð
> ondlongne dæg   eorodcistum
> on last legdun   laþum þeodum (20b–22),
> (The West Saxons in troops for the whole day pursued the hateful people.)

Hart's "on horseback" derives from published translations of *eorodcistum* in line 21b, which are erroneous.[15] It has been shown that *eorodcistum* means something like "*en masse*, in troops", and this makes irrelevant all Hart's following argument about how easy or not it is for horsemen to negotiate fen country.[16] Then in lines 32f, the poem says that Anlaf "with a small company" (*litle weorode*) escaped to the prow or stern of a ship which he pushed or which drove afloat and thus he escaped over *Dingesmere* onto the dark sea. There is no indication where this escape took place, though it

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[10]Breeze, *British Battles 493–937 Mount Badon to Brunanburh*, summarises his earlier hypothesis from "Brunanburh Located".

[11]Deakin.

[12]Writers such as Breeze and Wood have not engaged with the arguments and evidence presented in the *Casebook* (published 2011). Breeze does not list it in his bibliographies or discuss it at all in "Brunanburh Located" (2019) or *British Battles* (2021); Wood's "Searching for Brunanburh" (2013) has one reference to the *Casebook*, 149 note 57.

[13]Smyth, II, 37.

[14]Hart, 519 note 17.

[15]Whitelock, Douglas and Tucker, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 69, translates, "[t]he whole day long the West Saxons with mounted companies kept in pursuit of the hostile peoples". Many other translators follow suit: see Cavill, "*Eorodcistum*", 10–12.

[16]Ibid., 11.

might be implied to have been relatively close to the battle site. There is no indication that the ship was Anlaf's or ever did belong to him. In lines 53–56, the Norsemen, "dreary survivors of the spears", are said to have departed in nailed ships on *Dingesmere* back to Ireland: but there is no mention of the notion that these ships were those the men came in, or that Anlaf and the remnants left at the same time or from the same place.

The associated notions that the battle was fought "far away from the coast" and that "[t]he Anglo-Saxon poem clearly rules out a coastal location" because there was a day-long chase on horseback, are also unfounded.[17] Neither Smyth nor Hart appears to recognise that a day-long chase from battle might take place along a coast, a curious omission.

Getting Boxed into a Tangential Place

More recent interpretations of the battle site follow the same pattern of making assumptions about the sources. In particular the assumptions are deployed against the arguments made on behalf of the Wirral's Bromborough as Brunanburh. In his generally thoughtful and positive review of the *Casebook*, Neil McGuigan writes as follows:

> To believe [the idea that the battle might have taken place on the Wirral] you also have to believe that the Scottish king Causantín mac Áeda boxed himself into a small peninsula hundreds of miles from his heartland and escaped decisive defeat free and alive; and did so having led his followers and family into the heavily fortified region of western Mercia, the geography of which is erratically tangential to the project's likely aim.[18]

The main assumptions here are these: that Constantine (Causantín mac Áeda) "boxed himself into a small peninsula"; and that western Mercia was "erratically tangential to the project's likely aim". Similar ideas are embraced by other writers (see, for example, Breeze, below), and while it may seem unduly severe to hold a scholar to account for views expressed in a review, these views seem to be widely axiomatic and unexamined.

That Constantine marched "hundreds of miles from his heartland", "escaped decisive defeat free and alive", and "led his followers and family" into the southern areas are indisputable facts foundational to the whole narrative; the only source to suggest he did not do these things is William of Malmesbury who thought that Constantine died on the battlefield, rather than his son.[19] The late Scottish sources, Walter Bower and Hector Boece, both record the depredations of the Scottish armies in England: Bower writes, *rex Constantinus, Analafus et Goderfridus grandi nimis exercitu collecto, partes Anglorum australes invadunt, cuncta vastando per que transiebant* "King Constantine, Anlaf and Guthfrith collected together a very large army and invaded the southern regions of the English, laying waste all the land through which they passed."[20] Boece elaborates with disapproval on the rape, pillage and devastation of churches and property.[21] Though the details of the predation are absent or less prominent in other sources, the Scottish

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[17]Smyth, II, 45, 48
[18]McGuigan, review of *Casebook*, 286–8.
[19]William of Malmesbury writes, *Cecidit ibi rex Scottorum … aliique reges quinque, comites duodecim ominisque barborum congeries* "There fell Constantine, king of the Scots, … as well as five kings, twelve earls, and nearly the entire barbarian horde" (*Casebook*, 58–9). Information from the Old English poem appears to have been garbled in William's source.
[20]Bower, *Casebook*, 142–3.
[21]Boece, *Casebook*, 150–1.

sources agree with the general picture of a battle in England, in which Constantine was defeated, but from which he escaped alive.

It might be objected that these Scottish sources are late: Bower's work dates from the mid-fifteenth century and Boece's from the early sixteenth. What is clear, however, is that they had independent sources about the events of these years. Bower corrects William of Malmesbury when the latter reports that Constantine died in the battle, because *veraces et variae … cronice* "various reliable chronicles" record that Constantine returned, gave up the kingship and became a monk.[22] Bower also reports the names of Athelstan's nephews who died in the battle, information otherwise only known from Willliam of Malmesbury and for example the mid-fourteenth century English *Eulogium Historiarum*.[23] The late Scottish sources show an interest in aspects of the campaign that are sometimes ignored by the early English writers; the details may occasionally be fictional, but in the cases mentioned above and below, they are largely supported by the sources we have, and are indeed plausible.

That Constantine "boxed himself into a small peninsula" is not suggested by any source, and most proponents of the Wirral location do not suggest this either.[24] That Constantine escaped quite clearly militates against any conclusive "boxing in". The Old English poem uses the phrase *mid fleame com/ on his cyþþe norð* 37b–38a, Constantine "came north to his homeland by flight", and was not prevented. It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what happened in and after the battle, to be sure, but a scenario which allowed the escape of the Norsemen by ship and the Scots and Strathclyders by land is not impossible to envisage, as will appear later.

The second assumption is that western Mercia was "tangential to the project's likely aim". This assumes that we know what the "project's likely aim" was and that this is a widely accepted understanding, ignored by any interpretation that puts the battle in the west. Given the frequent arguments put forward for York it is possible that the kingdom of Northumbria is assumed to be the goal of the coalition armies.[25] There are good reasons to doubt this last notion, not least the frequent indication in the sources that the Northumbrians and "the Danes in England" supported the coalition,[26] and thus that that goal was already implicitly achieved; and hence that this was not in all probability the "project's likely aim".[27] But we know that West Mercia was English territory, relatively unscathed by the Viking wars, rich and well-provided with religious buildings, on a direct route to Winchester and Athelstan's heartlands,[28] and for all the Alfredian fortifications, relatively vulnerable. Above all, if the coalition attacked in the west of England they would hurt and threaten Athelstan. This intention of damaging Athelstan surely can be agreed to be the "project's likely aim", whatever the geographical details. But Mercia would be a greater loss to him:

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[22]Bower, *Casebook*, 142–3; Boece, *Casebook*, 152–3.

[23]Bower, *Casebook*, 142–3; *Eulogium Historiarum*, *Casebook*, 132–3.

[24]Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, sees the retreat of the coalition armies as having taken place entirely in the Wirral, but does not subscribe to the idea that they were "boxed in".

[25]Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh," is insistent that "[the] goal … was presumably … the restoration of the kingdom of the Northumbrians in York," 142, and that Mercia was not significant, 142, 143.

[26]Texts in *Casebook* which mention the Northumbrians joining the coalition include William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, 58–9; Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, 60–1; Bartholomew of Cotton, *Historia Anglicana*, 82–3; Bower, *Scotichronicon*, 142–3; and *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, 152–3.

[27]Arguments against York are given at greater length in Cavill, "Yorkshire Hypothesis".

[28]Direct Roman roads include Margary, 6a, 6b, 6c, 6d, Chester to Gloucester, 41c, 41b 41a, Gloucester to Silchester, and 42a, Silchester to Winchester.

Athelstan could lose York, since he only ever tenuously held it; he could not lose Mercia, where he was first proclaimed king and where he was (probably) brought up.[29]

Once more, a Scottish source indicates that the battle did not take place in or around Northumbria or Cumbria. Hector Boece wrote of the aftermath of the battle,

> Athelstanus visus victoria in Northumbriam cum victricibus Anglorum copiis exemplo abiit: qua regione quia praesidio vacua facile occupata, arces omnes et oppida in fidem recepit. Nihil inde ibi moratus movit in Vestmariam Cambriamque. Incolae autem illuc venienti regi inermes …

> (When Athelstan saw the victory, he at once went away to Northumbria with his companies of victorious English; this region, since it was without a ruler, he occupied easily and received the fortresses and settlements into his peace. Without delay he moved on from there to Westmorland and Cumbria. The inhabitants gave themselves up unarmed to the king as he arrived …)[30]

Boece telescopes events from Athelstan's reign somewhat, but he indicates that the king *abiit* "went, departed" to Northumbria, and then *movit* "moved on" to Westmorland and Cumbria after the battle. So the battle was overwhelmingly likely to have taken place somewhere other than Northumbria or Cumbria, so far as Boece was concerned.

We do not have any reason to suppose that Constantine "boxed himself into" the Wirral, or that West Mercia was in any way tangential to the aim of the coalition forces. These topics are still disputed and such assumptions are unsafe.

Return by Sea and Necks in a Noose

Andrew Breeze is another writer who makes large assumptions about the battle and the flight from Brunanburh. He writes,

> Partisans of Bromborough will find it hard to explain […] the supposed return home by sea from Cheshire of a Scottish army in England: an occurrence with no parallel in medieval or later British history.

And later:

> By entering a peninsula off the road north, the Scots and Strathclyders would put their necks in a noose. Without marine transport, they would be trapped.[31]

Once again, it is helpful to isolate the assumptions that underpin these statements. The first is that the Scottish army fled by sea. As has been mentioned above, few "partisans of Bromborough" suggest this actually happened.[32] Breeze is relying here on John of Worcester, quoted in the *Historia Regum*, who wrote *et reges Anlafum et Constantinum ad naues fugere compellentes* "[Athelstan and Edmund] forced kings Anlaf and

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[29]The Mercian upbringing is according to William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, ed. Mynors, Thomson and Winterbottom, ii, 210–12; the Mercian Register in the C version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 924, ed. O'Brien O'Keeffe, records that Athelstan was *of Myrcum gecoren* "chosen by the Mercians" before being consecrated at Kingston. See further Foot, 11–12, 17–20. I am grateful to Andrew Williamson for the observation that Mercia was more important to Athelstan than was York in this context.

[30]*Casebook*, 150–1.

[31]Breeze, "Brunanburh Located," 67 and 71.

[32]At the time of Breeze's writing, there were none recent in the scholarly literature; now Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, has embraced the idea, but see further below for a critique.

Constantine to flee to ships". John was almost certainly mistaken on this, and pretty much universally thought to be so in modern criticism. But Breeze's idea is illogical anyway. "Without marine transport" assumes that the Dublin Norsemen would have refused their allies means of escape in a desperate situation when flight from the battlefield must have been paramount. The Norse escaped by ship; it is hardly likely that they would have refused "marine transport" to any isolated Scots at need. Moreover Breeze assumes that there were no other ships in the vicinity by which the Scots might escape if they had to: this on a peninsula where one is never more than four miles from navigable waters.[33]

The corollary, that a peninsula provides a wealth of opportunities for escape to ships, highlights the second mistaken assumption: that "by entering a peninsula off the road north, the Scots and Strathclyders would put their necks in a noose". The idea that anyone believes they had no strategy but to make themselves vulnerable and unable to defeat the English and then also unable to escape is nonsensical. It is clearly most plausible that the coalition forces had a strategy to defeat the English, and in the event, it is clear that they also had means of escape. That they would have been trapped presupposes not only that they could not escape, but that a small and much depleted English army would have been able to round up all the Scots, Strathclyders and Norsemen who fled towards the Scandinavian settlements, or the woods, or to the port of Meols, all enticingly in the west of the Wirral peninsula. The earliest sources make it clear that Athelstan did not even try this, wherever the battle took place; he did not choose, or more probably he did not have the capacity, to prevent escape of the surviving opponents by sea or by land. The *Annals of Ulster* and other sources record that *multitudo Saxonum cecidit* "a great number of Saxons died";[34] the battle was a climactic victory for Athelstan, but he probably had significant losses of his own.

A further assumption is that the men of Alba and the Strathclyders entered the peninsula in such a way as to be cut off by the English. Once again, the sources do not suggest this. The broad pattern is that after the battle the English went south by road, the Scots went north by road and the Norsemen went west by sea. This suggests that there was a place where the battle took place, *ymbe Brunanburh* "around Brunanburh", the epicentre, and that the enemy contingents fled in different directions, pursued for a day by the English. The best explanation for this pattern has been suggested by Dr William Pickin.[35] It is that the Norsemen lured the English into the Wirral, where they knew they, the Scandinavians, could escape by ship if necessary. The Scots and Strathclyders then followed behind the English in a pincer movement from the Roman road in the east where they knew they could escape on foot. The idea was that the English would be massacred and annihilated by the attack on two sides. This is eminently plausible as part of this phase of "the project's likely aim" (as McGuigan calls it), and it provides a coherent explanation for the different escape routes. In this scenario, the Wirral was only a potential noose for the English, and that they came out victorious justifies the rhetorical claim in the Old English poem that the coalition had no reason to rejoice that they were better in *beaduweorca* "battle-deeds" when they *plegodan* "played" against Edward's

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[33]It might be noted that Lanchester is seventeen miles from the sea as the crow flies, so too far for a day's flight to ships after a pitched battle.
[34]*Casebook*, 144–5.
[35]Personal communication; I am grateful to Dr Pickin for permission to use this idea.

sons, 48–52. The poem suggests that the coalition forces fully expected to boast and rejoice in victory (see below), but their expectations and strategies were defeated.

Arrival and Return from the Same Place

A more recent argument that places the battle on the Wirral may also be founded on assumptions that will not bear examination. Michael Livingston's recent work, *Never Greater Slaughter*, has much to recommend it, but again, seems to slip into interpretations that the sources will not support. After quoting the Old English poem lines 25–32, Livingston writes,

> There is no differentiation made here between the two armies. The enemies of the English — Scots and Vikings both — came with Anlaf over the sea. Their departure is likewise presented, as the poem treats the Scots and the Vikings as a single unified force, as "hated peoples" who are "hewed … harshly from behind" during their attempt to flee. After the poem describes the departure of Anlaf, who saved his life by taking to sea, it turns immediately to Constantine: "So there also" — *swa þær eac* — "the old one came in flight". Rather than distinguishing between their two flights, the poem situates them in the same place. After condemning Constantine and then Anlaf once more, the poet refers to "the remnant of their army", once more treating them as a unified force, before referring to the "the Northmen" … departing on Dingesmere. Nothing is said of an overland Scots retreat and the conclusion must be that with Constantine they joined the Vikings in this departure, which helps to explain how they were able to escape the carnage at all.[36]

The assertions here are that all the coalition forces arrived by ship, the Cumbrians, the Scots and the Irish Scandinavians, and the poem makes no distinction between them; and that they also fled from the same place, *Dingesmere*, as they arrived at, in their ships.

The argument starts from the notion that the unusually large number of ships that the *Historia Regum* and Symeon of Durham record in the fleet, 615, might be a reflection of the combination of Scots and Cumbrians having their own ships and joining the fleet of the Scandinavians.[37] But the reading of the Old English poem in support of this notion here is rather eccentric. Lines 20–32 report the flight of the coalition armies, chased by the West Saxons and Mercians. It lists the dead, the five kings, seven generals of Anlaf, and a great host of the army, both sailors and Scots. But even in that list, it clearly distinguishes between the forces: the generals (and possibly the kings) are Anlaf's men; the dead included men of noticeably different origins, *flotena and Sceotta* "of sailors and Scots" (32a). The Scots are not sailors according to this, just as they are not *guma(n) norþerna* "northern warrior(s)" (18b) or *Norþmen* "Northmen" (53b). In addition, the Mercians, we are told, "did not refuse hard battle-play to any warrior of those who came with Anlaf", and the form of the pronoun and relative in line 26, *þara þe* "of those who" sought land with Anlaf, might be thought to imply that there were other warriors, those who had not sought land with Anlaf.[38] The syntax

[36]Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 140–1.

[37]See Downham, "How Big was Brunanburh?", for a (necessarily inconclusive) discussion of the numbers; Hart, *Danelaw*, is perhaps a little too severe: "Compared with the sizes of other fleets of the period reported in the A[nglo–]S[axon] C [hronicle] and elsewhere, this figure appears to be inflated to at least ten times the likely maximum number of ships", 517 note 13.

[38]The A Chronicle has the simple form of the relative, *þæ*, "to none of the warriors who sought land with Anlaf … "; see Campbell's note, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, 106.

furthermore implies a new sense-unit at line 28b: the focus shifts from the Mercians fighting those who arrived with Anlaf (24b–8a), to those who lay dead after the battle (28b–32a).

The separate kinds of departure of the defeated is actually rather carefully distinguished. Anlaf's departure in a single ship is depicted in lines 32b–6. The persistent singular verbs is a feature that has been noted before,[39] and one might also note the scorn that the flight of a leader attracts in the Chronicle and elsewhere.[40] Then it turns to Constantine, with the phrase *Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com / on his cyþþe norð* "likewise there also the old man came north by flight to his homeland". Livingston's assumption seems to be that the phrase *swa* [*recte: swilce*] *þær eac* means that Constantine also went by ship because the same place is indicated by *þær*. Adverbial *þær* simply means that they fled from the battlefield: it occurs three times in the poem, 17b, 32b and 37a and each time it refers to the place where the main action takes place, around Brunanburh. But as has been noted before *fleam* "flight" normally refers to escape by land rather than by water;[41] and the phrase clearly implies that Constantine fled, as did Anlaf, and does not at all imply that he fled by the same means. The poem has the same phrase just a few lines later: after dealing with the flight of the Norsemen to Dublin by ship, the poem has,

> … eft Ira land, æwiscmode
> Swilce þa gebroþer begen ætsamne,
> cyning and æþeling, cyþþe sohton,
> Wesseaxena land, wiges hremge. (57–9)
> ([The Northmen] went back to Ireland humiliated. Likewise, the brothers, the king and the prince both together, sought their homeland, the land of the West Saxons, exulting in war.)

Clearly the English brothers did not go by ship, did not go to Ireland and were not humiliated, and none of this is implied by *swilce*. They "likewise" went back home, but in very different fashion and in very different mood from Constantine and the others. It is not at all improbable that the phrase *begen ætsamne* "both together", referring to the unity of Athelstan and his brother, is a sarcastic reference to the disunity of the opposing kings and to the failure of kin-ties when Constantine left his son behind.[42]

Furthermore, the central section of the poem makes repeated play by litotes on the coalition leaders' expectations of the outcome of the battle. Constantine "had no reason to exult" (39b) because he lost and left his son on the battlefield; he "had no reason to boast" (44b) on that count. Neither he nor Anlaf, nor "the remnants of their army" (47a), "had any reason to rejoice" (47b) that they bettered the sons of Edward in battle-deeds. In this passage the focus is first on Constantine, but then it widens to the two leaders and the combined forces, who were soundly beaten. Then in a new sentence the poem goes on to recount the departure of the Norsemen on *Dingesmere* back to Ireland. The subject changes from Anlaf first fleeing; then Constantine; then the coalition armies and Constantine; then the *Norþmen*; then the English royal brothers leaving for home. At every stage, the Old English poem makes clear distinctions between the fates

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[39]Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", *Casebook*, 338 note 38, and see below.
[40]For example, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, note the bitter comments about Ealdormen Ælfric and Eadric, 992, 1003, and 1015, 1016; and the leaders Fræna, Godwine and Frythegyst in 993.
[41]Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", *Casebook*, 338 note 39.
[42]See Cavill, "Rhetoric of *Brunanburh*".

and returns of the different personnel. There are some similarities: lots of the coalition army men lay dead, Scandinavians and Scots; all parties returned home. But the differences between the returns home are especially marked.

A plausible strategy that accounts for the different departures is outlined above. But Livingston makes the common assumption, dealt with further below, that the Northmen (or in his view, the survivors of the whole coalition army) left from the same place and in the same ships as they arrived. He argues for the Poulton area on the Mersey coast of the Wirral as the place the ships arrived, and this is by no means improbable for the arrival. But he mounts an argument against the interpretation of *Dingesmere* as "wetland of the Thing" based on the assumption that this was the name of the place where the ships arrived.[43] "[T]he Dee estuary is a profoundly ill-advised place to harbour an invasion fleet", he remarks, and goes into great detail as to why that might be so and thus not the site of *Dingesmere*. He argues that "[f]rom a linguistic point of view, we should expect that [*Dingesmere*] means a pool or body of water: standing water, not a sometime-marshy coastline", and goes on to identify Wallasey Pool as *Dingesmere*.[44] The linguistic arguments for the meaning of *mere* "wetland" in place-names have been made elsewhere and do not need to be repeated here.[45] But Livingston's whole argument depends on the idea that the Northmen departed from the same place as where they arrived. The salient fact is that the poem does not say anything of the sort, nor indeed do any of the early sources. The Northmen *left* on *Dingesmere*, and the poem has no information on or (imaginably) interest in where they arrived:

> Gewitan him þa Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
> dreorig daraða laf on Dingesmere (54–5)
> (The Norsemen, dreary survivors of the spears, left in nailed ships on *Dingesmere*.)

The articles discussing *Dingesmere* suggest that the name itself would have been recognised as indicating a place unsuitable for the normal purposes of landing and embarkation, and thus the necessity to leave from there indicates the desperation of the escaping forces.[46]

The argument is later developed by Livingston that all the coalition forces retreated back to Wallasey Pool where it is assumed they had originally arrived: "the only route they knew was the route they had taken; flight in any other direction meant plunging into unknown territory with uncertain dangers".[47] If they had all arrived by ship, this might be logical, since Scots and Cumbrians might not have detailed knowledge of the geography of the Wirral. That would rather make their separate retreat, north via the Roman roads into Cumbria, friendly territory just north of the Wirral, as argued above, eminently sensible. But some of the men from Dublin very plausibly had a good grasp of the geography of the Wirral, since the trading routes between Wirral and Dublin were long established. Presumably this would have informed their choice of where to land in the first place if it was on the Wirral. Scandinavian settlers in the

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[43]The interpretation of *Dingesmere* as "wetland of the Thing" is advanced in Cavill, Harding and Jesch, and further refined in Cavill, "Coming Back to *Dingesmere*".

[44]Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 144–5.

[45]Cavill, Harding and Jesch, 32–6, Cavill, "Coming Back to *Dingesmere*," 35–8.

[46]Cavill, Harding and Jesch, 36, "For those who understood the name and were familiar with the area, this name was used to emphasise the desperation of the fugitives, in that they had to depart as best they could from an unsuitable place".

[47]Livingston, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 175.

Wirral a generation or two earlier than Brunanburh are known not only from the Ingimund legends, but from place-names.[48] Moreover, the sources indicate that there was a good deal of manoeuvring before the climactic battle, which would familiarise the invaders with the local territory. Indeed, the pursuit by the West Saxons and Mercians after the battle is unlikely to have been of a united force to a single place as an army fleeing in one direction could presumably regroup; the disunity of the coalition forces is likely to have been one of the reasons for the English victory.

There are reasons for the Wirral location of the battle to be preferred, and Livingston makes good arguments for that location. But the assumptions discussed above do not accurately represent the evidence we have in one of the main sources, and the earliest, the poem on Brunanburh. The Old English poem makes distinctions between the different cohorts of the coalition forces. And the idea that those forces all came by ship to the same place and left from that place in the original ships is supported neither by evidence nor logic. This last point needs further discussion.

The Humber, Return to Their Ships and Return to Dublin

Michael Wood is very specific about the arrival and departure of the Scandinavian forces. He writes,

> Dodgson … suggested the place of embarkation could have been different from the place where they first landed, but this is improbable.[49] If the invaders landed in the Humber, they cannot have left from the Dee. When Anlaf set off on the journey back to Dublin, one would have thought that he did so from the place where he had left his ships at the start of the campaign. Our only clear statement on this says this was in the Humber.[50]

This largely repeats the argument from his earlier article:

> The suggestion that the invaders embarked at a point completely different from that of their landing … cannot be accepted. If their fleet entered the Humber they can hardly have escaped from the Dee. No reliance can be placed on the OE poem's account of their flight. The poet may not have known how the various elements of the coalition made their way home, and he portrays their return in general and poetic terms. If the fleet landed in the Humber, as is most likely, then it will have returned via Scotland, and the notice of its arrival at Dublin early in 938 would support this (*Annals of Ulster* I 457).[51]

The assumptions here are more rational and rather better supported than some of the earlier examples. Nevertheless there are assumptions, which include the ideas that ships cannot move from where they first landed and that the escape must have been from that place of first landing; that men could not be cut off from their ships and that there were no other ships by which they might contrive to escape; that the Old English poem is not to be trusted and is vague about the retreat, and that John of Worcester is to be relied upon for this information; and that the escaping Norse fleet landed in Dublin via Scotland in 938. These ideas need to be considered further.

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[48]See, for example, Dodgson, "Background", Coates, 365–83, Harding.
[49]Wood's reference here is to Dodgson, "Background", 68.
[50]Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh", 149–50.
[51]Wood, "Brunanburh Revisited", 215 note 40.

It is convenient to treat the last of these proposals first. Wood reconstructs the events as follows:

> [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. As we have seen, Anlaf's return to Dublin early in 938, recorded by the contemporary *Annals of Ulster*, might support such a late date.[52]

And again,

> Guthfrithson escaped with his ships from the Humber northwards, perhaps wintering in Scotland, hence his return noted in spring 938, perhaps as much as three or four months after the battle.[53]

The view that the *Annals of Ulster* supports the notion that the fleet that (might have) landed in the Humber returned via Scotland and arrived in Dublin in 938 has been challenged on two grounds. First, there is no particular reason for an exit via the Humber to take several months to reach Dublin. Even relatively late in the year, such a journey would need to take no more than two or three weeks, and the imperative for the Northmen to return to Dublin noted in the Old English poem would have been strong. Secondly, the *Annals of Ulster* do not record the return of the fleet in 938, but only the return of Anlaf:

> 938. §5. Amhlaiph m. Gothfrith i nAth Cliath iterum
> (938. §5. Amlaíb [Anlaf] son of Gothfrith in Áth Cliath [Dublin] again.)

The *Annals* strongly support the Old English poem's suggestion that Anlaf escaped with a few men separately from the majority of the surviving Norsemen:

> 937. §6. Bellum ingens … gestum est, in quo plurima milia Nordmannorum que non numerata sunt, ceciderunt, sed rex cum paucis euassit, .i. Amlaiph
> (937. §6. A great battle was fought … in which many thousands of Norsemen beyond counting died; but the king, that is Anlaf, escaped with a few men.)

No mention is made in this source of the Humber, Scotland, or the fleet; and indeed no mention is made of a delayed Norse return, nor a Norse return via Scotland to Dublin, in any of the sources, including the Scottish ones which might have had independent traditions and an interest in such an eventuality.

There is, however, a Norman tradition that Anlaf went to Denmark after the battle. Langtoft, translating John of Worcester, adds to his source:

> Kant le rays Anlaphe avait perdu sa gent,
> il mesmes a grant payne passa del thorment;
> vers Danemarche s'en va al sigle et la vent.
> (When King Anlaf had lost his forces, he himself escaped with great difficulty from the conflict; he goes to Denmark, by wind and sail.)[54]

Robert Mannyng continues his account of the flight,

[52]Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh", 146.
[53]Ibid., 149.
[54]Langtoft, *Casebook*, 94; my translation.

> At the last, to ther schippes the kyng gan tham chace,
> alle away thei fled, that was of Godes grace,
> bot the most partie algate was slayn;
> that with the life fled, I trowe thei were fulle fayn.
> Whan the Kyng Anlaf sauh his folk lorn,
> he fled unto Danmark ther there he was born.
>
> (In the end, the king (Athelstan) began to chase them to their ships; it was by God's grace they fled away, but most of them were completely slaughtered. Those who fled away alive I imagine were well pleased. When King Anlaf saw his people had lost, he fled to Denmark where he was born.)[55]

This is interesting and not implausible. The Old English poem reports the departure of Anlaf with a small company separately from the larger departure of the shreds of his army to Dublin. Evidently Langtoft and Mannyng, and very plausibly the *Annals of Ulster*, understood the two departures to have had temporarily different destinations.[56]

The other main points asserted by Wood and others, that the place of departure for the fleeing forces was the same as that of arrival, and that John of Worcester is more reliable than the Old English poem can now be discussed. It was normal in the Viking wars for a raiding force to return to ships. But the campaign that culminated in Brunanburh was not a raid. An army of considerable size such as that of the coalition forces (whether or not one believes the 615 ships or other guesses at the numbers[57]) would need to be deployed quickly and widely: an army travels on its stomach, and to remain within reach of the ships would be a burden on the people and production of any locality as well as being completely pointless in terms of the larger objectives of the campaign. There is a persistent tradition that the army did in fact deploy far into England, and that Athelstan was rather slow in responding.[58] Another tradition from Scotland, recorded by Boece, mentions the preparations for land invasion:

> Naviter ergo et Scoti et Dani comparare quae in bello gerendo usui forent, frumentum ingens, iumentorum carroquibus arma ac commeatus veherentur, quam maximum numerum.
>
> (And thus both Scots and Danes diligently assembled the things that were useful in warfare, huge amounts of grain, and the largest possible number of drawing beasts and carts with which weapons and supplies were to be transported.)[59]

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[55]Mannyng, *Casebook*, 130, my translation.

[56]The vagaries of manuscript survival have left us with earlier manuscripts of Langtoft than of the *Annals of Ulster*. London, British Library, MS Cotton Julius A.v of Langtoft's *Chronique* is from the early fourteenth century: see Wright, ed., *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft in French Verse* … The best and earliest manuscript of the *Annals* is Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 1282 of the mid-fifteenth century, see Ó Corráin and Cournan, ed., *The Annals of Ulster: An Electronic Edition*. It is widely accepted that early material is present in the *Annals*. It is not known where Langtoft got his tradition about Denmark from: it not in his principal source, John of Worcester, nor in the *Historia Regum* which he also knew; it might have been his own idea or local tradition (Langtoft, the place, is in East Yorkshire, and some legends about the Scandinavians may have circulated there). But the manuscript preservation, where Langtoft is earlier than the *Annals* might be taken as a partial corrective to any chronological value judgement and preference for one rather than the other.

[57]The number of ships originated in the *Historia Regum*, *Casebook*, 64–65, but Langtoft, among others, inflates it to 715; see above for doubts expressed about the accuracy of the numbers.

[58]The poem in William of Malmesbury, *Casebook*, 58–59, is the first to make the point about the sluggishness of Athelstan's response, and see above for the endorsement of Bower and Boece for the deployment into England.

[59]Boece, *Casebook*, 148–51

Where the fleet landed, then, is in some sense irrelevant, since the army staying near it would not threaten Athelstan, but merely render the attackers ineffective. In a large-scale campaign, such as this one was, it would be perfectly possible for an army that landed in the Humber (improbable though I believe that to be) to range over the north of England and Mercia and to engage in battle on the Wirral. It might be noted that a Viking army did something similar in 893: the Essex Vikings collected a large army and went from their base there to Chester on the Wirral.[60] Such an event would mean that the Irish Scandinavian contingent escaped from Brunanburh in ships that they did not first land in, but that is not implausible, as will become clear.

In the Viking wars, ships often moved with the land army in support of the offensive and as transport for the booty and supplies that were captured. One of King Alfred's persistent concerns was how to neutralise the threat of ships and the mobility of the armies. Alfred deployed ships and designed his own ships, built riverbank fortresses, besieged camps, even dammed the river Lea to obstruct the free movement of his enemies.[61] Many of the military disasters of Æthelred's reign were related to ineffective use of ships or failure to neutralise the use of ships by his enemies.[62] In addition to the probability that the invading armies ranged widely, it is also probable that Athelstan's strategy would be to neutralise the threat of the ships the Norse contingent came in if that was likely to be an issue.

According to the sources generally, a remnant of the Scandinavian contingent escaped by ships back to Dublin. There is no specific reason to suppose that these were the ships they came in, or that the men retraced their steps to the original place they landed, whether in the Humber or elsewhere. In the Old English poem, they escaped on a stretch of water called *Dingesmere*, a place that the name itself suggests to be less than ideal for sailing, and which has not been convincingly identified anywhere near the Humber and has been largely ignored by Wood.[63] It has been suggested that this water was the estuary of the Dee on the Wirral.[64] If so, then the proximity of Meols and an established maritime trading route to Ireland would suggest that there were likely to be ships available for escape.[65] If the original force landed somewhere in the Mersey or Ribble, again on familiar trading routes from Ireland, some of the ships might have sailed round the Wirral to the Dee to aid the escape of fugitives from the battle. It is, then, entirely possible that some, if not most or all, of the ships in which the Norsemen escaped were not the ones they came in, and almost certain that they escaped at a place, *Dingesmere*, different from where they landed. [66]

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[60]Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (894 in C and D).

[61]These activities are documented for example in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 895 (896 Cand D).

[62]See, for example, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1004 (C, D, E), where the English failed to destroy Swein's ships as ordered; and 1009 (C, D, E), where ships were wrecked and too quickly abandoned.

[63]Wood, "Searching for Brunanburh", 143, writes, "the supplement to the Bosworth-Toller dictionary was correct in suggesting *dingesmere* as a poetic term for 'the loud sounding sea'", but the reader will find no such suggestion in Bosworth-Toller, either in the main part or the Supplement.

[64]Cavill, Harding and Jesch, and Cavill, "Coming Back to *Dingesmere*".

[65]Griffiths, especially 40–44.

[66]See, for example, the reconstruction suggested by Higham, 155. My own view is rather different, but Higham clearly articulates the ideas that the fugitives might have been cut off from the original fleet, that the ships the fugitives fled in might have been different from those they came in, and that Meols and the trading routes might have great potential importance. If there were men left guarding the original ships, as one might imagine, Livingston's observation, *Never Greater Slaughter*, 142, that "a crew of only half-a-dozen experienced hands" could man a ship which could carry about a hundred men, makes plausible some means of escape in some of the original ships, but from a different place.

The claim that the Old English poem is vague and "poetic" about the retreat, and hence "not to be trusted" has already in large part been refuted. An element of vagueness is to be expected, since the retreat was apparently disorderly, but the detail is significant and very largely agreed by other sources. Wood prefers John of Worcester's account, which specifies the landing in the Humber and the flight of Anlaf and Constantine by ship. The other details are taken from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tradition – the name Brunanburh, the day-long battle, the death of five kings and seven generals and greater bloodshed than previous battles. Wood takes the particular elements of John's account (Humber entry, Anlaf and Constantine fleeing by ship) to be more reliable than the Old English poem.

There has been a good deal of dispute about John's independent information. John gives his independent information in one sentence:

> [937] Hiberniensium multarumque insularum rex paganus Anlafus, a socero suo rege Scottorum Constantino incitatus, ostium Humbre fluminis ualida cum classe ingreditur.

> ([937]. Anlaf, the pagan king of the Irish and of many other islands, incited by his father-in-law Constantine, king of the Scots, entered the mouth of the River Humber with a strong fleet.)[67]

Clare Downham remarks that the relationship specified by John between the kings of Scots and Scandinavians, father-in-law and son-in-law, "cannot be relied upon", and suggests that the marriage links were a generation or two earlier than Constantine and Anlaf.[68] There were links between the dynasties of Constantine and Anlaf as Anlaf's "predecessor and namesake, Óláfr inn hviti of Dublin, was married to a daughter of Cináed mac Alpin back in the 870s",[69] but if this marriage existed, it is not confirmed elsewhere, and it no longer existed by 940 when Anlaf was noted by Roger of Wendover to be married to Aldgyth, Anglo-Danish daughter of Jarl Ormr.[70]

The Humber entry account has been much discussed, and the detail need not be recapitulated here. But John's readers will note that he had a formulaic habit of writing, and as well as confusing names, he not only observes patterns of behaviour, but writes about them in repeated formulaic expressions. The Humber entry has been noted to be very similar to the Humber entry of Tostig and his fleet in 1066,[71] but the frequency of John's use of the formula "(the pagans) entered the mouth of (river name)" as a prelude to invasion or raiding, is remarkable. There are more than twenty examples before the Norman Conquest (and many later) in his history:[72]

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[67]*Casebook*, 56–7. Downham, "Wirral Location," 21, analyses the passage and suggests that "John added details of Olaf's arrival and departure from the conflict, based on his own deductions".
[68]Downham, *Viking Kings*, 50.
[69]Smyth, II, 79.
[70]Ibid., I, 395–6.
[71]See for example, critiques of the Humber entry in Higham, 144 note 6; Woolf, 171; Cavill, "Place-Name Debate", *Casebook*, 337–9. But the parallels cited do not fully represent John's habitual usage, as outlined below. Downham, "Wirral Location," 23, briefly notes John's habit of giving riverine locations for events, not all of them geographically accurate: she concludes, "a similar level of geographical naivety could have led to the invasion of Northumbria in 937 to be linked with the Humber, regardless of accuracy".
[72]Darlington and McGurk, ed. *John of Worcester*. The dates are from this edition: the river names are noted with the page-numbers. Translations are superfluous here, since the formula is so regularly employed without significant variation in meaning.

851   in ostium Tamesis fluminis uenit (Thames, 264)
884   Sunne fluminis ostium intrans (Somme, 318)
885   ad ostium Sture fluminis venissent (Stour, 320)
886   in ostium fluminis quod dicitur Sequana intrans (Seine, 324)
887   ad ostium fluminis quod Mæterne nominatur peruenisset (Marne, 324)
        in ostium fluminis Meaterne deuertunt (Marne, 324)
893   in ostio amnis Limene … applicuit (Lympne, 338)
915   Sabrine fluminis ostium ingrediuntur (Severn, 370)
993   ad ostium Humbre fluminis cursum suum dirigens (Humber, 442)
997   ostium Sabrine fluminis intrauit (Severn, 446)
        in ostium fluminis Tamere (Tamar, 446)
998   ostium fluminis quod Frome dicitur appulsus (Frome, 448)
999   ostium Tamensis fluminis ingressus (Thames, 448)
1001   ostium fluminis Eaxe ingreditur (Exe, 450)
1013   ostium Humbre flumins intrauit (Humber, 472)
1015   ostium Frome fluminis introiuit (Frome, 480)
1049   ostium intrantes Sabrine (Irish pirates in the Severn, 550)
1052   ostium Sabrine nauibus multis intrantes (Severn, 566)
1066   in ostio Tine fluminis improuise applicuit (Tyne, 602)
        ostium Humbre fluminis intrauerunt (Humber, 602)

John's account of the Humber entry, *rex paganus Anlafus … ostium Humbre fluminis ualida cum classe ingreditur* clearly follows this pattern. Since invading fleets of pagans landed in river mouths,[73] John had only to supply a (to him) likely river name to complete the formula, since he knew there was a fleet, and it had to have landed somewhere.

But close reading of John's tradition exposes more assumptions that are made by proponents of the Humber account. Despite his view that the fleet entered the mouth of the Humber, John does not claim either that the battle took place near the Humber, or within a day's ride of the Humber, or anything of the sort. He gives the abbreviated details of the battle and its aftermath ultimately from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, with his version of how Anlaf and Constantine escaped. There is no immediate connection between the first sentence quoted above, and the next:

> Cui rex Æthelstanus fraterque suus clito Eadmundus in loco qui dicitur Brunanburh cum exercitu occurrerunt
>
> (King Athelstan and his brother Prince Edmund opposed him with an army at the place called Brunanburh.)

The connection (*Cui*) is the focus on Anlaf. But the information in the two sentences clearly came from different sources (the Chronicle here, and the introductory sentence from another, possibly John's imagination or reconstruction),[74] and John does not necessarily see Brunanburh as related to the place the ships (might have) landed. John makes no attempt to assimilate the two pieces of information: that is left to Langtoft and later writers adapting John's work for their own purposes. Langtoft is the first to refer to *a Bruneburge sur Humbre* "at Brunanburh on the Humber".[75]

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[73] Working on this assumption, Edward the Elder stationed troops from Cornwall *ad ostium fluminis Auene* (Avon, 370) in 915.

[74] Downham, "Wirral Location", has given compelling reasons for doubting Wood's insistence, "Searching for Brunanburh", 147, that John and other, later, northern writers, got this information independently from "a set of tenth-century northern annals from York".

[75] Langtoft, *Casebook*, 94–5.

John does not claim that the ships by means of which Anlaf and Constantine fled were the ones either of them (in his account) came in. This might at first sight seem an insignificant point. But the fact is that not one of the early sources asserts that the fleeing Norsemen or Scots, Anlaf or Constantine, returned to the Humber or went back to their ships. That this information is habitually supplied by translators and commentators points up how easy it is to make the assumption. The Old English poem, as has been suggested above, gives at least some cause for suspecting that the ships the Norsemen fled in were not their own. In John of Worcester we see *reges Anlafum et Constantinum ad naues fugere compellentes* "Kings Anlaf and Constantine were forced to flee to ships"; William of Malmesbury does not mention ships; Henry of Huntingdon has *Cum paucis uero in maris fluctus rex naui prouectus intrinsecus gemebat* "with only a few men sailing by ship on the sea-waves, the king mourned within", and later, *Normanni nauibus clauatis et Anlaf tabefactus ultra profundum flumen terras suas mesto animo repetissent* "the Norsemen in nailed ships and a subdued Anlaf had returned over the deep flood to their own lands in low spirits".[76] The Latin writers loved patterns and contrasts as appears in Henry of Huntingdon's *Nec enim paucos … Cum paucis uero* "Not a few [went] .. with only a few [Anlaf returned]". It would have been difficult to resist the pattern "*[the Norsemen] returned to their ships … [the English] returned to their lands", but the first phrase here never occurs.

In the later Viking wars the pattern was that the marauders attacked and then returned to their ships, often carrying off booty. John's accounts of these activities are as formulaic as his descriptions of the arrival of ships: he specifies over twenty times that the attackers returned to their ships. In every case the verb has the prefix *re-*, except for two examples in 885 and 1016, and in these two instances, his phrase contains *suas* "their" to specify whose ships they returned to. In most cases there is both a verb specifying a return, and a possessive pronoun specifying that the marauders return to *their* ships:[77]

860	ad naues cum ingenti predi reuerterentur (returning to [their] ships with great booty, 276–7)
885	ad naues suas confestim confugiunt (fled to their ships in haste, 318–19)
915	ad naues turpiter refugerant ([those who] shamefully took refuge in [their] ships, 37071)
997	ad naues repedauit (returned to [their] ships, 446–7)
1001	naues repetierunt … (returned to [their] ships, 450–1)
1003	cum ingenti preda naues repetiit ([Swein returned to [his] ships with great booty, 454–5)
	suas naues repetiit (he returned to their ships, 454–5)
1004	ad naues repedantibus (as they were returning to [their] ships, 456–7)
	nullo modo naues suas repeterent ([if the East Anglians had been at full force] they would certainly not have returned to their ships, 456–5)
1006	ad naues solito repedabant (returned to their ships, as was their custom, 458–9)
	ad naues repedarunt (returned to [their] ships, 458–9)
1009	naues repetentes (returning to [their] ships, 462–3)
	preda … qua suas ad naues reuersuri erant (booty with which they returned to their ships, 462–63)
1010	ad suas repedarunt naues (returned to their ships, 464–65)
	ad naues suas cum ingenti preda regressi sunt (went back to their ships with immense booty, 466–67)
	suas ad naues … reuersi sunt (returned to their ships, 466–67)
1013	ad suam classem reuersus ([Swein returned to his fleet, 474–75)
1016	suas cum omni exercitu naues repetiit (returned to his ships with his entire army, 483–85)

[76]Henry of Huntingdon, *Casebook,* 62–3.
[77]Once again, the text is Darlington and McGurk, *John of Worcester.* The dates are from this edition, as also are the translations; the page-numbers are with translations in parentheses. Where personal pronouns are supplied in the translations with no Latin equivalent, these are enclosed in square brackets.

      ad naues repedauit (returned to [his] ships again, 488–89)
      Danos ad suas naues fugauit (sent the Danes back to their ships in flight, 488–89)
      ad naues redeunt (went back to [their] ships, 488–89)
      ad naues repedant (returned to [their] ships, 490–91)
      suas ad naues redierunt (returned to their ships, 492–93)
1052   ad naues cum preda rediit (he returned to [his] ships with booty, 566–67)
1066   ad naues repedarunt (returned to [their own] ships, 602–03)

This clear and repeated patterning of language makes the phrase John uses about the flight of Anlaf and Constantine stand out by its absence:

> reges Anlafum et Constantinum ad naues fugere compellentes, magno reuersi sunt tripudio

> (They forced Anlaf and Constantine to flee to ships, and [Æthelstan and Edmund] then returned home with great rejoicing.)

Anlaf and Constantine did not "return" but were forced to flee to ships; and not "their" ships, but ships of a kind unspecified (and in the Old English poem specified only by the term *cnear*).[78] Athelstan and Edmund, by contrast, returned home rejoicing.

    Simply because John is so consistent in his use of the formula of "*returning* to *their* ships", we are alerted to the strong likelihood that John intended his readers to understand that the Scandinavian forces were cut off from their ships and had to return by whatever vessels they could find. The corollary is that while John thought the fleet came via the Humber, he did not necessarily think the same fleet left. Indeed, no early source refers to the Scandinavians "*returning* to *their* ships". Robert Mannyng in the fourteenth century, translating Langtoft,[79] is the first to make this assumption; he records the retreating forces returning to their ships after the battle, "At the last, to ther shippes the kyng gan tham chace".[80] Robert's immediate source, Langtoft, does not make this assumption, following John of Worcester more closely:

> Le rays Adelstan les ij. rays enschascait;
> chescun en sa terre enfauaunt s'en vayt.
> (King Athelstan chased the two kings; each one went in flight to his own land.)[81]

A closer reading of John of Worcester raises significant questions about the assumptions that Wood makes about the battle and the escape of the coalition forces.[82]

Conclusion

When analysed in the light of the detailed evidence, a very different picture emerges of the events of 937 from those assumed by many of the commentators. While some details remain uncertain, precision is of course imperative if we are to arrive at an accurate interpretation of the sources. And it becomes necessary not only to trace the dependence of present-day writers on assumptions about the sources, but also to be clear as to what the sources actually assert.

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[78]See Cavill, "Ships and *Brunanburh*" for fuller consideration of the significance of this term.
[79]Mannyng had various sources, but Langtoft was the principal one, *Casebook*, 227.
[80]Mannyng, *Casebook*, 130.
[81]Langtoft, *Casebook*, 94, my translation.
[82]For a fuller treatment of these issues based on close examination of the earliest sources, see further Cavill, "Yorkshire Hypothesis".

If we now put the evidence together, it becomes clear that arguments attempting to undermine a coastal location for the battle, and in particular the Wirral, are based on unfounded assumptions. None of the sources mention horsemen in relation to the battle; not one of the sources rules out a coastal location for the battle. Arguments for a Wirral location do not assume that the coalition forces "boxed themselves in" or "put their heads in a noose". West Mercia should not be assumed to be tangential to the goals of the invaders. Few people imagine that the coalition forces all arrived and escaped by ship. The assumption that the Old English poem makes no distinctions between the different invading cohorts is not based on accurate interpretation of the text; and nor indeed is the idea that they all arrived at and fled from *Dingesmere*. The assumption then that if the coalition arrived in the Humber, they must have departed in their own ships from the Humber does not bear examination. John of Worcester, assumed to be more reliable source than the Old English poem, himself does not hint at this, but neither do any of the early sources. And the repeated assumption that Anlaf and his men escaped at the same time and in their own ships and returned to Dublin via Scotland in 938 is specifically avoided by early and late sources.

In the process of the argument here a suggestion is made for the strategy of the battle and the departure of the defeated that is congruent with most of the sources and resolves many of the difficulties that writers have imputed to the theory locating the battle on the Wirral. No doubt there will be objections to that theory, and to the arguments mounted here; but they should be articulated in a rigorous fashion that shows that they are based on evidence and not on assumption.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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