

Brunanburh

A discussion document. Comments welcome.

The battle of [Brunanburh](#) was fought by the West Saxon king Athelstan and his brother Edmund against a coalition of Scots, Strathclyde Britons, and Dublin Norsemen in the year 937. The English won and wrote it up as a 73-line [poem](#) in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. That battle has been much discussed, because it “was the mother of all dark-age bloodbaths and would define the shape of Britain into the modern era”, but no one is certain where it happened. For an extended discussion of possible locations see [Cavill \(2014\)](#) and [Harding \(2012\)](#) for a Powerpoint-slides version. Those two authors both strongly support a location on the Wirral, which is almost certainly wrong. [Starkey \(2023\)](#) advocates a different location in the west of England, Wigan, and provides a convenient list of all the main sources.

The present document is prompted by a description of the battle in **Egil’s Saga** (manuscript from 1240, Old Norse text available [here](#)), whose section 52 names the site of the battle as *Vínheiði við Vínuskóga*, plus later *til Vínheiðar*. This led [Bjornhardsson \(2020\)](#) to suggest a location at Hunwick, near Binchester (Roman *Vinovia*), which [Starkey \(2021\)](#) tried to refute on the grounds of dating, until [Bjornhardsson \(2022\)](#) used his Icelandic knowledge to explain why that dating logic is wrong.

I have not read far enough into Icelandic sagas to know what to believe, beyond suspecting that [Bosworth-Toller](#) (1898) long ago solved the problem with “I think it was on the west of Durham”. The Roman main road to Scotland crossed the river Browney (Brune in 1190) there, in an area full of modern names such Brandon, Brancepeth, and Broompark. [Breeze \(2020\)](#) argues that the specific location was close to Lanchester (Roman *Lincovigla*).

The present document originally discussed some issues about names, which may have since been cleared up, but it is worth keeping these bits.

One key source seems to be **Simeon (or Symeon) of Durham** (who wrote between 1104 and 1129). His works translated into English in 1855 by Stevenson are posted [online](#) by Google:-

“AD 937 King Ethelstan fought at **Wendune** and put to flight king Onlaf with six hundred and fifteen ships. Also Constantine king of the Scots and the king of the Cumbrians, with all their host.” (in *History of the Kings of England*, page 482).

“in the year nine hundred and thirty-seven of our Lord’s nativity, Ethelstan fought at **Weardune** (which is called by another name, **Aet-Brunnanwerc** or **Brunnanbyrig**) against Onlaf the son of Guthred, the late king, who had arrived with a fleet of six hundred and fifteen ships, supported by the auxiliaries of the kings recently spoken of, that is to say of the Scots and Cumbrians. But trusting in the protection of St. Cuthbert, he slew a countless multitude of these people, drove those kings out of his realm ...”
(in *History of the Church of Durham*, page 669).

A key part of Simeon’s Latin text, is quoted by [Halloran](#) (2010) as *apud Weondune quod alio nomine Etbrunnanwerc vel Brunnanbyrig*. A small correction to *AetBrunnanwerc* seems to be generally agreed, but there seems to be no unanimity about whether *Weondune* should also be corrected to *Wendune*. Halloran favoured *Wen-*, and interprets that as like the English word *wen* ‘excrescence’, potentially applicable to a hill. Alternatively, *weon* could be an oblique case of Old English *weoh/wig/wih* ‘shrine, idol’; see *English place-name elements* (Smith 1956, 2, 254). Parallels to *Weondune* may then include [Weedon](#) (*Weodune* in 1040) near Aylesbury, [Weedon Bec](#) near Daventry, and [Wokefield](#) (*Weonfelda* in 950) near Reading. All these are near Roman roads and have evidence of early habitation, such as a cluster of tumuli and earthworks north of Silchester, but now no obvious sign of the heathen

shrine supposed to have led to their names. [Shincliffe](#) near Durham is a possible calque translation of *Weondune*, based on OE *scin* ‘evil spirit’.

There seems to be no difficulty in translating *skóga* as ‘wood’, because Old Norse *skogr* ‘wood’ survived into Middle English as *scogh*, *scow*, etc. And translating *heiði* as ‘heath’ seems reasonable because it also appears in contexts where ‘heath’ may fit, although the best online [dictionary](#) of Old Norse also has *heiðinn* ‘heathen’ and for *heiðr* besides ‘heath’ it also offers ‘clear’ and ‘honour’.

The main English translation available online evidently had trouble with the *Vin-* part, offering ‘Vin-heath by Vin-wood’. This prompted discussion of ‘vine’, ‘Wend’ ([Bullen](#) 2015), **Vina* (like the river Dvina, probably related to dwindle), Old Norse *vé* ‘shrine’, Old Norse *vín* ‘friend’ or ‘meadow’ in this [dictionary](#), which seems to be much the same as Old English **winn* (Smith 1956, 2,259). All that should be cleared up by my analysis of [Vindo-](#) in ancient names, which shows that **Win/*Vina* may have been a general name for winding rivers that could have applied to many rivers, including those now called Browney and Wear.

The Durham area may have had several Roman names. The Ravenna Cosmography’s [Lugunduno](#) needs a location somewhere in north-east England, between [Dixio](#) (possibly Cawthorn Camps) and [Coganges](#) (Chester-le-Street). The name meaning is clear enough, something like ‘fort with a wide field of view’, and I used to guess that was my namesake city of Durham, with its huge cathedral on top of its *Dunholm* ‘hill island’. For the Roman road there, 80a of Margary (1967), “nothing certain is known about the course into Durham”. However, its line of approach is very clear, heading dead straight for Maiden Castle.

My old assumption was that the Roman traces, including a bath house, found on the east of the river Wear in “Old Durham” came from a fort. However, [Scott](#) (1973) strongly suggests a mere villa. I used to worry that the suggested track of the Roman road needed to cross the Wear three times in quick succession, but thanks to Google Maps and to Scott Vanderbilt, that now looks not so terrible – a fairly simple bridging job for Roman engineers. Therefore, I am now happy to suggest that Maiden Castle was *Lugundunum*.

Not much remains of [Maiden Castle](#) nowadays, but its situation on a promontory, rising about 50 metres above the river, would have made it both prestigious and militarily strong. Its owner must have been on good terms with the Roman authorities and happy to provide a rest stop on one of the two main roads heading north. In Roman times the river Wear may not have had such well-defined banks and its flood plain or surrounding marshes probably extended across a large flat area (now occupied by the university sports centre) west of the river, and right up to Shincliffe on the east side. How deep the water was around Durham of course depended on whatever weir(s) existed in Roman times, just as it does now. And given the Romans’ insatiable taste for silver, and later operation of lead/silver mines in Weardale, it is likely that cargo boats used the river Wear.

Last edited by Anthony Durham on 18 October 2018.