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The Battle of Brunanburh

The Battle of Brunanburh took place in 937 between a combined army of Norsemen from Ireland under Anlaf and Scots under Constantine and another combined army of Mercians and West Saxons under the West Saxon brothers Æthelstan and Eadmund. No more can be decided about the site of the battle than the poem tells us, that it took place outside Wessex and outside the kingdom of Constantine and probably not very far from the sea, the sea in question being most likely the Irish Sea, as the Norse survivors returned to Dublin. Identification of the place-names Brunanburh and Dingsmere has proved impossible.

In view of the late date of the poem, it is, though vivid, surprisingly conventional, with its description of the passage of a day, ll. 12-17, its references to carrion beasts, ll. 60-5, and the two characteristically grim examples of litotes, ll. 39-40 and 44-9, the latter followed by the long list of varied expressions for battle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, London, 1938

The text here used is that of Campbell with the long vowels marked.

(195)

M1 ... need 1 ... find ...
M2 ... need 2 ... find ...
M3 ... need 3 ... find ...
M4 ... need 4 ... find ...

5 A A B1 A2 B1
D*2 A A C2
A1 A1 A A
B B A3 A
D3 A2 B1
D C B2 A

10 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

15 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

20 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

25 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

30 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

35 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

40 A A C2 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3
A A A1 B
A A A2 B
A1 A1 A3

The Battle of Brunanburh

5 *Æpelstān cyning,* *eorla dryhten,*
beorna bēahgifa, *and his brōþor ēac,*
Ēadmund æþeling, *ealdorlangne tīr*
geslōgon æt sǣcce *sweorda ecgum*
 10 *ymbe Brunanburh;* *bordweal clufan,*
hēowan heaþolinde *hamora lāfan*
afaran Ēadweardes; *swā him geæþele wæs*
from cnēomægum, *þæt hī æt campe oft*
wip lāþra gehwāne *land ealgodon,*
 15 *hord and hāmas.* *Hettend crungun,*
Sceotta leōða *and scipflotan*
fæge fēollan. *Feld dunnade*
secga swāte, *siðþan sunne up*
on morgentīd, *mære tungol,*
 20 *glād ofer grundas,* *Godes condel beorht,*
ēces Drihtnes, *oð sīo æþele gesceaft*
sāh tō setle. *Ðær læg secg mænig*
gārum āgēted, *guma norþerna*
ofer scild scoten, *swilce Scittisc ēac*
 25 *wērig, wīges sǣd.* *Wesseaxe forð*
ondlongne dæg *ēorodcistum*
on lāst legdun *lāþum þēodum,*
hēowan hereflēman *hindan þearle*
mēcum mylenscarpan. *Myrce ne wyrndon*
 30 *heardes hondplegan* *hæleþa nānum*
þæra þe mid Anlāfe *ofer ēargebland*
on lides bōsme *land gesōhtun*
fæge to gefeohte. *Fife lægun*
on þām campstede *cyningas giunge*
 35 *sweordum āswefede,* *swilce seofene ēac*
eorlas Anlāfes, *unrīm heriges,*
flotena and Sceotta. *Ðær geflēmed wearð*
Norðmanna bregu, *nēde gebēded*
tō lides stefne *lītle weorode;*

The Battle of Brunanburh

King Athelstan, the lord of warriors,
 Patron of heroes, and his brother too,
 Prince Edmund, won themselves eternal glory
 In battle with the edges of their swords
 Round Brunanburh; they broke the wall of shields,
 The sons of Edward with their well-forged swords
 Slashed at the linden-shields; such was their nature
 From boyhood that in battle they had often
 Fought for their land, its treasures and its homes,
 Against all enemies. Their foes fell dead,
 The Scottish soldiers and the pirate host
 Were doomed to perish; and with blood of men
 The field was darkened from the time the sun
 Rose at the break of day, the glorious star,
 God the eternal Lord's bright candle passed
 Across the land, until this noble creature
 Sank to its resting-place. There many men
 Lay slain by spears, and northern warriors
 Shot down despite their shields, and Scotsmen too,
 Weary, with battle sated. The West Saxons
 Throughout the whole long passing of the day
 Pressed on in troops behind the hostile people,
 Hewed fiercely from the rear the fleeing host
 With well-ground swords. The Mercians refused
 Hard battle-play to none among the fighters
 Who came with Anlaf over rolling seas,
 Bringing invasion to this land by ship,
 Destined to die in battle. Five young kings
 Lay dead upon the battlefield, by swords
 Sent to their final sleep; and likewise seven
 Of Anlaf's earls, and countless of his host,
 Both Scots and seamen. There the Norsemen's chief
 Was put to flight, and driven by dire need
 With a small retinue to seek his ship.

THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

35 crēad cneor on flot, cyning ūt gewāt
 on fealene flōd, feorh generede.
 Swilce þær ēac se frōða mid flēame cōm
 on his cýppe norð, Costontinus,
 hār hilderiŋ; hrēman ne þorfte
 40 mecga gemānan: hē wæs his mæga sceard,
 frēonda befyllad on folcstede,
 beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlēt
 on wælstōwe wundun forgrunden,
 giungne æt gūðe. Gelpan ne þorfte
 45 beorn blandenfeax bilgeslehtes,
 eald inwidda, ne Anlāf þý mā;
 mid heora herelāfum hlehhan ne þorfstun,
 þæt hēo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
 on campstede, cumbolgehnāstes,
 50 gārmittinge, gumena gemōtes,
 wāpengewrixles, þæs hī on wælfelda
 wiþ Ēadweardes afaran plegodan.
 Gewitan him þā Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
 drēorig daraða lāf, on Dingesmere,
 55 ofer dēop wæter Difelin sēcan,
 eft Īra laud, æwiscmōde.
 Swilce þā gebrōþer bēgen ætsamne,
 cyning and æþeling, cýppe sōhton,
 Wesseaxena land, wīges hrēmge.
 60 Lētan him þehindan hræ bryttian
 saluwigpādan, þone sweartan hræfn,
 hýrnednebban, and þane hasupādan,
 earn æftan hwīt, æses brūcan
 grædigne gūðhafoc and þæt græge dēor,
 65 wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wæl mære
 on þis ēiglande æfre gīeta
 folces gefyllum beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe ūs secgað bēc,
 ealde ūðwitan, siþþan ēastan hider
 70 Engle and Seaxe up becðman,

THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

The ship pressed out to sea, the king departed
 Onto the yellow flood and saved his life.
 Likewise the wise old Constantinus came,
 The veteran, to his northern native land
 By flight; he had no reason to exult
 In that encounter; for he lost there friends
 And was deprived of kinsmen in the strife
 Upon that battlefield, and left his son
 Destroyed by wounds on that grim place of slaughter,
 The young man in the fight. The grey-haired man
 Had little cause to boast about that battle,
 The sly old soldier, any more than Anlaf;
 They could not with their remnant laugh and claim
 That they were better in their warlike deeds
 When banners met upon the battlefield,
 Spears clashed and heroes greeted one another,
 Weapons contended, when they played at war
 With Edward's sons upon the place of carnage.
 The Norsemen left them in their well-nailed ships,
 The sad survivors of the darts, on Dingsmere
 Over the deep sea back they went to Dublin,
 To Ireland they returned with shameful hearts.
 The brothers also both went home together,
 The king and prince returned to their own country,
 The land of Wessex, triumphing in war.
 They left behind them corpses for the dark
 Black-coated raven, horny-beaked to enjoy,
 And for the eagle, white-backed and dun-coated,
 The greedy war-hawk, and that grey wild beast
 The forest wolf. Nor has there on this island
 Been ever yet a greater number slain,
 Killed by the edges of the sword before
 This time, as books make known to us, and old
 And learned scholars, after hither came
 The Angles and the Saxons from the east,



THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

ofer brād brimu Brytene sōhtan,
wlance wīgsmīpas, Wēalas ofercōman,
eorlas ārhwate, eard begēatan.

THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

Over the broad sea sought the land of Britain,
Proud warmakers, victorious warriors,
Conquered the Welsh, and so obtained this land.

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