



**Egil's Saga's
Battle of Vínheiðar
at Brasside**

Jonathan Starkey

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Introduction

Egil's Saga is a biography of the 10th century Icelandic mercenary, pirate and farmer Egill Skallagrimson (Figure 1). He spent time in England fighting for King Æthelstan. Egil's Saga describes their participation in a major battle. It is usually assumed to be the Battle of Brunanburh in 937. We are among the dissenters who think it is describing a different battle, for which we have adopted Egil's Saga's name, the 'Battle of Vínheiðar'. In this paper, we explain why we think it was fought at Brasside near Durham.



Figure 1: Bas-relief of Egill Skallagrimson carrying his dead brother, Borganes, Iceland

Historical background

Æthelstan came to power in 924. His realm covered the whole of modern England below the Humber, bar Cornwall. There were four realms north of the Humber: 1) The Kingdom of York; 2) The Anglian kingdom of Bernicia; 3) The Brythonic kingdom of Strathclyde and Cumberland; 4) The Pictish-Gael kingdom of Alba. The Kingdom of

York comprised the mainly Danish Viking region of Deira in the east and the mainly Brythonic region of modern Lancashire in the west. It was ruled, along with the islands and peninsulas around the western fringes of Britain, by a sect of Norse Vikings based in Dublin that we will refer to as the Hiberno-Norse.



Figure 2: British Isles in 924

In 926 or 927, Sihtric, Hiberno-Norse King of York, died. Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York. Sihtric's brother Guthfrith, King of the Hiberno-Norse at Dublin, was his heir. Some think that he raised an army and occupied Jorvik (the City of York), others think that he invaded England hoping to take Jorvik but did not get that far. Æthelstan defeated him in battle. The same year, he defeated King Constantine II of Alba, King Owain of Strathclyde & Cumberland, and King Hywel Dda of Wales. They were forced to accept his overlordship,

uniting most of modern England under a single ruler for the first time and giving him hegemony over mainland Britain.

The subjugated northern kings rebelled in 934. Æthelstan led an army into Alba to quell the uprising. Later that year Guthfrith died. Guthfrith's son Olaf succeeded to the Hiberno-Norse throne in Dublin. In 937, this Olaf (Guthfrithson) formed a rebel alliance with Constantine and Owain. They invaded somewhere in what is now the north of England, before being defeated by Æthelstan at the Battle of Brunanburh.

Egil's Saga's confusion with Brunanburh

At a glance, it seems that Egil's Saga's battle might be the Battle of Brunanburh:

- Egil's Saga describes Æthelstan's participation in a major battle at a place named 'Vínheiðar'. Brunanburh is the only major battle in which Æthelstan is known to have participated.
- Egil's Saga's battle was in the north of modern England. Brunanburh was in the north of modern England.
- Egil's Saga says that Æthelstan's adversaries were an alliance of invaders from the north. Brunanburh is the only documented conflict in which Æthelstan faced an alliance of invaders from the north.
- Egil's Saga says that the leader of the invaders was King Olaf the Red. Brunanburh is the only conflict in which Æthelstan is known to have faced anyone named Olaf.

Delving a little deeper, there are a bunch of inconsistencies which make it unlikely that Egil's Saga's battle is Brunanburh:

- Prelude - Egil's Saga says that the invaders were Scots and Britons. It does not mention Hiberno-Norse involvement in its battle. The English accounts say that the Brunanburh invaders included a big contingent of Hiberno-Norse, alongside Scots and Britons.

- Prelude – Egil’s Saga says that the invaders were led by Olaf the Red, King of the Scots, “*a Scot on his father’s side, Danish on his mother’s, being descended from Ragnar Hairy-Breeks*”. The English accounts say that the invaders were led by Olaf Guthfrithson, King of the Hiberno-Norse, who was Norse on his father’s side, being the grandson of Ímar, Norse founder of the Hiberno-Norse dynasty.
- Prelude – Egil’s Saga says that the invaders marched south from Scotland. The English accounts say that at least one major contingent of Brunanburh invaders, the Hiberno-Norse, arrived and left by ship.
- Prelude - Egil’s Saga says that Æthelstan was quick to issue a formal challenge to the invaders after they defeated his local Northumbrian militia. An English account (William of Malmesbury) says that Æthelstan was slow to respond to the Brunanburh invasion, and only did so when shamed by their ongoing plundering of his realm.
- Engagement - Egil’s Saga’s battle was arranged a week or more in advance on an agreed day at a demarcated field. An English account (Malmesbury) says that Brunanburh started with a surprise nocturnal raid on the English camp.
- Geography - Egil’s Saga’s battlefield was a symmetrical level plain bounded by hills on one side and a river on the other. An English account (Malmesbury) says that the Brunanburh battlefield was on a road at or near a ford.
- Military action - Egil’s Saga’s battle was shield wall to shield wall, both sides having time to organise their deployment and their advance. An English account (Malmesbury) describes Brunanburh as an opportunistic nocturnal raid on the English camp followed by an English counterattack.
- Military action – Egil’s Saga (in one of Egill’s poems) says that three kings/earls were “*laid low*” – i.e. defeated - in the battle. An English account says that five kings and seven earls were killed at Brunanburh, excluding at least three kings that escaped.
- Flight - Egil’s Saga does not mention any horses participating in its battle and it implies that the invaders were chased on foot. An English account (Malmesbury’s poem) says that the Brunanburh

invaders had: “*Countless squadrons both of foot and horse*”. Another (the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) says that Æthelstan’s men chased the fleeing Brunanburh invaders on horseback.

- Flight - Egil’s Saga implies that the invaders returned to their homeland on foot. The English accounts emphasise that a large proportion of the Brunanburh invaders fled left by ship.

Translator Alistair Campbell noted some of these inconsistencies back in the 1930s: “*it is evident that Egil’s Saga must be treated with the greatest caution and that none of its statements relative to the battle on Vinheithr must be taken as true of the battle of Brunanburh unless they are confirmed by independent sources*”.

Delving deeper still, if Egil’s Saga were describing Brunanburh, it would also create a bunch of impossible anachronisms. Egil’s Saga contains no dates, but it explains meticulously during Æthelstan’s reign where Egill spends his winters. A chronology can be worked out against Æthelstan’s accession because Egill and Thorolf arrived in England the following autumn. There is one year of uncertainty about many of the dates that follow because the English contemporary accounts differ by a year, and because in some cases their year started in September.

- Egill was with Thorir Hroaldsson at Gaular two winters before Egil’s Saga’s battle. Thorir died in 925, so Egil’s Saga’s battle cannot have been later than 927, at least ten years before Brunanburh.
- Egil’s Saga’s battle was in the year that Egill arrived in England, so no later than the end of 927, at least ten years before Brunanburh.
- Egill married his brother’s widow two years after Egil’s Saga’s battle and before Eric Bloodaxe became King of Norway in 932, so Egil’s Saga’s battle was before 930, at least seven years before Brunanburh.
- Egill returned to Norway the year after Egil’s Saga’s battle, to discover that Thorir Hroaldsson had died. He died in 925. If Egil’s Saga’s battle was Brunanburh, Egill would be returning to Norway in 938, 13 years after Thorir’s death. He was an important military leader, foster father to future king Eric Bloodaxe, best man at Thorolf’s wedding, and his father’s best friend. It is inconceivable

that Egill would not have heard news of his death within 13 years, so Egil's Saga's battle was not Brunanburh.

- Egill spent 'several' years with his father before he died. Egill's father died before Eric Bloodaxe killed his brothers which was before Haakon became King of Norway. Haakon became king in 934. Eric killed his brothers a year or so earlier. Egill's father died at least six winters after Egil's Saga's battle, so it was no later than 927, at least ten years before Brunanburh.
- Æthelstan died in 939. Egill visited Æthelstan at least eight winters after Egil's Saga's battle, so the battle was no later than 931, at least six years before Brunanburh.
- Egill hears upon his return to England that all is well with Æthelstan's kingdom. The only period of relative peace and stability during Æthelstan's reign was between his invasion of Alba in 934 and Brunanburh in 937. At least eight winters had passed after Egil's Saga's battle, so the battle was no later than 929, at least eight years before Brunanburh.
- Islendingabok shows that Egill's first child, Thorgerdr, was born in 939, Wikipedia reckons 935. Egill marries Asgerd, his brother's widow, two years after Egil's Saga's battle. Even if Asgerd fell pregnant immediately, Egil's Saga's battle was no later than 936 (or 932 if Wikipedia is right), at least a year before Brunanburh.
- Egil's Saga says that Egill was aged 13 when he left on his first overseas adventure. He returned to Iceland the year after he got married and he got married two years after Egil's Saga's battle. Egil's Saga says that he was away for 12 winters. So, he was aged 22 at Egil's Saga's battle. If Egil's Saga's battle was Brunanburh, Egill would have been born in 915. Islendingabok gives his mother's year of birth as 870, so she would have been 45 if Egil's Saga's battle was Brunanburh. The oldest known medieval childbirth age of 42, so Egil's Saga's battle was not Brunanburh. Wikipedia and Islendingabok give Egill's year of birth as 904 and 910 respectively, meaning that Egil's Saga's battle was in 926/7 or 932/3, at least four years before Brunanburh.

Egil's Saga translator Eric Eddison worked all this out in the 1930s: "The better opinion inclines to-day to identify the two battles, correcting the whole chronological system of the saga accordingly." Hermann Pálsson elaborated in his 1975 Egil's Saga translation: "The Battle of Vinheid in ESS [Egil's Saga] is usually identified with the Battle of Brunanburh, which was fought at an unknown place in 937, but such an identification makes a complete mess of the chronology of ESS". Eddison devised a chronology of Egil's life which dated Egil's Saga's battle to 927. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir published a more detailed chronology in Scudder's 2004 Egil's Saga translation which dated the battle to 925.

We discuss the evidence in much greater detail in our paper 'Why Egil's Saga is not describing Brunanburh'. It includes a revised chronology of Egil's life that confirms Egil's Saga's battle took place in 926 or 927. English chronicles – translations below – record Æthelstan's involvement in military action in 926/927, against Kings Constantine, Owain and Guthfrith. They are consistent with all the Egil's Saga clues and match most of them, with just one inconsistency.

The inconsistency concerns Olaf. Egil's Saga says that the leader of the invaders at its battle was named Olaf the Red. No one named Olaf is known to have fought Æthelstan in or near 927. But Olaf Guthfrithson was one of the leaders of the invaders at Brunanburh. This is the main evidence that Egil's Saga's battle is Brunanburh. There is a plausible explanation.

Egil's Saga says that its Olaf was "konungur á Skotlandi", 'King of Scotland', whereas Olaf Guthfrithson was King of the Hiberno-Norse in Dublin. Egil's Saga says that its Olaf was "skoskur að föðurkyni", 'patriarchally Scottish', whereas Olaf Guthfrithson's father could hardly have been more Norse, being the male-line grandson of Ímar who founded the Hiberno-Norse dynasty. Egil's Saga says that Æthelstan begs its Olaf to "fara heim í Skotland", 'go home to Scotland', whereas Olaf Guthfrithson's home was Dublin. These details convince us that Egil's Saga's King Olaf the Red referred to King Constantine II of Alba. Snorri Sturluson, its skald, might have made a mistake, but we think it

more likely that he deliberately gave Constantine a Norse name to make him more relevant to his Norse audience.

It is frustrating that our theory has any possible inconsistencies, but it is enormously better than the traditional ‘Egil’s Saga’s battle is Brunanburh’ theory which has 20 of them. We are therefore confident that Egil’s Saga is describing a battle that took place in Northumbria in 926 or 927 between Æthelstan and an alliance of Scots and Britons under Kings Constantine and Owain. Apart from us, the only person to have worked this out is Adrian Grant, so we will precis it is interesting to check his theory.

A battlefield north or south of Jorvik

Grant’s theory was first published in 2020 in his paper: “*The Battle of White Hill (Vin Heath), 927*”. It explains his theory that Egil’s Saga’s battle was fought in 927 against Guthfrith at White Hill near Doncaster. We think it was fought in 927 against Constantine II at Brasside some 90 miles north of Doncaster.

Our theories start out much the same. Egil’s Saga says: “*Olaf [Constantine] king of Scots, drew together a mighty host, and marched upon England. When he came to Northumberland, he advanced with shield of war*”. Constantine marched an army of Scots south from Eastern Scotland. They defeated Æthelstan’s Northumbrian militia under earls Alfgeir and Gudrek. They must have been on Dere Street to the east of the Pennines because the Strathclyde Britons who occupied the land west of the Pennines were on Æthelstan’s side until Constantine’s victory over Alfgeir and Gudrek.

Egill writes a poem about the battle between Constantine and Æthelstan’s Northumbrian militia. Pálsson’s translation: “*One earl fled from Olaf [Constantine], life ended for the other; The lusty war leader was lavish in blood gifts; England’s enemy conquered half Alfgeir’s earldom;*

While the great Godrek rambled on the gore plain.” It says that the invaders took half of Alfgeir’s earldom.

What was ‘Alfgeir’s earldom’? All we are told is that when Egill arrived in England that Northumberland: “*was in Athelstan’s dominions; he had set over it two earls, the one named Alfgeir, the other Gudrek*”. Perhaps they ruled Northumberland jointly, or perhaps one ruled Deira, the other Bernicia. The former seems least likely, unless perhaps Alfgeir and Gudrek were brothers, because joint earldoms are rare and tend to work poorly. Moreover, Egil’s Saga says that the invaders took half of Alfgeir’s earldom, which implies it was not held jointly. The invaders could not have taken half of Deira without taking all of Bernicia. Most likely, then, Alfgeir was Earl of Bernicia, and the invaders took the northern half of his earldom. This seems most likely anyway, because Alfgeir and Gudrek would not have allowed the invaders to get close to Deira without a fight, for fear the locals waded in with the enemy.

If Alfgeir was Earl of Bernicia and lost half of his land, the battle happened in central Bernicia. Bamburgh, the capital, was in central Bernicia and it is the most likely place for Alfgeir’s men to be garrisoned. We guess that the battle was on a section of Dere Street near to Bamburgh. Morebattle on the modern Scottish border sounds like a good candidate. Grant proposes Otterburn, twenty miles south of Morebattle.

This is where our theories diverge. Grant thinks the invaders went on to conquer the whole of Northumbria. If, as he believes, they occupied Jorvik (the City of York), the battlefield must have been somewhere south and/or west of it. He proposes White Hill, 30 miles south of modern York. We think that they never got into Deira, so the battlefield was at least 50 miles north of modern York.

The narrative seems to support Grant’s theory. Palsson’s translation of Chapter 52, starts: “*King Olaf [Constantine] of Scotland gathered a great army and led it south into England, plundering everywhere as soon as he came to Northumberland. When the earls in charge there got word of this,*

they mustered their force and went out to face the King. King Olaf won a fierce battle when they clashed. Earl Godrek was killed and Alfgeir had to make a run for it with most of the troops who had survived. Since Alfgeir could offer no resistance, King Olaf was able to take the whole of Northumberland.” The translation unequivocally says that the invaders took the whole of Northumbria, which would include Jorvik.

Palsson’s translation of the last sentence is valid, and the other translators have something similar, but diverse translations are possible. The original Icelandic says: “*lagði Ólafur konungur þá allt Norðimbraland undir sig*”, one translation being ‘*King Olaf laid under himself all Northumbria*’, which is interpreted to mean that he ‘subdued’ or ‘conquered’ all Northumbria. But ‘*lagði*’ can also mean ‘thrust into’, so this phrase is equally likely to mean “*King Olaf thrust into all Northumbria below him*”, or similar, meaning that he led his army south from wherever he defeated Alfgeir and Gudrek into southern Bernicia. This would not infer that the invaders occupied Jorvik, or indeed that they even got into Deira.

Guthfrith appears in Wikipedia’s king-list for the Kings of York. If he was crowned, it would support Grant’s theory, if not it would support ours. Clare Downham, who wrote the definitive reference book on Norse kings of England and Ireland, says that the evidence is inconclusive. He might be like Lady Jane Grey, for instance, in that he succeeded to the Kingdom of York on Sihtric’s death, but never got to Jorvik and was never crowned. Malmesbury says that Guthfrith laid siege to Jorvik after Constantine and Æthelstan had agreed a peace treaty but got repulsed and returned to Dublin. No contemporary accounts mention that Jorvik was attacked, besieged or occupied before the peace treaty was agreed. Indeed, there is no evidence that Guthfrith participated in the 926/927 conflicts before the peace treaty was signed, let alone that he was crowned.

Egil’s Saga says that Alfgeir rides to tell Æthelstan about the defeat. Æthelstan prepares immediately to intercept the invaders with the men he has at hand; a clue we think that he wanted to keep the invaders out

of Deira. Then he hears that Hring and Adils have defected to the enemy, taking their army of Strathclyde and Cumbrian Britons with them. Æthelstan needs more men. He sends the men he has at hand, supposedly with Egill and Thorolf in command, to intercept and hold the invaders while he heads south to recruit more men. Whether Egill and Thorolf were actually put in charge of this mission is questionable, but it makes no difference to the battlefield search, so we will play along with Egil's Saga's narrative. If, as Egil's Saga implies, Æthelstan's holding force was dispatched within five days of Alfgear's defeat, the invaders would not have had time to get to Deira before they were intercepted.

For what it's worth, here are our main reasons to favour our theory over Grant's. They are far from compelling, but in our opinion, the evidence supporting Grant's theory is less compelling still.

1. Grant's proposed battlefield at White Hill is in Deira and near to the Five Boroughs border. Egil's Saga says that Æthelstan chooses the battlefield. He would surely not have chosen a battlefield in hostile territory.
2. Constantine's best chance of victory would have been to march into Deira and incite an uprising of the local ethnic Danes, so Æthelstan would have been determined to prevent the invaders entering Deira. If they did not enter Deira, they did not occupy Jorvik.
3. If Egil's Saga's battle was in Deira or the Five Boroughs, a significant number of local ethnic Danes would have joined the invaders. Egil's Saga says that the original invaders were mainly Scots, and that they were augmented by Britons. It does not mention any Danes participating in its battle, so the battle was probably not fought in Deira or the Five Boroughs.
4. Æthelstan annexed the Kingdom of York immediately after Sihtric died, and appointed his own earls to control Northumbria. Indeed, we suspect that he was waiting at the border, because he arranged to have Sihtric poisoned. If Æthelstan immediately occupied

Jorvik, the invaders would not have been able to take the city without a siege but there is no mention of a siege in Egil's Saga. Moreover, Alfgear would have arrived at Jorvik at least ten days before the invaders could march there, giving plenty of time to prepare the city for a siege. If Jorvik was prepared, there is close to zero chance that the invaders could evict the occupants before Æthelstan's army came to relieve it. Therefore, we think that the invaders did not occupy Jorvik before Egil's Saga's battle.

5. Egil's Saga says that both armies are at a *'borg'*, meaning 'city' or 'stronghold'. But if the invaders occupied the City of York, it is odd that it is not mentioned by name. After all, it is mentioned by name in the poem that Egill writes about Arinbjorn and in Egill's meeting with Bloodaxe. Moreover, if the rebels were in Jorvik, there is no obvious reason they would leave to fight a battle somewhere less fortified.

The remainder of our theory assumes that the invaders did not take Jorvik before Egil's Saga's battle. We have no proof. We are not even sure that our theory is significantly more likely than Grant's, but we are sure it is valid. Readers can make up their own minds, perhaps rejecting both. We are happy to debate the possibilities offline.

The Battle of Vínheiðar

We are going to try to work out the Vínheiðar battlefield location from clues in Egil's Saga and the English accounts of 926 and 927. Note that medieval chronicles are often a year or two out due the time it took for news to disseminate and that some of them do not start their calendar year in January. They have enough in common to be confident they all refer to the same events. Downham calculates that it was in 927.

English accounts of 926/927 military actions

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle D recension for 926 (Whitlock) says: *"In this year appeared fiery lights in the northern quarter of the sky, and*

Sihtric died, and King Athelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians ; and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island : first Hywel, king of the West Welsh, and Constantine, king of the Scots, and Owain, king of the people of Gwent, and Aldred, son of Eadwulf from Bamburgh. And they established peace with pledge and oaths in the place which is called Eamont, on 12 July, and renounced all idolatry and afterwards departed in peace.”

- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle E recension for 927 (Whitlock) says: “In this year King Athelstan drove out King Guthfrith. And in this year Archbishop Wulf helm went to Rome.”
- John of Worcester’s entry for 926 says: “Fiery lights in the northern part of the heavens were visible throughout the whole of England. Shortly afterward, Sihtric, king of Northumbria, departed this life, and king Athelstan expelled Guthferth his son and successor, and united the kingdom to the others which were under his imperial sway, for he defeated in battle and put to flight all the kings throughout Albion; for instance, Howel, king of the West Britons (the Welsh), and afterwards Constantino, king of the Scots, and Wuer (Owen) king of the Wenti (q. Gwent). He also expelled Aldred, the son of Eadulf, from his royal town called by the English Bebbanbyrig (Bamborough). All these, finding that they could no longer resist his power, sued for peace, and assembling at a place called Eamot, on the fourth of the ides [the 12th] of July, ratified by their oaths a solemn treaty.”
- The Irish annals of Ulster says that in April 927: “The fleet of Linn Duachaill departed and Gothfrith abandoned Áth Cliath; and Gothfrith returned again within six months”.
- Malmesbury says of Sihtric: “dying after a year, Athelstan took that province under his own government, expelling one Aldulph, who resisted him”. The year can be calculated as 926 from context. Presumably he means Guthfrith.
- Huntingdon says of Æthelstan after Sihtric’s death: “For in the course of the year following, Guthfrith, king of the Danes, brother of Reginald, the king already named, having provoked him to war, was defeated and put to flight, and slain”.

- Simeon's second chronicle in History of the Kings for year 926 says: *“Sithric, king of the Northumbrians, departed this life; whose kingdom king Ethelstan added to his own dominion, driving out his son Guthferth, who had succeeded his father in the kingdom. He likewise conquered in battle, and put to flight, all the kings of the whole of Albion, namely, Huval, king of the West Britons, then Constantine, king of the Scots, and Wuer, king of the Wenti. All these, seeing they could not resist his might, begging from him peace, met him at the place called Eamotun, on the fourth of the ides of July [12th July], and made with him a treaty, which they confirmed with an oath.”*
- Gaimar says: *“His son Adelstan succeeded him. When he had reigned nearly four years, he fought a battle with the Danes, and discomfited king Gudfrid”*. ‘Nearly four years’ means that this happened in 927 or 928.
- Roger of Wendover's entry for 926 says: *“Fiery rays were seen throughout the whole of England in the northern quarter of the heavens, portending the disgraceful death of the aforesaid king Sithric, who came to an evil end shortly afterwards ; on which king Ethelstan expelled Guthferth his son from his kingdom, which he annexed to his own dominions”*.

Egil's Saga's battlefield description

Egil's Saga says that Olaf's [Constantine's] invading army was marching south from Scotland, and that the English army, purportedly under Egill Skallagrimsson and his brother Thorolf, was heading north to meet them. They faced off somewhere in Northumbria. Meanwhile, Æthelstan was in Wessex levying more men. Here is part of W C Green's 1893 translation:

1. After this they sent messengers to king Olaf [Constantine], giving out this as their errand, that king Athelstan would fain enhazel him a field and offer battle on Vínheiði by Vínuskóga; meanwhile he would

have them forbear to harry his land; but of the twain he should rule England who should conquer in the battle.

2. He appointed a week hence for the conflict, and whichever first came on the ground should wait a week for the other. Now this was then the custom, that so soon as a king had enhazelled a field, it was a shameful act to harry before the battle was ended. Accordingly king Olaf [Constantine] halted and harried not, but waited till the appointed day, when he moved his army to Vínheiði. North of the heath stood a town. There in the town king Olaf [Constantine] quartered him, and there he had the greatest part of his force, because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed.

3. But he sent men of his own up to the heath where the battlefield was appointed; these were to take camping-ground, and make all ready before the army came. But when the men came to the place where the field was enhazelled, there were all the hazel-poles set up to mark the ground where the battle should be. The place ought to be chosen level, and whereon a large host might be set in array. And such was this; for in the place where the battle was to be the heath was level, with a river flowing on one side, on the other a large wood.

4. But where the distance between the wood and the river was least (though this was a good long stretch), there king Athelstan's men had pitched, and their tents quite filled the space between wood and river.

5. They had so pitched that in every third tent there were no men at all, and in one of every three but few. Yet when king Olaf's [Constantine's] men came to them, they had then numbers swarming before all the tents, and the others could not get to go inside. Athelstan's men said that their tents were all full, so full that their people had not nearly enough room. But the front line of tents stood so high that it could not be seen over them whether they stood many or few in depth.

6. Olaf's [Constantine's] men imagined a vast host must be there. King Olaf's [Constantine's] men pitched north of the hazel-poles, toward which side the ground sloped a little.

Egill stalls, presumably under instruction from Æthelstan, offering ever more generous bribes for the invaders to go home. Meanwhile, Æthelstan was in Wessex and Mercia recruiting more men:

7. From day to day Athelstan's men said that the king would come, or was come, to the town that lay south of the heath. Meanwhile forces flocked to them both day and night.

There is a skirmish at the battlefield on the day before the main battle. An army of Britons led by the brothers Hring and Adils fight an English scouting army led by Alfgeir, Egill and Thorolf. Alfgeir flees. Egill and Thorolf take command. They kill Hring and Adils and rout the invaders.

The main battle is the following day. The Norse mercenaries under Thorolf fight near the woodland, the main English division under Æthelstan fight towards the river. Æthelstan insists that Egill, against his wishes, fights with the English:

8. After this they formed in the divisions as the king had arranged, and the standards were raised. The king's division stood on the plain towards the river; Thorolf's division moved on the higher ground beside the wood.

Æthelstan is victorious, but Thorolf is killed by skirmishers who loop through woodland to get behind the mercenary shield wall. Constantine and the surviving invaders flee. Egill pursues them, killing any that he catches. When sated, he returns to the battlefield to bury his brother. Æthelstan returns to his billet south of the battlefield:

9. *While his men still pursued the fugitives, king Æthelstan left the battle-field, and rode back to the town.*

Egill writes a poem about Thorolf's death:

10. *Dauntless the doughty champion dashed on, the earl's bold slayer:
In stormy stress of battle stout-hearted Thorolf fell; Green grows on
soil of Vinu grass o'er my noble brother; But we our woe - a sorrow
worse than death-pang must bear.*

Egill writes another poem about the aftermath of the main battle. Here he explains that he killed many invaders to the west of the hazelled battlefield, suggesting that they fled west.

11. *With warriors slain round standard the western field I burdened;
Adils with my blue Adder assailed mid snow of war; Olaf [?????],
young prince, encountered England in battle thunder; Hring stood not
stour of weapons, starved not the ravens' maw.*

So, putting this together. The English had marked out the battlefield with hazel poles¹. The place was named *Vínheiði*, meaning 'wine-heath'. It was next to a woodland named *Vínuskóga*, meaning 'wine-forest'¹. There was a 'town' north of the battlefield, where Constantine and most of his army were billeted². The battlefield was fairly level, bounded laterally by a river on one side and woodland on the other³. It was a little higher near the woodland, open to the north and south³. It was a little lower on the rebel side of the battlefield to the north⁶. The gap between the river and the woodland narrowed south of the battlefield, where the English had pitched their tents⁴. It was difficult to see beyond the front row of tents⁵. There was another 'town' to the south of the battlefield, where most of the English barons were billeted⁷. After the battle, the rebels fled to the west¹¹. Thorolf was buried at a place named 'Vinu'¹⁰.

It is difficult not to question Thorolf's winner-takes-all battle challenge.

Egil's Saga suggests that 'Olaf' was honour-bound to accept such a challenge by Norse custom. This seems unlikely because it is not a known Norse custom, and we think 'Olaf' referred to Constantine who was not Norse. We suspect that the challenge was superimposed on the real events by Snorri to thrill his Norse audience. It seems likely to us that both sides garrisoned at defensively sound strongholds when they came within striking distance, such that neither army was strong enough to break through the enemy fortifications. Each would have dug in, hoping the other might try a suicidal attack. Perhaps, they did eventually agree to fight on a level battlefield between the camps, each thinking they would win a fair fight. In other words, the places and battle events were the same as described in Egil's Saga but not because a challenge was issued and accepted.

If the rebels fled west, the river must have been to the east, with the wood to the west. The battlefield was perhaps 1000m wide, to encompass a shield wall of roughly 3000 men, and perhaps 1000m deep to allow them to manoeuvre. There was enough space north and south of the battlefield for perhaps 1000 tents on each side.

The statement about the rear tents being difficult to see might mean that the front row of tents was on an earthwork, it might mean that the ground fell away to the rear, or it might mean that the English put big tents at the front to block the view.

As we say above, we suspect that Æthelstan's challenge was a literary device that never existed but that the troop movements were much as Egil's Saga describes, leaving the armies facing each other from '*borgs*'. Green and Scudder translate '*borg*' and variations as 'town', but it usually means 'stronghold'. We interpret this to mean that there were substantial fortified settlements north and south of Egil's Saga's battlefield and that they were joined by a Roman road.

The battlefield at Brasside

Æthelstan would have been eager to prevent ethnic Danes in Deira being incited to join the invaders. Their non-involvement in Egil's Saga suggests he succeeded, so the armies probably met comfortably north of the Tees. There were two Roman roads between the Tyne and Humber, namely Dere Street and Cade's Road. They were roughly parallel and about 15 miles apart, Cade's Road to the east. It is usually assumed that Cade's Road was a relatively minor affair with just one Roman fortress (Concangis) compared to four on Dere Street (Isurium, Catteractonium, Vinovia and Vindomora) over the equivalent distance, but that was in Roman times.

Æthelstan passed through Beverley and Chester-le-Street, both on Cade's Road, on his way to invade Scotland in 934. St Cuthbert's relics, the most sacred in England at the time, were at Chester-le-Street, so Cade's Road must have had a stream of pilgrims. At the end of the 10th century, the relics were moved to Ripon and then Durham for safety, in part because Chester-le-Street was being raided from Scotland. It seems to us that Cade's Road was the major north-south route between the Tyne and Humber in the 10th century, especially for armies. We therefore believe that the invaders headed south from the Tyne on Cade's Road.

Both sides would have dispatched messengers and spies to scout the enemy's progress. With no chance of a surprise attack, and the English wanting to delay while Æthelstan raised more men, both sides would have made a defensively sound camp as they came within striking distance. Egil's Saga says that Olaf [Constantine] chooses his base: *"because there was a wide district around which seemed to him convenient for the bringing in of such provisions as the army needed"*. It also says that both armies were at a *'borg'* – city or stronghold – on the day before the Battle of Vinheiðar. The only city and the only Roman fortification (Concangis) on Cades Road were at modern Chester-le-Street. It was on a navigable part of the River Wear, allowing provisions by sea or river,

thereby matching Egil's Saga's description. If both armies were at a *borg* on Cade's Road, one or other was surely at Chester-le-Street.

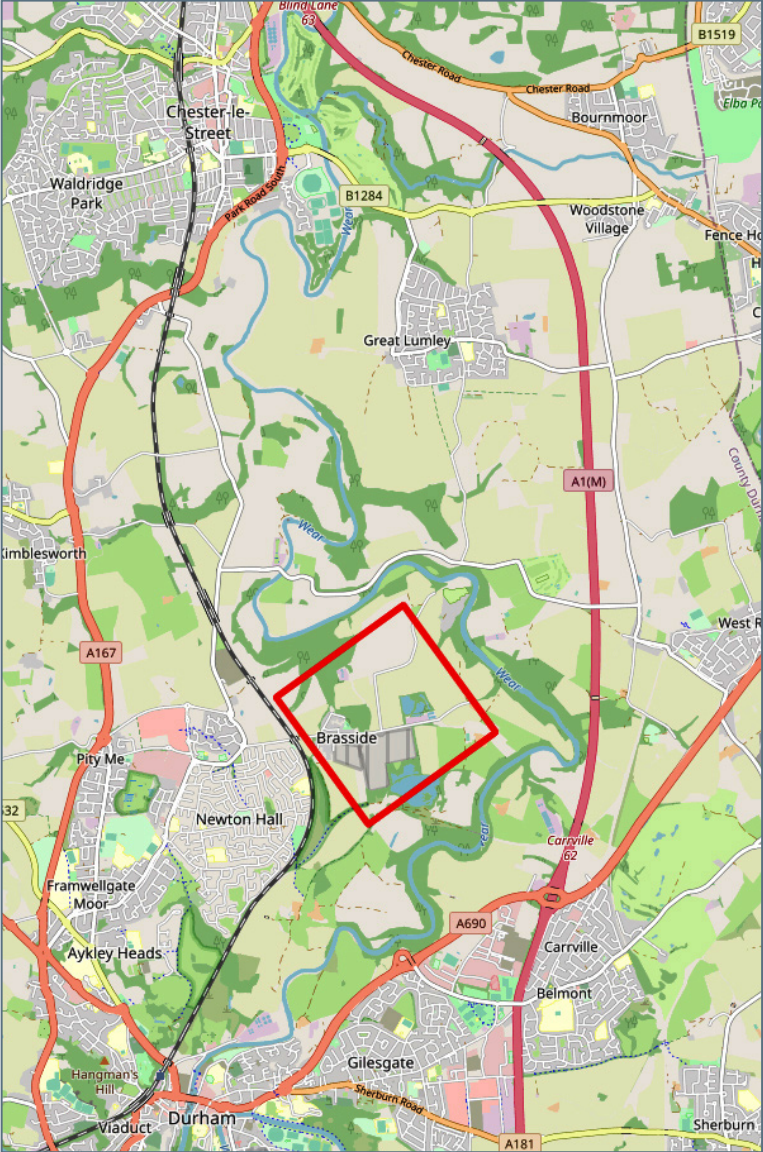


Figure 3: Geography at Brasside

If one of the armies was at Chester-le-Street and both were at some sort of city or fortification, either Constantine was at Pons Aelius on the Tyne, or the English were at Maiden Castle near Durham. We think the

latter far more likely. Egil's Saga says that the battlefield was bounded on one side by a river. The camps were north and south of the battlefield, so the river must have bounded the battlefield to the east or west, which means its course must have been generally north-south. The River Team almost fits the bill, flowing north-south near its confluence with the Tyne, but it has a steep sided valley, with no level banks fitting Egil's Saga's battlefield description. There are no other Pons Aelius candidates. Therefore, we think that Constantine was at Chester-le-Street, the English at Maiden Castle, the battlefield between.

Amazingly, the first place we looked for the battlefield almost exactly matched what we were looking for. It is a place named Brasside, an elevated plain inside an unusual square meander in the River Wear (red rectangle on Figure 3). It is bounded by a hill to the west, now occupied by the settlement of Newton Hall, and by the River Wear on the other three sides. The railway between Durham and Chester-le-Street winds around the bottom of the hill, perhaps on the course of Cade's Road.

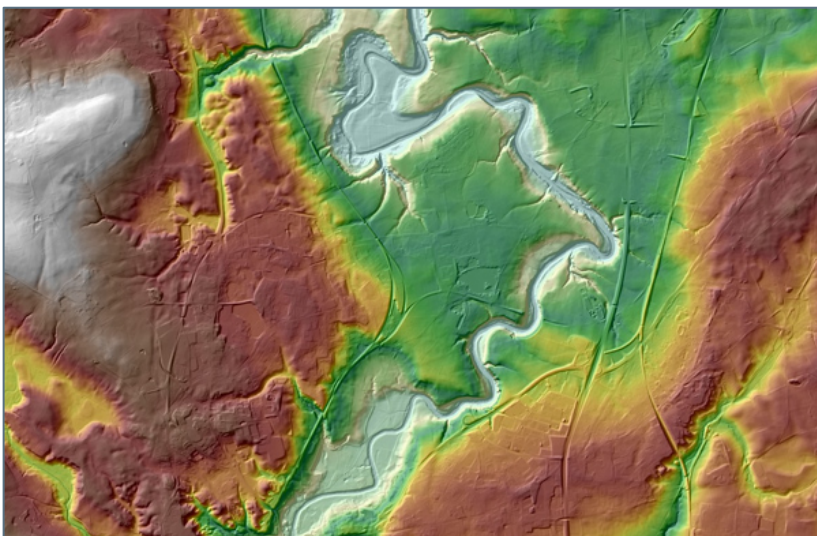


Figure 4: Terrain at Brasside

A heat relief map of the Brasside area (Figure 4) shows the terrain. It is at the western end of a 60m high plateau that extends northeast

through West Rainton and beyond. The plateau is incised by the River Wear in a three-mile gorge. It exactly matches the battlefield description in Egil's Saga: a level plain, big enough for armies of several thousand on each side, bounded by woodland to one side and a river to the other, a little higher towards the woodland, sloping down slightly to the north, narrowing to the south. The only inconsistency is that the woodland would have been to Thorolf's left, whereas Egil's Saga says that the woodland was to his right. Perhaps it is simply mistaken.

Unable to believe our luck, we followed the course of all the major rivers in Northumbria east of the Pennines. There is nowhere that comes close to matching this battlefield description. Indeed, we could not even find a 1km square of raised level ground adjacent to a river.

The only other non-geographic clues are Egil's Saga's name for the battlefield, 'Vinheiðar', and the adjacent woodland 'Vínuskóga'. It is unlikely that they are local Norse names because Brasside was in Anglian Bernicia. *heiðar* and *skóga* are the Old Norse words for 'heath' and 'woodland'. 'Vin' could be the Old Norse translation or transliteration of a local Old English or Brythonic name, or it could describe a local geographic feature or local fauna perhaps. 'Wine' links them all. Chester-le-Street had the greatest concentration of monks in Northumbria, if not in England, at the time. They would have needed lots of wine. Brasside would not have been ideal vine growing terroir, a tad claggy and temperate, but the climate was warm enough to grow some grape varieties and there was no need for high quality. We guess that the monks cultivated vines at Brasside because it was the nearest significant area of agricultural land to Chester-le-Street that was on the Roman road. Presumably, they escaped to choke the nearby woodland.

On visiting the area today, it is difficult to imagine the medieval scene, with Franklin prison sprawling over the middle of the battlefield, huge lakes marking where clay was excavated in Victorian times, the woodland having been cleared to make way for coal mines in the 18th century, then the entire area being built upon in the 20th century. Even

so, Brasside is still instantly recognisable to us as the place described in Egil's Saga.

Egil's Saga's battle, a revised narrative

Here we present a battle narrative. There is some uncertainty about the year because Egil's Saga has no absolute dates, and the various English chronicles assign the same events to 926 or 927. The discrepancies are partly due to the times that news takes to arrive, and partly due to some chronicles having year starts on the 1st or 24th of September. The only way to make the narrative consistent with the peace treaty date in July 927 is to assume the Egill arrived in England in the previous autumn, soon after a September year start.

Æthelstan was crowned in September 925, which may have been at the start of 926 for those calendars starting in September. He soon faced rebellions in East Anglia and the Five Boroughs, the regions subjugated by his father and grandfather, in addition to a longstanding conflict on the border with Northumbria. Æthelstan did not have enough men to police his realm, so he sent out a call for mercenaries.

Egill and Thorolf were freebooting off the coast of Denmark. Gunnhild, Eric Bloodaxe's wife, sent her brother Eyvind to kill them. Egill killed his men and took his ships with their cargo. Egill and Thorolf decide that it would be prudent to move elsewhere. They receive Æthelstan's open offer for mercenaries in the spring and arrive in England in the autumn, a year after Æthelstan had been crowned. It was 926 in absolute years, but 927 according to those calendars that start in September.

In the meantime, King Sihtric, ruler of the Kingdom of York, had died. Æthelstan immediately annexed the Kingdom of York. He garrisoned Jorvik, expelled Sihtric's son, Guthfrith, and appointed some stooge earls named Alfgeir and Gudrek as overlords of Bernicia and Deira, respectively.

Constantine feared the loss of the Northumbrian buffer zone between his realm and Æthelstan's. He set about raising an army to occupy Northumbria. Another Guthfrith, this one King of the Hiberno-Norse in Dublin and Sihtric's brother, thought himself to be Sihtric's rightful heir. He resolved to restore his Northumbrian realm. His fleet left Dublin in April 927, probably heading for Alba to join Constantine's army. The Scottish, probably augmented by Guthfrith and a few hundred Hiberno-Norse, invaded Northumbria in the late spring or early summer after Egill and Thorolf arrived in England.

The invaders marched down Dere Street from Scotland, until they were opposed in Bernicia by Æthelstan's local militia under the earls Gudrek and Alfgeir. Constantine was victorious at the ensuing battle. Gudrek was killed. Alfgeir fled by horse to give the bad news to Æthelstan.

Alfgeir delivered the news to Æthelstan's court within a couple of days. Æthelstan assembled his men at hand to intercept the invaders. Then he heard that Hring and Adils had defected to the enemy with their army of Britons. Constantine's augmented army was too strong for the men that Æthelstan had at hand, so he dispatched his men at hand, perhaps under Egill and Thorolf, to intercept and hold the invaders while he went to Wessex to levy more men.

The armies faced off somewhere between Bernicia and Jorvik. We think Constantine was at Chester-le-Street, the English at Maiden Castle. Each army was in too strong a defensive position for the other to defeat. The English delayed while Æthelstan raised more men. After a week or so of trying to goad the other side into a suicidal attack, they agree to meet in battle on level ground between the two camps. We think it was at Brasside. The result was a comprehensive victory for Æthelstan. Constantine returned to Alba. He went to Eamont in July, along with Owain and Hywel, to sign a peace treaty with Æthelstan. Guthfrith returned to Dublin in October, six months after he left.

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Help Wanted

We believe that the Battle of Vínheiðar was fought at Brasside near Durham. Our evidence is circumstantial and speculative. If you unearth any bones or medieval military finds in or around Brasside, please contact us by email. Likewise, if you have any evidence that supports or rebuts any of our theories.

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