

Geoffrey Gue

*Brunanburh (937 AD):
The Battle That Made England*

ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the Battle of Brunanburh (937 AD) and its impact on the history of England. Based on contemporary and later chronicles, charters, and poems, it first analyzes King Aethelstan's reign prior to the battle, then the battle itself, and finally its medieval legacy. The author argues that Brunanburh (much more so than Hastings in 1066 AD) was the battle that made England.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; tenth century; Europe; England; Northumbria; Battle of Brunanburh (937); Aethelstan; Danes; chronicles; charters*

Introduction

Sometime in the summer of 937 AD, two armies gathered on a field in England, ready to fight. One force consisted of a coalition of Scots, Strathclyde Welsh, and Norsemen from Dublin, the other mainly of West Saxons and Mercians, led by their King Aethelstan. The clash that ensued was the Battle of Brunanburh, a conflict that is shrouded in mystery with regard to its whereabouts and the meaning of its name, but that would be of considerable significance for the future of England.¹ When the two armies met at Brunanburh, both opposing forces knew that the victor would be the one to rule the land. The event was so momentous, in fact, that there are various accounts of Brunanburh in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC)*,² the most important primary source of the period. The ASC contains a poem that gives a vivid description of the battle, but there are over fifty additional primary-source references to this military encounter.³ This article argues that the Battle of Brunanburh was decisive and the reason why England became unified: an army came together to defend the land against an opposing force that had intended to end Aethelstan's rule in Northumbria.

The reason why this battle occurred takes us back to the year 925 when Aethelstan had just been crowned king. His father Edward had launched a campaign to gain territory in the northern part of England, Northumbria. He had been victorious, but near his death, in 924, revolts had broken out, and all that he had conquered was lost and would have to be regained by his son Aethelstan.⁴

¹ There are different theories regarding the battle's location and the meaning of *Brunanburh*. See Alistair Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburh* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1938).

² Four of the various manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC)* mention the Battle of Brunanburh; this article uses the following edition: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. George N. Garmonsway (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1960). For another edition, see "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," ed. Dorothy Whitelock, in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1 (c. 500-1042) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 135-235.

³ See *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

⁴ David P. Kirby, *The Making of England* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1967), 86-87.

King Aethelstan began his reign by courting favor in Mercia. Aethelstan had been raised in Mercia by his aunt Aethelflaed and her husband Aethelred.⁵ With this Mercian upbringing, Aethelstan was able to deal with Northumbrian affairs better than his father Edward. Aethelstan made an alliance with Sithric, king of York/Northumbria, by marrying him to his sister (whose name is unknown) in 926. Sithric died within the year, and Olaf, Sithric's son from a former wife, became king. Guthfrith, king of Dublin and Olaf's uncle, came to his nephew's aid.⁶ However, Aethelstan responded by invading Northumbria in 927, driving out both Olaf and Guthfrith. On July 12, 927, Aethelstan convened Hywel, king of the West Welsh, Constantine, king of the Scots, Owain, king of Gwent, and Ealdred Ealdulfing from Bramburgh at Eamont where they made peace with Aethelstan, gave pledges, swore oaths, and renounced idolatry.⁷ Aethelstan's supremacy in the North lasted until 934 when Constantine, king of the Scots, broke his oath, forcing Aethelstan to lead an army both by land and sea to counter Constantine's resistance.⁸ The result of this was the 937 Battle of Brunanburh. All of these developments contributed to the creation a unified realm under King Aethelstan. Brunanburh was the final push needed for Aethelstan to secure the land and drive out his enemies to "make" England.

The medieval sources on Brunanburh provide insight into the battle's significance. The main text used here is the ASC's poem about the battle.⁹ In Anglo-Saxon history, poems were only used for something (or someone) truly extraordinary. Historical events celebrated in poems, rather than just recorded, were deemed especially important and further legitimized by such poetic renditions.¹⁰ Other sources relate the battle in roughly the same way as the ASC, among them the tenth-century *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, the "Annals of Ulster" (recorded later, but based on contemporary texts), as well as Simeon of Durham's twelfth-century *Historia Regum* ("History of the Kings") and other "Works" (*Symeonis Monachi Opera*).¹¹ William of Malmesbury's twelfth-century work *De*

⁵ For a genealogical table of Aethelstan's family, see Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), xv.

⁶ Both "Olaf" and "Anlaf" are names used in this article; while they are variants of the same name, they refer to different people, namely Olaf Sithricson and Anlaf Guthfrithson.

⁷ *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 107.

⁸ The ASC gives a brief account of this event. For more details, see Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 342; as well as Kirby, *Making of England*, 87. Stenton indicates that this event occurred in 924; however, this appears to be incorrect since both the ASC and Kirby give 934 as the year.

⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 106-110.

¹⁰ Paul Hill, *The Age of Athelstan: Britain's Forgotten History* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd., 2004), 123.

¹¹ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. Alistair Campbell (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1962); "Annals of Ulster," in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 145; Simeon of Durham, "Historia Regum," ed.

Gestis Regum Anglorum (“On the Deeds of the Kings of the English”) contains an account of King Aethelstan’s reign and a good description of the battle.¹² Many of these materials are assembled in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, edited by Michael Livingston and published in 2011.¹³ Livingston’s anthology also contains several essays which address a number of controversial issues associated with the event. An additional text examined here is *Egil’s Saga*, an Icelandic narrative that follows the life of Egil Skallagrimsson.¹⁴ In 937, Egil supposedly fought on King Aethelstan’s side.¹⁵

Scholarship on the Battle of Brunanburh has generally focused on identifying where it took place and on the meaning of its name. John Henry Cockburn’s *The Battle of Brunanburh and Its Period* (1931) and Alistair Campbell’s *The Battle of Brunanburh* (1938) describe the event and attempt to identify its location; Cockburn, in particular, provides information about the period’s main characters, towns, and people.¹⁶ Works by Frank M. Stenton (3rd edition, 1971) and David P. Kirby (1967) offer general accounts of Anglo-Saxon history, as well as useful reflections on Aethelstan’s life and the Battle of Brunanburh.¹⁷ Paul Hill’s (2004) and Sarah Foot’s (2011) monographs focus on Aethelstan’s life.¹⁸ Stating that scholars have proposed over forty different possible battle sites, Foot discusses the most “popular” among these, but then settles on Bromborough as the most likely one.¹⁹ Bromborough is located south of Liverpool near the River Mersey and would have provided invading forces from Ireland with suitable access to the western side of the island.

I. Aethelstan before Brunanburh

Aethelstan came to believe that his rule would be different from that of his predecessors. Before 927, Aethelstan had followed in his father Edward’s and grandfather Alfred the Great’s footsteps by calling himself “king of the Angles

Dorothy Whitelock, in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1 (c. 500-1042) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 253; *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, ed. Thomas Arnold, vol. 1, Rolls Series, vol. 75.1 (London: Longman and Co., 1882).

¹² William of Malmesbury, “De Gestis Regum Anglorum,” ed. Dorothy Whitelock, in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1 (c. 500-1042) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 277-283.

¹³ *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston.

¹⁴ *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1960).

¹⁵ In this saga, the battle is called *Vinheithr*. The respective account shares similarities with what we know about Brunanburh, and it can be assumed that these battles were one and the same. However, *Egil’s Saga* dates this battle between 925 and 934, yet there was no battle on the scale described in the other primary sources during these years, suggesting that the saga’s date is off by a few years. See *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 207.

¹⁶ John Henry Cockburn, *The Battle of Brunanburh and Its Period Elucidated by Place-Names* (London: Sir W. C. Leng and Co., Ltd., 1931); Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*.

¹⁷ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*; Kirby, *Making of England*.

¹⁸ Hill, *Age of Athelstan*; Foot, *Æthelstan*.

¹⁹ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 179.

and Saxons.”²⁰ After 927, however, Aethelstan realized that Alfred the Great’s vision of a united land was within reach. Thus, he claimed to be “king of England,”²¹ even though he did not yet fully control the northern part of the island. Aethelstan used the title “king of England” in various post-927 charters, land grants, coins, and manuscripts. One of his charters, addressed to Milton Abbey in Dorset, starts with the statement, “In the name of God, I, Aethelstan, by the grace of God king ruling the whole of Britain.”²² Presumably issued in 934,²³ this charter gave land to the abbey. Aethelstan granted the land not just on behalf of himself, but also on behalf of the future kings of England. He was clearly confident in his rule and various campaigns. A grant to the Minster in Winchester in 934 includes the title “king of England” as well,²⁴ leading to the assumption that these documents were drawn up after Aethelstan’s invasion of Scotland. After his victory, Aethelstan was confident in his power over the territories that were now under his control. From the beginning of his reign, Aethelstan had made it a priority to recover lands that had been lost after his father’s death. Aethelstan declared himself king of England because he was convinced that he would be successful in reclaiming lost territory.

Scholars have pointed out that Aethelstan made these high claims for different reasons. According to David P. Kirby, Aethelstan held grand assemblies, namely ecclesiastical events that subjected rulers would sometimes attend. Kirby argues that Aethelstan received his royal titles from these assemblies.²⁵ Aethelstan presided over numerous gatherings of his court meetings and was involved in many donations to and dedications of churches. The people were grateful and wanted to thank Aethelstan by giving him titles such as “king of England.” Herbert Finberg writes that Aethelstan used “lofty” titles like *basileus* (Latinized Greek for “king”) to express his overlordship, and that his charters indicate that he considered his land untouchable.²⁶ Another reason why Aethelstan believed his rule to be different from that of other kings was that he considered himself

²⁰ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 26.

²¹ Hill, *Age of Athelstan*, 209-211, contains a list of the titles Anglo-Saxon kings used in charters, based on *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, 3 vols. (London: Whiting, 1885-1893).

²² “Charter of King Aethelstan to Milton Abbey, Dorset,” in *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. and trans. Agnes J. Robertson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 45.

²³ The charter is dated to the year 843: *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. and trans. Robertson, 45. However, this date appears to be incorrect as Aethelstan was not yet king or even born at this time.

²⁴ “Grant of Lands by King Aethelstan to the Old Minster, Winchester,” in *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. and trans. Robertson, 49.

²⁵ Kirby, *Making of England*, 88.

²⁶ Herbert P. R. Finberg, *The Formation of England, 550-1042* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1974), 153.

worthy to take his grandfather's throne.²⁷ According to Stenton, Alfred had regarded young Aethelstan as his heir and had given him a belt with gems, a red cloak, and a Saxon sword with a gold hilt.²⁸ Thus, Aethelstan saw himself as a king like none before him, as the "chosen one" or something of that nature, and he expected his advisors, subjects, and other leaders to hold him in high regard. However, Kevin Halloran has emphasized the most plausible reason for these titles, namely "Aethelstan's political and military achievement in creating an English monarchy," as well as "the importance of Aethelstan to the early Anglo-Norman kings both in his capacity as founder of the English state and for his claims."²⁹ According to David N. Dumville, Aethelstan was the "father of medieval and modern England" and made a claim "to overlordship of the surrounding Celtic peoples."³⁰ To gain support for his campaign to Brunanburh, Aethelstan provided gifts and manuscripts to St. Cuthbert's church in Northumbria,³¹ since many in Northumbria were resisting his push into the region. Aethelstan was a religious man, and he relied on God and the saints for help in his military endeavors. Thus, he gave gifts not only to gain a political advantage in the area, but also to show the community how devout he was.³²

By 937, King Aethelstan had secured much territory and earned considerable prestige in Europe. In various charters and grants, he was already referring to himself as "king of England," convinced that he had a higher purpose in his kingdom. His grandfather Alfred the Great had thought of him as the worthiest heir, and, indeed, Aethelstan would be the king to make Alfred's vision of a unified England come true.

II. The Battle Begins

Even though it lasted only for one day, the Battle of Brunanburh was the reason why England became unified. Two large forces clashed on a field that, by the end of the day, would be soaked with the blood of both friend and foe. Believing that this battle would be the hardest fought yet, Aethelstan, in a "Prayer" ascribed to him, asked God to grant him the victory:

²⁷ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 11.

²⁸ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 339.

²⁹ Kevin Halloran, "The Brunanburh Campaign: A Reappraisal," *The Scottish Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (October 2005): 133-148, here 134.

³⁰ David N. Dumville, "Between Alfred the Great and Edgar the Peacemaker: Athelstan, First King of England," in David N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1992), 141-171, here 168, 170-171.

³¹ David A Woodman, "Charters, Northumbria and the Unification of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," *Northern History* 52, no. 1 (2015): 35-51, here 45.

³² Andrew Breeze, "Communication: The Battle of Brunanburh and Cambridge, Css, Ms 183," *Northern History* 53, no. 1 (2016): 138-145, here 145.

Grant to me, Lord, that your might may strengthen my heart so that through your strength and through my hands and powers I may fight well and act manfully, so that my enemies may fall in my sight and may collapse just as Goliath collapsed before David your servant.³³

Aethelstan makes other Old Testament references about large forces being crushed by those who have God on their side. His prayer continues,

[T]hus let my enemies collapse beneath my feet, and let them come on one path against me and let them by seven paths run away from me. And may the Lord burst their weapons and break their swords and melt them in my sight [...] So that all the peoples of the earth may know that upon me is placed the name of Our Holy Lord Christ. And so let your name, Lord, be increased upon my adversaries.³⁴

This suggests that Aethelstan was somewhat worried about the coalition that he was up against and aware that victory would be necessary if he wanted to secure the land. Aethelstan, like his grandfather, was a devout Christian and trusted in God for his decisions. From the beginning of the battle, both sides had a sense of how important this encounter would be for the future of England.

Little is known about the size of the forces that clashed at Brunanburh, but it is safe to assume that both armies were quite large in number. Various sources give rather inflated estimates.³⁵ According to Simeon of Durham, a twelfth-century chronicler from Durham who wrote roughly 170 years after Brunanburh, Anlaf Guthfrithson brought 615 ships to the battle, in addition to the troops furnished by the Scots and Cumbrians.³⁶ Both William of Malmesbury, a twelfth-century monk, and Simeon of Durham provide reliable descriptions of the battle, but are probably not accurate with regard to troop strength. Primarily, they recorded the

³³ "Aethelstan's Prayer" [from London, British Library, MS Cotton Galba A.xiv, ms. s. XI, fol. 4v], in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 51. For further information on this text and manuscript, see *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 185-186.

³⁴ "Aethelstan's Prayer," in *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 51.

³⁵ William of Malmesbury, "Gesta Regum Anglorum," in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 59; "Annals of Clonmacnoise," in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 153. William of Malmesbury states that there were around 100,000 troops, while the "Annals of Clonmacnoise" state that the forces numbered around 30,000. It is unknown how large the armies were; while 30,000 troops sound more reasonable, the numbers are inflated in both cases.

³⁶ *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, ed. Arnold, 76: *Quarto post hæc anno, hoc est, DCCCCXXXVII. Dominicæ natiuitatis anno, apud Weondun, quod alio nomine Etbrunnanwerc, vel Brunnabyrig appellatur, pugnavit contra Onlaf, Guthredi quondam regis filium, qui DC et XV. Navibus advenerat, secim habens contra Ethelstanum auxilia regum præfatorum, scilicet Scotorum et Cumbrorum.* "In the fourth year thereafter, that is in the 937th year since the birth of the Lord [i.e., Christ], he [i.e., Aethelstan] fought at Weondune, which is otherwise also called Etbrunnanwerc or Brunnabyrig, against Anlaf, the son of the late King Guthred [i.e., Guthfrith], who had come with 615 ships, and who had with him, against Aethelstan, the aid [i.e., the troops] of the aforementioned kings, namely of the Scots and the Cumbrians." Translation provided by Jochen Burgtorf.

battle to propagate its legendary status.³⁷ These authors exaggerated to show that this battle was still considered significant, even in their twelfth-century lifetimes.

The *ASC's* poem mentions the key players and underscores the battle's significance for the people and the land. It describes the Anglo-Saxon leaders, Aethelstan and his young brother Edmund,³⁸ as the victors of the Battle of Brunanburh. They defended their land from the Scots and the Norse, led by Anlaf Guthfrithson and Constantine, king of Scots. The poem goes on to say that both West Saxons and Mercians came together and fought hard against their enemies. Five kings and seven of Anlaf's jarls fell on the battlefield. Many lives were lost, and the remainder of the enemy force fled. Anlaf went back to Dublin, and Constantine, leaving his dead son, fled to the North. The brothers, Aethelstan and Edward, were victorious and went back home.³⁹ In the oldest version of the *ASC*,⁴⁰ the author of the poem uses the phrase "Anlaf's warriors, who invaded our land."⁴¹ This is noteworthy because the *ASC* was compiled by contemporaries⁴² who, in this case, point out that different people, namely West Saxons and Mercians came together to defend a land that they saw as their own, a unified force to push back an enemy that was threatening their land.

Egil's Saga also describes the fighting at Brunanburh, even though it refers to the battle as *Vinheithr*. The saga, written sometime in the mid-thirteenth century, gives a more narrative account of the battle and provides evidence that there were Norse mercenaries among Aethelstan's ranks.⁴³ It is more of a literary creation than a historically reliable narrative.⁴⁴ Alistair Campbell agrees that the battle related in the saga is that of Brunanburh, but the story of the saga is not accurate. Campbell states that many sagas cast their heroes into the great battles of their time.⁴⁵ While this may be the case, the saga indicates that the battle was of great significance, possibly because England was born from it.

There are also accounts of Brunanburh from the opposing side which indicate that this battle was significant not just because it was a harsh defeat for the Norse

³⁷ Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, 54-55.

³⁸ Edmund would have been around the age of 15 or 16 during the battle. This is known because the *ASC* also states that, once Aethelstan had died in 939, Edmund took the throne at the age of 18.

³⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 106-110.

⁴⁰ The Parker Chronicle, which is the oldest rendition of the *ASC*: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173, ms. s. XI.

⁴¹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 108.

⁴² Generation after generation, scribes added events to the chronicle as they unfolded; see *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, xvii.

⁴³ "Egil's Saga," in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 69-81.

⁴⁴ Foot, *Aethelstan*, 180.

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Battle of Brunanburh*, 72-73.

in Ireland, as well as the Scots, but of its aftermath. *The Annals of Ulster*, compiled in the fifteenth century on the basis of much older texts, describe it as a

huge war, lamentable and horrible which was cruelly waged between the Saxons and Norsemen. Many thousands of Norsemen beyond number died although King Anlaf escaped with a few men. While a greater number of Saxons fell on the other side, Aethelstan, king of the Saxons, was enriched by the great victory.⁴⁶

This is a small entry in the overall text, but nonetheless important because the *Annals of Ulster* were written in Ireland. Even though the battle had been lost by the Irish, it was still mentioned. Many times, after a disastrous defeat, the losing side does not want to remember the event, but with Brunanburh it is different, presumably because of the battle's impact on the British Isles and the rest of Europe. The *Annals* were compiled hundreds of years after the battle, yet even then the Battle of Brunanburh was still considered important enough to be recorded. The *Annals* would, of course, have sounded quite differently if Anlaf Guthfrithson and his forces had won at Brunanburh.

In sum, the Battle of Brunanburh was of paramount importance for the unification of England. If not for Aethelstan's victory, England would have remained in disarray with several small kingdoms fighting for power. The outcome could have been that the Norse and the Scots would have ruled the land, and England would have never been born. Aethelstan's defeat would have gone down in the history books as a major victory for the Scots and the Norse. According to Foot, if there had been a Scottish-Norse victory, the kingdom of York would have been restored and would have threatened Mercia and the land to the east known as the Danelaw.⁴⁷ The *ASC's* poem elaborates that, "Never before in this island, as the books of ancient historians tell us, was an army put to greater slaughter by the sword since the time when Angles and Saxons [had] landed."⁴⁸ This suggests the sentiments of the people at the time. The poet wanted to emphasize how significant Aethelstan's victory was, as England had been unified.

III. The Battle's Impact

Brunanburh had a significant impact on the history of England and, by extension, the world. One contemporary text that highlights this is *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*. It dates from around 980; thus, some time had passed since the battle. Aethelstan had passed away in 939, and his brother Edmund had taken over. In 940, Anlaf Guthfrithson saw his opportunity, and he returned to England where he retook York, and the Five Boroughs of the Danelaw.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁶ "Annals of Ulster," in *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 145.

⁴⁷ Foot, *Æthelstan*, 171-172.

⁴⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 109-110

⁴⁹ See Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 357-358. The Five Boroughs were Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford.

threatened everything Aethelstan had fought for but, luckily for Edmund, Anlaf died in 941, and Edmund was able to retake the territory that had been lost.⁵⁰ According to Aethelweard, Brunanburh⁵¹ was the “great battle” or “great war:” “the fields of Britain were consolidated into one, there was peace everywhere, and abundance of all things, and since then no fleet has remained here, having advanced against these shores, except under the treaty with the English.”⁵² This shows the battle’s impact. According to Paul Hill, Aethelweard knew that the Battle of Brunanburh had been more than just another military victory.⁵³ It brought the land under one king’s rule and awareness of the English as a unified people. Thus, the battle certainly had more significance than any other battle that had preceded it.

Excerpts from other annals and chronicles also state that this battle was of great importance. Henry of Huntington’s *Historia Anglorum* (“History of the English”), written in 1133, states that, “King Aethelstan engaged in battle at Brunebirih [Brunanburh], the greatest of battles.”⁵⁴ Henry uses the Latin phrase *preliorum maximum*⁵⁵ (“the greatest of battles”) to describe the event, which shows that this battle was held in high regard. In fact, Henry’s statement appears to suggest that he considered Brunanburh as greater than the Battle of Hastings (1066). When Henry was writing, almost seventy years had passed since the Norman Conquest. And it is noteworthy that Brunanburh receives this Latin title in other medieval sources as well. Another source that uses the phrase “greatest of battles” is Bartholomew of Cotton’s *Historia Anglicana* (“English History”).⁵⁶ Bartholomew was a historian and monk of Norwich in the mid-to-late thirteenth century. Additionally, the *Annals of Waverly*, written in the late thirteenth century, record Brunanburh as the “greatest battle.”⁵⁷ One would think that chroniclers after Hastings, especially Anglo-Norman writers, would have seen Hastings as more significant. Yet, as recently as 2016, historian Andrew Breeze referred to Brunanburh as the Hastings of the tenth century.⁵⁸ According to Michael Livingston, what Aethelstan won on the field of Brunanburh was not

⁵⁰ Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 88-89.

⁵¹ Aethelweard calls the battle *Brunandun* and states that it happened in 927, but various other accounts of the battle affirm that it occurred in 937.

⁵² *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. Campbell, 54.

⁵³ Hill, *Age of Athelstan*, 154.

⁵⁴ Henry of Huntington, “*Historia Anglorum*,” in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 61.

⁵⁵ Henry of Huntington, “*Historia Anglorum*,” 61.

⁵⁶ Bartholomew of Cotton, “*Historia Anglicana*,” in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 82-83.

⁵⁷ “*Annals of Waverly*,” in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 88-89.

⁵⁸ Breeze, “Communication: The Battle of Brunanburh,” 138.

just land: he won a kingdom of heart and mind, meaning that those who would succeed him as king were not just kings of Wessex, but kings of Britain.⁵⁹ Livingston goes on to say that, even though the key figures, location, and name of the battle faded out of memory in the years after Brunanburh, what the battle represented remained.⁶⁰

Let us now consider the Battle of Hastings (1066). The latter did have an impact on the history of England and brought about significant change for the English people. In 1066, William the Conqueror attacked a largely unified country, and he did not have to fight a lengthy series of wars to conquer one kingdom after another. After the battle, William was crowned king, but soon there was rebellion throughout the land.⁶¹ The difference between Hastings and Brunanburh was that Brunanburh, a victory for the Anglo-Saxons, had united the insular kingdoms and expanded the realm, while Hastings, a defeat for the Anglo-Saxons, had made England merely a part of the Norman (and soon to be Angevin) empire. The Normans brought their own way of government, culture, literature, and ecclesiastical policies. According to Richard Huscroft, after 1066, the English Church had its personnel “decimated and its buildings destroyed.”⁶² The history of England was taken over by the Normans. They were in control of what was being documented, meaning that the perspective on English history was now a Norman rather than an Anglo-Saxon one. Therefore, much was recorded about the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror.

According to Stenton, “events were to show that he [William the Conqueror] had won one of the battles which at rare intervals have decided the fate of nations.”⁶³ Granted, this turned over a new leaf for England’s history, but it would take some time for the Normans to gain full control over the conquered land. Another reason why Brunanburh has been pushed into the shadow of Hastings is the *Bayeux Tapestry*.⁶⁴ This beautiful embroidered cloth depicts the events of the Norman Conquest and the Battle of Hastings. It is nearly 70 meters (230 feet) long and 50 centimeters (approximately 20 inches) high, and it is currently on display in a museum in Bayeux, Normandy (France). Not only does it record the events surrounding the Battle of Hasting, it also references eleventh-century culture and life. Commissioned shortly after the Norman Conquest, the *Bayeux Tapestry* was first mentioned in a 1476 inventory list for Bayeux

⁵⁹ Michael Livingston, “The Roads to Brunanburh,” in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 25.

⁶⁰ Livingston, “Roads to Brunanburh,” 25.

⁶¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 599-600.

⁶² Richard Huscroft, *Making England, 796-1042* (London: Routledge, 2019), 269-270.

⁶³ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 596.

⁶⁴ *The Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Lucien Musset, trans. Richard Rex (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005).

Cathedral,⁶⁵ and historians began to take an interest in the *Bayeux Tapestry* when the artwork reemerged in the eighteenth century, as it connected Norman and English history. Due to its many detailed scenes, the *Bayeux Tapestry* is one of the most significant sources for the Battle of Hastings. In addition to the *Bayeux Tapestry*, there are numerous written accounts, recently compiled in Stephen Morillo's anthology *The Battle of Hastings* (1996),⁶⁶ among them William of Poitiers' *Gesta Willemi ducis Normannorum et Regis Anglorum* ("Deeds of William, Duke of the Normans and King of the English"),⁶⁷ William of Jumièges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* ("Deeds of the Dukes of the Normans"),⁶⁸ the ASC,⁶⁹ Florence of Worcester's *Chronicon ex Chronicis* ("Chronicle from Chronicles"),⁷⁰ and the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio* ("Song about the Battle of Hastings").⁷¹ Various chroniclers in the twelfth century and beyond also wrote about Hastings, but they took much of their information from these contemporary accounts. The overall scholarly assessment of Hastings is that it is one of the most significant battles in English history. However, without the Battle of Brunanburh, Hastings could not have happened. A West Saxon defeat at Brunanburh would have meant that England would have most likely fallen into Danish hands. In reality, the West Saxon victory at Brunanburh preserved the mints, laws, government, and foreign relations that Aethelstan had established prior to the battle.

Returning to Brunanburh and its legacy, the twelfth-century chronicler Simeon of Durham relates that, after Brunanburh, Aethelstan was "terrible to his enemies on all sides, [but] he was peaceable to his own people. Afterwards he ended his days in peace, leaving the rule of his empire to his brother Edmund."⁷² After the victory at Brunanburh, there were apparently no more major conflicts as Anlaf Guthfrithson had been driven back to Dublin and Constantine back to the North, leaving Aethelstan as ruler over Northumbria and a now united

⁶⁵ *Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Musset, 14.

⁶⁶ *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996).

⁶⁷ William of Poitiers, "Gesta Willemi ducis Normannorum et Regis Anglorum," in *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), 3-17.

⁶⁸ William of Jumièges, "Gesta Normannorum Ducum," in *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), 17-19.

⁶⁹ *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 194-201.

⁷⁰ Florence of Worcester, "Chronicon ex Chronicis," in *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), 29-33.

⁷¹ "The *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*," in *The Battle of Hastings: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephen Morillo (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), 45-53.

⁷² Simeon of Durham, "Libellus de Exordio," in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 55.

land.⁷³ Simeon clearly viewed Aethelstan's reign as mighty, otherwise he would have used the term "empire."

Rex Pius Aethelstan ("Pious King Aethelstan"), a poem written around the time of Brunanburh (roughly 937-939), was composed in response to Aethelstan's donation of a gospel book to Christ Church, Canterbury.⁷⁴ It gives praise to Aethelstan, stating that he is famous across the world and a glorious king whom God has put on earth to rule England.⁷⁵ The poem states that, "this king himself, strong in war, might conquer defiant kings, treading upon their arrogant necks."⁷⁶ This means that the people, even though they loved Aethelstan, saw him as fierce and highly respected. Opposite this poem in the manuscript is a preface to the gospel book. This preface states that Aethelstan was the guardian of all Britain.⁷⁷ Both the poem and the preface show the impact that Aethelstan, as well as his victory at Brunanburh, had on the English people of his time.

Another significant piece of evidence for the battle's impact can be found in a charter issued in 940, three years after the battle.⁷⁸ In this document, Aethelstan grants land in Eaton (near modern Derby) to a knight (or soldier) named Byrhtelm. Most land grants at that time pertained to the Church, so it is surprising to see a knight receiving a grant in this territory. Byrhtelm must have been a successful warrior at Brunanburh to be given this land and the responsibility of watching over it. The charter states:

The lands of eternal heredity and the privileges of perpetual prosperity, which Christ Jesus is already granting to the great designs of the deserving [people], must be distributed, wherefore Edelstan [i.e., Aethelstan], namely the king [*rex*] of Anglosaxonia and emperor [*imperator*] of Northumbria, ruler [*gubernator*] of the pagans and defender [*propugnator*] of the Britons, contributes with a generous hand the gains [i.e., conquests] to be enjoyed most generously, so that he can most definitely be lifted up by the government of the kingdoms. Therefore he now already enriches that knight Byrhtelm by giving him land, namely five pieces of land [*cassatos*] at the place which the locals call Eatun, for his faithful service and as his acceptable payment, so that he [i.e., Byrhtelm] may own it [i.e., the land] with all—that according to custom belong to it—meadows, pastures, fields, woods, and [with the right] to

⁷³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway, 108-109.

⁷⁴ "Rex Pius Aethelstan" [from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A.ii, ms. s. X, fol. 15r], in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 39; see *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 172-173.

⁷⁵ Several scholars, including Stenton, Kirby, Hill, and Foot, state that Aethelstan made quite the effort to secure a name for himself and his country on the continent of Europe. Aethelstan's father, Edward the Elder, had many daughters whom Aethelstan used to create marriage alliances and peace with other nations. Moreover, Aethelstan received an annual tribute from the Welsh; see Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 340.

⁷⁶ "Rex Pius Aethelstan," in *Battle of Brunanburh*, ed. Livingston, 39.

⁷⁷ "Preface to Aethelstan's Gospel" [London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A.ii, s. X, fol. 15v], in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 173.

⁷⁸ The date here seems to be inaccurate as Aethelstan died on October 27, 939.

leave it, after his death, to whichever heir he wants. And the aforesaid land shall be free except for the construction of those three arched bridges for the military campaign.⁷⁹

At the beginning of this charter, Aethelstan pays his respects to Jesus Christ. After this, he lists his titles. Among the ones that stand out are the labels “emperor of Northumbria” and “ruler of the pagans;” both show that Aethelstan’s victory at Brunanburh had a major impact on the territory of Northumbria because he is the one ruling the area now, including the (presumably heathen) Danes still living in the territory. The king’s title as the “defender of the Britons” underscores the impact that Brunanburh had on the people. This title makes clear that, at one point, the people had been at risk from an invading force, but now Aethelstan and his forces are there to defend them. The grant goes on to talk about Byrhtelm receiving land, stating that he owns all of it except for three bridges that are being constructed for a military campaign. This shows that King Aethelstan was preparing for a campaign, possibly to make troop mobility more efficient and to suppress any threats or invasions.

In sum, Brunanburh played a major role in shaping England into what it is today. The battle consolidated power into one figurehead, King Aethelstan, and unified the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia into (what would become) England. By controlling the entire island, Aethelstan was able to gain renown on the European continent, indicating that the emerging realm was ready to play politics on the continent. Brunanburh had a key impact not only on England’s history, but on the history of the world, for without England much of the world (for good or ill) would not be what it is today.

Conclusion

The Battle of Brunanburh was a decisive moment in history for it “made” England. Brunanburh saw different people from both Mercia and Wessex fighting for a common cause, namely to defend their land from invading forces. With the help of King Aethelstan and due to his great military prowess, Brunanburh was won and went down in history as the battle that defined and created England. Brunanburh, however, is not the only battle that created or unified a country. The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212 “made” the country of Spain as it consolidated the reconquest of Spain by the Christians. Another battle that created a nation was the 1870 Battle of Sedan during the Franco-Prussian war: this battle unified the German states into one nation. Brunanburh, like the aforementioned battles, defined a country and is a significant event in world history. Future research on the battle of Brunanburh will likely continue to study the question of the battle’s actual location or what the countries on the European continent thought about the battle. Without Brunanburh and without

⁷⁹ “Grant by King Aethelstan to Byrhtelm, “miles” [i.e., knight, soldier], of land at Eatun, or Eaton, co. Derby, AD 850 for 940,” in *Cartularium Saxonicum*, ed. De Gray Birch, 2: 466-467. Translation (above) by Jochen Burgdorf.

King Aethelstan, England would have looked significantly different than what it is today, and this is why Brunanburh is arguably more important than the Battle of Hastings. Brunanburh shows that people can join together to fight for a common cause. In modern times, this may be opposite political parties joining together to help their nation's economy, food shortage, or the like. Brunanburh can be seen as a great example for different factions to come together if they want their community to survive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Geoffrey Gue of Yorba Linda, California, completed his B.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2018), where he is also a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). He is currently enrolled in CSUF's Teaching Credential program, pursuing a Single Subject Credential in Social Science. He is conducting research for an M.A. thesis in History that analyzes the role of medieval battles in the formation of English nationhood. In addition, he is working as a student teacher in the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District. He also served as an editor for this volume of "The Welebaethan: A Journal of History." His article printed above originated in a CSUF junior seminar in Historical Writing.