

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (2)

The Reign of Æðelstan and ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’

The following text covers annals 924 to 940 of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the reign of King Æðelstan of Wessex, grandson of Alfred. This part of the Chronicle is probably best known for its inclusion of the heroic poem, ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’. It survives in four of the manuscripts that make up the collective Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; the version below is from Manuscript A, ‘The Parker Chronicle’, folios 26 recto to 27 recto. The poem, which forms the annal entry for 937, is written as prose in the manuscript but a single point is usually placed after half-lines; here, it is edited as verse. The major scholarly edition of the poetic text is that of A. Campbell, The Battle of Brunanburh. Campbell terms the poem and the other surviving poems contained in the Chronicle manuscripts as ‘panegyrics upon royal persons, arising out of the commemoration of events in which they were concerned’ (p. 37). The poet certainly lauds his English protagonists and glorifies their abilities as warriors to the detriment of the Norse opponents, who are made to appear somewhat cowardly in their retreat to Ireland; and whose fragmentation and loss is emphasised by the unity of the rejoicing brothers’ return to Wessex. Many typical motifs of Old English heroic poetry are incorporated into this poem, from the vocabulary of weaponry to the depiction of the enjoyment of the birds and beasts of battle of their gruesome prey. The author of the prose Chronicle account that surrounds the poem is noticeably controlled in his praise of the king, preferring to create a sense of objectivity and historical restraint; the poem is the more effective precisely because of its context.

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924 Her Eadweard cing forþferde, ond Æþelstan his sunu feng to rice. Ond Sancte Dunstan wearð akænned, ond Wulfelm feng to þan arcebiscoprice on Cantuarebyri.

931 Her mon hadode Byrnstan bisceop to Wintanceastre .iiii. kalendas Junii, ond he heold þridde healf gear bisceopdom.

5 **932** Her forþferde Fryþestan bisceop.

933 Her for Æþelstan cyning in on Scotland, ægþer ge mid landhere ge mid scyphere, ond his micel oferhergade. Ond Byrnstan bisceop forþferde on Wintanceastre to Omnium Sanctorum.

934 Her feng Ælfeah bisceop to bisceopdome.

10 **937** Her Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
beorna beahgifa, ond his broþor eac,
Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brunnanburh. Bordweal clufan,
15 heowan heapolinde hamora lafan,
afaran Eadweardes, swa him geæþele wæs
from cneomægum, þæt hi æt campe oft
wiþ laþra gehwæne land ealgodon,
hord ond hamas. Hettend crungun,
20 Sceotta leoda ond scipflotan
fæge feollan. Feld dænnede
secgas hwate, siðþan sunne up
on morgentid; mære tungol
glad ofer grundas, Godes condel beorht,
25 eces Drihtnes, oð sio æþele gesceaft
sah to setle. Þær læg secg mænig
garum ageted, guma norþerna
ofer scild scoten; swilce Scittisc eac,
werig, wiges sæd. Wesseaxe forð
30 ondlongne dæg eorodcistum
on last legdun laþum þeodum,
heowan herefleman hindan þearle
mecum mylenscearpan. Myrce ne wyrndon
heardes hondplegan hæleþa nanum
35 þæ mid Anlafe ofer æra gebland
on lides bosme land gesohtun,
fæge to gefeohte. Fife lægun
on þam campstede, cyninges giunge,
sweordum aswefede; swilce seofene eac
40 eorlas Anlafes, unrim heriges,
flotan ond Sceotta. Þær geflemed wearð
Norðmanna bregu, nede gebeded,
to lides stefne litle weorode;
cread cnear on flot, cyning ut gewat
45 on fealene flod: feorh generede.
Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
on his cyþþe norð, Costontinus,
har hilderig, hreman ne þorfte

50 mæcan gemanan; he wæs his mæga sceard,
 freonda gefylled on folcstede,
 beslagen æt sæcce; ond his sunu forlet
 on wælstowe wundun fergrunden,
 giungne æt guðe. Gelpan ne þorfte
 beorn blandenfeax bilgeslehtes,
 55 eald inwidda, ne Anlaf þy ma;
 mid heora herelafum hlehhan ne þorftun
 þæt heo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
 on campstede cumbolgehnastes,
 garmittinge, gumena gemotes,
 60 wæpengewrixles, þæs hi on wælfelda
 wiþ Eadweardes afaran plegodan.
 Gewitan him þa Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
 dreorig daraða laf, on Dingesmere
 ofer deop wæter Difelin secan,
 65 ond eft Hiraland, æwiscmode.
 Swilce þa gebroþer begen ætsamne,
 cyning ond æpeling, cyþþe sohton,
 Wesseaxena land, wiges hremige.
 Letan him behindan hræw bryttian
 70 saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn,
 hyrnednebban, ond þane hasewanpadan,
 earn æftan hwit, æses brucan,
 grædigne guðhafoc, ond þæt græge deor,
 wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wæl mare
 75 on þis eiglande æfer gieta
 folces gefylled beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
 ealde uðwitan, siþþan eastan hider
 Engle ond Seaxe up becoman,
 80 ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
 wlance wigsmiþas, Weealles ofercoman,
 eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.

940 Her Æþelstan cyning forðferde on vi kalendas Novembris ymbe xl wintra butan
 anre niht þæs þe Ælfred cyning forþferde, ond Eadmund æpeling feng to rice, ond he
 85 wæs þa xviii wintre. Ond Æþelstan cyning rixade xiiii gear ond x wucan. Þa was
 Wulfelm arcebiscop on Cantwarebyri.

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924 In this year King Edward died, and Æþelstan his son succeeded to the kingdom.
And Saint Dunstan was born, and Wulfelm succeeded to the archbishopric of
Canterbury.

90 **931** In this year Byrnstan was consecrated bishop of Winchester on the 29th May, and
he held that see for two and a half years.

932 In this year Bishop Fryþestan died.

933 In this year King Æþelstan went into Scotland with both an army and a fleet, and
ravaged much of it. And Bishop Byrnstan died in Winchester on All Saints’ Day.

95 **934** In this year Bishop Ælfheah succeeded to the see [of Winchester].

937 In this year King Æþelstan, lord of warriors,
ring-giver of men, and also his brother,
atheling Edmund, obtained eternal glory
by fighting in battle with the edges of swords
100 around Brunanburh. They split the shield-wall,
cut down the lime-shields with the remnants of hammers,¹
Edward’s offspring; thus it was innate to them
because of their ancestors, that they should often defend
at battle against every enemy, their land,
105 treasure and homes. The enemies perished,
the people of the Scots and the sailors
fell doomed. The field was darkened
with the blood of warriors, after the sun came rose
in the morning-time; the glorious heavenly body
110 glided over the land, the bright candle of God,
of the eternal Lord, until the noble creature
sank in setting. There lay many a warrior
destroyed by spears, men of the North
shot above the shield; likewise the Scottish too,
115 weary, sated with war. The West-Saxons went forward
the whole length of the day with the troops
pressed on in the track of the hostile people,²
cut down fugitive soldiers severely from behind
with file-sharpened swords. The Mercians did not refuse
120 hard battle to any of the heroes
who with Anlaf over the turmoil of the seas
in the ship’s bosom sought land,
doomed in battle. Five lay
on the battlefield, young kings,
125 put to sleep by swords; similarly another seven
jarls of Anlaf, a countless number of the army,
sailors and Scots. There, put to flight,
was the prince of the Norsemen, compelled by force
into the prow of the ship with a small troop;
130 the ship was driven onto water, the king sailed out
onto the fallow sea: he saved his life.
Likewise there too the old Costontinus

¹ i.e. swords.

² As Campbell, Battle of Brunanburh, p. 105.

with flight came into his northern native land;
this grey-haired warrior had no cause to exult
135 in the meeting of swords; he was deprived of kinsmen,
of friends, killed on the battlefield,
deprived by the strife; and he left his son
on the slaughter-field ground down by wounds,
young in battle. The grey-haired warrior
140 had no reason to boast there of the sword-clash,
the old wicked man, no more than did Anlaf;
with their remnant of an army they had no cause to rejoice
that they would be the better in deeds of war
on the battlefield in the clash of banners,
145 in the meeting of spears, in the confrontation of men,
in the hostile encounter, when they played on the slaughter-field
with Edward's descendants.

Then the Norsemen departed in nailed ships,
mournful survivors of spears, into Dingesmere
150 over deep water to seek Dublin,
and Ireland again, ashamed.
Likewise, both brothers together,³
the king and the prince, sought their native land,
the country of the West-Saxons, exultant in battle.
155 They left behind them to enjoy the corpse
the dark-coated one, the black raven,
the horny-beaked one, and the dun-coated one,
the eagle, white from behind, to enjoy the carrion,
the greedy bird of war, and the grey animal,
160 the wolf in the wood. Never was there a greater slaughter
of people killed on this island
by the sword's edge, even up until now
or before this, of which the books of ancient scholars
tell us; that is since from the east
165 the Angles and Saxons arrived up
over the broad seas to seek Britain,
proud warriors, they overcame the Welsh,
noble warriors, eager for glory, they conquered the country.

170 **940** In this year King Æpelstan died on the 27 October about forty years less one
night after King Alfred died, and prince Edmund succeeded to the kingdom, and he
was then eighteen years old. And King Æpelstan reigned for fourteen years and ten
weeks. Wulfelm was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time.

³ Æpelstan and Edmund.