

# 'Markings on the Land' and Early Medieval Warfare in the British Isles

Kerry Cathers

**ABSTRACT:** Rather than examining how terrain affected the strategies of battles and how it was a factor to be exploited, this paper focuses upon its symbolic function. Early medieval warfare in Britain was characterised by numerous, swift raids into enemy territory for the purpose of inflicting damage and capturing booty, not for the acquisition of land or political domination. These raids were carried out by relatively small groups which could not be considered armies. The best examples of this style of warfare are the early Viking raids. Warfare was not, however, limited to raids; campaigns for the purpose of conquest were also fought. These were more complex and infrequent. Codes of behaviour surrounded the process of going to war in these situations. The absence of standing armies meant that troops had to be summoned from the surrounding area before they were mustered and then moved to what would be the battlefield. Such a process was time consuming and, as a result, invading armies did not carry out their campaign with the swiftness later armies would. They entered their opponent's territory, made camp and awaited the arrival of the defending army. It was essential that not only their presence be known, but also their location. For this purpose, well-known and easily identified locations were chosen. This paper examines this practice. Was it to be found throughout the British Isles? In Ireland, many battles were fought by waterways or other territorial borders. Was this for utilitarian purposes or was there symbolic significance involved? How late did the practice survive and what happened if enemy did not respond to the challenge? These questions are explored.

## 1. Introduction

Early medieval battlefields have been used to determine various things such as cultural expansion, reasons for a particular war and what kingdoms or political groups participated. Though attention has been given to locating the sites, little has gone into examining the uses of terrain in warfare (Wood, 1980) and it is the purpose of this paper to examine its role. As with other periods of history, terrain was a factor in battles of the early Middle Ages and contemporary warleaders were aware of its importance and took it into

consideration in their strategies and in the deployment of their troops. For this period the terrain or 'markings on the land' served another purpose; one which could be interpreted as symbolic as it was not a factor in battles themselves, but was part of the process of warfare. In an era when an army could remain elusive and avoid a pitched battle simply by remaining mobile, mechanisms had to be devised to bring an army to war. This device was setting up camp and staying put. It is at this point that the location of the eventual conflict and its characteristics play their first role.

## 2. Defining the location of battles

Before this function is discussed, it is appropriate to talk first about what we do and do not know about the battlefields in the British Isles in the early Middle Ages. As a whole, evidence available to us about warfare during this period is scarce. Contemporary sources are not as detailed as historians would like them to be. Information regarding the battlefields is no exception. In many, if not most, instances before a battlefield can be discussed, it must first be located; a task not easily done. Writing in 1950, Lieut.-Col. Alfred Burne stated that for no battlefield from the early medieval period 'can the exact site be pointed to with absolute certainty' (Burne, 1950). Even though battles, recorded in the contemporary sources, are provided with names their locations remain obscure and for many, completely unknown. However, this has not prevented attempts being made to locate them.

For most searches, the starting point has been with the place names themselves. But difficulties arise with this type of evidence which in many cases prevents certainty. Place names do not remain constant through time: *Eoforwic* is now York; *Dineiddyn* is now Edinburgh. For some, an element of the original name can be found in its present-day form — *eiddyn*, for example forms part of Edinburgh — and because of this it can be traced through a number of documents and forms. This occurs for only a few of the larger, better-known and well-recorded sites. Other names do not allow for this for a number of reasons. Contemporary sources provide different spellings for the same name resulting in confusion over its original meaning and its metamorphosis into its final form. Names were incorrectly copied: a confusion of *hēdh* 'hill', with *heidhr*, 'heath' can have significant impact upon a search based on a correlation between the typography of a proposed site and details contained in the name of the battlefield. This is even more complicated if we consider the mixing of languages. Is the root Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon or Celtic? Another problem with the actual recording of these sites is that different sources give different names. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* it is the Battle of Hatfield while in the *Annales Cambriae* it is the Battle of Meigen<sup>1</sup>. Other names simply disappear from written sources. Some names are distinct to the period of Scandinavian dominance in the northeast only to be abandoned (Pearson, 1995). The small-scale migration of people led to the moving of

settlements (which could supersede an existing name) or a complete abandonment of them.

The search for the battlefield of Brunanburh illustrates the difficulties encountered when using placenames as identifiers. The name itself is recorded only in a poem and could be a false one given to the site for alliteration purposes. Its closest, contemporary equivalent is found in the *Annales Cambriae* where it is referred to as Brune<sup>2</sup>. As Pearson explains in her article about battlesites around Bramham Moor, the etymology and origin of Brunanburh are uncertain (Pearson, 1995). This increases the number of present-day places which could have had it as their original form, but does not allow for absolute identification. Until recently, the general locality of the battle was uncertain which has resulted in over thirty sites being proposed, ranging from Scotland to the south of England. It is accepted as having been fought in northern England, but no placenames resemble Brunanburh exists in the regions suggested. As has been stated, the vagueness of the name allows for numerous possibilities to be argued — though with much manipulation. The search for the battle site continues.

Place names are not the only evidence available. For a few battles we have had some description of the battlefield, or at least clues to the surroundings recorded as well as their name. This information can be used as Pearson has done with Brunanburh; to eliminate locations with similar placenames in support of Bramham Moor (Pearson, 1995). Other methods involve examination of archaeological evidence to establish a zone of settlement or penetration and thereby limit the geographical region of the search. From this a borderland is established within which battles were most likely to have taken place. Names and topographical features are then examined to find the battlefields in question. This approach has been used for battles of the migration period to isolate a region along a proposed borderland between the advancing Anglo-Saxons and the Britons. It has resulted in three sites being proposed for Badon within a certain zone (Burkitt, 1990). Caution must be taken when using this method and an awareness that its usefulness is limited to the early battles between the Britons and the invading Angles and Saxons, or the movement north by the Angles into southern Pictland.

For other periods and conflicts where there is no invasion by a cultural group, the establishment of borders has been used to narrow the possibilities. This is based on the assumption that battles were fought in border regions, in so-called buffer zones. Michael Wood uses this assumption as the basis for his search for Brunanburh. He identifies a border zone along a series of fortified sites running between Dore and Whitwell Gap just south of the Don River. He has isolated this area based on the political situation in the north (the animosity between the southern English — those under the rule of Wessex — and the Northumbrians and Danes of that region). From this, and a few hints from the sources, Brinsworth is proposed as the possible site (Wood, 1980). It should be remembered that Pearson identifies Bramham Moor as the site for Brunanburh — a location further to the north.

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