

# WIRRALH SKIP FELAGR



*Viking & Anglo Saxon Living History*

## The Battle of Brunanburh (937AD).

Think of the most important battle fought in the UK and you may think of the battle of Britain (1940), the battle of Naseby (1645), Bosworth Field (1485) or perhaps the Battle of Hastings (1066)? It's doubtful you thought of the battle of Brunanburh (937AD). Chances are you've probably never heard of it? However, some historians argue that it is the most important battle in this island's history for it could be seen as the birth of Englishness, "the anvil on which England was forged". Before this battle the simple political boundary of what we now know as England just didn't exist. Thereafter for more than a thousand years armies have fought to try control all of it as a single unified country under one ruler.

With regard to the population of the British Isles it was once possible to talk about the Saxon South, the Jutes and Angles of the South East, the Danes in the East and the midlands, the Norse in the North West, Britons in the area we now know as Wales along with Gaels and Picts in Scotland. By the early tenth century genetic heritage, allegiances and political boundaries had become very complex and blurred as the Anglo Saxon Kingdom of Wessex in the South, had begun through political negotiation, marriage or military conflict to try bring more of the British Isles under its influence. All this uncertainty culminated in a major battle fought principally between those rulers who saw the chance to gain from such changes and those who feared losing control of land they viewed as theirs by tradition.

Though much has been written about this great conflict little is known with certainty. All we can be certain of is that nobody has yet offered an explanation to satisfy all the experts. Historical sources such as the Anglo Saxon Chronicles date the battle to 937AD but few academics will stake their reputation by fully committing themselves to where Brunanburh was. Most scholarly attention has focused on Bromborough on the Wirral, nevertheless we must also acknowledge the existence of other theories. With large armies being formed of men travelling from far and wide it could be that many places have a legitimate connection with this great battle, either as staging posts, points of embarkation or disembarkation, maybe even smaller skirmishes all leading up to the great battle.

Wherever Brunanburh may have been fought it is known from several sources that a hastily formed and uneasy reactionary alliance of many Norse, Scots, Irish and perhaps some Welsh, lead principally by the Norse King Olaf from Dublin and Scots King Constantine unsuccessfully fought to hold back the ambitious King Æthelstan of Anglo Saxon Wessex. This grandson of Alfred the Great, with the support from the Mercians and many Danes sought to subjugate much of what we now call England. The Anglo Saxon Chronicles describe Brunanburh as a great battle in which Æthelstan was victorious and that five kings, seven earls and countless more lay dead on the field of battle with other rulers fleeing from our shores. It would be wrong to say that over night a completely new geographical and political administration was established across the whole country, and for a good number of years afterwards descendants of displaced rulers continued to fight for control of different regions. Nevertheless after this battle we do know that, for a short while at least, Æthelstan did proclaim himself the first King of all Britain, and in essence, the idea of a United Kingdom was born among the dead of Brunanburh.

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