

The Battle of Brunanburh: A Verse Translation

Translated by Michael R. Collings

In this year:

Æthelstan, monarch and master of nobles,
Ring-giver of warriors, with his brother,
Edmund Ætheling, age-long glory
Garnered by strife of swords' blades
Near Brunanburh. Battling the shield-wall,
Hewing linden battle-shields by the strength of swords,
These sons of Edward— as suited their descent
From ancestors well-born— warred often
With dread enemies; defending land,
Treasure and family. Their foemen perished;
The Scots flotilla, the ship-floaters
Fated to die, fell. Fields flowed
With retainers' blood. The rising son,
In morning grandeur, that glorious star,
God's great candle, glided over the ground
Of each battling host until that brilliant creation
Sank to its western seat, sealing in death
The spears' prey— the sons of the north,
Betrayed by shields; and the Scots also,
Sated with battle.

The Saxon swordsmen

Pursued with deadly purpose the people of the North,
Hewing fearfully the fleeing foemen
With merciless blades. The Mercian heroes
Refused not— nay, not a one—
The hard hand-play with heathen warriors
Until great Anlaf sought the sea-surges,
Sought his homeland, sheltered in his ship's bosom,
Fearful longer to fight. Five young kings
Remained on the battlefield, resting in honorable death,
Sleeping, by swords slain; seven also succumbed,
Earls of Anlaf; and of the armies, innumerable
Vikings and Scots. The sovereign of the North
Fled the field, forced to his ships
By fear and by necessity— by fear of Wessex warriors.
The ships were launched, sustaining the king
On the dusky stream, saving his disgraced life.
Thus the old campaigner came defeated
To his northern country, cold Constantine,
The ancient warrior, with exultation stifled,
Mindful of the Wessex blades; bereft of kinsman,
Deprived of companions dead on the battlefield
Bereaved by the strife; his son abandoned
On the field of death, destroyed and twisted
In youth by conflict. Yea, he boasted not,
The grizzle-haired warrior, of warfare worthy;
The malevolent one, more wicked than Anlaf.

With his army remnant repented he with reason
That his deeds of war were not the better
On the battlefield— in banners' collision,
In the meeting of spears, in the struggle of men,
In the weapon-exchange, which on the battlefield
He willingly shared with the sons of Edward.

The Northmen departed in nailed ships,
The dejected survivors on Dinges Mere,
Riding the watery deeps, returning to Dublin;
Retreating to Ireland ashamed in spirit.
Likewise the brothers, both together,
King and Prince— war-exulting warriors—
Sought their fatherland, far-flung Wessex.
There remained but the dead, and the dark-coated ones
Who devour the corpses: the coal-black raven,
The horn-beaked owl, the baleful eagle,
Dusky-coated one, carrion-eater,
Greedy war-hawk; and that gray brute,
The wolf of the forest.

 Such satiety of slaughter
By sword's stroke saw this island
Never, say books and sages' tales,
Since from the East Saxons and Angles
Came over sea-surges, seeking Britain—
Gallant war-smiths and worthy earls
Who overcame the Celts and conquered a homeland.

NOTE: In the year 936, Olaf (Anlaf), son of Guthfrith of Dublin, sailed to England, joining forces with Constantine, King of the Scots and Strathclyde, to invade England. Constantine, after having sworn allegiance to Athelstan, allied himself with the Danes of Ireland. The invading army was met by Athelstan and his brother Edward and an army from Mercia and Wessex. The encounter resulted in the death of five kings and seven earls of Ireland, and a son of the King of the Scots. The northern kings retreated, reaching their own lands with considerable difficulty. Anlaf returned to Ireland.

The poem is preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.