

THE BATTLES AT CORBRIDGE

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DURING the second decade of the tenth century a Viking leader named Ragnald arrived in Northumbria and forcibly carved out a kingdom for himself. Although he holds an important place in the history of the north, his career is badly recorded and at some points quite obscure. He is usually identified with the Ragnald who is described in Irish sources as "grandson of Ivar" and "King of the Dubhgall", but recently it has been suggested that this identification should be abandoned and that the two Ragnalds should be kept separate.¹ The problem of Ragnald and his identity is only one of the many problems that arise from our ignorance of events and conditions in Northumbria. A heavy mist hangs over the north. We do not know what happened to the shattered fragments of the Anglian kingdom after the battle at York on 21 March 867; we know little about the Danish kingdom later established, and we know even less about the subsequent relations of the Angles, the Danes and the other peoples of the north. From about 900 onwards Norsemen from Ireland poured into north-western England, and the expedition of Ragnald may well mark the culmination of this movement. Another element was thus added to the racial complex, and though we may speculate on possible repercussions we can be sure only that the arrival of the Norsemen disturbed whatever uneasy political balance then existed.

With a background so confused and so uncertain it is not surprising that doubts surround the battles fought

¹ Alistair Campbell, *The Northumbrian Kingdom of Rægnald* (*English Historical Review*, Vol. LVII, pp. 85-91).

between 913 and 918 at Corbridge on the Tyne. There are several sources of information, not all independent of each other, and the single certain fact is that they cannot be completely reconciled. The central problem in this connexion is whether or not a battle fought in 918 between Ragnald King of the Dubhgall and Constantine King of the Scots should be identified with one of the two battles fought at Corbridge. As Constantine is said to have been present at the first Battle of Corbridge it has been usual to identify this battle with the battle of 918. But such an equation is not permissible, and Alistair Campbell concludes that there were three separate battles involving two separate Ragnalds.² It is unlikely that the obscurity which overhangs the Northumbrian scene will ever permit a final solution to this fascinating problem, but it is supposed to be the historian's duty to reconcile his sources even when, as in the present case, they appear to contradict each other. And, indeed, when our conflicting sources are examined, the most prominent discrepancies seem to lose their jagged edges, and a plausible reconstruction of events becomes possible. It is no more than a tentative interpretation of intractable evidence, but perhaps it deserves to be put forward.

The story of the battles at Corbridge is told, without dates and from a pronounced local angle, by the anonymous author of the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*.³ Ragnald "the king" arrived with a great number of ships and seized the lands of Ealdred *qui erat dilectus regi Eadwardo sicut et pater suus Eadulfus dilectus fuit regi Elfredo*. This was Ealdred of Bamburgh, son of Eadulf of Bamburgh. Ealdred fled northwards and persuaded Constantine King of Scots to join in the opposition to Ragnald. The armies met at Corbridge; the "heathen

² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³ *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, Vol. I (1882), pp. 208-210.

king" was victorious, Constantine was driven to flight, the Scots were scattered, and all the English nobles (except Ealdred and his brother Uhtred) were slain. Among the English dead is mentioned a certain Alfred, whose name introduces the story and whose interest for the writer clearly lies in the fact that he was a tenant of Bishop Cutheard. This was the first battle of Corbridge. It was followed by a division of the conquered territory between two Scandinavian warriors.⁴ One of them, described as *filius diaboli*, was especially hostile to God and St. Cuthbert until, after interrupting a service conducted by Bishop Cutheard, he involuntarily joined his Satanic father in Hell, providing an interesting and instructive spectacle for the congregation.

At least three years later—if we may accept as chronologically accurate the sequence of events in the *Historia*—Ragnald again assembled an army at Corbridge and there slew Eadred, another tenant of the bishop, together with a great number of Angles. Eadred's lands he granted to two young English noblemen, sons of Eadred, who had been lusty warriors in the battle.⁵ Thus, somewhat mysteriously, ended the second battle at Corbridge. Eadred and his sons are the only Angles named as having taken part in the encounter with Ragnald, but this again is probably a reflection of the writer's local view-point and limited interest.

Approximate dates can be fixed to these events.

⁴ On this division, its limits, and its significance see F. M. Stenton, *The Danes in England*, pp. 4-5 (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XIII, pp. 204-205).

⁵ *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, cit. sup., p. 210: *Regenwaldus rex . . . totam illam terram quam Edred tenuerat sancto Cuthberto abstulit, et dedit Esbrido filio Edred, et fratri suo Elstano comiti, qui in hoc prælio robusti bellatores fuerunt.*

Ealdred's father, Eadulf of Bamburgh, died in 913.⁶ The first battle, the land-division and the punishment of the sacrilegious Scandinavian warrior all fell within Cutheard's episcopate which cannot be extended beyond 915.⁷ Therefore the first Battle of Corbridge was fought between 913 and 915, and we should not be far from the mark if we put it in 914. The second Battle of Corbridge seems to have been fought in 917 or 918. Chronological considerations alone, therefore, preclude any attempt to identify the battle of 918 (discussed below) with the first Battle of Corbridge. But there is at least no such chronological bar to an identification of the battle of 918 with the second Battle of Corbridge.

In 914 Ragnald "grandson of Ivar" is known to have fought a naval battle off the Isle of Man,⁸ and in 917 he was at Waterford with other Scandinavian forces.⁹ Later in the same year Ragnald "King of the Dubhgal" was involved in fighting between the Irish and the Scandinavians in the country behind Waterford.¹⁰ It seems almost certain that Ragnald grandson of Ivar is Ragnald King of the Dubhgal, and there is no good reason for regarding Ragnald of Northumbria as anyone but the same person. The *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, it will have been noticed, repeatedly refers to Ragnald of Northumbria as "king", and English chroniclers, unlike

⁶ *Annals of Ulster* (Vol. I, ed. W. M. Hennessy, 1887), *sub anno* 912 *alias* 913: "... Etulb King of the North Saxons died." The "alias" dates in this section of the *Annals of Ulster* may be tested at several points and shown to be trustworthy. Æthelweard (*Monumenta Historica Britannica*, 1848, p. 520) uses a complicated system for indicating chronological sequence, but he clearly places the death of Eadulf (*Athulf*) in 913. Æthelweard's chronology for this period is often maligned, but it should be remembered that the marginal dates were inserted not by Æthelweard but by Savile. The death of Eadulf (*Etalbh*) is also mentioned in the *Three Fragments of Irish Annals* (ed. John O'Donovan, 1860, p. 244) in association with events which belong to 913.

⁷ F. M. Stenton, *loc. cit.*

⁸ *Annals of Ulster*, *cit. sup.*, *sub anno* 913 *alias* 914.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *sub anno* 916 *alias* 917.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

their Irish and Welsh contemporaries, are conspicuously careful in their use of such titles. To see here three or even two Ragnalds introduces an unnecessary complication. Ragnald could have sailed from the Isle of Man to Northumbria, fought at Corbridge, divided up his conquests, returned to Ireland and, after a sojourn in Waterford, returned to Northumbria again. Much is obscure in Ragnald's career, but this simple version of events between 914 and 918 raises no obvious difficulty and strikes no discordant note.

In 914 also, in the early part of the summer, Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, built a fortress at Eddisbury in Cheshire. The date is a significant clue to the date of Ragnald's arrival in Northumbria. Eddisbury was a unit in a developed system of fortification which served several purposes,¹¹ one of which was to protect western Mercia from dangers that lay to the north. The building of the fortress at Eddisbury seems to reflect Æthelflæd's appreciation of a northern menace, and it is not unreasonable to associate it with the arrival of Ragnald. Though there is no record of direct Mercian intervention at the first Battle of Corbridge, Æthelflæd was apparently interested in and somewhat alarmed at the progress of events.

Irish sources do not mention either of the two Battles of Corbridge, but they give details of the important battle of 918. The fullest and most reliable version comes from the trustworthy *Annals of Ulster*¹² which preserves what seems to be a contemporary narrative. The date of the battle is beyond dispute, because the same annal records the death of Æthelflæd, which is known to have occurred on 12 June 918, and because the following annal correctly

¹¹ See F. T. Wainwright, *Cledemutha*, pp. 206, (*English Historical Review*, Vol. LXV, 1950), and *North-west Mercia*, pp. 23-25 (*Lancs. and Ches. Hist. Soc. Trans.*, Vol. 94, 1942).

¹² *cit. sup.*, *sub anno* 917 *alias* 918.

notes that Easter in 919 fell on the seventh of the Kalends of May, i.e. 25 April, noteworthy to the chronicler as the latest possible date for Easter Day.¹³ If events within the annal for 918 are arranged in chronological order, then the battle fell in the first half of the year, before Æthel-flæd's death on 12 June. Ragnald King of the Dubhgall left Waterford, where he had been in 917, with a force of Scandinavians which included the two earls Ottir¹⁴ and Graggabai.¹⁵ They attacked the men of Alba (*Fir Alban*), but they were ready for them and so "they met on the banks of the Tyne among the North Saxons".¹⁶ The Scandinavians were in four divisions: one under Guth-frith grandson of Ivar, a second under the two earls, a third under the young nobles, and the fourth, out of sight and held in reserve, under Ragnald himself. The men of Alba defeated the first three divisions and slew many of the Scandinavian warriors, including Ottir and Graggabai. Then Ragnald threw in his reserves and "made a slaughter" of the enemy. The men of Alba had had the initial success, but Ragnald's stratagem clearly turned the tables—not completely, however, for we are told that no king or mormaer¹⁷ was amongst the slain. And we are told specifically that "night interrupted the battle."

It is sometimes stated that Ragnald was soundly defeated in this battle, but our chief source does not give that impression. It was a battle of surprises and changing fortunes, no doubt, and the result seems to have been indecisive and debatable. Both sides could, and probably

¹³ F. T. Wainwright, *The Chronology of the "Mercian Register"*, p. 386 (*English Historical Review*, Vol. LX, 1945).

¹⁴ i.e. ON. *Óttarr* or **Óttirr*.

¹⁵ i.e. ON. *Krakabein* (Cf. E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Islandska Personbinamn*, pp. 217-218).

¹⁶ *la Saxanu tuaiscirt* (see below, p. 166).

¹⁷ An important officer of state. On the origin of the word see A. O. Anderson, *Ninian and the Southern Picts*, *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. XXVII (1948), p. 40 (Reprinted separately, p. 17).

did, claim the victory. But according to our most reliable authority it was night, not a clear decision in the field, that put an end to the fighting. These points are important, as will be seen, in an attempt to identify the battle with the second Battle of Corbridge.

Other sources add little to our knowledge of the battle of 918. Their versions are shorter than the version preserved in the *Annals of Ulster*, but they demonstrate with startling emphasis the very important fact that major discrepancies have crept into the different accounts of the same battle. The *Annals of the Four Masters* state briefly that Oitir and the foreigners went from Waterford to Alba, that Constantine son of Aedh gave them battle, and that Oitir and his followers were slain.¹⁸ The name of Constantine is an unimportant addition to the version in the *Annals of Ulster*, but there is no mention of Ragnald, the leader and outstanding personality in the battle, no mention of the stratagem which turned the tables, and no mention of Krakabein. It is implied but not definitely stated that the victory lay with the Scots. The battle is clearly the same as that described in the *Annals of Ulster*, but it is much distorted in this summary.

In *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* occurs the short entry: "They [the Scandinavians] went . . . to Alba, and the men of Alba gave them battle, and they were slain there, i.e. Ragnall and Oittir."¹⁹ This entry obviously refers to the same battle but is even more distorted than the version in the *Annals of the Four Masters* for instead of merely ignoring Ragnald it lists him as killed, an error not of detail but of the first magnitude.

In the so-called *Pictish Chronicle* we find the note:

¹⁸ *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, ed. John O'Donovan (7 vols., Dublin, 1851), *sub anno* 916, Vol. II, p. 593.

¹⁹ *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, ed. J. H. Todd (London, 1867), p. 235. A later version adds the name of Constantine (*ibid.*, p. 35).

*Bellum Tinemore factum est in xviii anno inter Constantinum et Regnall, et Scotti habuerunt victoriam.*²⁰ The eighteenth year of Constantine was 918,²¹ and this is clearly another reference to the same battle even though Otter does not figure in it. The name *Tinemore* is an interesting addition which effects a link with the statement in the *Annals of Ulster* that the battle was fought "on the banks of the Tyne". And here we have the only direct claim that the battle ended in victory for the Scots. a claim which, in this source, we may both understand and discount.

Despite discrepancies it is certain that the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Annals of the Four Masters*, the *War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, and the *Pictish Chronicle* are all concerned with the same battle, that of 918. But can this battle be identified with the second Battle of Corbridge? They seem to have been fought at about the same time, and the known details of Ragnald's career raise no difficulty against the assumption that they are the same battle. There are, however, serious objections to this identification. In the first place it might be argued—it has been argued—that Ragnald was soundly defeated in the battle of 918 and that he was victorious in the second Battle of Corbridge. Neither of these arguments can be accepted. It has been shown above that the result of the battle described in the *Annals of Ulster*, our best authority, was indecisive and debatable in the extreme. And an examination of the story preserved in the *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* suggests that the result of the second Battle of Corbridge was also indecisive and debatable. In a passage quoted above²²

²⁰ *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots, and other Early Memorials of Scottish History*, ed. W. F. Skene (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 9.

²¹ Cf. A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1922), pp. cxiii, 444 n, 446 n.

²² p. 158 note.

it is stated that Ragnald, having slain Eadred, gave his lands to his (Eadred's) two sons who had fought lustily in the battle. The view has been put forward that here we have an example of local Englishmen of rank fighting on the Scandinavian side, but there is no suggestion in the *Historia* that the two young Angles had fought on Ragnald's side, and there is no suggestion that Eadred their father was not the Eadred slain by Ragnald. It is perhaps more likely that the two young Angles had fought on the English side and that Ragnald had allowed them to keep their father's lands after the battle. This is what we might expect to have happened if, but only if, the battle had been so indecisive that Ragnald felt the need to compromise with his enemies. Eadred had been killed and so Ragnald could claim the victory; but Eadred's sons retained their father's lands and so the Northumbrians could also claim the victory. The second Battle of Corbridge, like the battle of 918, was neither a clear-cut victory nor a clear-cut defeat. There is no difficulty, on this score at least, in accepting the view that they were the same battle.

The composition of the forces opposing Ragnald raises a more serious difficulty: at the second Battle of Corbridge he fought against the Northumbrian Angles, and at the battle of 918 he fought against the Scots. The proposed identification involves the assumption that the *Historia* ignored the presence of the Scots and that the non-English sources ignored the presence of the Angles. At this point the attempt to reconcile conflicting sources becomes strained; historical interpretation of facts gives place to conjecture, though not necessarily to speculation, and the following points are relevant to the discussion. It is quite clear that the *Historia* preserves a version of events which is essentially local and incomplete. The writer was interested primarily, perhaps exclusively, in the fate of

the lands and adherents of the bishop. He makes little effort to relate his material to the wider historical issues, such as the submission of the men of York to Æthelflæd in 918²³ and Ragnald's subsequent seizure of the city,²⁴ though these must have been common knowledge in Northumbria. He builds his story around such local figures as Alfred and Eadred, and he may very well have ignored the parts played by more important men and by more important forces.

That the second battle at Corbridge was of more than local interest can hardly be doubted. We know that the Scots took part in the first battle at Corbridge, and it is certain that they would be at least keenly interested in the outcome of the second conflict with the common enemy. Similarly Æthelflæd and the Mercians had apparently reacted sharply to Ragnald's arrival in 914, and in 918 the men of York sought and were granted Æthelflæd's protection, presumably against Ragnald and his Norsemen. Therefore the failure of the *Historia* to mention either Scottish or Mercian intervention at the second Battle of Corbridge is not in itself conclusive proof that Scots and Mercians refrained from active participation in the shaping of events.

It would be a singularly curious coincidence if the Scots, the Northumbrians and the Mercians all fought as allies in a battle against Ragnald, and if the Northumbrian account ignored the Scots, the other accounts ignored the Northumbrians, and all ignored the Mercians. Yet, as on the one hand the *Historia* presents an incomplete and local version of the second Battle of Corbridge, so on the other hand the non-English sources record the battle of 918 with such a bewildering series of

²³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ed. B. Thorpe, 1861), MSS. B and C (British Museum, Cott. Tib. A VI and Cott. Tib. B I) *sub anno* 918.

²⁴ Symeon of Durham, *Historia Regum*, *sub anno* 919 (*Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, cit. sup., Vol. II, p. 93).

errors and omissions that the door is not altogether closed against the possibility that the Northumbrians were there as allies of the Scots. Indeed, in the only account of the battle that is at once detailed and trustworthy, the account in the *Annals of Ulster*, there occurs a phrase that might perhaps be construed as supporting this view. The Scots are said to have met Ragnald in battle "on the banks of the Tyne among the North Saxons"—*la Saxanu tuaiscirt*. This phrase means literally "with the Saxons of the north", and it used to be taken to mean "with the assistance of the North Saxons"²⁵ (i.e. the northern Angles or Northumbrians). It is now more often taken to indicate the area where the battle was fought rather than the composition of the defending forces.²⁶ In this sense it is perhaps more in accord with idiomatic usage, but it will undoubtedly bear the older interpretation without difficulty. It is possible, therefore, that the Irish writer whose work survives in the *Annals of Ulster* meant to include the Northumbrian Angles as allies of the Scots in the battle of 918. If we could be sure that this was so our problem of reconciliation would present no great difficulty. Unfortunately we cannot be sure.

We can be sure, however, that the battle of 918 was fought near the Tyne, and the fact that the second Battle of Corbridge was also fought near the Tyne would seem to be sufficient to bring the two battles into very close association. But even this is doubtful, for it is possible

²⁵ See John O'Donovan, *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters* (1851), Vol. II, p. 593 note; William Reeves, *Adamnan's Life of St. Columba* (Dublin 1857), p. 333 note; W. F. Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots* (1867), p. 363; J. H. Todd, *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (1867), p. lxxxvi.

²⁶ i.e. *with* or *among* in the sense of *in the land of* (the North Saxons). W. M. Hennessy (*Annals of Ulster*, *loc. cit.*) takes the phrase to mean "in North Saxonland", i.e. in Northumbria. A. O. Anderson (*Early Sources of Scottish History*, Vol. I, p. 406) gives a literal translation in a footnote and takes this to mean "in the north of England."

that the battle of 918 was fought not near the Newcastle Tyne but in East Lothian near the Haddington Tyne.²⁷ In tentative support of this possibility is sometimes quoted an annal which Symeon of Durham copied from an earlier writer and which now runs thus: *Anno DCCCCXII. Reingwald rex et Oter comes et Oswl Cracabam irruerunt et vastaverunt Dunbline.*²⁸ This section of the work has suffered some chronological dislocation,²⁹ and the date now attached to the annal may be ignored. The association of Cracabam (or Cracabain, i.e. *Kraka-bein*) with Ragnald and Otter effects a strong link between this raid and the expedition of 918. *Dunbline* cannot be Dublin, as is sometimes suggested; it is probably Dunblane,³⁰ and it may be that Ragnald's forces sacked Dunblane before they fought the battle on the Tyne. The appearance of Ragnald at Dunblane perhaps strengthens the claims of East Lothian as against Corbridge as the site of the battle of 918. Norsemen are known to have devastated this area as well as the Corbridge area, and it may be that the battle of 918 should be kept distinct from the battles at Corbridge. Perhaps Ragnald sacked Dunblane and then fought the Scots near the Haddington Tyne before pushing southwards to Corbridge and, ultimately, to York. Such a theory would fit the few known facts as well as any other, and it has much to recommend it. Doubts and difficulties abound in this period, and though it is interesting to examine one possible reconstruction of events it is unwise to ignore all others.

A little light may be thrown on our immediate problem

²⁷ As suggested, for example, by A. O. Anderson (*op. cit.*, p. 406 note) and A. Campbell (*op. cit.*, pp. 89-90).

²⁸ *Historia Regum, sub anno 912* (Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, loc. cit.).

²⁹ On which see A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

³⁰ *Dunbline* is not the form in which we should expect Dunblane to occur, but unless another place is suggested the identification should be accepted.

by an Irish annalistic compilation which survives only in a late transcript known as the *Three Fragments*.³¹ Scholars have been reluctant to use this source because its origins are obscure and because it contains much that is legendary rather than historical. But it also contains, especially for our period, much genuine historical information which seems to have its roots in a contemporary narrative.³² Two passages in the *Three Fragments* are of interest in the present connexion. The first passage tells of a battle between the Norsemen and the men of Alba; after a fierce struggle the men of Alba were victorious and the King of the Norsemen, Oittir son of Iarnгна (ON. *Iárnkné*), was slain with many of his followers.³³ This story has been crudely inserted in the middle of the long account of Ingimund's attack on Chester, but it is clearly misplaced. The mention of Otter's death alone would carry it forward to 918, and in content it is very like the notice of the battle of 918 preserved in the *Annals of the Four Masters*.³⁴ It is usually accepted as a reference to the battle of 918,³⁵ and there seems to be neither valid objection nor suitable alternative to this identification.

The second passage is more difficult to place. It gives a long and, as is usual in the *Three Fragments*, a garbled and legendary description of a battle between the Scandinavians and the English.³⁶ Errors, later additions and legendary details may bring the *Three Fragments* under

³¹ *Annals of Ireland, Three Fragments*, ed. John O'Donovan (*Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society*, Dublin 1860). On the origin of the name, *Three Fragments*, see F. T. Wainwright, *Duald's "Three Fragments"* (*Scriptorium*, Vol. I, Part ii, 1948, pp. 56-58).

³² F. T. Wainwright, *Ingimund's Invasion* (*English Historical Review*, Vol. LXIII, 1948, pp. 145-169).

³³ John O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-230; Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels, MS. 5301-5320. fol. 33b (p. 66).

³⁴ See above p. 162.

³⁵ E.g. William Reeves, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-334; A. O. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 407-408.

³⁶ John O'Donovan, *op. cit.*, pp. 244-246; Bibliothèque Royale MS. 5301-5320, fol. 35b (p. 70).

suspicion, but we cannot dismiss as mere fabrication a source which, though itself confused and inaccurate, apparently preserves a core of genuine historical fact. We are told that a large force of Scandinavians attacked the English after accepting "Sitriuca" (ON. *Sigtryggr*), grandson of Ivar, as their king. The battle seems to have been exceptionally bloody; many important men were slain, but the English were victorious and destroyed many of their pagan enemies. We are told that the king of the pagans, "attacked by a disease", was carried into a wood where he died, and that Oittir, "the most active jarl in the battle", also fled into the woods with the remaining Scandinavians. Then Æthelflæd, who seems to have been responsible for the English strategy, ordered the wood to be cut down; this was done, no doubt with facility possible only in legend, and all the pagans were killed. Æthelflæd's fame is reputed to have spread far and wide. So ends the story of the battle. It is followed by an interesting paragraph, the last in the *Three Fragments*, which specifically states that Æthelflæd concluded a defensive alliance with both the Britons and the men of Alba; each was bound to render assistance to the other against the Norsemen. The statement that the Scots and the Britons proceeded to destroy positions held by the Norsemen suggests that the alliance was more than an empty gesture.

There is much in this story that we cannot accept, but the record of an Anglo-Celtic alliance against the Norsemen is of first-rate importance, and the account of the battle, though garbled and legendary in its present form, is worthy of consideration. To which of the known battles might it refer? O'Donovan³⁷ linked it with the Battle of Tettenhall which is described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in which a certain *Ohter eorl* was

³⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 245 note.

among the slain.³⁸ But the death of an Otter in each of the two battles is the only link between them. The Battle of Tettenhall appears to have followed a raid southwards of the Danish Army of Northumbria, and it belongs to the year 910; the battle described in the *Three Fragments* leaves one with the impression that it followed an invasion from across the sea, and in its present context it is preceded by a series of events which belong to the years 913-917. It cannot have occurred later than 918 because Æthelflæd died in that year. It is altogether easier to link this battle with the battle of 918 than to link it with the Battle of Tettenhall. The Otter who was "the most active jarl in the battle" and who died there should be identified with the Otter slain at the battle of 918 and not with the Otter slain at Tettenhall. This identification also gains some support from an examination of the possible sources used by the compiler whose work now survives as the *Three Fragments*.³⁹

The introduction of Sihtric, grandson of Ivar, into the story is obviously an error; it is impossible to accept the implication that he died in 918 or at any time during the lifetime of Æthelflæd. He survived her death in 918 to pursue an illustrious career in England and Ireland before he died in 927.⁴⁰ It is possible that the name Sihtric was added as a mistaken explanatory gloss to "grandson of Ivar" and was transferred to the text by a later copyist. Both Ragnald and Sihtric were grandsons of Ivar and both appear under this description in Irish annals for the years 917 and 918.⁴¹ It would be easy enough for a scribe to choose the wrong one for his gloss. It is true, of course, that Ragnald also survived the battle of 918, but it is

³⁸ MSS. B, C and D *sub anno* 911 (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. B. Thorpe, Vol. I, pp. 184-185).

³⁹ Cf. *Ingimund's Invasion*, *cit. sup.*, pp. 152, 153, 159 *et passim*.

⁴⁰ *Annals of Ulster*, *cit. sup.*, *sub. anno* 926 *alias* 927.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, *sub annis* 916 *alias* 917, and 917 *alias* 918.

significant that one version (in *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*) lists Ragnald and Otter as slain⁴² just as the *Three Fragments* lists both Sihtric and Otter as slain. It looks as if a scribe whose work is now incorporated in the *Three Fragments* made worse, by a faulty gloss, an error already current in at least one Irish version: Ragnald was present at the battle of 918 but he did not die there; Sihtric, so far as we know, was not even present.

It is possible, therefore, to regard the story in the *Three Fragments* as yet another version of the battle of 918. The existence of an earlier notice of this battle, mistakenly inserted into the account of Ingimund's attack on Chester, raises no obstacle, for it is not unusual in the *Three Fragments* to find the same event recorded more than once—this simply shows that a compiler had more than one source before him.⁴³ There is no need to emphasize the obvious point that, if this is indeed another version of the battle of 918, then it goes far towards reconciling the divergent traditions current in Durham (*Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*) and Ireland (*Annals of Ulster, Annals of the Four Masters, War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*). The reconciliation of our different sources would be sufficiently complete to permit the identification of the battle of 918 with the second Battle of Corbridge.

The importance of the version in the *Three Fragments*, however, lies less in its possible reconciliation of other sources than in its introduction of Æthelflæd and the Mercians as active participants in the moulding of northern events. Æthelflæd had as much reason as Constantine to be interested in the activities of Ragnald and the Norsemen, but only in the *Three Fragments* do

⁴² See above p. 162

⁴³ Cf *Ingimund's Invasion*, *cit. sup.*, p. 156.

we get a direct statement that she collaborated with the northern peoples against the common enemy. The story in the *Three Fragments*, though perhaps unreliable in its details, tells us no more than we might have guessed from a study of the scraps of evidence which are all that we have of northern history in this period. Æthelflæd would not be blind to the dangers arising from Norse invasions beyond her northern frontiers, and it has already been suggested that her fortification of Eddisbury in 914 is some measure of her alarm. Her anxiety would not be relieved by subsequent events, and the Anglo-Celtic alliance, with the formation of which she is credited by the *Three Fragments*, may be closely associated with the submission of the men of York to her in 918. Such a development, dictated by the common fear of Northumbrian, Mercian, Scot and Briton, would naturally follow a battle which so clearly emphasized the menace of the Norsemen. That the fear was founded upon a sound appreciation of the situation was proved, after Æthelflæd's death, by Ragnald's seizure of York.

But what of the second Battle of Corbridge? Is it possible to identify it with the battle of 918? The view that these two battles are one and the same has already been put forward,⁴⁴ and it certainly is possible to accept it. This essay has attempted to show that beneath an acceptance of this identification must lie a reconciliation of apparently conflicting sources, and to show that such a reconciliation is possible. But the resulting structure is not free from stresses and strains; its weaknesses are no less prominent than its strength. We may, if we wish, believe that Ragnald sailed to Northumbria in 914, fought a battle against the English and Scots at Corbridge, divided up his conquests, ravaged in Ireland (917), and returned to sack Dunblane and to fight against the

⁴⁴ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943), p. 329.

English and Scots again at Corbridge in 918. We may believe, that is to say, that the battle of 918 is identical with the second Battle of Corbridge. But it is equally possible to believe that the two battles are distinct and that in 918 Ragnald fought the Scots on the Haddington Tyne before pushing southwards. It is even possible to believe that there was no second battle at Corbridge at all. An unsatisfactory conclusion may be summarized thus: if there were two battles at Corbridge, the first was fought in about 914, the second was fought in about 918, and it is probable, though by no means certain, that the second is the same battle as that which, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, was fought in 918 "on the banks of the Tyne among the Saxons of the north."