



A creative translation of the Old English poem
The Battle of Brunanburh

Giuseppe Giordano

Department of Mental Health, ASL CN2 Alba-Bra, CN, Italy

ABSTRACT

The Battle of Brunanburh, also spelled Brunnanburh, is an Old English poem of 73 lines included in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 937. It relates the victory of the Saxon king Athelstan over the allied Norse, Scots, and Briton invaders under the leadership of Olaf Guthfrithson, king of Dublin and claimant to the throne of York. The poem is considered as a panegyric composed for Athelstan to celebrate his victory. It describes the dead kings and earls on the battlefield and pictures the Norsemen fleeing back to Dublin in their ships while their dead sons are being devoured by ravens and wolves. The poem asserts that this was the greatest battle ever fought in England and also that of a great slaughter. The present paper is a creative translation into Modern English of the Old English text.

Keywords: *The Battle of Brunanburh, Old English poetry, Creative writing, Translation work.*

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INTRODUCTION

The battle of Brunanburh recounts the story of a battle fought between the Anglo-Saxons under the command of King Æthelstan against a coalition of warriors belonging to the Scots, Britons and Vikings tribes headed by kings Constantine and Olaf. It was fought some time before its inclusion into the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and someplace in the north of England. The battlefield was probably located around Wirral, near Liverpool, although there is no archaeological evidence to confirm exactly where it occurred [1]. The poem is a praise of the victory of the Anglo-Saxons against the hegemony of the Danes and, as such, it is considered as a panegyric writing. It is composed of seventy-three lines and fifteen stanzas, each stanza being of the same length except for the first and ending ones. In the original text there are many characteristics of a heroic Old English poem such as alliteration, the division of lines into two halves separated by a caesura, kennings, compound names and poetic vocabulary referring to war. For a detailed explanation of the literary terms mentioned here, it may be helpful to consult a reliable dictionary [2]. Alliteration is frequent throughout the poem with the consonants h, w and s highly represented, probably to reinforce the ideas of war elements such as *sweorda* (weapons), *hæleþa* (warrior/hero) and *wiges* (war). There are several examples of kennings: line 6, *hamora lafan*, standing for swords; line 20, *wiges saed*, meaning the dead; line 30, *sweordum answefedede*, which refers to those killed by swords [3]. Compound names are represented by *beahgifa* in line 2 which can be translated as ring-giver; *Bordweal* in line 6 (shield-wall) and *heapolinde* in line 7 (war-shield).

Creative translation of the poem

The translation of the poem was performed with the help of two online resources, the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary [4] and the Old English to Modern English Translator [5]. The detection of the subjects and the verbs was fundamental to have an idea of who were the agents of the actions performed. This was also helpful to understand the order of the sentence in OE and then, consequently, to invert the order of the sequence into Modern English to make the text more appealing to a modern reader. The most difficult thing was to detect OE inflections. For example, the ending –*es* of nouns is typical of the genitive declension which expresses possession like in *sweordes ecgum*, the edges of the sword, line 68. The same noun is inflected with the ending –*um* to create the dative declension (indirect object) as in line 30: *sweordum*, plural form of *sweord* [6]. Some words were very difficult to translate and for this reason it has been useful to consult the explanatory notes of The Cambridge Old English Reader [7] to understand the meaning of terms such as *hraefn* (raven), line 61, and *waepengewrixles*, line 51, meaning exchange of weapons. This version of the poem could not be obviously a literal translation of the original text since an adaptation to Modern English was essential to render the text comprehensible, but it has been possible to reproduce some features of OE poetry such as alliteration, kenning and compounds. In line 2, for example, alliteration is created with the consonant w: ‘the warrior and wealth keeper along with the wise brother’ and, similarly, in line 32: ‘were forced to fall on the front line’. Examples of kennings are ‘wealth keeper’ in line 2, standing for the king and sea swell in line 26 which refers to the sea and its waves. For what concerns the compound names, some nouns were kept such as war-shield, battlefield and battle tent and war-

smiths in lines 6, 4, 5, 72, respectively. The present translation into Modern English includes an introductory and concluding parts as if an imaginary storyteller is entertaining an audience with the narration of the poem. In the intro, ideas of national pride and praise to the ruler of the Anglo-Saxons are emphasised along with the illustration of the rivals of the battle, the place where it likely happened and how it ended up. In the finale, much attention was given to the expressions of happiness and excitement by writing a regular rhyming pattern *aabb* (coupled rhyme) in all the three stanzas. This pattern creates a rhythm which is pleasant to the ear, smooth and steady so that the main message of the poem, that is the victory of a nation, is clearly conveyed.

Intro

Listen all you folks! Lend your ear to this tale
of glory and fame, of praise and majesty.
The commemoration of our King's heroic deeds
who saved our land from the enemies.

It befell somewhere in the Northern territories
Between the borders of Wessex and Scotland
A great deal of men, about thirty thousand
Collapsed under the sword of our soldiers.

They called it 'the great war' at the time.
The armies of the Scots, Picts and Danes
were forced to kneel to our supremacy,
to the birth of our country: England!.

¹ The most honourable King Aethelstan, the supreme ruler,
the warrior and wealth keeper, with his wise brother,
prince Edmund, to both eternal honour,
who killed on the battlefield, and wounded with the sword

⁵ near Brunaburh. Close to the battle tent
with his familiar war-shield, forged by the hammer
marched Edward the Elder, of noble birth
of royal blood, he was often in combat
defending every land with furor

¹⁰ treasures and estates too. The enemies died in combat,
the people of Scotland and the pirates
were forced to fall on the front line
and the bleeding warriors since sunrise
in the morning praised the stars,

¹⁵ moved on the ground, lighted a candle to their gods
to the eternal lords to set the destiny of their land
they marched to rest. Where many warriors stood
the men from the north seized their spears
the Danish rushed with the Scots,

²⁰ fatigued and weary of the war, the West-Saxons went ahead
all that day, and their troops chased the enemy
they attacked the hated foe from behind
with blades sharpened on the grindstone.
The Mercians did not refrain any man from fighting

²⁵ all warriors struggled with much pain
those who came with Olaf over the sea swell,
in round ships, they wanted our land,
but failed to fight. Five lay dead
on the battlefield, young kings

³⁰ put to sleep with swords. Likewise seven
of Olaf's earls, and countless of the legion,
sailors and Scots. They were forced to flee away
the ruler of the Northmen was compelled
to retire to a ship with a little group of men;

³⁵ he drove the ship in deep water, the king departed
on dusky waters to save his life.
Also, the wise commander tried to escape,
to his lands in the north, Constantine-
old grey-haired warrior - had good reason to scream

⁴⁰ during the attacks for he lost his kinsmen,
many of his friends fell on the battlefield,
slain in strife, and even his own son was left
on that place of slaughter, killed and torn into pieces,
he, who was too young for war.

⁴⁵ The senior warrior, the sound of swords,
that old evil man and also Olaf,
with what remained of the host, had no reason
to sneer that they were superior in combat
on that battlefield, fight of flags,

⁵⁰ clashing of spears, encounter of men,
exchanging of blows, as they fought with
the sons of Edward on the battlefield.
The Northmen left in wooden ships,
the sorrowful survivors sought for

⁵⁵ Dublin and crossed the Dinges sea over deep water
all the way back to Ireland, with woeful hearts.
Likewise, the kinsmen escaped together,
the king and the prince, back to their homes,
in Wessex, grieving for their defeat.

⁶⁰ They left behind them dismembered bodies,
where the dark-feathered black raven
and the horn-beaked dark-plumaged
white-tailed eagle, feasted with the carrions,
the greedy war hawk and the wild beast,

⁶⁵ the wolf from the woods. Never saw such a slaughter
on this island, not even so many
men that died before this day
under the blades of the swords, as books tell us,
the old wisemen, as the Angles and Saxons

⁷⁰ came here from the east,
over the vast sea heading to Britain
proud war-smiths, conquered the Welsh,
and eager for glory, took this land.

Finale

Yes! What a great success!
much joy and honour to express

there are no more enemies to fear
not even the sound of a spear.

Praise to Aethelstan our lord
and thanks to his mighty sword
because our land is finally back
no other Danes to track.

Yay! Celebrate with mead
the glory of this deed
and may the minstrel's music play
enchant forever this day!

CONCLUSION

There are several translations of the The Battle of Brunanburh, one of these is Tennyson's translation which was edited in the nineteenth century while a successive rendering of the poem is due to Alistair Campbell published in 1938. The most recent adaptation was edited by Michael Livingston in 2011 which includes two alternative translations of the poem as well as essays on the battle and the poem [8]. The translation presented here is an attempt to render a simplified but creative version of the poem with the embellishment and addition of opening and concluding verses.

Appendix 1 - The Battle of Brunanburh in Old English [9]

	Her æþelstan cyning, beorna beahgifa, Eadmund æþeling, geslogon æt sæcce	eorla dryhten, and his broþor eac, ealdorlangne tir sweorda ecgum
5	ymbe Brunanburh. heowan heaþolinde afaran Eadweardes, from cneomægum, wiþ laþra gehwæne	Bordweal clufan, hamora lafan, swa him geæþele wæs þæt hi æt campe oft land ealgodon,
10	hord and hamas. Sceotta leoda fæge feollan, secga <u>swate</u> , on morgentid,	Hettend crungun, and scipflotan feld dænnede siðþan sunne up mære tungol,
15	glad ofer grundas, eces drihtnes, sah to setle. garum ageted, ofer scild scoten,	godes condel beorht, oð sio æþele gesceaft þær læg secg mænig guma norþerna swilce Scittisc eac,
20	werig, wiges sæd. ondlongne dæg on last legdun heowan herefleman mecum mylenscarpan.	Wesseaxe forð eorodcistum laþum þeodum, hindan þearle Myrce ne wyrndon
25	heardes hondplegan þæra þe mid Anlafe on lides bosme fæge to gefeohte. on þam campstede	hæleþa nanum ofer æra gebland land gesohtun, Fife lægun cyningas giunge,
30	sweordum aswefede, eorlas Anlafes, flotan and Sceotta.	swilce seofene eac unrim heriges, þær geflemed wearð

- Norðmanna bregu, nede gebeded,
to lides stefne litle weorode;
- 35**
cread cneor on flot, cyning ut gewat
on fealene flod, feorh generede.
Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
on his cyþþe norð, Costontinus,
har hilderinc, hreman ne þorfte
- 40**
mæca gemanan; he wæs his mæga sceard,
freonda gefylled on folcstede,
beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
on wælstowe wundun forgrunden,
giungne æt guðe. Gelpan ne þorfte
- 45**
beorn blandenfeax bilgeslehtes,
eald inwidda, ne Anlaf þy ma;
mid heora herelafum hlehhan ne þorftun
þæt heo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
on campstede cumbolgehnastes,
- 50**
garmittinge, gumena gemotes,
wæpengewrixles, þæs hi on wælfelda
wiþ Eadwardes afaran plegodan.
Gewitan him þa Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
dreorig daraða laf, on Dinges mere
- 55**
ofer deop wæter Difelin secan,
eft Iraland, æwiscmode.
Swilce þa gebroþer begen ætsamne,
cyning and æþeling, cyþþe sohton,
Wesseaxena land, wiges hremige.
- 60**
Letan him behindan hræw bryttian
saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn,
hynnednebban, and þane hasewanpadan,
earn æftan whit, æses brucan,
grædigne guðhafoc and þæt græge deor,
- 65**
wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wæl mare
on þis eiglande æfre gieta
folces gefylled beforan þissum
sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
ealde uðwitan, siþþan eastan hider
- 70**
Engle and Seaxe up becoman,
ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
wlance wigsmiþas, Wealas ofercoman,
eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.

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