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Proceedings
of the
Somersetshire Archæological and
Natural History Society,
1875, Part II.

P A P E R S , E T C .

An inquiry concerning the real

Site of the Battle of Athan-dune,
and of other localities mentioned by Asser in his account of the great
struggle which took place in the year 878, between King Ælfred
and the Danes for the possession of Wessex.

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THE battle of Æthandune, which took place in the year 878 between the English under King Ælfred and the Danish army under Gothrum, may justly be regarded as one of the most important events in our national history. The existence of the English as a nation was decided on that day. The Danes had already made themselves masters of the whole of England, with the exception of a portion of the kingdom of Wessex. If the issue of this battle had been reversed, if Gothrum had triumphed instead of Ælfred, the conquest of England would have been completed, and the English would henceforth have been reduced to the condition into which the men of Northumbria had already sunk, of harrowers and plowers to the Danes.¹ This calamity was averted by the

(1). Sax. Chron. 876.

genius and perseverance of Ælfred, but the means by which he achieved success are involved in much obscurity, and doubt exists as to the very site of Æthandune itself. It is generally supposed to be Bratton Hill, near Edington, in Wilts. My object in the present paper is to show that the true site of Æthandune is not in Wiltshire but in Somerset. I shall also bring forward evidence regarding other localities mentioned by Asser and the Chronicle, and the identification of these places will enable me to set forth a clear and connected narrative of the steps by which Ælfred prepared and achieved this the greatest of his victories.

At the close of summer of the year 877 the Danish army,² having been compelled by Ælfred to surrender at Exeter, swore to leave Wessex, and withdrew to Gloucester in Mercia. But on twelfth-night, the 6th of January, 878, they stole out to Chippenham which they surprised and captured. Gothrum, their leader, had hoped by this treacherous move to sieze the King, but Ælfred saved himself by flight, and the Danes having only partially succeeded in their object, did not attempt further operations at that season of the year. They rode over and subdued to their will the surrounding country, but without penetrating into the interior of Wessex they took up their winter quarters in Chippenham. Ælfred, with a small band of followers, sought for safety the fastnesses of the moors, and led a restless life amongst the peat marshes of Somerset. He also was forced patiently to bide his time. Meanwhile the winter passed by.

Presently an event occurred which is thus described by Asser :—"That same year a brother of Healfden and Inguar,

(2). This large heathen army came over to England A.D. 866, after which date the Saxon Chronicle always refers to it as "the army" as here," and Asser calls it "Paganorum exercitus; prædictus Exercitus." It was composed, writes Ingulf, of the followers of five kings, and as many dukes, but the supreme command was intrusted to Gothrum, and under his artful guidance "The army" steadily pursued the conquest of England. It was against this army that Ælfred had to contend throughout.

with three-and-twenty ships, leaving the region of Demetia where he had wintered, after having made great slaughter of the Christians of those parts, set sail for Devon, and there with twelve hundred men rashly doing, he was in the end defeated and slain by the King's officers before the castle Cynwit. For within the enclosure of this same castle many of the King's officers with their men had taken refuge together. Now when the Pagans saw that the castle was destitute of provisions, and without means of defence of any kind, save that it had walls after our fashion, they did not attempt to carry it by assault; but as the nature of the ground rendered it very safe on all sides except towards the east (as we ourselves have noticed), they began to lay siege to it, thinking that those men driven by hunger and thirst and the blockade would soon be compelled to surrender, for there was no water nigh to the castle. But it turned out contrary to what they had expected. For the Christians waited not to be reduced to such extremities, but inspired from heaven, and deeming it far preferable to earn either death or victory, in the early morning suddenly rushed down upon the Pagans, and assailing their enemies like wild boars, put to the sword the greater part of them, together with their king, a few only making good their escape to the ships, and there they took no small amount of spoil. Amongst other things they got possession of the flag called the Raven."

The brother of Healfden and Inguar here spoken of is Ubbo, as we learn from John Brompton and Gaimar.³ It is important we should determine with accuracy the date of his landing on the English coast. Nor is it difficult to do so. It must have

(3). Ubbo is one of the ten chiefs mentioned by Ingulph, whose followers constituted the Danish army: he was therefore probably with Gothrum at Exeter in the previous summer. It seems that the army on quitting Exeter sailed round the Land's End, and returned by the Severn to Gloucester in Mercia. But on reaching the Bristol Channel Ubbo with his followers must have detached himself from the rest and landed in South Wales (Demetia. See *Poste Britannie Researches*, B. 11, c. 1; *Gildas Ep.*, c. 31), where he ravaged the coast and took up his quarters for the winter. He was now coming over to England to rejoin the army under Gothrum and complete the conquest of Wessex.

taken place in spring: for Ubbo came from Wales where he had passed the winter. (*In qua hiemaverat*). It cannot therefore have occurred much *before* the vernal equinox, the 21st of March. But neither can it have taken place *later* than that date. For it was not till after Ælfred had received the news of the death of Ubbo that he began to build a fort at Athelney, and this he did *at Easter*. (Sax. Chron.) Now Easter in that year fell on the 23rd of March; the landing therefore must have taken place about the 21st.⁴

The *date* being thus fixed, the *site* of the landing must next be determined; and in weighing the evidence attention must be paid not only to each separate statement, but even more so to the harmony between those statements which results from the adoption of the particular site which I am about to indicate, whereas on every other supposition those statements appear to be either meaningless or contradictory.

It is commonly asserted that the Danes under Ubbo landed at Apledore, near Bideford, in North Devon: now I can find no ground whatever for this opinion. Asser, the Chronicle, and all ancient writers assert that he landed in Devon, but none of them mention Apledore, and the opinion seems to have originated with an error of Spelman, who quotes Leland as his authority. But Leland in the passage referred to is speaking of an invasion which took place at Apledore in Kent full twelve years later, A.D. 893, as may be seen in the Saxon Chronicle which is quoted by Leland.

No place near Apledore in Devon answers to the description given by Asser of Cynwit Castle. Lisson in his *Magna Britannia*, refers to a paper by Mr. Studley Videt, F.S.A., who "supposes that a small fortified spot called Henniborough, or Henny Castle, about a mile north-east of Bideford, was the site

(4). The 20th of March was the feast of St. Cuthbert, to whose intercession Ælfred, as William of Malmesbury informs us, used to ascribe the change which now took place in his fortunes. Perhaps the death of Ubbo occurred on that day.

of Kynwith Castle, of which Camden and Baxter had considered every vestige to have been long ago obliterated or swallowed up by the sea. In one important point however, the want of water, it does not agree with Asser's description." This circumstance alone is fatal to its claims.

Nor is it easy to imagine what motive could have induced Ubbo to land at a spot where he would be separated by the river Taw and the forest of Exmore from the army of Gothrum. There can be little doubt that Ubbo and Gothrum were acting in concert. "It appears," says Lingard, "as if the two brothers had previously agreed to crush the King between the pressure of their respective armies." As Ælfred was in the marshes of Somerset, and Gothrum was coming from Chippenham, Ubbo, in order to attain this object, should have landed his forces at the mouth of the river Parret; and that he did so in fact will I think be made clear by the evidence I am about to produce. It will naturally be objected that the Parret is in Somerset, whereas Ubbo is expressly stated to have landed in Devonshire. But the Parret in those days was the boundary of the two shires,⁵ so that Ubbo's having landed in Devon need only imply that he landed on the western bank of that river. Now on the western bank of the Parret, a few miles below Bridgwater, stands the little seaport of Comwich, and Cynwich is the name by which Roger de Hoveden designates the place where Ubbo fell.⁶ At the distance of about a mile from Comwich is Cannington Park: an isolated hill of limestone, rising abruptly from the plain. On its summit is an ancient encampment, answering in every respect to Asser's description of the Castle of Cynwit. Its walls, injured by time, are built of loose stones

(5). See note at end of this paper.

(6). "Occisi sunt ante Cimwich, in qua se praedicti regis ministri refugii causa concluserant." Rog. de Hov. The Cynwit of Asser and the Cimwich of Roger are only different forms of spelling the same word. Cyn-wit or Cyn-wich, signifying King's-town, was probably the name of the port. Cyn-wit-tun, *ara* Cynwit, the castle or enclosure of King's-town, the name of the adjoining fort. May not this be the origin of Cannington?

like other British encampments (*more nostro*, says the Briton Asser), the escarpment of the hill is very precipitous on all sides except towards the east, and there is no water on the hill. It is also worthy of remark that Asser mentions having seen the place himself. Now Asser during his stay at the court of Ælfred had repeatedly occasion to visit his monastery in Wales, as he himself informs us. The port at the mouth of the Parret offered the most ready means of communication for that purpose.⁷ Asser therefore must more than once have found himself detained in this immediate neighbourhood when waiting to embark. On any one of these occasions he would naturally visit a spot so full of interest to him. It is not easy on the other hand to see what circumstances could have led him to Bideford.

Before proceeding further I must call attention to some passages of other writers,⁸ which seem at first sight to conflict with the narrative of Asser, but which in fact confirm and illustrate it if only it be admitted that the Danes landed at the mouth of the Parret. John Brompton, who flourished towards the close of the twelfth century, writes as follows:—"The Danes on hearing of Ælfred's arrival abandoned the city (Exeter) and proceeded into Wessex as far as Chippenham. There (*i.e.* in Wessex) they did much damage, pillaging the country, imprisoning the men, and so forcing the inhabitants to fly from their native land. But there (*i.e.* in Wessex) King Ælfred came upon them, and bravely fought a battle with the Danes, in which

(7). An ancient road runs along the ridge of Polden hill direct from the mouth of the Parret to Glastonbury: and another from the neighbourhood of Glastonbury through Selwood to Sarum and Winchester.

(8). These writers are late, as compared with Asser and the Chronicle, and therefore it might not be thought prudent to attach great weight to their statements. But the strength of their testimony lies in this: that whereas they appear to contradict Asser, or to be wholly unintelligible on the supposition that what Asser relates took place near Bideford, they harmonise with him and throw light on his narrative if the scene of action is placed at Combwich. It is seldom that writers invent stories for the mere purpose of deceiving their readers; but it would be truly wonderful if facts and places harmonized with fiction better than with truth.

conflict Ubbo, the brother of Inguar, and Bruen Bocard, who first came over with them from Denmark, were slain. Many were killed on either side, but the Danes were in the end victorious, and King Ælfred who, surrounded by a few followers, had pressed too far in advance, withdrew on that occasion as best he could from the field.⁹ The Danes finding the body of Ubbo amongst the slain, buried it with loud lamentations, and raised over it a mound which they named Ubbalowe; wherefore the place is so called to this day, and it is in the county of Devon."

It seems difficult at first sight to reconcile this narrative with the preceding one of Asser. Asser describes a Saxon victory, Brompton a defeat. No mention is made of Ælfred by Asser; Brompton says not only that he was present but that his daring nearly cost him his life. Lastly, Brompton has been understood to say that Ubbo was slain near Chippenham and buried in Devonshire. Whereupon Spelman remarks that he is not consistent either with other writers or with himself. But these discrepancies are not real.

1st, Asser, it is true, relates a victory gained by the Saxons *in the early morning*, but his language plainly indicates that it had been preceded by a defeat. He describes the Castle of Cynwith as an open camp without water, and wholly destitute of provisions and of every means of defence except its walls. It was not therefore a garrisoned fortress, but simply a place where some of the King's officers had taken refuge on an emergency (*in qua se concluderant refugii causa*).¹⁰ Brompton tells us what that emer-

(9). "Propter suam nimiam versus eos accelerationem paucis stipatus, a campo illa vice, modo meliori quo poterat, se retraxit."

(10). Several such camps in various parts of the country were used for the purpose of affording refuge to the inhabitants, or to small bodies of troops when surprised by the Danes, till succour arrived. They were called *Sheet-castles*, or castles of refuge. Thus *Sheet-anchor*, is the safety-anchor, and *sheet* in nautical language is the safety-rope—a rope fastened to the lower corner of the sail, and which may be slackened at will, so as to prevent the boat capsizing. *Castle-of-Comfort* (a name which also occurs in various parts of the country) has the same signification: comfort being used in the sense of support or assistance.

gency was, namely a defeat sustained on the previous day. The success of the Saxons was (as we shall see presently) only transient, and had no effect in reversing the victory gained by the Danes, wherefore Brompton, who does not profess to give more than a brief summary, treats the two events as portions of one engagement, the final result of which was favourable to the Danes, though Ubbo lost his life : Asser on the contrary relates at full the success of the Saxons, but, with something of the address of a courtier, passes over in silence the previous defeat of his patron.

2ndly, Ælfred was not with the party that took refuge in Cynwith Castle, hence no mention occurs of him in Asser's account. But if the landing took place at Combwich, then what Brompton says *must* be true, viz., that Ælfred was present at the battle on the previous day. For if he was at the time in Athelney, or anywhere in the marshes, how can we suppose that the beacons were lighted, the country roused, and a battle fought within a few miles of his place of abode without his taking part in it ?

3rdly, Brompton does not say (as Spelman understands him to say) that Ubbo fell near Chippenham and was buried in Devonshire. What he says is that Ubbo fell in a battle fought in Wessex in which Ælfred was engaged with the army which had occupied Chippenham, and that he was buried in Devonshire. His words present no difficulty if we assume Ælfred to have been in the marshes of Somerset, Ubbo to have landed at Combwich, Gothrum to have marched from Chippenham to meet him, and the battle to have taken place on the banks of the Parret, that river forming the boundary of the county of Devon.

The next statement to which I must draw attention is one which has greatly puzzled historians. Æthelward gives an account of the Saxon victory before Cynwith, similar in every respect to that given by Asser, but concludes with the remark that in the end the place where the Saxons had gained the victory re-

mained in possession of the Danes. "*Postremo victoriae obtinent locum Dani.*" How this came to pass I shall show presently.

Another point to be observed is, that while Asser states that a few only of the Danes escaped to their ships, Matthew of Westminster says that the greater part of the followers of Ubbo joined Gothrum, and together with his troops ravaged the country.¹¹

Lastly, it should be noticed that Asser ascribes the death of Ubbo to his having acted rashly (*perperam agens*), though it is not easy to see anything in his narrative to justify the charge.

The explanation of these seemingly conflicting statements is to be found in the account which follows. About the 18th or 19th of March a Danish fleet of three-and-twenty ships was descried in the Bristol Channel coming from Wales. The beacons¹² on Quantock notified its approach. Forthwith the men from all the country around hastened to the appointed place of assembly. Odda, the Alderman of Devon, was ready at his post,¹³ and Ælfred who was probably at Athelney, and certainly somewhere in the marshes at the time, was not long in joining

(11). "*Maxima pars eorum per fugam elapsi ad Gytronem regem paganorum se contulerunt.*" Matth. West.

(12). Beacons in the days of Ælfred consisted of stacks of wood. They were called *dagunga*, and in later times *dawns*, from *dagian* to dawn, to spread light. King Edward III, in the eleventh year of his reign, ordered that there should be substituted high standards, with pitch-pans on the top of them. These were called Dawn trees. The family of Dauntre bore three such dawn trees on their escutcheon. (See Guillim's *Heraldry*). Dundry tower, near Bristol, marks the site of a Dawn tree. Dunster is Dawn-tor—the beacon-tor. In connection with the Dawns or beacons, camps were established where the troops might assemble. These were termed Dawnboroughs—a name not infrequently corrupted to Danesborough. The name of Beggars bush or Beggars huish, which is not uncommonly to be found in the neighbourhood of such places, is a corruption of Becker's-bush and Becker's huish—the hostelry or the dwelling of the becker—the men who had charge of the beacons.

(13). His name is mentioned by Æthelward. He was probably at Taunton, that fortress guarding the entrance to Devonshire on the side whence an attack would be expected from the Danes coming from Chippenham. There is a Dawnborough on the Quantock, and it is not at all improbable that it is the place where the troops assembled on this occasion, and marched from thence to oppose the landing of the Danes.

them. He anxiously watched the progress of the fleet, and when it became clear that they were making for the mouth of the Parret he led his men to the river to oppose the landing. Meanwhile Gothrum had left Chippenham and was marching to meet Ubbo, with the view of closing Ælfred between their two forces. The battle ensued, which is described by Brompton. Some of Gothrum's men must have arrived in time to take part in it, and it was probably the arrival of these reinforcements that turned the scale in favour of the Danes. The Saxons were defeated, and Ælfred with difficulty escaped being either killed or made prisoner. Of his followers who survived, the the greater number fled, in all probability to the Quantock, but Odda, the alderman, with some of the King's officers and men, veterans no doubt accustomed to this kind of warfare, took refuge in the Castle of Cynwit, now Cannington Park, which was close at hand. The Danes did not pursue the fugitives, but at once prepared to overrun and pillage the country. For this purpose the main body of the army crossed over to the right, or Somerset, side of the river, which offered the greatest amount of booty. But Ubbo, with a select band of followers, remained on the left bank to conduct in person the siege of the castle, thinking, no doubt that Ælfred was amongst those who had taken refuge within its enclosure, and so designing for him a martyrdom similar to that which only eight years previously he had inflicted on St. Edmund, King of the East Saxons.¹⁴

We shall now see how his failure was due to his having *acted rashly*. Immediately opposite the entrance on the east side of the camp on Cannington Park is a lower eminence, now worked as a quarry,¹⁵ and near it are some springs. Here Ubbo planted

(14). The name of the leaders who slew the King were Hinguar and Hubba. Sax. Chron. 870.

(15). The men who work these quarries have found here many remains of bodies lying scattered immediately under the surface. By some they have been supposed to belong to followers of the Duke of Monmouth, who fled from the battle of Sedgmoor: possibly they are the bones of Danes, the followers of Ubbo.

his standard, and took up his position to watch the Saxons and prevent their gaining access to the water. He was in full sight of the main body of the army, which was encamped at about a mile's distance on the opposite bank of the river, so that by sounding his horn he could at any time summon reinforcements in case of need. One circumstance he failed to notice. The bed of the Parret, which at this spot is of considerable width, consists of deep alluvial mud which cannot be forded. This circumstance was well known to Odda and the men of Devon, and the sequence shows that they timed their attack so that it should take place when the tide was low. Their sudden and unexpected onslaught threw the Danes into confusion, but Ubbo thought soon to restore confidence by summoning his supports. Only then he discovered that he had rashly cut himself off from the army. The ships lay high and dry on the banks, and the mud rendered it impossible for the Danes on the opposite shore to ford the stream. They could hear the cries and witness the slaughter of their comrades, but they were powerless to render them any assistance. A panic ensued. Ubbo fell, bravely fighting and vainly endeavouring to rally his men. With him fell the greater part of the besiegers,¹⁶ a few only, as Asser relates, escaping to the ships. Here under the protection of the archers on the opposite shore, they were safe from pursuit. But these were only a portion of the men who had followed Ubbo from Wales, the greater portion were on the opposite bank, and they, as Matthew of Westminster states, joined Gothrum.

The Alderman and his little troop did not tarry long on the spot. Long before the rising tide could float the Danish ships (within an hour, says the *Vita S. Neot*) they made good their

(16). The number of Danes slain is computed in the Chronicle at 840. This in any case must comprise not only those who were slain during the sortie from the fort, but those also who fell in the engagement which preceded it, when, as Brompton says, many were slain on either side. But the truth is that no great reliance can be placed on these numbers, for the field of battle having remained in possession of the Danes, it is not easy to see what means the Saxons could have had of counting the dead.

retreat to the Quantock. But first they stripped the bodies of Ubbo and the other chiefs of their rich armour and costly ornaments, and possessed themselves of the royal war-flag. These costly spoils they carried with them as trophies of their victory.

As soon as the tide floated their ships the Danes crossed over, and thus it came to pass, as Æthelward states, that "*in the end the Danes gained possession of the place where the victory had been won*" by the Saxons. But the victors were far away. Amongst the slain the Danes found the denuded body of their chief, and they gave him the honours of a royal funeral. With loud lamentations they bore his mangled remains to a spot on the shore near to his ships.¹⁷ There they laid him in the ground, and raised over his remains a large pile of stones. Brompton says "They named it Ubbalowe, and it is in the county of Devon." The place, says Camden, "has ever since been known to our historians as Hubbaboro, or tumulus Hubbae," the mound of Hubba.

Does any vestige of it remain at this day? I have diligently sought for it. At the distance of about a mile from Combech, on, what I call the Devonshire side of the river, at the corner of a field on the left hand side of the road, which leads from Stokeland Bristol to Stert, not far from the bank of the river, may be seen a large circular mound covered with turf and surrounded by a trench. Its appearance and position recalls the tombs of the Vikings lately discovered in Norway.¹⁸ May not this be the mound of Ubbo? I have not found any evidence

(17). "Dani cadaver Ubbe, inter occisos invenientes, illud cum clamore maximo sepelierunt, cumulum apponentes, quem Hubbelowe vocaverunt: unde sic usque in hodiernum diem locus ille appellatus est, et est in comitatu Devonise." Brompton.

(18). A very interesting account was published in 1872 at Christiania by Professor Ringwold, of the opening of one of these tombs. A ship had been dragged on shore, the body of the Viking had been laid in it, and a pile of stones raised over it, the whole was covered with turf. The ship in this instance was discovered in a very perfect condition. The question as to whether the mound near Stert is the mound of Ubbo, might perhaps be decided by exploring it: but this ought not to be attempted except under the direction of experienced archaeologists.

of its ever having been known by the name of Hubbalowe or Hubbaboro, but at the distance of about a mile there is a farm called Upper Cock farm. *Cock* is a word still in use to signify a mound or hillock, when we speak of a *hay-cock*. *To cock* is *to set erect* or *raise on piles*. May not then *Upper-cock* be a corruption of *Ubba-coc*, the *mound of Ubba*?

The victory at Kenwith greatly raised the spirits of the English, but it had no immediate effect on the fortunes of the war. The Danes had lost one (perhaps more than one) of their chiefs and many of their comrades, but they retained all the advantages gained by their victory on the previous day. There was no English army to follow up Odda's success. The remainder of Ubbo's forces joined the army under Gothrum and spread themselves like locusts over the country, pillaging and burning all that came within their reach. They extended their raids as far as Glastonbury which they destroyed.¹⁹

Meanwhile, however, the news of Adda's victory was not long in reaching the ear of Ælfred, who having narrowly escaped death or capture in the previous engagement, had sought safety somewhere in the neighbourhood, probably on the Quantock. He lost no time in turning to account the enthusiasm to which this unexpected success had given birth amongst his officers and men. The plan of action he now formed was so bold in its conception and so successful in its execution, that his followers ever after ascribed it to a special inspiration from heaven. The Danes were encamped on the right of the Parret in the vale of Bridgwater: Ælfred conceived the idea of gaining possession of the heights of Polden hill in the rear and suddenly falling upon the enemy who would be shut up on every other side by the river and the marshes. But in order to carry out this plan he had to meet at the outset two formidable obstacles. 1st, an army had to be raised numerous, and well trained enough to cope

(19). "Splenduit locus usque ad Danorum sub Elfredo Rege adventum: tunc ut caetera desolatus, notas desideravit incolas. Porro quidquid turbo bellorum obtriverat, reparavit Dunstanus." Guil. Malm.

with the forces under Gothrum, and this had to be done without attracting the enemy's notice. 2ndly, the raising of such a force would require considerable time, and meanwhile it would be necessary to occupy the attention of the enemy, and detain him in his present position till the English army was ready for action. A matter of no small difficulty, for it was natural to suppose that in a very short time the Danes, after pillaging the country near Bridgwater, would proceed into the interior, in the direction either of Exeter or of Winchester, in order to complete the conquest of Wessex. Ælfred provided for both these difficulties. He commissioned some of his most trusted officers to call to arms all the men of Somerset, of Wilts, and of Hampshire²⁰ who had not fled the country from fear of the Danes, and to assemble them in groups in the towns and villages to the east of Selwood. This great forest and the marshes which lay to the west of it would screen the assembling forces from the observation of the Danes in the vale of Bridgwater. Moreover in order the better to secure secrecy, he occupied (says Wallingford) the towns in the hills and guarded the passes.²¹

The second and more difficult task of occupying the enemy's attention and detaining him in his present position till all was ready for action, Ælfred undertook to perform in person.²² He chose for his companions a small body of men chiefly from amongst the nobles of Somerset: men acquainted with the

(20). Gaimar v. 3168, adds *Dorset*. The men of Devon are not mentioned, though many of those who had fled after the first defeat must have rejoined Odda on hearing of his success. It is probable that they were required to remain on Quantock, and at Taunton, to be ready in case Gothrum attempted to march on Exeter.

(21). "Receptis undique viribus, municipia occupavit montuosa, et loca transitu difficilia munivit, et viam hostibus interclusit." Walling. an. 878.

(22). Ælfred went to Athelney at Easter (March 23rd), only a few days after the death of Ubbo, which, as we have seen, must have taken place about March the 21st. The news could not have reached Ælfred so rapidly, nor could he have proceeded to fortify Athelney so shortly after, unless the event had taken place in the vicinity. This is a fresh proof that Ubbo landed and was slain not far from Athelney. Moreover the very choice of Athelney by Ælfred, as a place from which he could assail the Danes, shows that already at Easter the Danish army was in that neighbourhood.

country and the dangerous passes through the marshes. With them he repaired to the island of Athelney, and so careful was he to guard against any chance of his secrets being betrayed to the enemy, that he would admit none into the island but nobles, or men entitled by their rank to sit as members of his household at the royal table—men on whose honour he could implicitly rely.²³ All the works which he undertook in the island were accomplished by the hands of these men. Hence it received the name of *Æthelings-igg*, *Clytonum insula*, the island of the *Æthelings* or nobles.²⁴

It is impossible here to do more than briefly to indicate the nature of the works undertaken by *Ælfred* in the island. The hillock, known at present as the island of Athelney, forms but a small portion of the island as it existed in the days of *Ælfred*.²⁵ This higher ground afforded pasture for a few cows, but the greater portion of the island, which extended as far as the conflux of the *Tone* and the *Parret*, and for a considerable distance down the right bank of the latter river, consisted of low, swampy ground, barely raised above the level of the surrounding waters, and covered by a forest of alders, giving shelter to deer and other game. Not far from the conflux of the two rivers, on the far side of the *Parret*, rises a steep, conical hill or *Stan*, whence the marsh derives its name of *Stan meer* (now *Stanmoor*). At the foot of this rock *Ælfred* threw a bridge across the *Parret*, and on the hill itself he built a fort, or entrenchment (which *Asser* praises for the elegance of its design²⁶), whence the bridge

(23). "Nec alise tunc ei adjutrices, excepto his qui regio pastu utebantur familia." *Æthelw.* lib. iii.

(24). *Æthelney* has the same meaning. *East-Ling*, the name of the adjoining village, is a corruption of *Ætheling* or *Æthelings-igg*.

(25). For the extent and features of the island I rely chiefly on the testimony of *William of Malmesbury*. The works are described by *Asser* as he saw them some years after their erection when he visited the monastery which *Ælfred* founded at Athelney. I have compared the localities as they exist at present with the descriptions of these writers.

(26). It probably consisted of three concentric rings rising one above the other and crowning the summit of the hill.

in after times derived its name of *Borough bridge*. This fort answered the double purpose of guarding the entrance to the island, and furnishing a look-out on the enemy and the surrounding country. From the foot of the *stan* a natural causeway, about a mile in length, stretched across the marsh to the high ground near Othery, whence access might be obtained to the vale of Bridgwater. It was mostly covered by water, and formed one of those dangerous passes known to the natives, which were practicable at certain seasons and at certain stages of the tide. This causeway Ælfred improved so as to render more easy the access to the main land, and at the far end of it he constructed another smaller fort as a protection. From this impregnable position Ælfred with his companions daily sallied forth to assail the Danes.²⁸ The object of these sorties was—1st. To abstract from the enemy and those who had submitted to their yoke, the food necessary for the support of himself and his companions. 2ndly. To draw the attention of the Danes away from Selwood, and make them believe that the English were gathering in force on the left bank of the Parret. This strategy met with complete success. Gothrum soon became aware that Ælfred was preparing for battle, though he was ignorant of the nature and extent of his preparations. "The enemy," writes Wallingford, "acted with no less caution on the other hand, and strained every nerve to meet the English successfully in the field. For this purpose Gothrum summoned from all parts the Danes who had settled in various places in England, and had occupied towns in the hills, ordering them to quit these and join the army, thus rushing headlong, and as it were advisedly into the snare. For he saw that there was danger in delay, as the King's army increased in strength every day. Wherefore he likewise drew together a large force, and prodigal of the lives of his men anxiously looked forward to the day of the conflict."

In seven weeks' time, that is to say by Whitsunday, the 11th of

(28). Both Asser and the Chronicle mention these sorties. Æthelward says they were *daily*. Lib. iii.

May, the officers were able to report to Ælfred that the English army east of Selwood was ready to take the field. "Then," writes Asser, "in the seventh week after Easter he rode to the Rock of Ægbryht (ad Petram Ægbryhta), which lies on the eastern side of the forest of Selwuda, in Latin *Syloa magna*, in British *Coitmaur*, and there all the inhabitants of Somerset and Wilton, and all those of the county of Hamtun who had not gone beyond sea through fear of the Pagans, came to meet him. And seeing the King they were duly filled with immense joy, and welcomed him as one who had come to life again after so many tribulations. Early at dawn of the following day, the King moving his camp came to a place called Ægglea and there he encamped one night. Next morning at daybreak moving thence his standard he came to the place called Ethandun, and bravely waging war against the whole Pagan army, protected by a dense covering of shields, after a long and stubborn conflict he with the Divine assistance gained the victory."

Each of the places mentioned by Asser requires our particular attention.

The forest of Selwood,²⁸ covered the high ground on the borders of Somerset and Wilts. Leland (circ. A.D. 1550) writes concerning it, "As it is now it is a 30 miles yn compace, and streacheth one way almost onto Warminstre, and another way onto the Quarters of Shaftesbury, by estimation a ten miles." The limits assigned to it by the royal commissioners who perambulated the boundaries in the reign of Edward I, substantially agree with those mentioned by Leland.²⁹ Probably in the days of Ælfred they were much wider.

Leaving Athelney, Ælfred with some of his officers traversed

(28). Simon of Durham calls it Mycel-wudu, which really means "the Great wood," like the Latin and British names given by Asser, whereas Selwudu or Seal-wudu means Willow-wood. Probably its full name was Mycel-seal-wudu, the Great-willow-wood, but it was called for brevity sake the Great wood, by the Romans and Britons—and the Willow-wood by the Saxons. And this is all in fact that Asser states.

(29.) See Collinson's *Somerset*, and Phelps.

this forest, and after a ride of over thirty miles he came early in the morning to the Rock of Eggbryht, or Egbert. (*Ecgbryhtes-stane. Sax. Chron.*) "Brixton Deveril," writes Sir Richard Hoare, "was undoubtedly the Petra Ægbryhta of Ascer." The position of this village east of Selwood, and the resemblance between Brixton and Ecgbryhtes-stane or Egbricht-stan, has led most historians to adopt this view. But though I readily admit Brixton to be a corruption of Ægbryhtes-stane, the following reasons seem to show that Brixton-Deveril does not mark the site of the Rock of Egbert. 1st, Five villages in the same valley bear the name of Deveril, and they are distinguished from each other by an adjunct taken from some neighbouring object or circumstance. (Hill-Deveril, Monkton Deveril, etc.) All therefore that we have a right to assume is, that the Rock of Egbert, from which Brixton-Deveril derives its distinctive name, was somewhere in that neighbourhood. 2ndly, From the pointed way in which Ascer calls attention to the meaning of Ecgbryhtes-stane it seems natural to conclude that it stood on a rock or eminence. Brixton-Deveril lies by a stream in the valley. 3rdly, The country east of Selwood abounds in military camps: is it probable that Ælfred would have chosen in preference to any one of these for assembling his troops a retired village offering no military advantage whatever? Ecgbryhtes-stane is spoken of in the *Vita S. Neot* as of well-known celebrity.³⁰ 4th, Ælfred went to Ecgbryhtes-stane to raise his standard and summon to it from all the country around the men who had been assembling in the towns and villages during the past seven weeks. The scene is thus described in the *Vita S. Neot*:—"Having reached the place known to us by the famous name of Egbricht-stan, which signifies the Rock of Egbricht, they reined their horses, and sounded their warlike instruments to notify the arrival of the King. The shrill voice of the trumpets proclaimed the news far and wide, and on hearing the summons

(30). "Ad locum pervenientes quem Egbricht-stan celebri novimus designatum vocabulo." *Vita S. Neot*.

countless numbers flocked to them in the course of that day." This description implies some lofty eminence commanding an extensive view of the surrounding country, and such a place the famous Rock of Egbert must have been.

I recognise it in an ancient encampment of extraordinary strength situated on the brow of a steep and lofty promontory, at a few miles distance from Brixton-Deveril, known at this day by the name of Whit-Sheet-Castle. Two ancient roads, one British, the other the Roman road to Sarum, pass in its immediate vicinity, whilst all around it are to be seen numerous mounds and ancient remains, which clearly indicate that the place was of great importance even before the days of Ælfred. The view from its walls extends over a vast plain studded with towns and villages, and minor camps crown several of the neighbouring heights. This I believe to be the true Rock of Egbert, and I think it probable that not only Brixton-Deveril, but also Kingston-Deveril and Hill Deveril, derive their distinctive appellations from this famous stronghold.³¹ From this commanding position Ælfred unfurled his standard and proclaimed his presence by sound of trumpet, and thither all the men flocked to him from the towns and villages around during the course of the day. The assembled forces slept that night on the heights round Ecgbryhtes-stane, and early next morning Ælfred began his march to surprise the enemy. At evening he pitched his camp at a place called *Æglea* or *Iglea*.

All attempts to identify this locality have hitherto failed. It is supposed that it must have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of Westbury. But the first step towards the identification of *Iglea* is to ascertain where the enemy was encamped that Ælfred was marching to attack, for *Iglea* lay on his line of march. Now the army over which Ælfred gained the victory at

(31). Two other points of this same hill on which the castle stands bear the names of Kingston down (*Cynges-stane-dun*, the hill of the King's rock) and King's hill.

Æthandune was no other than the one against which he had been fighting for the last seven weeks in the neighbourhood of Athelney. The testimony of the Chronicle is conclusive on this point. "At Easter King Ælfred raised a fort at Æthelunga-igg, from which he assailed *the army* then in the seventh week he went to Ecgbryhtes-stane thence to Iglea and thence to Æthandune : and there he fought with all *the army*." Ælfred's whole efforts had been directed towards detaining this army in the neighbourhood of Athelney till his own forces were assembled, and now that they were ready for action he led them to attack it. It was the army led by Gothrum, which had been at Chippenham, but had since moved to meet Ubbo in the vale of Bridgwater, whither, as we have seen, Gothrum had now summoned the Danes from all parts of England to join him in attacking Ælfred whom he believed to be occupying Athelney in force.

This is further confirmed by Asser's account of the events which followed the battle of Æthandune. The Danes, he says, after their defeat took refuge in a neighbouring fort, and when they capitulated Gothrum and the other chiefs presented themselves to Ælfred at Alre which is near Athelney. It follows that the fort, and consequently Æthandune, as well as Alre and Athelney, were all in the same neighbourhood. Here therefore, in the vale of Bridgwater, not near Westbury in Wilts, the Danes were encamped when Ælfred came upon them : in this direction did he march from Ecgbryhtes-stane, and in this direction must Iglea be sought for. It is described in the *Vita S. Neot* as a spacious plain on the skirts of a willow wood, and covered by marshes in its front. It was at the distance of a day's march from the Rock of Egbert. It was so near the Danish camp that, by starting at dawn next day, the King was able at an early hour to gain possession of the heights commanding the enemy's position, yet so situated that the whole English army were able to encamp there without attracting the notice of the Danes.

The plain at the foot of Glastonbury Tor answers this description in every respect. In this plain is a village called in modern maps Edgar-lea,³² but in the old map in *Dugdale's Monasticon* Egerly: the inhabitants so pronounce its name to this day. It is distant some 18 miles from the Rock of Egbert, in front of it lies Pennant moor, once a marsh, and at its rear is Pennard hill formerly no doubt covered with wood. All view of the Bridgwater valley is shut out by the ridge of Polden hill, but, from the adjoining height of the Tor, Ælfred might see Athelney and the distant fires of the Danish camp. Here Ælfred allowed his men to rest the night after their long day's march. "On the following morning at daybreak he moved his standard and came to the place called Æthandune."

At the distance of about 8 miles west from Iglea on the north side of the ridge of Polden hill, lies the village of Edington, immediately above which the hill reaches its highest elevation, and a bold promontory projects towards the south facing Athelney, and commanding an extensive view of the marshes and the vale of Bridgwater. This (not Eddington in Wilts) is the Æthandune of Asser, the site of Ælfred's most memorable victory. The possession of this promontory had formed all along the object of all his plans and wishes. He had anxiously watched it from Athelney to which it stands directly opposite, knowing what an advantage it would be to the enemy if they forestalled him in taking possession of it.³³ Having at length secured it he held the key of the position, for the Danes in the valley were now closed in on all sides by the river, the marshes, and these heights.

(32). The real name of the place I believe to be Iglea as it appears in the Chronicle, or Æcglea as in Asser, and as the country people still call it: meaning the lea or pasture of the island (i.e. of Glastonbury), from Ig or Aega, an island, and Leah, a pasture or field. Edgar-lea is probably a modern attempt to connect the name of the village with King Edgar, whose remains were buried at Glastonbury.

(33). "Anticipavit montem, hostibus nimis aptum si præcavissent." Walling. p. 538. "Deposita seriatim acie, proximam anticipaverunt promontorium." *Vita S. Neot.*

The question has been mooted whether Ælfred took Gothrum by surprise. The truth is that the capture of the heights in his rear was a surprise: the battle itself was not so. The Danish army was prepared for battle,³⁴ only they expected to meet their enemy in the opposite direction. The English from the heights watched their movements,³⁵ they uttered loud cries of defiance,³⁶ but waited in their strong position the enemy's approach. It was Gothrum, not Ælfred, that commenced the attack. Enraged, but not daunted, at seeing himself out-generalled, the Danish chief addressed his followers calling on them not to fear an enemy they had so repeatedly vanquished, and then placing them in order of battle, moved forward to carry the position of the English.³⁷ Many interesting incidents of the battle have been recorded by various writers. It began at noon³⁸ and lasted for several consecutive hours. It was not confined to one spot, but raged for a long distance along the ridge, the cries of the combatants being heard for miles around. Positions were alternately lost and won, and for a considerable length of time the issue seemed doubtful. Ælfred, who to his followers seemed more than mortal, was everywhere present restoring confidence and inspiring fresh courage in his men. At length Gothrum led in person a vigorous attack on the high promontory which formed the key of Ælfred's position. The Danes advanced in order, under a dense covering of their shields, supported by their archers. They were met by discharges from the English

(34). "Venit cum immenso exercitu ad locum qui dicitur Adderandum, quo juxta Paganorum immenses phalanges invenit ad bellum paratas." Simon Dunelm.

(35). "Hinc hostium explorabant occursum." *Vita S. Neot.*

(36). "Audacter provocabant infideles ad bellum." Simon Dunelm.

(37). "Cum adversus antea devictos crebris exhortationibus animasset ad pugnam, protinus juxta morem suum acies disposerunt, ad locum certaminis castra moventes." *Vita S. Neot.*

(38). "E lendemain a hure de none

Donc sunt venuz a Edensdona." *Norman Rhyming Chronicle*, v. 3189.

"Animoseque et diu persistens." Asser.

"Commiserunt bellum per longa tempora diei utriusque populi, quorum voces et collisiones armorum per longa spatia terrarum audita sunt." Simon Dunelm.

bowmen:³⁹ then, when they neared the heights, the English soldiers sprung from the ground where they had been lying⁴⁰ and charged down on them with their spears. A hand to hand fight ensued, but the Danes in the end broke and fled. Gothrum, unable to rally them, hastened to take refuge in a neighbouring fort, and the Danes all along the range seeing the flight of their chief fled also, closely pursued by the English. Gothrum, fearing lest the victors should enter with the fugitives, caused the gates of the fortress to be closed,⁴¹ leaving many of his followers outside to the mercy of their enemies.

"Ælfred fought bravely," writes Asser, "against the whole army of the Danes, protected by a dense covering of shields, and having after a long and stubborn conflict, by the Divine assistance, gained the victory, he overthrew the Pagans with great slaughter, and striking the fugitives he pursued them to their fort, and all that he found outside the fort, men and horses and cattle, he cut off, killing the men forthwith. Then with the whole of his army he boldly pitched his camp before the gates of the Pagan fortress. And when he had remained there fourteen days, the Pagans overcome by hunger and cold and fear, driven at last to despair, sued for peace on the following terms: That the King should chose from among them by name any number of hostages he pleased, without giving any in return; on which terms they had never before made peace with any one. The King listened to their message, and moved by his innate mercy, took from them as many hostages as he chose to designate by name. 'This done, the Pagans further made oath that they would depart from his kingdom without delay. Moreover, Gothrum their King, promised to become a Christian and to receive baptism under King Ælfred: all which things Gothrum and his followers performed according to promise.

(39). See the account in the *Vita S. Neot.*

(40). "Surgentes a solo." Simon Dunelm.

(41). "Ad eam quam primo firmaverant arcem (Aluredus) eos ovanter insequutus est." *Vita S. Neot.* *Firmare*, in low Latin, is to shut, like the Italian *fermare*, and the French *fermer*.

For after seven weeks Gothrum, the Pagan King, together with thirty of the principal men of his army, came to Ælfred at the place called Alre, and King Ælfred adopting him as his son stood sponser for him at the sacred font of baptism, and his Chrysom-leasing took place on the 8th day, at the royal villa called Wedmore. After his baptism he remained with the King twelve nights, and the King with great liberality bestowed upon him and his followers many and very valuable presents."

It remains for us to inquire where the fortress stood in which Gothrum and the Danes took refuge after their defeat. Unfortunately no writer has mentioned it by name. That it was either a fortress or walled town, and not an intrenched camp like Cynwith Castle or Bratton Castle, (which latter place is commonly adopted by those who suppose the battle to have taken place near Westbury in Wilts) is evident from two circumstances. 1st, It was provided with gates,⁴² which were shut against the victors. 2ndly, The Danish army consisting of several thousand men were able to stand a siege of a fortnight within its walls. This would have been impossible in an open camp without water. Like Odda, with his men at Cynwith, the Danes would have been obliged either to cut their way through their besiegers, or to surrender after a short delay. As regards the position of the fort, though it was in the neighbourhood of Æthandune, still it was at some little distance therefrom, for the Chronicle says that Ælfred rode after the fugitives to the fort. Moreover it was situated, not like Bratton Castle on a hill, but in the plain, for the Danes having failed to carry the heights fled to the plain. Lastly, Asser speaks of it as the Pagan fortress (*Paganica Arx*), an expression which seems to imply that it had served as head quarters to the Pagan army during the time they had been encamped in that neighbourhood, a surmise which derives further support from the

(42). "Ad portas paganicae arcis . . . castramentatus est." Asser.
"Ad eam quam primo firmaverant arcem, eos ovanter insequutus est." Vita S. Neot.

fact that the English found outside it large herds of cattle and horses: the booty in all probability collected by the Danes from the country round.

Taking all these circumstances into consideration, I am inclined to think that Bridgwater was most probably the fort or walled town in which the Danes took refuge. It lies in the plain, and is distant about five miles from the heights above Edington, but scarcely two from the nearest point of Polden hill. There was a bridge across the Parret at this point in Ælfred's days, for it was on the high road to Ina's strong fortress at Taunton; and a bridge had most probably existed there since the days of the Romans. A bridge generally implied a station or town of some kind. In *Doomsday* we find Brydige named amongst the possessions of Walter de Douay. From him it seems to have derived the name of Bridge-Walter or Bridgwater, as it is now called. Prior to his time it was called simply Brydige, which again seems a likely translation of "Ad Pontem," a not uncommon name for a Roman station. As in later times Bridgwater possessed a castle, so it probably was a fortified place even in the days of Ælfred. The Danes having landed at Combwich, Bridgwater would have been a convenient place for them to occupy, both as a depôt for their plunder, and as the head-quarters of their army when preparing to attack Ælfred at Athelney, or to force their way by Taunton to Exeter. Hence, though it is not possible to speak with certainty, no writer having mentioned the fortress by name, I know not of any other place in the neighbourhood which seems more likely to have been the refuge of the Danish army than the town of Bridgwater.

Note on the Western Boundary of Somerset.

It will be necessary to offer here some remarks concerning the origin of the western boundary of Somerset as it exists in the present day, at some considerable distance beyond the Parret. The province of Damnonia under the Romans extended

from Land's End to the Parret. (See Poste's *Britannic Researches*, b. 11, c. 1.) Between this river and Glastonbury the country was full of marshes and lakes, the waters of which communicated with the sea, and were affected by the tides. These were called, in the language of the Saxons, Seo-meres, or sea lakes; from Seo, the sea, and Mere, a lake. The inhabitants who dwelt in the islands, and in the neighbouring country, were called Seo-mere-setas, or dwellers-by-the-sea-lakes. The country itself was called Seo-mere-set or Somerset, the district of the sea-lakes. As Somerset is a name of Saxon origin, it cannot have belonged to the country prior to the Saxon invasion; and inasmuch as Cenwealh, in the year 658, made the Parret the western boundary of his kingdom, there can be no reason for supposing that at that period any portion of the country west of the Parret bore the Saxon name of Somerset. It still remained Damnonia. As the West-Saxon kings pursued their conquests, each new portion of British territory which they occupied was annexed to the kingdom of Wessex, but it did not on that account become part of Somerset. It went to form the shire of Defnescire. Moreover, at no period that we are acquainted with, did the present boundary line of Somerset mark the limits of a Saxon occupation; hence we cannot account for it by supposing it to have formed at one time the boundary of Wessex. We are therefore forced to seek for some other explanation. The probability is that the boundary was removed from the Parret to its present position by Ælfred himself, some years later than the period we are now treating of, in connexion with those measures which he is known to have adopted for the defence of the country against the Danes. "The shires," writes Lingard, "owe their origin to different princes, who divided the country as necessity might require or policy suggest." So it happened in this instance. By the military regulations of those days, the defence of the sea coast was intrusted in each of the maritime counties to the alderman of the county. The sea-board along the Bristol Channel, from

Porlock to Clevedon, was in a special manner open to piratical incursions, and the mouth of the Parret offered convenient anchorage for a hostile fleet. It was evidently a source of great weakness for the defence of this line of seaboard to be divided between two separate commands ; more especially as the line of demarcation between the two jurisdictions occurred at the very spot where unity of command and prompt action was most likely to be required. But in addition to these motives of public safety, the question was one of great personal interest to Ælfred. A large portion of his family estates was spread along this coast, on both sides of the Parret, from Carhampton to Cheddar (as we learn from his Will), and in case of invasion, these estates would be amongst the first to suffer. Thus every consideration of public policy and private interest pointed to the expediency of placing the whole of that line of coast under one command, and this necessitated such a change in the limits of the two shires as would bring the whole of the sea-board under the jurisdiction of the Alderman of Somerset. Accordingly we find that the present boundaries of Somerset extend so far west as to take in the whole of the low coast, and to include the whole of Ælfred's property beyond Carhampton. They also include the town of Taunton. In the days of Ælfred this stronghold was no longer needed to keep the Britons in check (for which purpose it had been built by Ina), but it was conveniently placed as a residence for the alderman charged with the defence of the coast along the Bristol Channel. It is therefore probable, that at the same time that the new boundaries were fixed, the head place of the shire was removed from Somerton to Taunton.
