Revisiting *Dingesmere*

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Dingesmere is a place known only from the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh*, found in versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 937 (A, Corpus Christi College Cambridge 173; B, London, British Library Cotton Tiberius A. vi; C, Cotton Tiberius B. i; and D, Cotton Tiberius B. iv and one manuscript now lost, but copied and published before 1731 when the original was destroyed, Cotton Otho B. xi). After the resounding victory of Æthelstan and Edmund at *Brunanburh*, the coalition of Dublin Norse, Strathclyde Welsh, Picts and Scots split up, with the survivors making their own way home. The Dublin Norsemen sailed away *on dinges mere*.

> Gewitan him þa Norþmen nægledcnearrum,
> dreorig daraða laf, on Dingesmere,
> ofer deop wæter Difelin secan,
> eft Ira land, æwiscmode. (53–6)
> (Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, went in the nail-studded ships on *Dingesmere*, over deep water, to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed.)

This is Campbell's text (Campbell 1938), and with minor variations of word-division, punctuation and spelling, the text of more recent editors. The manuscript variants of the phrase *on dinges mere* found in the A and C texts are as follows: *on dyngesmere* in B, *on dynigesmere* in D and *on dinnesmere* in Otho.

There are two main lines of interpretation in relation to this phrase. One is that it is not a place-name at all, but that *dinges*, or more particularly *dinnes*, is a noun in the genitive which qualifies *mere* and thus means 'sea of noise' (Bosworth-Toller 1898, s.v. *dynge*), i.e. 'noisy sea' (see, for example, Cockburn 1931). A corollary of this interpretation is that the phrase has no particular relevance to the localisation of *Brunanburh*: it could be any sea. The other approach is that *dinges mere* is a name, with a personal- or place-name in the

genitive for the first element and poetic *mere* 'sea' for the second. Most scholars take this line, though only John Dodgson has given the meaning of the name serious consideration (see below). A recent book spends an entire chapter on the location of *Brunanburh* without reference to *dinges mere* beyond translating it as 'Ding's Mere' (Hill 2004).

Our purpose here is to point to certain difficulties in both of these lines of interpretation, and then to suggest another which resolves some difficulties, though it doubtless raises others.

Dinnes

The first line of interpretation can perhaps be relatively quickly dismissed. As Campbell (1938: 115) notes,

> In view of the agreement of A, B-C and D on a form with *g*, the form of the Otho MS., *Dinnesmere*, must be regarded as an alteration by the scribe. He may have meant *dinnes* as gen. s. of *dyne*, 'noise' . . . or he may have had some other name in mind, such as those quoted from charters by B.-T., *Supp.*, s.v. *dynge*.

In other words, this interpretation privileges a spelling of the phrase which is likely to be that of a scribe trying to make sense of an unfamiliar word, or indeed substituting an alternative name for it. If *dinnes mere* is to be taken as 'sea of noise' (Bosworth-Toller 1898, s.v. *dynge*), the fact that the noun or adjective is not in the accusative, as it would otherwise be in the phrase *on x mere*, indicates that it should probably be understood as an appellative, i.e. 'Sea of Noise'. At any rate, 'noisy sea' as a translation ignores the grammatical problems, and 'sea of noise' does not make overmuch sense as a name at all, though it might suffice to get a scribe out of a corner.

Bosworth-Toller *Supplement* (1921) s.v. *dynge* 'a storm' adduces several charter references, some also attributed to the element *din, dyn* 'Geräusch, Getön, Klang, Rauschen' by Middendorff (1902 s.v.). Those of particular interest here are a **dinmere* in Thanet, which, according to Wallenberg (1931: 259) may be from *dynn, dyne* 'noise' or possibly from a reduced form of *denu* 'valley'; but the charter context of the name *fram dinmeres muþan . . . oþ dinmeres fleot . . . oþ dinmeres muþan* leads Cullen (1997: 525–6) to suggest that the form *dinmeres* might be the possessive of a personal name, **Denemǣr*. However, the *din-* element here is clearly not genitive, and therefore has no direct bearing on the interpretation of *dinnes* (or *dinges*) *mere*. Two others have a form *dinnes*, however: *to dinnes hangran* S 437, BCS 712, a grant of land probably in Water Newton, Huntingdonshire, and *on dinnes hlinch* S 696, BCS

1072, a grant of land in Ebbesborne, Wiltshire. The former has been identified as Deanshanger, containing the personal name *Dynne* + *hangra* 'slope', PN Nth 101–2; the latter is also most likely a personal name, translated by Grundy as 'Dinn's Lynch' (Grundy 1920: 68).

The evidence briefly reviewed here shows that despite the best efforts of scholars to find a sense for *dinnes* or *dinges* or *dynges* as common nouns or adjectives in the versions of the poem on *Brunanburh*, neither the syntax of the phrase nor the proposed parallel expressions give unequivocal support to the notion. In fact, the evidence points towards the expression being a toponym. A further problem with this first line of interpretation also obtains with the second, and is treated below, namely that *mere* in the phrase *dinges* (or *dinnes*) *mere* may not be poetical *mere* 'sea'.

Ding

The second line of interpretation is that published over the space of 40 years in various places by John Dodgson. Since the course of his argument will be unknown to many, it may be best to outline it here. Dodgson argued for the identification of *Brunanburh* as Bromborough on the Wirral in his article 'The background of *Brunanburh*' in 1957; at that point he had nothing to add on the 'sea-name *Dingesmere*'. In 1967, as a footnote to his article 'The English arrival in Cheshire', he wrote:

> In the light of my argument hereafter about the importance of the -*ing*-suffix formations in English place-names, it is of almost ironical interest to note that such a formation appears as clinching evidence for the identification of *Brunanburh* with Bromborough. In the *Saga-Book* review of this historical problem I committed myself to A. H. Smith's identification of the battle-site and the Wirral place-name as against the identification with Burnswark in Dumfriesshire: but there remained a loose end — there was no explanation of the sea-name *Dingesmere* ... a water across which the defeated Norsemen escaped back to Dublin. I now think that *Dingesmere* is a poetic and figurative invention of a name for the Irish Sea, from OE *mere*, 'a lake, a body of water', here 'the sea', compounded with a form *Dinges* which is the genitive singular of a name-form *Ding*. This form is not explicable as any known Old English personal-name, but it would be quite easily explicable as a kind of place-name form, i.e. as an OE -*ing*-suffix derivative of the river-name Dee (OE *Dēing* > *Ding*), so that *Dingesmere* would mean 'the water of *Ding*', and *Ding* would mean 'that which is named after or is associated with or which belongs to, R. Dee'.

Dodgson ruefully withdrew this promising idea in 1972 in PN Ch **4** 240, where he wrote:

> OE *Dē-ing* would contract to **Deng* rather than **Ding*, and the poem-text is too early for the late OE, eME change *-eng* > *-ing*, so this attempt cannot be maintained.

But in the Addenda and Corrigenda of PN Ch **5:2** xxi of 1997, this was finally revised by adducing an example of the sound change:

> The objection can now be countered by citing the analogy of Margaretting Ess 258 and its base OE **Gīgingas*, **Gēgingas* (> ME *Ginge(s)*, *Genge(s)*) from **gē** 'district' and **ingas**. Here the resultant OE **Gē-ing-* formation has contracted to **Gēng-* and **Gīng-*.

Dodgson's argument is a strong one, but on this account, the name would be in some senses a double tautology. If **Ding* means 'that which is called after Dee, the Dee water, the sea into which the Dee flows' (PN Ch **4** 240) then we would expect neither a genitive construction, nor *mere* as a generic. It is clear that singular *-ing* names occur in the genitive, as Smith (EPNE s.n. *ing*[2]) and Ekwall (1962) demonstrate, and as Coates (1997) also suggests, but this is not common in pre-Conquest sources, and rarely appears in what Tengstrand (1940) calls 'secondary compounds' such as *Dingesmere* would be if we followed this line of interpretation. This is at least partly because singular *-ing* in Old English names already has a quasi-genitival function, meaning something akin to 'place of ~', and an additional genitive implies that the name has become an appellative. And then if **Ding* means 'the sea into which the Dee flows' and *mere* also means 'the sea' here, then the latter element simply duplicates the meaning. That in itself might suggest that by the time *Dingesmere* came to be formed as a place-name, **Ding* had become an appellative which had lost association with the Dee.

Of course, place-names are peculiarly susceptible to duplication and tautology of the sort mentioned above. But the *formation* of the name would imply that **Ding* was an appellative used of some land or river feature, perhaps originally and later loosely associated with the River Dee, and that *mere* was added as an explanatory generic for a particular place in relation to **Ding*. That then raises the question whether the *mere* generic would be understood as a 'sea-name', and we consider this further below.
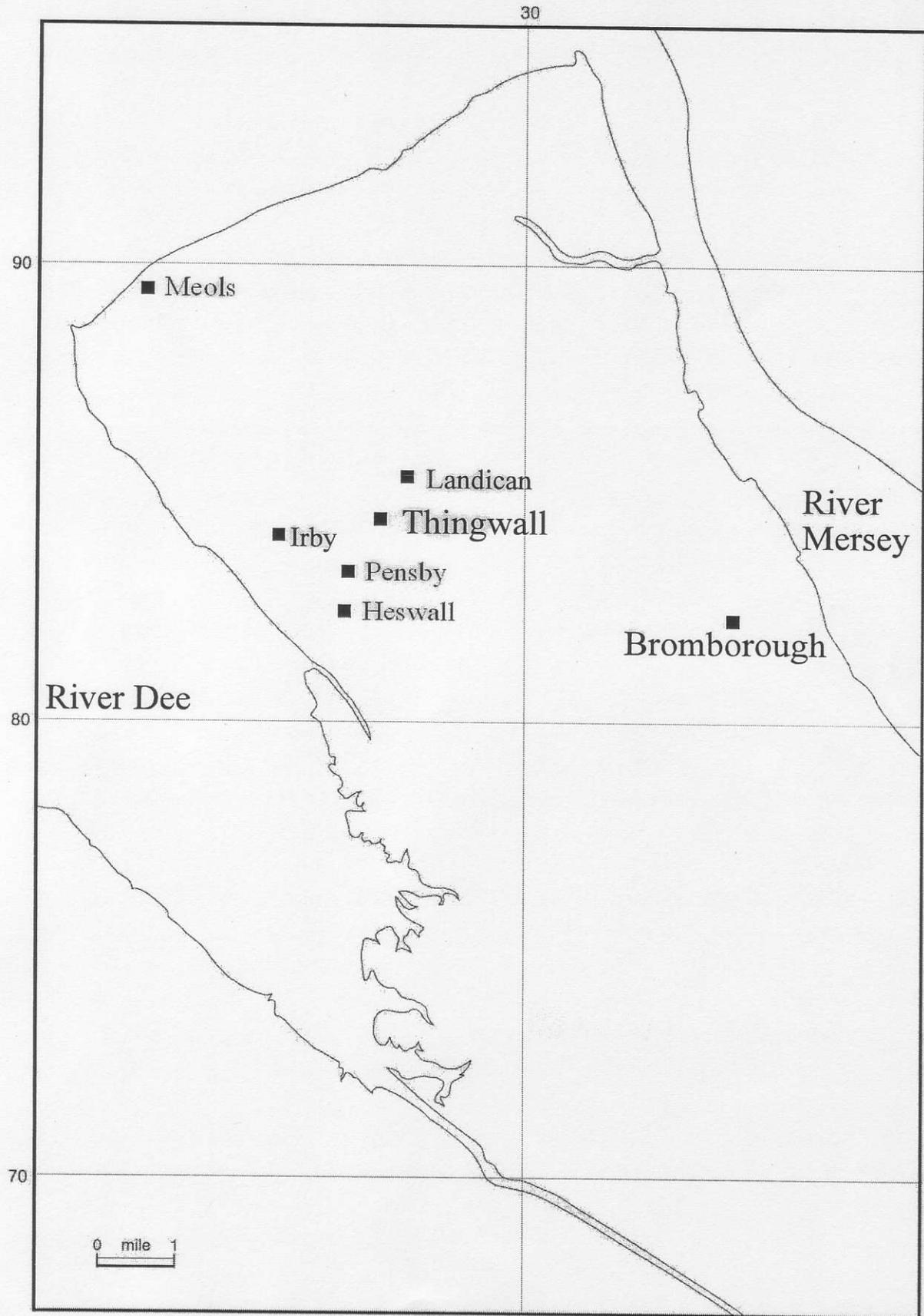
Þing

Our suggestion is that **Ding* does not refer to the Dee or to the Irish Sea except indirectly. Rather, that the element refers to the *þing* of Thingwall. Thingwall is one of a series of eleven names in Britain deriving from Old Norse *þing-vǫllr* 'place where the assembly meets' (Fellows-Jensen 1993). Although the name here is not recorded before 1086 DB, in the nature of the case it must have arisen soon after the settlement of the Wirral by the Scandinavians early in the tenth century, along with the other Scandinavian names in the area. Like the Lancashire Thingwall, it is situated at some distance from a place called *rá-býr* (Raby in Wirral and Roby in Lancashire), a farm marking the boundary of the main Scandinavian enclave. The significance of the place is not as a settlement, but rather as the political and administrative centre of the region: Thingwall in Wirral is geographically central to the peninsula, about three miles from Raby and only eight miles from the extreme north-western tip at Wallasey (see map). It is on relatively high, gently sloping ground just over two miles from the Dee at Heswall (there is a steep incline at Heswall itself), or three miles from the Dee west of Thurstaston (avoiding the incline). The Mersey is something over four miles distant east at Bromborough, or slightly less north-east at Tranmere.

The early spellings (all post-Conquest) of Thingwall on the Wirral have initial *T-* or *Th-*, the normal Anglo-Norman way of rendering names with an initial *Þ-*. We want to argue that these spellings represent both later spelling conventions and later pronunciation. For our suggestion to carry conviction, evidence is needed first that a place-name deriving from *þing* could be pronounced *ding*; and second, that place-names associated with a *þing* could have this element as the specific with the genitive inflection. This evidence is available, though it is often late.

Dingwall in Ross-shire, Scotland (first recorded 1227 as *Dingwell in Ross*, Johnston 1934: 156, Watson 1904: 93), derives from *þing-vǫllr*, but it is only recorded in spellings with initial D-. Fellows-Jensen 1993 suggests two possible reasons for this. Gaelic speakers replaced the initial Norse /þ/ with /t/, a process demonstrable in several of the other names from this compound, Tinwald, Tingwall, and so on. Then she goes on to remark,

> The initial D- in all the recorded forms of Dingwall probably reflects the fact that the Gaelic starting-point for the subsequent adoption of the name into English was the dative case, probably dependent on the preposition *i^n* (later *ann*, *an^{(n)}*) 'in'. The *n* of the preposition would have the effect of voicing the initial /t/ of the Gaelic form of the name to /d/.

30

90

■ Meols

■ Landican

■ Thingwall

■ Irby

■ Pensby

■ Heswall

River
Mersey

River Dee

■ Bromborough

80

70

0   mile   1

Wirral

She also suggests that nasal mutation may also be a factor, and mentions English pronunciations with initial /d/ of Gaelic names with initial /t/. Whatever factor or combination of factors gave rise to *þing* being pronounced *ding* in Dingwall, it is clear that it happened in a Gaelic linguistic environment.

The inhabitants of the Wirral in the tenth century were very varied. The place-names indicate Brittonic/Welsh-speaking people (among others, Pensby, Landican, Macefen, and probably Wallasey), as well as Norse, Danes and English. But a good number were Irish or Hiberno-Norse, if we may trust the Irish and Welsh sources discussed by Wainwright (1948) and evidenced by place-names (and see also the discussion in Cavill *et al.* 2000: 3–4). Arrowe SJ 2686 ('shieling', ON **ærgi*, from Common Gaelic *áirge*, VEPN s.n.), Noctorum in Woodchurch SJ 2887 ('dry hillock', OIr *cnocc tírim*, PN Ch **4** 268) and Irby SJ 2584 ('farmstead of the Irish', ON *Íra-býr*, PN Ch **4** 264), the main Irish-related names in Wirral, are all places within a mile and a half of Thingwall. This suggests a local linguistic environment heavily influenced by Gaelic which could give rise to the pronunciation of *þing-* as *ding-* in the place-name. In passing, it is also of interest that Landican SJ 2885 ('Tegan's church', PrW *lann* + OWelsh *Tecan* or an otherwise unknown Welsh saint **Tegan*, PN Ch **4** 266–7) is within the same range of Thingwall as the names discussed above, and illustrates the voicing of /t/ after *n* above posited: the sound-change itself is not peculiar to Gaelic. We may conclude, then, that the initial syllable of Thingwall could have been pronounced *ding-* by those likely to use it most often.

The Old Norse neuter noun *þing* in the genitive singular is *þings*. It rarely takes the genitive inflection in place-names, but the inflection occurs often enough to make it plausible in the case of *dinges mere*. Fellows-Jensen (1993: 62) notes a late-recorded village name in Sweden, *Tingsvallen* in Säters parish in Dalarna, which is especially interesting in the absence of any example in Britain of *þing-vǫllr* with *þing* in the genitive. And Fellows-Jensen (1993: 55) and Bridget Gordon (1963: 88–91) argue that the Glen Hinnisdal, Isle of Skye (*Glen Tinesdale* 1804), derives its name from ON *þings-dalr* 'valley of the thing'.

The toponym *þing-haugr* 'thing mound' occurs several times in England, but in Deerness, Orkney, there is a *Dingishowe* (Fellows-Jensen 1993: 60, Marwick 1952: 121), now Dingieshowe. The initial D- in this name reinforces the earlier point about *þing* being pronounced *ding*, but in this case, and more interestingly, the linguistic environment is Norse and subsequently Norn. Marwick (1929: xlvii) notes that ON *þ* is usually *t* in the Orcadian dialect, but that 'occasionally' it is *d*: he gives the words *droo* for ON *þráðr* and pronominal forms *du* for ON *þu*, and his glossary turns up several more.

This evidence is sparse and late-recorded, but is suggestive enough. The two examples of ON *þings-* from Norse or Gaelic-speaking areas (Dingieshowe and Hinnisdal) give the genitive form an intrusive vowel. This is non-grammatical, a meaningless sound to aid pronunciation. The important matter for our argument is that there are toponyms with *þing* in the genitive, and that the genitive of this element in the mouths of Gaelic and other speakers is often disyllabic. There is good reason, then, to suppose that a putative *þings-* pronounced by locals of the Wirral could have been heard by an English speaker as *dinges-*, with the *dingis-* interpreted as an English noun with the OE strong genitive singular inflection *-es*.

The habit of applying the English genitive when it does not properly belong to the name-element can be paralleled in many early spellings of Scandinavian names or hybrid English-Scandinavian names. These show 'secondary genitive' forms, that is, they decline the Scandinavian noun as if it were an English strong neuter or masculine with genitive *-es*. The Domesday Book forms for Basford (*Berchesford*, probably from ON *Barkr*, PN Ch **3** 48), Knutsford (*Cunetesford*, from ODan *Knut*, PN Ch **3** 73) and Rostherne (*Rodestorne*, from ON *Rauðr*, PN Ch **2** 56) are among the many examples in Cheshire of this phenomenon. Thurstaston has a series of spellings from the 12th century onwards with an intrusive vowel in the penultimate syllable, and these are the first recorded spellings with the genitive inflection (*Turtaniston*, *Turstaniston*, PNCh **4** 279–80). If the personal name here was that of an original Scandinavian settler, then this also has a secondary genitive in the later spellings.

One final possibility is that the whole name *dinges mere* was an English name. If this were the case, we would have a grammatically regular OE *þinges mere* '*mere* of the thing', or possibly even '*mere* of Thingwall', with omission of the second element of the compound name Thingwall. This could have been heard as *dinges mere* when pronounced by the local population, and recorded in the poem in that form.

Mere

There are two quite different senses for OE *mere*. In verse, as a simplex and as first element of many compounds, it means 'the sea, the ocean'. In prose and place-names it has a range of meanings listed by Gelling and Cole as: 'pond, lake, pool, wetland' (2000: 21). Mersea in Essex may be the only exception to this two-fold pattern, though on examination this seems unlikely. Jacobsson (1997: 66) interprets the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's phrase 'on an igland þæt is ute on þære sæ, þæt is Meresig haten' (A, *s.a.* 895: 'on one island that is out in the sea, called Mersea') as 'the only instance where *mere* is used about the sea (the ocean)'. But as Jacobsson goes on to say in the next sentence, it may not

actually mean the sea: 'More specifically, [*mere*] is probably used about the major inlet from the sea formed by the estuaries of the Colne and the Blackwater.' Gelling and Cole, if we interpret their hint correctly (they conclude a discussion of Sturmer, Essex thus: 'so Sturmer is probably "(place overlooking) the Stour wetland". This may be the sense in Mersea ESX.'), surmise that Mersea might mean something more like 'the island of (or by, or overlooking) the wetland' (2000: 22). Jacobsson on reflection interprets *mere* here as an estuarine feature; Gelling and Cole interpret it in line with other wetland features. At any rate, none of them think that the specific of Mersea necessarily means 'sea'; and the geography of the island, cut off by water, but closely surrounded for two-thirds of its periphery by land, certainly militates against the interpretation of *mere* as 'ocean'.

The question that naturally arises now is which of the two ranges of meanings is appropriate for *dinges mere* in the poem.

Dodgson proposed that *Dingesmere* was a 'poetic and figurative invention of a name for the Irish Sea', and Campbell also understood the phrase in this sense: 'It seems most likely, in view of the other place-names introduced in the passage, that *Dingesmere* is the name of part of the sea' (1938: 115). This interpretation is not without difficulty (see below), but in several ways it fits the syntax and style of the poem. In relation to sea-journeys, adverbial phrases with *on* and *ofer* in close proximity, such as *on Dingesmere, / ofer deop wæter*, are usually examples of variation, the iterative stylistic feature of Old English poetry. We might notice *The Seafarer* 58, *on hwælweg . . . ofer holma gelagu* 'on the path of the whale, over the expanse of the seas'; or *Christ* 850 *on laguflode / ofer cald wæter* 'on the sea-flood over the cold water'. This stylistic feature implies that the two phrases refer to the same feature imaged in different ways. On this interpretation, the phrases *on Dingesmere, ofer deop wæter* would refer to the departure of the Norsemen to Dublin via the Irish Sea, where the sea was named after the area controlled by the *þing* of Thingwall. This could plausibly have been anywhere towards the end of the peninsula, the Scandinavian enclave in the western and northern areas of the Wirral, perhaps with the Dee estuary being the most likely, because closest to the *þing*-site.

It remains a possibility that *mere* in *dinges mere* should be translated as 'sea', having its full poetic sense, thus:

Gewitan him þa Norþmen   nægledcnearrum,
dreorig daraða laf,   on Dingesmere,
ofer deop wæter   Difelin secan,
eft Ira land,   æwiscmode. (53–6)

(Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, left in the nail-studded ships on the sea of [controlled by?] the *þing*, over the deep water to seek Dublin, went back to Ireland ashamed.)

But when we reviewed the evidence for the formation of the expression *dinges mere* earlier, we concluded that it was coined as a name, a toponym, and this brings a different range of evidence into play in interpreting the phrase, the evidence of names. The simple and dominant fact here is that there is no example in Old English verse or prose or names of *mere* with a genitive singular qualifier where the element *mere* refers to the sea. In other words, if *dinges mere* is a toponym like others in Old English, it almost certainly does not have the element *mere* with the meaning 'sea'.

There are abundant examples of *mere* as a name generic with a genitive singular qualifier, but they all refer to specific water-features in the landscape, and not to the sea in general. The qualifiers vary from animals and birds (*culfran mere* 'dove's ~' S 786, BCS 1282) to flora (*secges mere* 'sedge ~' S 142, BCS 219), to officials (*kingesmere* 'king's ~' S462, BCS 749), to a god (*Tyes mere* 'Tiw's ~' S 1272, BCS 455), to more ordinary and very frequent personal names (37 times excluding doubtful cases, counted by Jacobsson 1997: 216). While this does not make it impossible that *dinges mere* refers to the Irish Sea as Dodgson suggests, it does give us pause for thought; certainly we would wish for some parallel to support the notion.

The second element of *dinges mere* in the Old English poem could then have been understood as *mere* 'pond, lake, pool, wetland' (Gelling and Cole 2000: 21). Gelling and Cole (2000: 22) remark:

In so far as *mere* had a specialized meaning this was probably that the pond or lake was not a part of a larger feature. For a land-locked bay of the sea, a wide estuary, or a pool in a major river, the Anglo-Saxons were more likely to use **pōl**.

Though the Dee itself is not part of a larger feature, it [*earlier*] cannot reasonably be referred to as a *mere* by this definition. At the north-western end of Wirral is the much smaller estuarine/river pool feature of Poulton, with OE *pōl*. In this particular part of the country, near the great estuary of the Dee, Cole's identification of *mere* as 'wetland' (Cole 1993: 40), and Jacobsson's as 'land liable to flood' (1997: 218), is the likeliest feature to be referred to by the element. The topography of the current Wirral coastline is not the same as that of the tenth century, of course, but there is a substantial area of wetland, between Gayton Sands and offshore of Heswall, just over two miles south-west

of Thingwall. This might imaginably have been referred to as 'the *mere* of the thing': it is rough marshy land subject to flooding by tide and river.

The syntax of the poem and Old English poetry more generally, as mentioned earlier, seems to militate against such an interpretation. The noticeable thing about the *on . . . ofer* expressions discussed is that they are general. There are examples of this type of syntactic structure which refer to different places. When names are introduced, it is apparent that although a voyage is still the focus, the names can and do specify places where different water features are in question. This passage from *Solomon and Saturn* is similar in many ways to the *Brunanburh* one:

> . . . gif ðu gewitest   on Wendelsæ
> ofer Coforflod   cyððe secean . . . (Krapp and Dobbie 1942: 38, lines 204–5)
> (if you go on the Mediterranean Sea, over the [River] Chabur to seek your homeland . . .)

This passage picks up Saturn's declaration earlier:

> wende mec on willan   on wæteres hrigc
> ofer Coferflod   Caldeas secan. (Krapp and Dobbie 1942: 31, lines 19–20)
> (I shall go gladly on the water's surface over the [River] Chabur to seek the Chaldeans.)

As in *Beowulf* 471, *wæteres hricg* refers to the sea, as plainly does *Wendelsæ*. *Coforflod* in this poem has been identified variously as the biblical River Chabur or Chebar (Krapp and Dobbie 1942: 161, note to line 20), but it seems reasonably certain that it is a river name. The passages apparently refer to two different but connected maritime locations. So *on . . . ofer* expressions do not always refer to the same piece of water. With this in mind, the related passage from the *Brunanburh* poem might then be plausibly glossed as follows:

> Gewitan him þa Norþmen   nægledcnearrum,
> dreorig daraða laf,   on Dingesmere,
> ofer deop wæter   Difelin secan,
> eft Ira land,   æwiscmode. (53–6)
> (Then the Northmen, dreary survivors of the spears, went to [or in] the nail-studded ships on the wetland by the thing, [went] over deep water to seek Dublin, back to Ireland ashamed.)

One final possibility might also be considered. If, as we suppose, *dinges mere* was the wetland by the *þing*, the original name might have been Norse, and interpreted in both its parts as English. The ON element *marr* frequently interchanges with OE *mere* in English place-names (EPNE **2** 36), and could easily be confused with it in the present instance. There is, moreover, considerable overlap in meaning between ON *marr* 'marsh, fen' and OE *mere* 'wetland'. Whether the original generic of this name was OE *mere* or ON *marr*, the purpose of the name would be clear to those who used it: it would locate the feature near the important *þing* site; and it would alert travellers using the shallow tidal waters of the Dee estuary of the danger of marshland.

Conclusion

We would like to suggest that the *ding* of *dinges mere* in the Old English poem of *Brunanburh* refers to the *þing* of Thingwall. There can be little question that the *mere* refers to a water feature, and we further suggest that the name refers to water overlooked or controlled by, or associated with the *þing*. This might be the Dee estuary and the Irish Sea. But the name probably derives ultimately from the hybrid Norse-OE *þings-mere* 'wetland by the thing', or possibly from a pure Norse compound, *þings-marr* 'marshland by the thing'. In our view this name was spoken with a Gaelic inflection and heard by a speaker of English. The process producing the form *dinges mere* from the posited *þings-mere* or *þings-marr* is undoubtedly complex, but there is sufficient contextual and comparative evidence to make it plausible.

We return to and close with the poem. The poem is a propaganda piece which intends to exalt the exploits of the West Saxon and Mercian forces and humiliate the enemy coalition. All kinds of rhetorical devices are deployed to these ends (Carroll 2001: 125–40 gives a particularly acute analysis of the linguistic structure of *Brunanburh*). In this context, and with the awareness that *dinges mere* would not be widely known as a place to most of those who would hear or read the poem, the poet very likely had some specific purpose in mind when mentioning the place. If our interpretation of the place-name *dinges mere* is correct, the poet's purpose becomes clearer. *Dinges mere* was not necessarily a poetic reference to the Irish Sea, but the name of a place at some distance from the site of the onset of the battle. For those who understood the name and were familiar with the area, this name was used to emphasise the desperation of the fugitives, in that they had to depart as best they could from an unsuitable place, wetland or coastal marshland (*mere* in Old English, *marr* in Old Norse), before they could make the safety of the deeper water and escape to Dublin. But the name would especially highlight the brutal fact that the Norsemen fled from a

place close to the centre of Scandinavian power and the symbol of Scandinavian independence and self-determination, the *þing*.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations and References

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Nottingham scholars - Paul Cavill, who runs the English Place-Name Society, Steve Harding, a scientist, and Judith Jesch, a Viking studies lecturer - have identified Wirral as the site of what was described as the bloodiest battle to have taken place in England. Five British kings and seven earls were killed on the Celtic side as were numerous Saxons, including two of Athelstan's cousins.

The researchers base their conclusion on analysis of two place names - Brunanburh itself and Dingesmere - mentioned in the 73-line *Chronicle*. The former, meaning "Bruna's fort", has been assumed by many scholars to be the old name for Bromborough, where a well-established Scandinavian colony existed at the time of the battle, making it a sympathetic base for northern raiders.

If Dingesmere could be identified as being near by, then that would provide confirmation. But the origin of that place name was puzzling - until Professor Harding suggested it might be related to theOld Norse word for a place of assembly or *Thing*, as in Manx *Tynwald* or Icelandic *Althingi*. And indeed just such a parliament, known as *Thingwall*, used to be held in Wirral. The *Thing* field itself is thought to be at Cross Hill, off the A551; the word would have been pronounced "Ding" by local Viking folk who had picked up a Celtic accent.

The researchers then realised that Dinges-mere derived from the Old Norse for "marshland of the *Thing*". The place-name served to warn travellers of the dangerous marshland of the Dee, particularly when attending the *Thing*.

Professor Harding said they had solved one of the "important loose ends" in the story of the Battle of Brunanburh. A paper explaining the theory has been published in the *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*.

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