

# Battle of Brunanburh

Alfred Tennyson

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Constantinus, King of the Scot, after having sworn allegiance to Athelstan, allied himself with the Danes of Ireland under Anlaf, and invading England, was defeated by Athelstan and his brother Edmund with great slaughter at Brunanburh in the year 937.

## I.

<sup>1</sup> **A**THELSTAN King,  
Lord among Earls,  
Bracelet-bestower and  
Baron of Barons,  
He with his brother,  
Edmund Atheling,  
Gaining a lifelong  
Glory in battle,  
Slew with the sword-edge  
There by Brunanburh,  
Brake the shield-wall,  
Hew'd the lindenwood,<sup>2</sup>  
Hack'd the battleshield,  
Sons of Edward with hammer'd brands.

## II.

Theirs was a greatness  
Got from their Grandsires—  
Theirs that so often in  
Strife with their enemies  
Struck for their hoards and their hearths and their homes.

## III.

Bow'd the spoiler,  
Bent the Scotsman,  
Fell the shipcrews  
Doom'd to the death.  
All the field with blood of the fighters  
Flow'd, from when first the great  
Sun-star of morningtide,  
Lamp of the Lord God  
Lord everlasting,  
Glode over earth till the glorious creature  
Sank to his setting.

## IV.

There lay many a man  
Marr'd by the javelin,  
Men of the Northland  
Shot over shield.  
There was the Scotsman  
Weary of war.

## V.

We the West-Saxons,  
Long as the daylight

Lasted, in companies  
Troubled the track of the host that we hated,  
Grimly with swords that were sharp from the grindstone,  
Fiercely we hack'd at the flyers before us.

VI.

Mighty the Mercian,  
Hard was his hand-play,  
Sparing not any of  
Those that with Anlaf,  
Warriors over the  
Weltering waters  
Borne in the bark's-bosom,  
Drew to this island:  
Doom'd to the death.

VII.

Five young kings put asleep by the sword-stroke,  
Seven strong Earls of the army of Anlaf  
Fell on the war-field, numberless numbers,  
Shipmen and Scotsmen.

VIII.

Then the Norse leader.  
Dire was his need of it,  
Few were his following,  
Fled to his warship  
Fleeted his vessel to sea with the king in it.  
Saving his life on the fallow flood.

IX.

Also the crafty one,  
Constantinus,  
Crept to his North again,  
Hoar-headed hero!

X.

Slender warrant had  
*He* to be proud of  
The welcome of war-knives—  
He that was reft of his  
Folk and his friends that had  
Fallen in conflict,  
Leaving his son too  
Lost in the carnage,  
Mangled to morsels,  
A youngster in war!

XI.

Slender reason had  
*He* to be glad of  
The clash of the war-glaive—  
Traitor and trickster  
And spurner of treaties—  
He nor had Anlaf  
With armies so broken  
A reason for bragging  
That they had the better  
In perils of battle

On places of slaughter—  
The struggle of standards,  
The rush of the javelins,  
The crash of the charges,<sup>3</sup>  
The wielding of weapons—  
The play that they play'd with  
The children of Edward.

XII.

Then with their nail'd prows  
Parted the Norsemen, a  
Blood-redden'd relic of  
Javelins over  
The jarring breaker, the deep-sea billow,  
Shaping their way toward Dyflen<sup>4</sup> again,  
Shamed in their souls.

XIII.

Also the brethren,  
King and Atheling,  
Each in his glory,  
Went to his own in his own West-Saxonland,  
Glad of the war.

XIV.

Many a carcase they left to be carrion,  
Many a livid one, many a sallow-skin—  
Left for the white-tail'd eagle to tear it, and  
Left for the horny-nibb'd raven to rend it, and  
Gave to the garbaging war-hawk to gorge it, and  
That gray beast, the wolf of the weald.

XV.

Never had huger  
Slaughter of heroes  
Slain by the sword-edge—  
Such as old writers  
Have writ of in histories—  
Hapt in this isle, since  
Up from the East hither  
Saxon and Angle from  
Over the broad billow  
Broke into Britain with  
Haughty war-workers who  
Harried the Welshman, when  
Earls that were lured by the  
Hunger of glory gat  
Hold of the land.

1. I have more or less availed myself of my son's prose translation of this poem in the *Contemporary Review* (November 1876).
2. Shields of lindenwood.
3. Lit. 'the gathering of men.'
4. Dublin.