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The Society notes with sorrow the death on 1 March 2017 of its
Vice-President, Prof Dai Morgan Evans FSA, Hon MiFA.
An obituary will appear in the next volume of the *Journal*.

Papers relating to the Architecture, Archaeology and History
of the County, City and Neighbourhood of Chester

Abbreviations
The abbreviations used in this volume follow
the system laid down in British Standard 4148 part 2;
many of the most relevant abbreviations are listed in
Signposts for archaeological publication ed 3.
London: Council for British Archaeology, 1991.
http://www.archaeologyuk.org/sites/www.britarch.ac.uk/
files/node-files/signposts_archpub_3rded.pdf

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V: Æthelfrith and the Battle of Chester

by Clive Tolley*

The battle of Chester, AD 604 x 616, was won by the Northumbrian king Æthelfrith. It was described by Bede in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, written over a century later. Skeletons, apparently of warriors who fought in the battle, have been uncovered at Heronbridge, just south of Chester. The paper considers the medieval documentary sources relating to the battle and aims to evince a critical approach to them in the hope of elucidating some aspects of the battle. It also considers the geopolitical situation of the time and Æthelfrith's likely motives for his incursion and adumbrates a few areas where subsequent archaeological investigation may provide clearer answers to presently insoluble problems of interpretation.

Introduction

King Æthelfrith, who ruled over Northumbria in the late sixth to early seventh century AD, led a series of expansionist raids against the British kingdoms along the western seaboard, and was a fierce and successful leader. So relates the main historian of the period, the Northumbrian monk Bede, writing a century or so later. Among these expeditions far from Æthelfrith's homeland that Bede recounts was a victorious foray to Chester. The battle which took place is unusual for the period in the detail with which it is described and unique in having left us archaeological remains in the form of a 'battle cemetery' at Heronbridge, just to the south of Chester. This paper does not engage with the details of the excavation of the site but it raises some questions about their interpretation and considers the general historical situation in northern Britannia at the time; it also takes up some points raised by the modern historiography of the battle, in particular the reliability of the ancient sources.

Written sources

Bede

In his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*The ecclesiastical history of the English people*) II.2 (Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 141–3), composed around 731, Bede recounts a battle fought by the Northumbrian (Bernician) king, Æthelfrith, against the British near the city of Chester, as a conclusion to his presentation of a second meeting of St Augustine with the British bishops, at which Augustine was snubbed, resulting in the Britons suffering their due come-uppance:

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For later on, that very powerful king of the English, Æthelfrith, whom we have already spoken of, collected a great army against the city of the legions which is called Legacæstir by the English and more correctly Caerlegion (Chester) by the Britons, and made a great slaughter of that nation of heretics. When he was about to give battle and saw their priests, who had assembled to pray to God on behalf of the soldiers taking part in the fight, standing apart in a safer place, he asked who they were and for what purpose they had gathered there. Most of them were from the monastery of Bangor, where there was said to be so great a number of monks that, when it was divided into seven parts with the superiors over each, no division had less than 300 men, all of whom were accustomed to live by the labour of their hands. After a three days' fast, most of these had come to the battle in order to pray with the others. They had a guard named Brocmail, whose duty it was to protect them against the barbarians' swords while they were praying. When Æthelfrith heard why they had come he said, 'If they are praying to their God against us, then, even if they do not bear arms, they are fighting against us, assailing us as they do with prayers for our defeat.' So he ordered them to be attacked first and then he destroyed the remainder of their wicked host, though not without heavy losses. It is said that in this battle about twelve hundred men were slain who had come to pray and only fifty escaped by flight. Brocmail and his men at the first enemy attack turned their backs on those whom they should have defended, leaving them unarmed and helpless before the swords of their foes. Thus the prophecy of the holy Bishop Augustine was fulfilled, although he had long been translated to the heavenly kingdom, namely that those heretics would also suffer the vengeance of temporal death because they had despised the offer of everlasting salvation.

While Bede is regarded as a good historian, the writing of history served different purposes from those of modern historians, and the rhetorical arrangement and presentation of the text reflect this (*cf* Ray 1997, 11–13). In the present case, the account given above forms the last of a three-part section concerning the mission of St Augustine and his interaction with the native British Church. A thorough and penetrating analysis of the whole section, which largely supersedes earlier discussions within the areas covered (such as Chadwick 1963), is offered by Stancliffe (1999, particularly 124–9 for the Chester portion).

The first part of Bede's account deals with Augustine's meeting with the British clerics at an oak tree on the border between the Hwicce and Wessex; the second concerns a second meeting (possibly at Chester; it involved representatives from Bangor, at least); and the third presents the battle of Chester as retribution for the behaviour of the British Church towards Augustine. Whilst it is clear that Augustine, directed by his master, Pope Gregory, took a high-handed approach towards the native Church, expecting it to submit without question to his authority, Bede is wholly on his side, and regards all that the British suffered, in particular at Chester, as their just deserts.

The three parts of the overall presentation must derive from different sources, a matter that Stancliffe discusses at some length. The first part is told directly, without reference to any sources, and contains nothing that could not derive solely from an English source (which includes Roman sources held, for example, in Canterbury); here, Augustine belittles the British representatives by performing a miracle, something that they are unable to achieve themselves. The second and third parts, however, contain information that must have derived

from a British source, and they are peppered with qualifying statements such as 'they say', indicating some reluctance to accept the full validity of the underlying source. Stancliffe demonstrates that Bede often uses such qualifying statements to indicate an oral source, but in this case a written source, containing the British names Brocmail and Dinoot (and probably Carlegion, the British name for Chester), must lie behind Bede's account; the qualifications do not here indicate orality but rather an origin among the British, whom Bede in general held in low regard. The positive depiction of Bangor and its learned inhabitants reflects an original British bias, which Bede preserves but somewhat besmirches with his own excoriations of the British *gens perfida* ('treacherous nation').

The source document, which I see as being British, was, Stancliffe argues, most probably in Latin; its ultimate origin must surely have lain with the monastery of Bangor or someone closely associated with it. It is highly unlikely to have come to Bede from Canterbury, whose archives Bede always esteemed (and quoted in an unqualified way, as with his description of Augustine's first meeting), but exactly how Bede came by it is open to some debate. Stancliffe (1999, 128) suggests that the monastery of Malmesbury, founded within a generation or so of the battle of Chester on the border between Wessex and the Hwicce and hence in the general area of Augustine's oak-tree meeting, may have held the document, whence it came, possibly with additional information relating to the whole interchange between Augustine and the British Church, to Bede.

Stancliffe rightly dismisses the notion that any British oral traditions lie behind the account of the battle of Chester as reported by Bede (the details of the names, and of the organisation of the monastery of Bangor, effectively preclude this); this is not, however, to deny that such traditions may have existed and may have influenced other, later British sources, which I consider below. On the other hand, the depiction of King Æthelfrith in general is quite likely to have its origins in oral heroic poetry among the English (although even here, the figure of Æthelfrith is made Saul-like, with Edwin in exile as a David-figure, according to the biblically inspired rhetoric of Bede's understanding of history); the description is general in nature, and decidedly adulatory, which would reflect its origins in praise poetry addressed to a warrior prince, plenty of remnants of which are found in Old English verse (although of course in a Christianised form). The battle of Chester might, of course, have featured in such praise poetry for Æthelfrith, if he survived long enough to hear it, but it is unlikely that it would have supplied any of the details Bede gives us, which surely derive from the written British source discussed above.

The implications of this are that the description of Æthelfrith as singling out the monks for slaughter – which makes no sense from a pagan king's perspective – is a projection of motive onto a pagan foe by the Christian-minded monks of Bangor, who we may surmise viewed him as a sort of devilish tormentor who brought about their martyrdom, a point picked up by Bede, who, while accepting the basis of the interpretation, turned the tables and viewed Æthelfrith as an instrument of divine retribution, a viewpoint that we may be confident was absent from the original British document derived from Bangor.

One difficult matter in Bede's account is the action of Brocmail. His treacherous betrayal of his helpless charges fits Bede's overall narrative of the perfidious British very well, but

it is more difficult to explain how the event was recorded within a British context. It is possible that Bede has put his own slant on an event that in his source was not so negatively viewed, but there might also be something like a dynastic struggle implicit in the account, with Brocmail coming, for example, from a neighbouring clan rather than the royal family under whose protection the monastery lay. At this distance, and in the absence of any further evidence, this is of course mere speculation. (Brocmail is considered further below, in the section on the monks in battle.)

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The entry for the battle in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Plummer & Earle eds 1892) may be dismissed as a worthless derivative of Bede (*cf* Bu'Lock 1962, 47). It gives no further information other than assigning a date of 605, which is inferred, without a great deal of consideration, from Bede in that it follows on from the last previously mentioned dated event; the specification that two hundred priests prayed for victory on the British side, of whom fifty escaped, derives from Bede's account (presumably with mcc misread as cc).

The Historia Brittonum

The *Historia Brittonum* (Morris ed 1980), traditionally but probably inaccurately ascribed to Nennius, was a work compiled in Gwynedd in 829–30 on the basis of earlier sources; the earliest manuscript (British Library, Harley 3859) dates from *c* 1100 (Charles-Edwards 2013, 346). The work contains valuable information which, as it is derived largely from British traditions, supplements what is found in Bede. Nonetheless, although annals of an arguably extensive nature were used (Charles-Edwards 2013, 358–9), much of what informs this 'history' was traditional poetry or stories, in which the presentation of events was adapted for rhetorical effect, including the adaptation of tradition to reflect the particular concerns current at the time of the work's composition; this includes the creation of an anachronistic version of history which opposes the Welsh to the English – Charles-Edwards (2013, 447) characterises it as an *apologia pro gente sua*. (For a survey of the *Historia Brittonum* as a historical document, and its sources, *see* Charles-Edwards 2013, 437–52).

The *Historia Brittonum* does not directly mention the battle of Chester, but chapters 61 and 63 include an interesting piece of information about Æthelfrith, which will have some relevance later in the discussion:

> Ida […] joined Din Guaire to Bernicia.
> Æthelfrith the Artful (*Flesaurs*) reigned 12 years in Bernicia and another 12 in Deira. He reigned 24 years in the two kingdoms, and gave Din Guaire to his wife, whose name was Bebba, and it was named Bamburgh from his wife's name.

The nickname given to Æthelfrith, in Welsh within a Latin text, suggests a vernacular, legendary source (presumably Welsh heroic poems), but the rest of the information could well derive from more annalistic material.

The Irish and Welsh Annals

The battle of Chester is mentioned in various Irish annals. They are somewhat complicated in terms of their history and survival (*see* Charles-Edwards ed 2006; 2013, 346–59). The

Chronicle of Ireland was composed in the tenth century on the basis of earlier annals, and went up to the year 911, but it survives only in the form of daughter chronicles such as the *Annals of Ulster* (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill eds 1983) and the *Annals of Tigernach* (Stokes ed 1895), whose manuscripts date from Tudor times (but nonetheless preserve, it is believed, much intact material from many centuries earlier) (Charles-Edwards ed 2006, 1). The source used by the Chronicle of Ireland for entries up to 642 was a chronicle of Iona, recording events of interest to the kingdom of Dál Riata, which included the battle of Chester (for the Iona chronicle's strata *see* Charles-Edwards ed 2006, 38). Charles-Edwards (ed 2006, 128) gives the reconstructed form of the Chronicle of Ireland for 613 in English translation as follows; the second part, in italics, is from the Clonmacnois version (*Annals of Tigernach*) and cannot therefore be assigned with confidence to the Chronicle of Ireland:

> The battle of Caer Legion, where holy men were killed and Solon son of Conan, king of the Britons, fell, *and King Cetula fell. Æthelfrith was the victor, who died immediately afterwards.*

The *Annales Cambriae* (A text, MS Harley 3859; Morris ed 1980) record the battle, and another event in the same year, 613:

> The battle of Chester. And Selim son of Cinan fell there.
> And the falling asleep of Iacob son of Beli.

The manuscript is, as noted, from *c* 1100, and it also contains the Harleian genealogies; as annal entries stretch up to the time of Owain ap Hywel, king of Dyfed, who died *c* 970, and the opening Harleian genealogies converge on Owain, the original on which the manuscript is based is likely to be from the third quarter of the tenth century (Charles-Edwards 2013, 346–7). The *Annales Cambriae* appear to have been composed at St David's in Dyfed.

The analysis of the development of the Irish and Welsh annals in more detail is highly complex and has been subject to a good deal of controversy. It is sufficient here to note that, according to the most recent research, the *Annales Cambriae* in fact appear to be, in large part, a tenth-century abbreviation derived from the Chronicle of Ireland in its Clonmacnois version (Charles-Edwards 2013, 349) and are thus to a degree a secondary source in comparison to the Chronicle – although the matter is complicated by the fact that the Chronicle of Ireland no longer exists as such, and also not everything in the *Annales Cambriae* is derived from the Chronicle of Ireland. The derivative nature of the *Annales Cambriae* and their complex later history need to be borne in mind when assessing their content but we are still left with a good deal of uncertainty about their early history. Ultimately, if – and I would regard this as a big if – the information in the Chronicle of Ireland and the *Annales Cambriae* about the battle is not in essence derived from Bede with some additions from legendary tradition, then it must derive from a Welsh source (or oral informant) known to the monks of Iona (the chronicle of which fed into the Chronicle of Ireland); note, for example, the Welsh form Cair Legion for Chester (which, however, also occurs, in the form Carlegion, in Bede, whence it may have been taken). It has already been argued that Bede's account of the battle must go back to a document that derived

ultimately from Bangor; the simplest supposition would be that the same monastery recorded the event in its annals, from which the *Annales Cambriae* derived the information, though through how many intervening stages is difficult to say. There is, of course, no direct evidence for such a supposition; it is merely the result of applying Occam's razor.

Whatever their precise development, the Irish and Welsh annals, through the many recensions and revisions they underwent over many centuries, had plenty of opportunity to make use of sources such as Bede and to incorporate allusions to legendary tradition; it is clear, for example, that Bede's *Chronica maiora* (which do not mention the battle of Chester) were used as a basis for some aspects of the Chronicle of Ireland (Charles-Edwards ed 2006, 3, 52). Annals, like chronicles, inscriptions, chronicles or poetry, could and did serve political ends, and it would be a mistake to accept whatever they say as being historically accurate.

A number of observations may be made on the basis of the critical approach just espoused. Firstly, the dates in the Chronicle of Ireland and the *Annales Cambriae* are almost certainly wrong for the period under discussion. It has long been recognised that a mistake has been made with the dating of entries as a result of the Iona chronicler splicing two separate sources relating to the period up to the year 642, and they should be revised in such a way that the date of the battle is actually intended to be not 613, but 616, or possibly 615 (Charles-Edwards ed 2006, 128; 2013, 352; the observation had also already been made long ago by Plummer ed 1896, **2**, 77).

The entry in the *Annales Cambriae* for Iacob (Iago) is on a separate line and is not connected with the battle; a 'falling asleep' suggests death from old age or illness, not falling in battle. Iacob may be connected with Welsh royal dynasties, and be identified as the Iacob, great-grandson of Mailcun (the Maglocunus of Gildas, *The ruin of Britain*) and grandfather of Catgollaun (Cadwallon) of Harleian genealogy 1 (Bartrum 1966, 9); Cadwallon, king of Gwynedd, overthrew Edwin of Northumbria in 633 and ravaged his realm for a year (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.20; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 202–5). However, there is no reason on the basis of this annal to associate either Iacob or the house of Gwynedd with the battle, despite many historians having done so.

The Cetula of the *Annals of Tigernach* has been identified with Cadwal Crysban (Bartrum 1993, *sv*), who appears as Catgual crisban in the Harleian genealogy 3 pedigree of the princes of Rhos (Bartrum 1966, 10). He was great-grandson of Cinglas (the Cuneglasus of Gildas, *The ruin of Britain*). It is possible that he did take part in the battle, but again his name may have been attracted into association with the battle as a result of legendary fame; moreover, the identitifcation of Cetula as this Cadwal is supposition and may reflect the desire of modern scholars to carry on what their predecessors in the Middle Ages no doubt did, which is to look for connections between events and characters known elsewhere from tradition, even when there is no particular justification for doing so.

Similarly, the association of Selim (Selyf in more modern form) with the battle may be the result of a desire to link events with legendary heroes, and could have been made long after the event, given the contorted history of the annals, although, as noted below, there are reasons to think the annal entry is in essence correct. Selyf is a major figure who appears

in a number of sources, both saints' lives and poetry; his father Cynan is similarly well represented, and in one genealogy appears as the maternal grandfather of the great king Cadwallon (Bartrum 1993, *sv* 'Selyf Sarffgadau'; 'Cynan Garwyn'). Selyf appears as one of the three battle-leaders of Britain in Triad 25 (Bromwich ed 2014, 48), and elsewhere has the epithet *sarffgadeu*, 'serpent of battles', a title which Bromwich (ed 2014, 498) views as originating in bardic encomium: a prestige built up in poetic tradition is likely to have its origins in the activities of a successful king, even if it is not strictly historical in itself.

Selyf's grandfather in genealogical tradition was Brochfael/Brochwel (later forms of Bede's Brocmail). It has been supposed that Brochwel might have retired to the monastery and could have been called upon to act as an aged warrior when needed. As Bartrum notes (1993, *sv* 'Brochwel, captain at the Battle of Chester'), this is unwarranted; Brochwel was a particularly common name, borne by many kings and heroes (*cf* entries in Bartrum 1993). There is no reason to associate Bede's Brocmail with any such hero kings, particularly in view of his reprehensible behaviour. It is notable that this Brocmail makes no appearances in any other recorded traditions, understandably so.

The entries in annals are not, then, particularly reliable and could be explained as the imposition of legendary figures on events that were derived from elsewhere, for example from Bede. This does not on itself make the entries untrue, but they can in no way be relied on to give authoritative information.

The Harleian genealogies

The main source of early genealogies, the Harley 3859 manuscript, was composed under Hywel (950–*c* 970); some other genealogies appear to date from a similar time (Charles-Edwards 2013, 359). The analysis of Charles-Edwards (2013, 359–64) makes abundantly clear that the genealogies were arranged as political propaganda for the ruling houses, primarily of Gwynedd, and reflect the *realpolitik* of the time of Hywel. For example, Hywel belonged to a dynasty which had ruled Gwynedd for little more than a century, but links were made to the previous dynasty, the descendants of Cunedda, through his mother, and a similar tactic was used to justify his rule over the kingdom of Dyfed. Genealogies represented the political situation of the time of their composition through the imposition of a diachronic interpretation of that situation; they can therefore scarcely be relied on to represent the realities of several centuries earlier, as viewed from different centres of power, although they may contain fragments of such realities.

Welsh poems and related bardic materials

Welsh (or British) bards, supposedly from the time of Ida, first English king of Bernicia (mid-sixth century), are known by name in the *Historia Brittonum*. However, the manuscripts of Welsh poems supposedly composed from the sixth century onwards date almost exclusively only from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, and even if the texts reproduce earlier versions, they bear little resemblance to what could have existed in the sixth or seventh centuries (Charles-Edwards 2013, 364; also his survey of verse more widely, 651–79). In addition, the dating of the composition of many Welsh texts has recently been brought later, closer to the dates of the manuscripts (Charles-Edwards 2013, 653–5). Before they reached their extant forms, poems were passed down in a mixture of oral and

written versions and were subject to considerable revision on the basis of the wider bardic heroic tradition. Moreover, from its inception a poem is a literary, not a historical, work: its purpose is not to relate events, but, for example, to praise a ruler or to evoke the pathos of loss; events are therefore incidental, and motives of the protagonists subject to the literary whims of the poet.

Poems may sometimes preserve information about genuine events or people, but this needs to be extracted and interpreted cautiously. Thus Rowland (1990, 120–41; *cf* Gelling 1992, 72–6) shows that the *Canu Heledd*, depicting the ravaging and loss of Shropshire to the English in the seventh century, is wholly unhistorical and represents the concerns of a later time (illustrated for example by the poet's having to fabricate historically inaccurate Welsh names on the basis of existing English ones); violent incursion into Powys from Mercia began only in the mid-eighth century. In the case of the *Canu Heledd*, Gelling (1992, 73) warns how 'the powerful poetry of the verses can still seduce scholars into accepting their message': but verisimilitude is not veracity. We would be unwise, therefore, to accept uncritically the picture of Mercian–British relations at the time of the battle of Chester that is evoked here. On the other hand, the elegy for Cynddylan, prince of Powys, the *Marwnad Cynddylan*, which is set at the same time, presents no such Mercian conquest, and appears to envisage the hero Cynddylan working alongside the Mercians in some of the battles mentioned by Bede; it is most probably essentially a seventh-century work (Rowland 1990, 122–3). The conclusion drawn by Rowland (1990, 120–41) in her extensive critical investigation of the early Welsh poems is that the genuinely early ones show a consistent picture of collaboration between the forces of Powys and Gwynedd with Mercia against Northumbria throughout the first half of the seventh century.

Another ancient poem, the *Trawsganu Kynan Garwyn*, features Cynan, the father of Selyf of the *Annales Cambriae* entry. Cynan is praised for his victories over neighbouring British peoples, without mentioning the English: this would reflect the reality of the situation in the north Wales area before Æthelfrith's incursion, which appears to have been the first penetration by the English this far west (Charles-Edwards 2013, 16).

The most directly relevant fragment of Welsh poetic lore for the battle of Chester is found in the Triads, the *Trioedd ynys Prydain* (Bromwich ed 2014). The triads represent a distillation of bardic tradition, in the form of snippets of information topically arranged into groups of three; many of the ancient poems from which the information originally derived are now lost. Triad 60 (Bromwich ed 2014, 171) mentions the *gweith*, the action or battle, of Perllan Fangor, the Orchard of Bangor. The fifteenth-century version of the *Brut y brenhinedd*, a Welsh rendering of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, preserved in manuscript BL Cotton Cleopatra B.v is the only authority for identifying the battle of Perllan Fangor with the battle of Chester, but Bromwich (ed 2014, 172) regards this as representing a genuine tradition (it would be difficult, indeed, to relate it to any other battle). There is no reason to posit a separate battle of the Orchard of Bangor in addition to the battle of Chester: they are one and the same event (*cf* Bartrum 1993, *sv* 'Caerlleon (Chester), Battles of'; and *pace* Davies 2010, 146). The Orchard of Bangor may relate to the historical battle of Chester, but the triad represents what was remembered in poetic tradition, which, as noted, may not form a historically reliable source of information; I give the triad the benefit of doubt in

the arguments that follow, but in a short appendix I note some of the probable poetic allusion, interwoven with historic reference, implicit in its imagery.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

Various post-Norman Conquest sources mention the battle; these are largely derived from Bede, and it is highly questionable whether they contain anything of independent value derived from ancient sources. Geoffrey of Monmouth is the most significant of these post-Conquest sources; he wrote in the earlier twelfth century. Geoffrey claimed to have used an ancient book in the British tongue, given to him by Archdeacon Walter of Oxford, as his source, but in fact he used – or, to put it more accurately, manipulatively misused (*cf* Wright 1986) – primarily Bede, Gildas and the *Historia Brittonum* for his accounts of British history, with his own imagination as the source for much of the fantastical material; his near-contemporary, William of Newburgh, already regarded him as having invented most of what he recounted: 'It is quite clear that everything this man wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons' (cited from Thorpe ed 1968, 17); the view of a modern, critical historian, Karen Jankulak (2010, 17), is scarcely less damning. Whether Geoffrey's ancient British book ever existed has always been doubtful, and Geoffrey can be shown to have deliberately lied about his sources, but he did have access to sources of Welsh history, possibly compiled into one book (Jankulak 2010, 14–15 and ch 2; §3 of Thorpe's Introduction). Yet the existence of such sources does not justify the assumption that Geoffrey is relaying ancient information whenever his account of an event differs from or supplements other, earlier accounts: a comparison between such extant sources as Geoffrey may have used and his own history reveals a wholly different character to the two types of account, and the only reasonable approach is to assume that the source of Geoffrey's 'information', when it cannot be traced to extant sources, is his own imagination, until specific arguments to the contrary are made in individual cases. There is nothing to indicate any such lost source in the case of the battle of Chester. Geoffrey writes:

> When Ethelbert, the King of the men of Kent, saw that the Britons were refusing to accept the authority of Augustine and were scorning his preaching, he bore it very ill. He stirred up Ethelfrid, King of the Northumbrians, and a number of other petty kings of the Saxons. A huge army was assembled and ordered to march to the city of Bangor [-is-Coed] and destroy Abbot Dinoot and the other churchmen who had scorned Augustine. They accepted Ethelbert's orders, collected an enormous army together and set out for the land of the Britons. They came to Chester, where Brocmail, who was in command of that city, awaited their coming. A great number of monks and hermits from the city of Bangor had sought refuge in Chester, so that they could pray there for the people's safety. Armies were drawn upon both sides and Ethelfrid, King of the Northumbrians, joined battle with Brocmail. Brocmail stood firm against him, although his force was smaller. In the end, however, Brocmail abandoned the city and fled, but only after inflicting enormous losses on the enemy. When Ethelfrid occupied the city and discovered the reason why these monks whom I have mentioned had come there, he immediately let his soldiery loose against them. That same day 1,200 monks won the crown of martyrdom and assured themselves of a seat in heaven. After this the

Saxon tyrant marched to the town of Bangor. When they heard of this mad frenzy, the leaders of the Britons came from all directions to oppose him: Blederic, Duke of Cornwall; Margadud, King of the Demetae, and Cadvan of the Venedoti. Battle was joined. They wounded Ethelfrid and forced him to flee. They killed so many of his army that some 10,066 died that day. On the side of the Britons there died Blederic, Duke of Cornwall, who commanded the others in these wars.
History of the kings of Britain, bk XI, ch 189; Reeve ed 2007, 261; Thorpe ed 1968, 266–8

There is practically nothing here that calls for any other explanation than a biased mis-reading of Bede – the little that cannot be so explained is a random series of names of Welsh princes, culled from other sources known to Geoffrey (no other source indicates any association between these characters and the battle of Chester). Let us look at just a few of the features of Geoffrey's account.

a   Although Geoffrey relies on Bede, he lends a distinctive flavour to his account, typical of his overt bias in favour of the British (on this, *see* Jankulak 2010, ch 4), in which he distinguishes himself markedly from Bede in his adulation of the British monks and the demonisation of the English.

b   Geoffrey is adept at lending an air of verisimilitude (at least for his contemporaries) by ascribing motives to his actors, but ones which can be grounded in nothing but his own surmise. The notion that Æthelberht of Kent could 'stir up' Æthelfrith to attack the monks of Bangor as a vendetta for their mistreatment of Augustine is preposterous, but it reflects a particular way of reading between the lines in Bede's rather more subtle (and credible) account; the idea that Æthelfrith was especially motivated to attack the monks in Chester because they had gone there to pray for the people's safety is almost as incredible, though again it derives from an overzealous reading of the more nuanced account that Bede gives (which itself is not very believable at this point).

c   Equally preposterous is the notion that over ten thousand of Æthelfrith's troops perished – but the precise number of 10,066 of course acts as a deliberate premonition of 1066, the year when the Normans – who, in the eyes of Geoffrey and other writers, saw themselves as restitutors of their lost *imperium* to the Britons – defeated the English, the successors of Æthelfrith.

d   Geoffrey's siting of the battle within the city of Chester is an overreading of Bede's 'ad Ciuitatem Legionum', where *ad* means 'at, near', not 'in'; Geoffrey has a notion of the storming of cities, such as took place in his own day indeed, whereas Chester around 600 can scarcely have consisted of much more than a series of derelict Roman buildings, which certainly did not offer a suitable site for battle as conducted at this time. Bangor similarly appears anachronistically as a city.

e   Æthelfrith's vindictive religious reasons for marching on Bangor are a clear invention of a Christian of a later age and mentality.

ƒ   The notion that two battles took place, one at Chester and a second at Bangor, derives
from Bede's mention of both Chester and Bangor in his account: Geoffrey's reading is
nothing more than a crude *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of vengeance being wrought
against the monks of Bangor, which the overcoming of Chester, as opposed to Bangor,
the dragon's head itself, did not suffice to bring to a satisfactory conclusion, in Geoffrey's
reckoning. As archaeological investigation has shown, Geoffrey was wrong in both
respects, as the battle took place neither at Chester nor at Bangor but, as Bede indicated,
'ad Ciuitatem Legionum', *at* but not *in* Chester.

It is possible that in some details Geoffrey may by chance have hit upon the truth, but it is
not acceptable to use his account as *evidence* for anything to do with the battle; any possible
truths in Geoffrey's account must be independently argued. I therefore now set aside Geoffrey
as not warranting further consideration; moreover, I refrain from engaging with arguments
which are based primarily on accepting Geoffrey's account of the battle. Historians are
bound to use the materials available to them, but relying on Geoffrey of Monmouth is tanta-
mount to building a house of cards upon a quicksand foundation of late-medieval fantasy.

The archaeological evidence
The battle cemetery
The site of the battle of Chester has now been established with a fair degree of precision.
Heronbridge is an open-field site lying somewhat over two kilometres south of the centre
of Chester on a main Roman road and close to the River Dee. A fairly extensive Roman
settlement flanked the road at this point, on the lower ground between the Heronbridge rise
to the north and the slope up to the village of Eccleston to the south; it was abandoned by
around AD 400 and nothing is now visible above ground. Excavations undertaken from
1929 to 1931 revealed that a series of burials in north–south rows, with their heads to the
west, had been laid into the Roman remains; all the skeletons were male, aged mainly 20
to 45, many showing signs of a violent death. The skeletons excavated are held in Manchester
University Museum. Excavations continued intermittently after the war, up until 1967; the
suggestion that the burials related to the battle of Chester was made in 1951 by Graham
Webster, but technology was not sufficiently advanced to prove or disprove this (Mason
2007, 48).

Any doubt over the dating of the skeletons was removed by the latest excavations, under-
taken by David Mason and the Chester Archaeological Society in 2002–5 (*see* provisionally
Mason 2002; 2003; 2004; 2007, particularly ch 3; the final report is still awaited). Further
skeletons were uncovered and these have been radiocarbon-dated and the region of the
upbringing of two of them investigated by radio-isotope analysis: a date of around AD 600
has been confirmed (one was dated 430–640 at 95.4% confidence, and at 530–620 with
58.4% confidence; a second was dated 530–660 at 95.4% confidence and 595–645 at 51.5%
confidence: Mason 2004, 42), and they were not local, but from an area stretching from
the Peak District up to the Grampians (one of them being from a coal-bearing region),
suggesting a Northumbrian origin (Mason 2004, 51). Mason calculated that at least 112
bodies were interred, though of course only a relatively small portion of the overall cemetery
has been excavated. Detailed pathological reports indicated an array of violent injuries, as
well as indications of earlier, healed injuries, suggesting protracted military service. As

Mason notes, the most reasonable conclusion is that the burials represent fighters from Æthelfrith's army. The British dead would presumably have been afforded obsequies locally, taken care of by the native population. Early Anglo-Saxon burial involved both interment and cremation. Cremation occurred in Deira, but not in Bernicia (O'Brien 1999, 75), so the burials are consistent with Bernician practice.

The rampart

Still visible at Heronbridge is an earth rampart surrounding a large area of around six hectares of ground, one side of which runs alongside the course of Eaton Road (effectively, the Roman road), while at north and south it curves towards the river (*see* plan in Mason 2007, 45); it overlies the Roman settlement. Excavation has also revealed that the rampart, now much diminished, was once much more impressive, with a ditch some 5.5m wide and 3m deep, with the rampart around 2.5m high and 4.5m wide (Mason 2007, 46). As far as the limited excavations have gone, the burial pit and the rampart respect each other spatially, neither underlying or cutting into the other; there is therefore nothing that explicitly links the results of the battle with the rampart.

Radiocarbon dating of flax stems from the rampart ditch to the late seventh to mid-ninth century indicates secondary usage as a flax-retting tank (Mason 2004, 53; 2007, 54). This gives a wide date range of *c* 400 to *c* 700 for the construction of the rampart. Excavation in its interior has been insufficient (especially given the evanescent nature of post-Roman remains) to determine what type of use the enclosure marked out by the rampart was put to. The battle of Chester, which took place at the very same site, to judge from the skeletal remains, falls within this period, but it seems irresponsible to yield, without further evidence, to the temptation to assume the rampart demarcated a fort intimately connected with Æthelfrith's campaign.

The topography of the fort needs some comment:

a The fort is certainly defensible: it is protected by the River Dee along one side to the east, a steep-sided stream (now largely filled in) to the north, and another to the south, with a Roman road (useful for swift movement) along the west.

b On the other hand, the site is quaggy, and is moreover overlooked slightly on three sides; thus it does not follow the normal pattern of an elevated hillfort.

c It is fully open on one side; this may not preclude a defensive purpose, as this side is closed off by a substantial river, but it may suggest that access to the river was as important as defence, and access to the Roman road appears less important than to the river, in that the rampart appears to have been unbroken, meaning access from the road must have been over it.

d It has good visibility in some directions, but not others; it seems to be geared to viewing especially towards the north-east to south-east rather than towards the Welsh hills or to the south beyond Eccleston towards Bangor (*pace* Davies 2010, 155–6, following Mason). A better site for visibility towards Wales would be afforded by an area just to the west of Eccleston, which is moreover more elevated and defensible.

e   It could defend against attacks equally from any direction, if we allow that the river served a defensive purpose (*pace* Mason 2007, 54, who sees it as clearly laid out to fend off attacks from the south or west); essentially, it guards the lower Dee valley.

The provenance of the fort also calls for comment; Mason (2007, 55) aptly draws a comparison with Æthelfrith's stronghold of Bamburgh, but the inference that this favours a Northumbrian origin for the earthwork seems misplaced:

a   Comparable fortifications, constructed in post-Roman times or reused from the Iron Age, are characteristic of British areas of the west; several examples are found in north Wales (*see* the useful survey, with a map of some examples, in Snyder 1998, 176–202), such as Dinas Emrys, Deganwy, Dinorben and Dinerth (Din Eirth, now Bryn Euryn) at Colwyn Bay (which may have been held by the small principality of Rhos).

b   Heronbridge's large size is notable, something it shares, if not on quite such a scale, with South Cadbury, for example; the reuse of Roman building rubble for the revetment at South Cadbury (Snyder 1998, 182) also matches that of Heronbridge (Mason 2004, 51).

c   The purpose of such defended sites varied, but, apart from military uses, one was undoubtedly seasonal trading, as was the case with Tintagel (Snyder 1998, 185). Another was to act as ecclesiastical compounds; examples in western Britain were often huge (*see* the summary and references in Mason 2004, 56–7). Mason dismisses the possibility that Heronbridge could be an example of such an enclosure, but his arguments are weak. The idea that the compound would duplicate Bangor, and that two such religious establishments existed so close together is unlikely, seems of little weight: the fact that the battle was remembered as the Orchard of Bangor indicates (probably) that Bangor had a subsidiary foundation somewhere around Eccleston, whose very name points to the existence of such an establishment (*see* discussion below); the 'church' (or 'church estate') in question could just as well have been at Heronbridge as at Eccleston itself. The very numbers of monks remembered as being attached to Bangor suggest they could well have been dispersed among various daughter-establishments in the area. If the attack was on a monastic compound, presumably being used also to house an army, then the focus on the battle as an attack on monks receives an explanation. The siting of the enclosure on both the Roman road and the river would allow access from Bangor by both routes (Bangor is some way from the main Roman road, but directly on the river; on the other hand, the river meanders exceedingly). The openness to the river may imply a desire to access it, rather than the compound serving purely military purposes; hence either a trading post or ecclesiastical compound seems feasible.

d   When examples are found in English areas, most notably Bamburgh and Yeavering, it is clear from documentary or archaeological evidence that they were pre-existing British structures (Snyder 1998, 195; *cf Historia Brittonum*, ch 61). A British origin for Heronbridge is therefore more likely, but an English reuse is quite possible.

What historical context during this period, therefore, would favour the construction of a large fort, requiring considerable man-power, with river (and road) access apparently determining

its siting in a somewhat less than optimal defensive position, close to a Roman city which also acted as a port?

a It could be a British construction, in effect a continuation of the legionary fortress of Deva, acting as a bulwark against attack primarily from local tribes. The battle would represent the Northumbrians taking out a local centre of power, as it seems they had done with Bamburgh half a century or so earlier. The fort would also function as a mustering point for an army from surrounding realms, such as Higham postulated as having taken place before the battle. This view of the rampart links it with comparable known fortifications in the area and explains the proximity of the burials to the rampart: the warriors were buried where they fell, storming the fort. Yet it is scarcely a classic hillfort such as Din Eirth, which suggests that its original primary purpose was not purely defensive; a seasonal trading emporium or ecclesiastical enclosure, which might take on other uses as required, would suit better as an interpretation. In this scenario, the British forces would be mustering in the fort, with the monks of Bangor assisting their campaign with prayers and fasting; the intention was either, if this was an offensive strike aimed at Northumbria, to proceed over the Dee and march towards Deira, only for Æthelfrith to storm them before they were able to, or, if it was essentially a defensive move aimed at preventing Æthelfrith proceeding into Powys, to wait at Heronbridge and draw Æthelfrith on into some semblance of an ambush. Two features of early Anglo-Saxon funerary practices may also hint at the fort's existence at the time of the battle. Burials often took place in pre-existing monuments such as barrows: this appears to have been an act of symbolic appropriation of the ancestral lands of the subjugated local populace; northern Bernicia has a number of such burials (O'Brien 1999, 70, 186). Departed warriors could also act as sentinels, buried on the edge of territory held and overlooking enemy areas as a guard against them; such burials are particularly common in the Midlands. If the Heronbridge rampart already existed, burial within it could be seen as fitting into both these types: sovereignty of the land is marked by burial within a secured local monument associated with power, and the departed warriors look out from the rampart over the still-British lands around.

b It could have been constructed by Æthelfrith. The rampart was far more substantial than that of Roman marching camps; the labour required in my view precludes its having been built before the battle, particularly as it could have held about ten times the numbers of troops he is likely to have led. Æthelfrith could perhaps have constructed it afterwards as a defensive measure aimed at securing the local area, and thus access to the sea and the other facilities of the Chester environs already noted. His heavy losses, however, point to his having withdrawn sooner rather than later. And if he built it after-wards, why pick precisely the site of the battle, when there are other sites nearby that afford better visibility towards the highlands (and would offer the opportunity for a more classic type of hillfort)? The proximity of the burials and the rampart is either (more or less) coincidence, or there is a direct connection; yet, if there is a connection, it makes better sense to see the rampart as already in existence, the burials being situated at it because the warriors were killed in storming it.

c   When we turn to Æthelfrith's successor, Edwin, a quite different situation emerges. Edwin is recorded by Bede as having overcome Anglesey and Man (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.5; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 148–9): Chester is a likely port for the navy that this clearly implies, continuing the function that it had in Roman times. The battle at Heronbridge was the only recorded suppression of British power around Chester before Edwin, so the territory would still have been hostile and not securely in Northumbrian hands in his reign. The rampart could thus have been a defensive measure carried out in connection with Edwin's campaigns in the Irish Sea. It guards against attack by land both from the south and from the area of Clwyd, but is open to the river without steep slopes; this enabled those posted inside both to attack any enemy ships proceeding along the river, and also to control and guard any trade along the river (such as supplies for Edwin's navy) or the nearby Roman road; possibly, the Huntington basin (currently a silted-up marshy area) could also have acted as a sort of ships' depot (for shallow vessels, at least). It is at a safe distance from Chester to guard passage (whether hostile or not) towards the city and port, but not too far to put itself beyond usefulness. Its position immediately on the site of the battle the Northumbrians had recently won would essentially be fortuitous in terms of its purpose, though not as regards its symbolic significance. The lack of any link between cemetery and rampart beyond the symbolic is a weakness in this proposal, but the battle would have taken place just a few years earlier, and the construction here could potentially have acted as a reaffirmation of English control, placed directly on the site of the battle they had recently won. We might ask why Edwin would not simply use the walled *castra* of Chester itself, instead of expending the effort of constructing a fort at Heronbridge. We may, however, question how far the Northumbrians would have wished to make use, for defensive purposes, of a ruinous collection of Roman buildings, which they were not used to living in and probably regarded as useful primarily for ceremonial purposes, as Edwin did at York in establishing his new church there; more importantly, the Heronbridge site, on the Welsh side of the Dee and on the Roman road south, was arguably better placed to guard against ingression, and might stymie incursions over the Dee to Chester and beyond. (Obviously, the same arguments apply if the fort was established in connection with Æthelfrith's occupation of the Chester environs.)

The topography of the Heronbridge area

Bede's account implies that whoever originated the traditions behind it was aware that the English king could indeed have picked the monks out from his vantage point before the battle – which is not to say that he actually did so, but that he could be imagined to have done so. This is, I think, likely to reflect the actual topography of the site, known to the original writers of the accounts Bede used (Ill V.1).

Proceeding south from Chester, the Roman road crossed the Dee, then after around 100m dog-legged up a fairly steep slope; from here, the main road proceeded south towards Heronbridge, and on to Viroconium (Wroxeter). Another route split off towards Ffrith and the Welsh highlands, but this too later divided south-west of Chester, with a branch going roughly along the north Wales coast. The interpretation of the aims of the battle is made more difficult in that it is not clear where the road into Wales (Margary road 66a; *see* for example the *Digital atlas of the Roman empire*) branched off south of Chester. The Lache

Eye marshes had to be avoided, but the most direct route would follow roughly the current main road through Lache in a south-westerly direction. Even if a fully constructed military road did not exist along this route (because, for example, it existed further south), or had fallen out of use, almost certainly some form of path did, serving anyone coming from north Wales wishing to cross the Dee at Chester, or travelling in the opposite direction; there is no need to proceed as far south as Heronbridge to do this.

After a flat stretch of around 1.5km, the Roman road south from Chester dipped slightly at Heronbridge for about 100m; the ground again rises slightly to the northern end of the rampart just to the east of the road, and is a little up and down along the side of the rampart
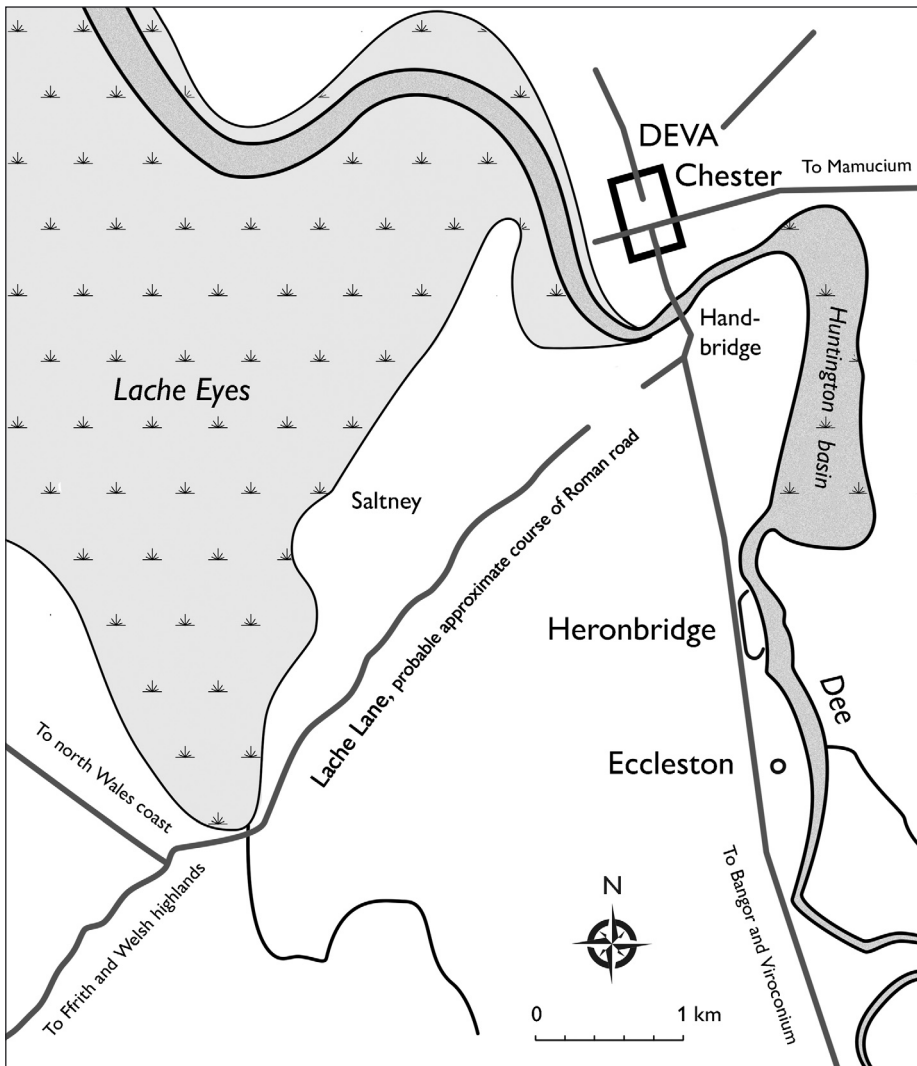
Ill V.1 Topography of the Heronbridge area, as envisaged for the time of the battle of Chester

for around 500m, then rises gradually for 1km, and is cut into by several fairly deep gullies, up to the village of Eccleston, which stands on a good defensive site: apart from the incline to its north, there is quite a steep slope down to the Dee on its east, and another, not quite as steep, to its west, overlooking flat land (and some marshland) to the Welsh hills some 10km away; there is a shorter and less pronounced, but nonetheless noticeable, slope to the south, and the land is then fairly flat for 2.5km as far as the ford at Aldford, beyond which, at a distance of a further 14km over varied countryside, lay the monastery of Bangor, which was on the Dee but some distance from the main Wroxeter road. The site of the battle therefore forms a shallow dip in the landscape, beside the Dee to the east and over-looked to both north and south (and to a lesser degree to the west) by slopes which, while not excessively steep, are quite noticeable.

The Heronbridge site is marked, as noted, by the presence of a large rampart immediately next to the excavated burials. Although technically in a hollow, the large rampart is not at a huge tactical disadvantage, as the slopes towards it are gentle, and the rampart itself would both have prevented easy access and increased visibility for those upon it. Visibility from here is an important factor, and encompasses a wider band of the horizon than many surrounding sites which might seem on other grounds preferable for a defensive position: northwards towards Chester – limited (unless a watchtower were raised quite high, to be able to see along the flat road into the city); north-eastwards – good; it is possible, in particular, to see the Roman road entering the city from the east, along which Æthelfrith probably came; eastwards – very good up to the rise immediately east of the Dee, but no further; south-eastwards – very good, with views right over to the mid-Cheshire ridge; southwards – good as far as Eccleston, but no further; south-westwards – limited, only as far as rise to the west of Eccleston; westwards – limited to a few hundred metres, but a raised platform would afford visibility to the Welsh hills, but not the plain in between across which incursions towards Chester would take place; north-westwards – very limited, as there is a rise in the ground here, unless a high tower existed, from which the Saltney area might to an extent be viewed. The best views, therefore, are afforded towards the quadrant from north-east to south-east.

The portion of the ridge on which Eccleston stands might seem to offer a force approaching from the south a good vantage point from which to launch an attack downhill towards Heronbridge; in reality, and considering the size of forces at this period, the distance is too great for a charge and is hampered by gullies. In contrast, for a force approaching from the north, it is but a short distance from the plateau just to the north of Heronbridge down to the rampart and the site of the battle; moreover, it would be possible to view anyone con-tained within the rampart quite clearly (as Æthelfrith is supposed to have done with the monks). An attack could easily be launched from here, but would face a rise in the ground just before the rampart itself. Tactically, the site of the battle makes better sense if the rampart was in place: the defenders would have a strong defensive wall and good visibility in several directions (and more so if they had watchtowers), but attackers would have some advantage in being able to descend a slight slope to reach the fort: a battle between equal forces could go either way here. If the rampart was not there at the time of the battle, we have to imagine the British forces descending well over a kilometre from Eccleston to meet the English (taking the cemetery to be close to the battle site), who would have launched

an attack from the Heronbridge rise, covering a much shorter distance, much to their advantage. If the British forces were at Eccleston, as they must have been before the battle, it is difficult to conceive why they would set out to confront the English in this way to their own disadvantage, instead of drawing the English on to attack at Eccleston.

Place names
Chester
That Chester is the site near which the battle took place is scarcely in doubt: the Old English Legacæstir (along with slight variants), first recorded by Bede in the context of this battle, occurs as the city's name up until the eleventh century, when the Lega- was dropped, giving 'Chester'; the Old English form derives from Old Welsh Cair Legion (Dodgson 1981, 2–7). The Roman form Deva (*see* Rivet & Smith 1979, *sv*) does not survive as the name of the city, only the river, but in any case probably always meant '[the fortress] on the Dee'. The English form *Dee* must have been borrowed from Old Welsh *Dēw* before $\bar{e} > ui$ in the seventh century (Dodgson 1970, 21).

Eccleston
The name Eccleston, although English, includes as its first element a British word derived from Latin *ecclesia*, 'church'. As far as records indicate, the only word for 'church' ever used in Old English was *cirice* (derived ultimately from Greek *kyriake*). Several place names in Eccles- exist, particularly in northern England and south-eastern Scotland; there is a concentration in Lancashire, and Eccleston south of Chester could be regarded as an outlier of this group, which would put it within an area west of the Pennines overrun by Northumbria mainly in the early seventh century, even though it came to fall later within the kingdom of Mercia. Some important work on Eccles- place names has been carried out in recent years, for example by Hough (2009) and James (2009). From this it emerges that places containing the element Eccles- were probably designated as such by British speakers as a sort of pseudo-place name indicating 'the church' or 'church estate', and that the term was adopted by English speakers, who took it as a place name proper (without necessarily understanding its commonplace meaning, and without borrowing it into English as a word for 'church'). Elements such as *-ton* were added by the English to indicate a settlement. The name clearly indicates the presence of both English and British speakers in the vicinity for a time, the English learning from the British that the place was designated (an) *eglēs* and then using this as a proper noun in English. The English name would have been given either by neighbouring English-speakers to a British settlement, or by the English inhabitants of such a settlement after the British-speaking inhabitants had departed or gone over to speaking English but while its particular status as an *eglēs* was remembered (it is possible that, using a form adapted to the phonology of English, *eclēs* was retained as a substrate item from their earlier language by new speakers of English): in the case of Eccleston, this must be the early to mid-seventh century; a similar date is arrived at independently for the Dee (*see above*).

The *eglēs* nomenclature need not necessarily indicate the presence of an actual church, however. James (2009, 126–7) points out that the primary meaning of *ecclesia*, the Church as an institution rather than a building for worship, was most probably current in the post-Roman period in Britain, the primarily concrete sense only taking over in succeeding

centuries, probably only after the tenth century in British areas. In the sixth century, the physical presence of the Church would have been manifested mainly in rather lowly oratories and the buildings of proto-monastic communities; *eglēs* would have referred to the location of a Christian community, encompassing both the homestead, along with a place of worship, and its accompanying land. The pagan English would have regarded *eglēs* as the name for a particular type of land holding, subject to the jurisdiction of the Church institution; they are unlikely to have been interested in the Christian religious dimension as such (James 2009, 141). As James points out, this differs from earlier interpretations, which took *eclēs* to be a term used by the early, pagan English to designate a Celtic church building.

James (2009, 131–3) argues that Eccles- place names in Northumbria may indicate church estates, originally British, that were taken over by the English as useful, cohesive landhold-ings (whether or not any ecclesiastical presence was maintained by the English), with a system of administration, command of which would have facilitated the rapid expansion of Northumbrian power in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. West of the Pennines, Eccles- place names between the Fylde and the Mersey correspond to later hundreds, for example, indicating the likelihood of administrative continuity from British to English authority. Such a connection cannot be shown so clearly in the case of Eccleston, but it may be noted that both Eccleston and Bangor-is-Coed, whose connections are considered below, are included within the Domesday Cheshire hundred of Dudestan (Broxton), despite being on opposite sides of the river. At the least, the place name Eccleston may point to a link with the Northumbrian adoption of pre-existing British estates evidenced elsewhere, and hence indicate Northumbrian presence here, whether under Æthelfrith or his successor Edwin.

Bede's account of the monks of Bangor at the battle, combined with the archaeological evidence that the battle took place close to Eccleston, suggests that the ecclesiastical estate or *eglēs* from which Eccleston took its name belonged to the monastery of Bangor. Triad 60's link between the battle and the Orchard of Bangor points in the same direction, and the orchard in question may be identified with the *eglēs*, a sort of 'grange' (to use a term applicable to a later period). The *eglēs* need not, of course, have been precisely in modern Eccleston; the place name merely indicates that the *tun*, settlement, was somewhere near an *eglēs*. This fact, and the acknowledgement that an *eglēs* was not a church building but an estate, may, unfortunately, render recent archaeological attempts to pinpoint a British church in Eccleston fruitless.

Bangor

Bangor is the name of at least three early ecclesiastical foundations in Wales (Bangor on the Menai, Bangor-is-Coed on the Dee and Bangor Teifi). The name indicates a stockaded enclosure (a cloister, as it were), *bangor* still being a word in agricultural use for an enclosure protected by a wattled fence strengthened by a plaited top (Owen & Morgan 2007, *sv* 'Bangor'). Bede's form, Bancornaburg, is partially anglicised: *burg* means a defensible enclosure, and *corna* is probably the genitive plural of an ethnonym, so 'the protected enclosure of the people of Bangor' (Owen & Morgan 2007, *sv* 'Bangor-is-Coed'). There is little doubt that the site of Bangor on the Dee is intended, though the generality of the name's meaning could leave open the possibility that some other early ecclesiastical site was intended.

The status of Chester

The fact that the battle took place south of Chester hints at the city's relative unimportance, in that the British chose not to make a stand to its north-east, the direction from which the English forces almost certainly proceeded. It could therefore not have been a major focus of population or power at the time, although it could presumably still have functioned as a port (though even here, it may have been superseded by Meols, on the north Wirral coast, at least as a trading entrepôt; Griffiths *et al* 2007; Higham 1993a, 63; Snyder 1998, 167).

Quite what Chester's status was is difficult to determine. Much of the evidence that has survived at Wroxeter that has enabled us to see this city flourishing into the early seventh century (White & Barker 1998, ch 7) would not have survived at Chester owing to later urbanisation, but the evidence reviewed by Mason (2007), scant though it may be, tends to suggest a rather lower level of occupancy after the Roman period than at Wroxeter.

Mason (2007, 30) notes the probability that the city where a council of British ecclesiastics met Augustine in 601 was Chester, although Bede does not specify the location – the *Annales Cambriae*, at least, say it took place in the *urbs legionis* (which is in fact a rendering of the Old Welsh name of the city, Cair Legion). The *Annales* may not be independent of Bede here; the identification of the location could easily have been surmised from the general contextual mention of Chester and Bangor in the *Historia ecclesiastica.* Yet the surmise is probably correct: Bede's narrative shows the deep involvement of the monks of Bangor, with the implication that the council must have been held close to their monastery, juxtaposed with their later destruction at the battle of Chester, explicitly close to the monastery. Augustine's prophecy of calamity visited upon the British heretics appears to be directed not so much at the British Church in general as at hosts at the 601 council, namely the monks of Bangor, who now met a grisly end, close to where, it is implied, the council had been held. Chester then emerges as a city with symbolic significance, suited to host a Church council; it is also likely to have had its own bishop. However, as Mason indicates, it also probably had the practical advantage of being able to accommodate the parties concerned, particularly if, as seems likely, the *principia* buildings were still in a state of repair to offer facilities such as a large hall (we might compare the survival of the *principia* at York, which Edwin used as a palace, setting up the predecessor of York Minster in its grounds: Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.14; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 186–7 and n 3). The city may well have been regarded as neutral ground, as opposed to the monastery itself, and as offering the sort of Roman urban setting that Augustine would be used to from the continent as a venue for a council – the hosts are keeping up appearances, in other words, and this illustrates an essential difference between the sub-Roman British still seeking to maintain some semblance of Roman culture while the pagan English, to judge from what can be seen of Æthelfrith's action, had no regard for it whatever (and only acquired it upon their adoption of a form of Roman culture in the form of Christianity). Yet the population of the city was probably very small, despite its possible symbolic status.

If Chester was not the local centre of population, what was (insofar as a 'centre' existed at all)? The clue may lie in what Bede tells us of Bangor: although his account of over 2100 monks living and working there is surely an exaggeration, we are presented with the picture of a substantial community and centre of politico-ecclesiastical power. It would be a mistake

to think in terms of an urban centre, but if Bangor was anything like as substantial as Bede hints, it must have been the most significant focus of population and power in the immediate area. The site of the battle could be interpreted as indicating a desire to defend (for the British) or take (for the English) this more important centre, rather than the largely symbolic city of Chester itself (though its port may have been of interest). It is even possible that Heronbridge itself was part of the monastery dispersed among 'daughter-houses'.

The wider political context

Establishing the wider political situation around the time of the battle is highly problematic (*cf* Higham 1993a, especially 30–6). The development of the early Welsh (British) kingdoms is discussed by Charles-Edwards (2013, 14–21). Around AD 600, there was an array of smaller subkingdoms, whose allegiances would have shifted, in addition to the large realms that are better known such as Gwynedd (this situation is also supported by the historical memories reflected in the earliest Welsh poetry, with Powys in particular being a fluid entity: Rowland 1990, 125). Whatever the details, any overarching kingdom such as Gwynedd or Powys must have been composed of a number of smaller subkingdoms, the names of which may survive in later commotes such as Tegeingl or Dogfeiling. In the face of an onslaught from Æthelfrith, the smaller realms in the area would have formed an alliance: hence Æthelfrith's strike was in effect against Powys, conceived as a union of lesser sub-kingdoms.

A similar situation almost certainly obtained in English areas. The Midlands probably had a multiplicity of smaller kingdoms (Brooks 1989, 163); the smaller examples would have been little more than ancestral clan holdings, but, as the Tribal Hidage indicates, these small realms such as the Pencersæte or Tomsæte were gradually becoming tributary districts of more powerful kingdoms (Bassett 1989, 18–23). The actual origins of the English kingdoms are matters of debate (Bassett 1989, 3–5), but, apart from initially small-scale settlement of possibly already functioning estates, at least one element was the take-over of pre-existing British administrative areas, whether by clan-based settlement groups or erstwhile mercenaries posted by the British authorities to guard strategic sites (Bassett 1989, 24–5); this might have given rise to larger realms almost from the outset, and it would also have allowed for some continuity in large-scale administration, which could be relevant to the development of the Cornovian territory into Mercia, for example. The geopolitical situation in central Britannia around the year 600 is presented, in tentative form and in broad strokes, in Ill V.2.

Gwynedd

North-west Wales – essentially Snowdonia and Anglesey, extending south and east to an undetermined distance – was in Roman times the region of the Ordovices (*see* Rivet & Smith 1979, *sv*). They are last mentioned in a fifth-century inscription, which is followed fairly soon by the first mention of Gwynedd, which was clearly essentially the same realm renamed, most probably representing an alliance over the Irish Sea with the Féni (whose name gave rise to 'Gwynedd') – the Irish settlement in this area being substantial, with Irish speakers probably surviving until *c* 600, by when they had become assimilated (Charles-Edwards 2013, 178–9, 190). The story found in the *Historia Brittonum* (ch 14 and 62) by which Gwynedd was established by a British force from the north, and expelled the Irish, has no historical basis and represents the propaganda of a later century (Charles-Edwards 2013, 190).

Powys

The origins of the later realm of Powys are debatable; the name does not occur before the ninth century but in origin must be much older, from Latin *pagenses*, 'country folk'. Charles-Edwards (2013, 16, 389) tends to favour the *pagenses* being a breakaway group from western Cornovian territory (characterised by town-dwellers, presumably, as at Wroxeter), but there is little indication that the Cornovii ever extended far into what is now Wales, where the heartland of Powys lay from the time it was first recorded; note, for example, the siting of the Pillar of Eliseg (an early monument of Powys) in the Valle Crucis. As noted above, the notion of Powys having lost the lands of Shropshire is a later poetic fabrication, even if it retains the basic truth that British lands became English. If the Cornovii 'became' Powys, then only the region's westernmost fringe eventually ended up in the new polity, which must have absorbed a series of smaller entities to the west.

The fall of Selyf, king of Powys, at the battle of Chester may be the result of annalistic attribution of legendary figures to recorded events, but even if it is, a king of Powys, in the sense of a possibly loose amalgamation of smaller realms, is likely – whatever his name may have been – to have led a contingent against Æthelfrith, and, given Æthelfrith's victory, to have fallen.

Tegeingl

In the north-east of Wales in Roman times lived the tribe of the Deceangli (*see* Rivet & Smith 1979, *sv*), whose name survives in that of the area of Tegeingl. They had no *civitas* capital, as far as is known, and may have been under direct Roman governmental control, as lead was derived from their territory. It is probable that their eastern border was the Dee.

Higham (1993a, 72) views the origins of Powys as lying in north-east Wales, hence roughly the area of the former Deceangli, although surprisingly he does not mention Tegeingl in this connection. However, the north-east corner of Wales does not correspond to the heartland of the later kingdom of Powys, so the proposal is rather questionable. Where Higham's postulated proto-Powys would have been ruled from is also not clear; we might think of Rhos, but this sub-kingdom when recorded later was very much a secondary part of Gwynedd. It is arguable that the influence of Gwynedd is likely to have extended even at an early period into north-east Wales.

Despite some weaknesses in Higham's proposals, we may, for the sake of argument, postulate a realm in the north-east of Wales that we may term Tegeingl (covering a larger area than the later-recorded district of Tegeingl); the reason for doing so, apart from the likelihood of some tribal continuity from Roman times, is to ward off the assumption that around the year 600 the political situation was the same as a few centuries later, with a few large kingdoms in operation; if Powys existed, it would have had a much looser organisation, and areas such as Tegeingl would have been subject to varying allegiances.

The Cornovii

In Roman times, the northern Marches were the territory of the Cornovii. Their *civitas* capital was Viroconium (Wroxeter). They appear to have occupied all the lowlands south of the Mersey between the Welsh highlands and the Peak District, and southwards a little
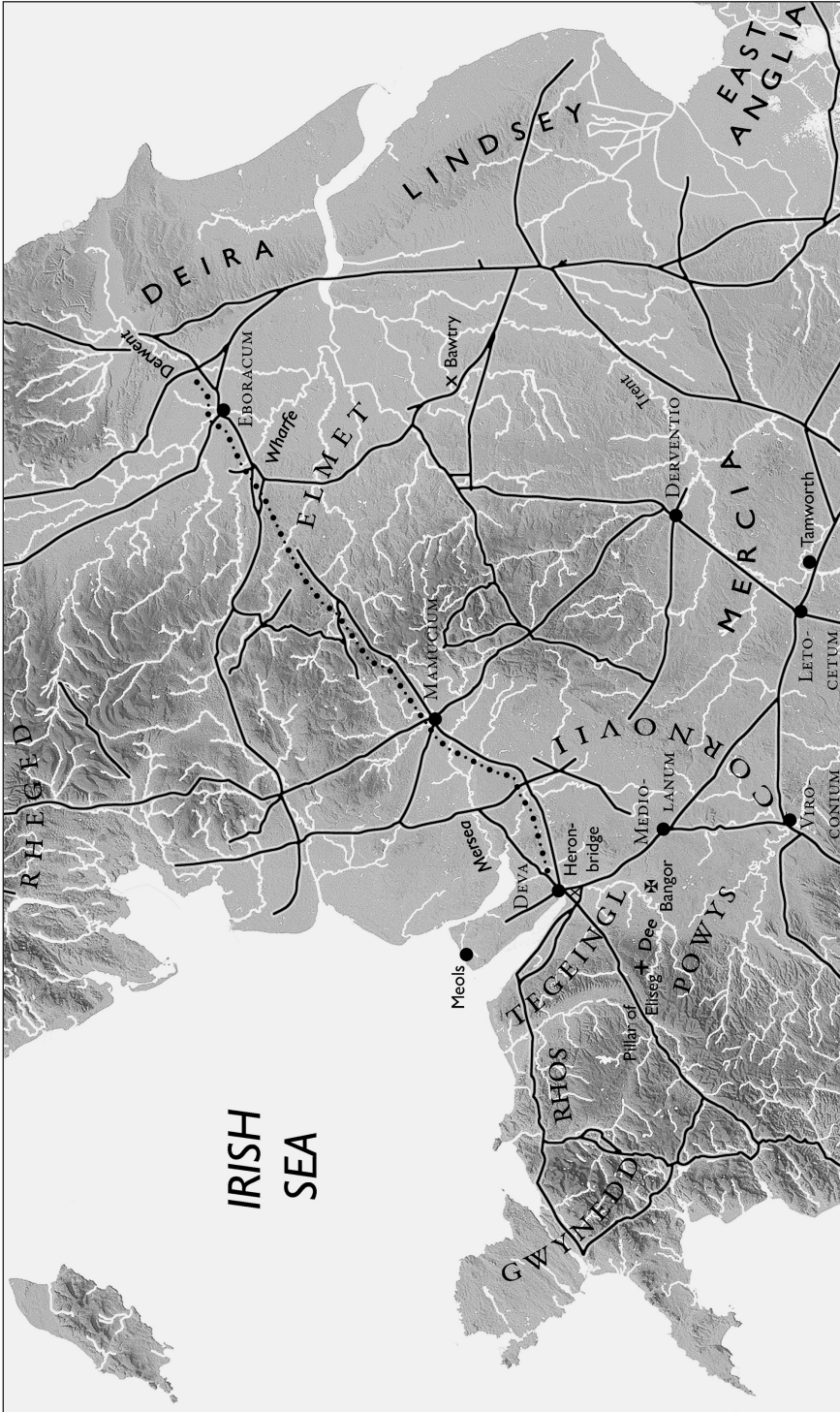
Ill V.2 British and English kingdoms, places mentioned, Roman roads and Æthelfrith's probable route (dotted)

distance from Wroxeter, bordering on the Dobunni; towards the east they bordered the Corieltavi of Lincolnshire and Leicestershire, perhaps a little to the east of Tamworth. In subsequent discussion I refer to the Cornovii in reference to the post-Roman situation; the successor realm to the Roman *civitas* of the Cornovii was probably actually known by the name of its 'capital', Viroconium (compare how the realm of the Silures became Gwent, from the city Venta: Charles-Edwards 2013, 17), and this is perpetuated in the English term, Wreocensæte, 'inhabitants of Viroconium' (rather than 'of the Wrekin': Higham 1993a, 69), who appear as tributaries of Mercia in the Tribal Hidage. According to Higham's analysis, they occupied Shropshire and Cheshire and some of Staffordshire; in 600, these areas would certainly still have been British, not English. Viroconium, the destination of the Roman road southwards from Chester, was still a place of significance at this time, and possibly still the administrative heart of a realm that included Chester. If, as Higham argues, the Wreocensæte were a continuation of the Cornovii, their territory had clearly shrunk: the eastern part of the Cornovian realm was taken up by English Mercia.

There is some incongruity in seeing small realms in many areas, both Welsh and English, alongside large units, the successors of the *civitates*, but such may have been the case; in reality, the local lords within such large units are likely to have increasingly lent their allegiance to more powerful, warrior-based kingdoms nearby, whether British or English, which suggests that by 600, the *civitas* of the Cornovii as a functioning administrative unit may have been somewhat superficial in its authority, a moribund entity that was soon to be displaced by Mercia and Powys.

Mercia

Our understanding of the battle of Chester depends in no small part on the status of Mercia. Mercia proper appears, on the basis of the earliest pagan burials, to have been based around the middle Trent valley, in the area just upstream of Burton (*see* O'Brien 1999, map 21; Gelling 1992, 29; Brooks 1989, 162), and extending to Repton, where a Mercian royal monastery was situated at least from the late seventh century (Brooks 1989, 162). The origins of Mercia probably lie in the sixth rather than fifth century. It cannot have taken long to expand beyond the heartland, for example the ten kilometres or so south to encompass Lichfield and Tamworth, where the later archbishopric and royal hall were situated. Yet around the year 600, English settlements in the west Midlands were still limited (Higham notes, 1993a, 77, 90, that pagan English burials did not extend much beyond the upper Trent valley and the Peak District or into Cheshire), and the British *civitas* capital of Wroxeter was still an entity to be reckoned with. Brooks (1989, 163) argues that it was only later, under Penda in the mid-seventh century, that a powerful kingdom of Mercia emerged. The battle of Chester falls in the middle of a century or so during which Mercia grew from a small English enclave on the eastern edge of the Cornovian territory to the major political power of the Midlands, but just what its status was around 600 is debatable.

Higham seeks to push back the rise of Mercian hegemony. He argues (1995, 75–7) that around the time of the Anglo-Saxon Tribal Hidage, which he views as having been undertaken for Æthelfrith's successor Edwin but which uses an earlier Mercian tribute list, Mercia was a significant English realm, with a number of tributary tribes under it. In another important article (1992) that revises the whole context of the battle of Chester, he argues that

it was already significant under Æthelfrith's contemporary, Cearl. Edwin clearly regarded him as a powerful ally, able to protect him from Æthelfrith, as he not only spent a considerable portion of his exile under Cearl, but also married his daughter, Cwœnburh, who bore two sons to him there (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.14; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 186–7). The marriage alliance indicates Cearl entertained the hope of ousting Æthelfrith from the throne of Northumbria; yet Edwin's long sojourn in Mercia, while it indicates that Cearl regarded Northumbria as an ongoing threat, also points to protracted insecurity on Cearl's part in effecting the usurpation of Æthelfrith. The battle of Chester may represent an attempt at it, however. Cearl needed greater forces to undertake the foray, which meant forming an alliance with British forces. These would have been unwilling to support him until they saw some benefit to themselves. Æthelfrith's continued raiding of British areas, as reported by Bede, would have inclined the British realms towards forming the alliance Cearl was seeking.

It is interesting that Edwin is regarded in Welsh tradition as a great traitor. This may derive simply from his attacks on north Wales when he was king, but such actions do not amount to treachery as such; however, if he had been the beneficiary of Welsh support in an abortive attempt to take the throne (which in the end he achieved with East Anglian assistance), only later to exploit the weakening of Welsh forces that his rival Æthelfrith had achieved in defeating the army gathered for the very purpose of putting Edwin on the throne, the derision with which Welsh tradition regarded Edwin would be explicable.

Bede does not hint at Mercian involvement in the battle – but he also gives no indication of who was leading the British forces either, his focus being solely on the monks. Higham (1992, 7) suggests that just as Chester had formed a suitable central venue for churchmen travelling from the British areas of Wales and the western seaboard of Britain, and was on the hub of the Roman road system, so too it might have functioned as a mustering point for a force drawn from the Marches, north Wales and Mercia, as it set out to harry Northumbria, and perhaps attempt to put Edwin on the throne. The reason for Æthelfrith fighting as far west as Chester would be that he swooped down on this force and destroyed it. If Mercia was indeed involved and was defeated, Northumbria would have imposed a friendly ruler on it after Cearl (who may have been killed in the battle); Edwin's subsequent ability to operate freely around the Irish Sea, unhindered by Mercian aggression as far as we know, would thus be explained.

Mercia's relations with the British appear to have been collaborative, a reflection, no doubt, of the origins of Mercia. The British would initially have regarded Mercia as an area of English settlement within their own Cornovian realm and under its control, but in time any real power would have become focused on the warrior-based nascent English kingdom; this had certainly taken place by 600, but Mercian expansion had so far been minimal, and the British may well have maintained the delusion of authority resting in their hands. Thus, instead of thinking of two opposed realms, of the British Cornovii and the English Mercians, we should envisage two co-existent world-views: the British regarded themselves as the legitimate controllers of the region, including its English populace, while the English saw themselves as heirs to the local administration of the Cornovian region, including Chester, even though as yet they occupied only a small part of it. The succeeding period of English

expansion in the seventh century was in all likelihood to a large degree a switching of allegiance of local lords away from the increasingly ineffective British authorities (other than those in the highlands) to the powerful king of Mercia, accompanied by an English acculturation (Higham 1993a, 90, 99; he thinks the British Cornovii, the Wreocensæte, may have survived until 642, when direct rule was imposed by Mercia). Æthelfrith's incursion deep into Cornovian territory without meeting any noted resistance suggests a weakness of political control in the area, with the British authorities ineffective but with strong Mercian power still not extending much beyond its heartland in this direction.

The political relations between Mercia and the British realms at the time of the battle of Chester are uncertain, but Mercian aggression towards Powys can be discerned only from the time of Æthelbald (716–57) onwards (Rowland 1990, 138); before this, all evidence, both English and Welsh, points to Powys and Gwynedd working alongside Mercia in conflict with Northumbria (Rowland 1990, 125–38). The earliest clear instance is the defeat by Cadwallon and Penda of Edwin at Hatfield Chase in 633. The death of Oswald in the Marches at Maserfelth (Oswestry) in 642 almost certainly reflects a Northumbrian attempt to defeat Powys as an ally of Mercia, splitting the Welsh from their Mercian allies; the battle of Cogwy (as it is known in Welsh tradition) was celebrated for example by Cynddelw in the late eleventh century as a clash between Powys and Oswald (Rowland 1990, 124). The natural conclusion, particularly if Mercia was already as significant as Higham reckons, would be that Æthelfrith's incursion was a prototype of what his son Oswald attempted a little later, an effort to defeat Powys and thus stymie Mercian–British collaboration against Northumbria.

Northumbria

Æthelfrith's kingdom of Northumbria was formed of two realms, Bernicia and Deira. Æthelfrith was from the royal house of Bernicia, but, as king of Bernicia, took over Deira around 604 and exiled the males of its royal house, including Edwin. Bede makes it clear that Æthelfrith was an expansionist ruler (he defeated the Scots of Dál Riata, for example) but fairly rapid expansion began much earlier; for example, the *Historia Brittonum* (ch 61) indicates that the Northumbrian royal fort of Bamburgh was taken by Ida, founder of the Bernician dynasty, from the British in the mid-sixth century (Charles-Edwards 2013, 383). The areas controlled by the English were, however, small at this time: burial evidence indicates that Anglo-Saxon physical presence in Bernicia, including Yeavering, and Elmet, in the fifth, sixth and early seventh centuries was minimal (O'Brien 1999, 185). Æthelfrith's successor Edwin continued the expansionist policy, subjugating the isles of the Irish Sea, and destroying the subject kingdom of Elmet, very near to Deira (its boundary was probably the River Wharfe), as well, in all likelihood, as other areas such as Rheged around the Solway Firth (Higham 1993b, 99; 1995, 80, 83). Thus Æthelfrith's incursion as far as Chester was part of a much longer-term expansion of the realm of Northumbria.

East Anglia

The other main central Anglo-Saxon kingdom was East Anglia, under Rædwald. Rædwald was under the protection of Æthelberht of Kent: he would not have been in a position to start wars without Æthelberht's approval (Higham 1992, 5) and would thus have been contained as a threat to Northumbria. When Æthelberht died in 616, Rædwald became free

either to appease the powerful Æthelfrith or to confront him. He chose confrontation: for now he had Æthelfrith's rival, the exiled Edwin, in his court, a situation which gave him the opportunity to put a friendly ally on the throne of Northumbria. However, before this Rædwald, under pressure from the Northumbrian king, had come very close to betraying Edwin to Æthelfrith – Bede shows a king vacillating. His reasons were no doubt twofold: the risk of the undertaking (in the event, he lost his son in the battle which toppled Æthelfrith), and his impotence to act while Æthelberht was alive. What can be deduced about the likely course of events? Æthelfrith's campaign away from East Anglia, culminating in the battle at Chester, implies that Rædwald was not yet a threat, or he would have focused his efforts there, and also that Edwin was not yet at Rædwald's court, which might have had a similar effect. It is probable, therefore, that Edwin came to Rædwald after the battle of Chester, possibly indeed as a result of it if it is seen as having undermined the power of Mercia, where he had previously been in exile. Rædwald, in taking the exiled prince in, may have calculated Æthelfrith to have been seriously weakened after his losses at Chester, offering him the opportunity to use Edwin to extend his power-base into Northumbria at some point. Yet Æthelberht would have been alive, meaning that Rædwald could not put Edwin to immediate use, but he must have expected to be able to do so soon, since harbouring him made him a target of Æthelfrith, as Bede makes clear, and in the meantime Edwin may have been regarded as more of a liability than an asset; hence a date late in Æthelberht's reign is likely. The several attempts to persuade Rædwald to yield Edwin up that Bede records suggest a sojourn of some time, but not a long time, given how precarious the situation of harbouring him was. Some such length of time is consistent with the fact that no direct connection between the battle and Æthelfrith's final demise in 616 is suggested by Bede's narrative. Rædwald in fact surprised Æthelfrith (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.12; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 180–1), suggesting a period of peace when he had little time to muster an army. Bawtry, the probable site of Æthelfrith's final defeat on east bank of the Idle (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.12; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 180–1), is a likely site for a battle between Northumbria and East Anglia, but it is less convincing as a place of passage back to Northumbria from Chester, so a more natural inference would be to dissociate the Chester campaign from it altogether. Hence a date of 615 or slightly earlier is preferable for the battle of Chester.

The Dee valley

Chester, along with Heronbridge, and Bangor emerge as being in a marchland area between realms. As Bangor is east of the Dee, it could technically have been in Cornovian territory, but it is now, and has long been, in the Maelor Saesneg, an extension of Wales between Cheshire and Shropshire; such meandering boundaries could have existed around 600 as well. The lower Dee valley, with Bangor at the southern end as the river came down from the highlands, and Chester at the river mouth to the north, lies on a boundary between the highlands of Wales and the plains of Cheshire and Shropshire, and, in 600, was situated on the edge of areas under Mercian influence and those which were falling under Northumbrian control as Æthelfrith harried the British west of the Pennines. It was a nexus not only of the Roman road system, but also of the political interests of the day. It was at this nexus, possibly guarded already by the fort at Heronbridge, that Æthelfrith was striking.

The battle

Major aspects of the battle and its circumstances are bound to remain unknown. These include the date of the Heronbridge rampart, whether Æthelfrith was acting in a predominantly offensive or defensive manner, and what the medium-term consequences of the battle were (in other words, how far a Northumbrian presence was established in the Chester area as a consequence). I aim in this section to outline and evaluate some of the possible interpretations of the circumstances of the battle.

Date

Bede, our primary source, does not date the battle, merely setting it between the death of Augustine in 604 and Æthelfrith's demise at the hands of Rædwald of East Anglia in 616, and indicating that it was closer to the latter but without making any link between the battle and Æthelfrith's defeat. Annals must, by definition, assign events to particular years, but their dates for the battle derive from nothing more than an overzealous reading of Bede. The now lost source chronicle underlying the Chronicle of Ireland and *Annales Cambriae* indicated a date of 615/616 for the battle; indeed, the *Annals of Tigernach* (and probably the Chronicle of Ireland before it) record Æthelfrith's fall as taking place 'immediately' after the battle of Chester, which is an overreading of Bede's mere juxtaposition of these two events, the latter of which took place explicitly in 616. A date of 615/616 may thus be fairly ancient, but that does not make it historically reliable. Why did Bede not date the battle himself? Almost certainly he was unable to do so, because his source consisted of an account derived ultimately from Bangor that dealt with the battle from a religious perspective, not a chronological one, and Bede did not venture to supply information he did not have. The annalists appear to have had no such compunction – and there is no reason to believe they had any more information than Bede. In assessing the course of events that actually took place, therefore, we do not need to feel compelled to accept that the battle took place in 615 or 616 if there should be compelling reasons to date it somewhat earlier (though not so much earlier that it would encroach on Augustine's death in 604). As noted, one likely, but not certain, scenario would see Edwin seeking refuge with Rædwald after the battle and staying there long enough for several attempts to be made on his life, but briefly enough to escape Rædwald's inclination to yield him up, which would suggest a date of 615 or perhaps 614 for the battle.

Æthelfrith's aims and targets

The chief difficulty in ascertaining Æthelfrith's aims, and hence the targets of his campaign, is that we cannot determine whether he was acting offensively, or responding to an offensive launched against Northumbria. Bede gives no indication of an attack planned against Northumbria in connection with the battle, but his information was extremely limited; even so, it highlights the position of Edwin as an exiled prince intent on reclaiming his throne at some point.

From Northumbria, Chester is on the route to the realms of north Wales. The most straightforward interpretation of the battle is that it took place where the Welsh forces mustered to oppose an invading army; Æthelfrith was simply extending his conquests of British territories west of the Pennines, without singling out any specific Welsh kingdom as his target. In practice, it was Tegeingl/Powys/the northern Cornovii that he confronted. By

placing the fall of Selyf, king of Powys, at the battle, Welsh tradition recognises that defeat of Powys was Æthelfrith's aim, without indicating any wider forces being involved. We may discount Gwynedd as being directly involved (although Tegeingl could conceivably have been under its protection) – its heartland was too far from Chester – unless it was part of a wider alliance. As Gwynedd has often appeared in the historiography of the battle, however, a few further remarks are called for. Gwynedd, it is true, was the most powerful realm in north Wales, and within a generation its king, Cadwallon, was able to lead a successful campaign against Northumbria and overthrow its king, Edwin (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.20; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 202–5). Mason (2004, 52, following Plummer's proposal (ed 1896, **2**, 93)) suggests that part of the reason for attacking Gwynedd was that Æthelfrith's enemy Edwin was trying to forge an alliance there; in reality we have no reliable evidence that he was seeking such an alliance: it is only much later Welsh sources, and Reginald of Durham's twelfth-century *Vita sancti Oswaldi* (Arnold ed 1882; *see* Tudor 1995), that indicate Edwin ever took shelter in Gwynedd – and Reginald puts the exile *after* the battle, which makes better sense (*cf* Gelling 1992, 77). If Æthelfrith intended to establish a presence in Cheshire, he would at some point have needed to confront Gwynedd, but to aim to push so far on an initial strike seems unconvincing; it would mean penetrating difficult terrain held by a warlike society, far from Northumbria. Moreover, Heronbridge is situated on the road south, not directly on the route to Gwynedd.

It cannot have been Æthelfrith's intention to defeat Mercia unless Mercia was in an alliance with northern Welsh realms, since Chester is nowhere near the heart of Mercia on the middle Trent and not on the route to it. Such an alliance would be consistent with later joint Mercian–British attacks on Northumbria, though the first of these we know of was that between Cadwallon and Penda, who defeated Edwin at Hatfield Chase on 12 October 633 (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.20; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 202–3). Bede gives no hint of Mercian involvement at the battle of Chester, but if Mercia took part it would imply the involvement of Cearl's protégé Edwin with British forces, and in particular with the perfidious British clergy singled out for retribution at the battle: so, even if Bede knew of such supposed involvement, he would avoid mentioning it. If Mercia was indeed involved in the battle, it implies that Æthelfrith was acting in a pre-emptively defensive manner, striking out against a Mercian–British joint force before it reached Northumbria, since it is unlikely that the Welsh and Mercians would have had time to form an alliance and assemble at Chester in response to the swift sort of attack Æthelfrith appears to have been wont to launch.

Whether Æthelfrith's attack was essentially offensive or defensive, his overriding purpose may have been to split Mercia from its Welsh allies and to prevent either from launching incursions on Northumbria, by obtaining control over the northern Marches; Higham (1992, 7; 1995, 78), for example, argues that it may have been Æthelfrith's intention to confront the wider regional powers from the outset. The later engagement (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.9; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 242–3) on 5 August 642 of Æthelfrith's son Oswald at Maserfelth (Oswestry: on the identification as such *see* Stancliffe 1995) could be seen as modelled on that of Æthelfrith. The position of Maserfelth between the areas controlled by Mercia and the Welsh kingdoms suggests that an objective for Oswald was to interpose himself between the allied Mercian and Welsh forces; Higham (1993a, 87) suggests a

similar reasoning behind the geography of the battle at Chester. Whether Mercia's rule extended very firmly into the Marches, however, is rather less certain for 615 than it is for 642. Oswald was killed in the attempt; Æthelfrith was not but nonetheless suffered serious losses. Both, therefore, met concerted opposition, which hints at a mighty alliance of regional powers in both cases.

We need also to consider the local target of the campaign, which can be defined as the lower Dee, from Chester through Heronbridge up to Bangor. The ruinous Roman fortress of Chester itself would have been of little interest, and Æthelfrith appears to have passed through it, suggesting it was of great interest neither to him nor to the British, but control of Chester at the hub of the Roman road network, and its port, would have given access to the Irish Sea and trade there; it would also have prevented Mercian expansion northwards and incursions from Gwynedd towards Northumbria. Taking control of the local area of Chester, rather than the city *per se*, was thus almost certainly among Æthelfrith's aims. The battle took place at Heronbridge, however. While this may be more or less coincidental, as the place where Northumbrians coming from the north-east met British forces coming from the south-west, a different picture emerges if the fort was already in existence: Heronbridge itself may have represented a focus of local power that Æthelfrith stormed. However, the local power that Bede represents Æthelfrith as confronting is specified only as the monks of Bangor (even if, in reality, it must have included local secular powers too). If the monks were embroiled in the politics of the region, as their presence at the battle suggests, then Bangor emerges as a focus of power to be defeated. The battle took place at Heronbridge as this was an outlier of the monastery. The words placed in Æthelfrith's mouth in Bede's account, exhorting his men to put effort first into destroying the monks of Bangor, may, surprisingly, conceal a real objective of his, although of course he would scarcely have been motivated by religious persecution in the way the account intimates.

The battle strategy

The battle 'strategy' (if we may so term it) may perhaps be illuminated by comparing what happened at the battle on the Idle, close to Bawtry, in which Æthelfrith was slain by Rædwald. Here, Æthelfrith was exerting pressure on Rædwald, who eventually responded by launching an attack on Northumbria; Æthelfrith managed to muster an army but was essentially taken by surprise. He marched towards East Anglia and met Rædwald in border regions between Northumbrian and East Anglian control. Rædwald was able to defeat him, but only with heavy losses. It would be reasonable to imagine the battle of Chester as the culmination of a similar set of events. As he was later to do with Rædwald, Æthelfrith may have threatened whoever was harbouring Edwin (probably Cearl of Mercia); the response was to form a strong regional alliance, with British forces willing to collaborate in view of Æthelfrith's widespread ravaging of British lands and threat of encroachment into what is now Wales. The forces moved towards Northumbria and expected to encounter Æthelfrith imminently, but Æthelfrith nonetheless surprised them when they had reached only as far as Heronbridge, and defeated them, perhaps by storming their stronghold. We might also look at events from a slightly different perspective, with Æthelfrith in a position comparable to that of Rædwald later: he was threatened by a Mercian–British alliance, and responded by marching against them, taking them essentially by surprise and defeating them in a border

region, although not without heavy losses, just as Æthelfrith himself was later defeated by Rædwald in similar circumstances.

The element of surprise implies speed. Although Chester is a good distance from the Northumbria of the time, Æthelfrith would have been on his own territory (including the vassal realm of Elmet) well up into the Pennines, and after his descent from the hills above Manchester it could have taken him as little as a couple of days to reach Chester, while news might have preceded him only if there were fast horsemen to take it.

Æthelfrith's route

Being able to move quickly, as Æthelfrith almost certainly did, suggests keeping to good routes, and it is notable that this battle took place on a Roman road, as did many battles of the time: Æthelfrith's subsequent defeat at Bawtry, for example, took place where the Roman road from the south-east, followed by Rædwald from East Anglia, crosses the Idle, close to the boundary of Elmet.

If Æthelfrith came directly from Northumbria, as is most likely, the Bernician centre of Bamburgh is an improbable point of departure (*pace* Davies 2010, 148); the much closer southern realm of Northumbria, Deira, which Æthelfrith had ruled since 604, is far more likely, although he could have come down from Bernicia into Deira shortly beforehand. York itself, which was probably only seriously occupied later, by Edwin, is less likely to have been a point of departure than somewhere in the Derwent valley, the centre of Deira, where Edwin is said to have had a hall later (Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.9; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 164–5). This would have brought him across the Pennines through Mamucium (Manchester, a minor settlement in Roman times) and westwards across to Chester. This route would have involved crossing the British kingdom of Elmet, east of the Pennines and abutting Deira (Higham 1993b, 84–7), but Elmet was probably little more than a client kingdom by this stage. If he came from campaigns further north on the western side of the Pennines, then the postulated Roman route into Chester from Warrington would be a possibility. It is unlikely that he approached from further south and then up through Mediolanum (Whitchurch): this would imply his crossing vast swathes of territory to the south of the Pennines that were not in Northumbrian hands and would also imply an encounter with the British or Mercian forces to the south or east, not north, of Bangor.

At Chester itself, Mason (2007, 51) suggests Æthelfrith may have avoided the city and diverted on a minor Roman road which appears to have forded the Dee just north of Heronbridge, although, as Mason admits, the ford has not actually been uncovered. This is possible but there is no reason to suppose that anything other than the main Roman road through Chester was used; taking a large body of armed men over a substantial river would, moreover, scarcely be the option of choice when a functioning Roman bridge almost certainly existed at Chester itself. Æthelfrith would also need to have gained knowledge of the ford, which required local informants – an unlikely scenario on this strike deep into enemy territory. If Æthelfrith went through Chester itself, it implies that there was little resistance; alternatively, he may simply have skirted the walls and proceeded over the bridge. There is nothing to suggest that the fabric of the settlement itself was anything of significance to him.

The size of the forces

Mason (2004, 42) estimates there must be at least 112 warriors buried on the site, and probably rather more than this; as argued above, these probably represent Northumbrian casualties. Bede states that Æthelfrith had a *grandis exercitus* and suffered heavy losses, but while this indicates its strength relative to the norms of the time, it says little about its actual size and must, in any case, be based on oral memory. He also states that twelve hundred monks of Bangor fell on the opposing side, but his figures are unreliable here too; they are most probably motivated by biblical numerological concerns. Nonetheless, the fundamental fact of substantial forces being involved is probably true. Davies (2010, 153) presents a useful survey of information about troop numbers in this period: other attempts at taking whole realms sometimes involved forces of under a hundred, and a couple of hundred warriors could be reckoned as substantial. However, as the Heronbridge battle cemetery is unique we have nothing to compare it with directly: it may not be exceptional as the numbers of troops given in written sources are not necessarily reliable. Balancing the size of force needed to achieve decisive victories deep in enemy territory with the problems of maintaining such a force, somewhere between five hundred and a thousand men seems the best estimate.

How did Æthelfrith muster such a powerful army? The basis of his power would certainly have been the *comitatus*, his personal band of warriors, which would have consisted of more experienced, landed lords and younger, unlanded fighters who were seeking glory in battle and the reward of land and wealth (*see* Evans 1997 for a detailed discussion of the *comitatus*). The members of his warband would themselves presumably have had their own followers. The whole system relied not on the notion of an army raised to defend the land (the *fyrd* of later centuries) but on personal loyalty and patronage (Abels 1988, 185; Davies 2010, 152). The main source of wealth was victory in war, so the *comitatus* system was essentially expansionist by definition, but there was a limit to the number of followers who could be kept in check in such a system, and the size of Æthelfrith's forces is likely to have been at the upper limit in these terms. Loyalty depended on success, and the size of Æthelfrith's forces is a function of the success that we may surmise them to have enjoyed in previous campaigns: Æthelfrith was a king who commanded loyalty because he defeated so many foes and overran their lands. He appears to have been exceptional in how far he was able to go with a system that at a certain point was bound to implode.

The site and course of the battle

Within the Chester area several sites might have been chosen for the battle. During the Civil War, a great battle took place in 1645 on Rowton Moor to the east of Chester. The British might be expected to have made a stand against Æthelfrith in this area before he could reach Chester. The fact the battle did not take place here is revealing. Chester itself was presumably unable to raise forces for its defence, suggesting it was relatively unimportant, and other local lords did not regard it as sufficiently significant to try to defend it either. The force which did confront Æthelfrith had at least in part come up from, and been heavily supported by, the monastery of Bangor-is-Coed, some kilometres to the south, and evidently they did not envisage proceeding too far from their base. The Dee may have formed some sort of boundary which the forces of Powys/Tegeingl did not wish to cross.

The British forces could have swept down on Æthelfrith as he crossed the Dee at Chester, or indeed tried to prevent him crossing. Yet the site is not really suited to battle: the space of a few hundred yards between the slope and the river was (and still is) strewn with the remains of Roman quarries, and in places is almost precipitous. Faced with an opposing force, the English are unlikely to have risked crossing over here at all, and neither would the British be likely to want to risk battle here.

The battle in fact took place at Heronbridge. Why? If the fort was in existence, the British would have taken up position in it, with the aim of preventing English advance into Powys/Tegeingl, and the English would have attacked, sweeping down from the plateau just to the north of Heronbridge, with each side calculating they had an equal advantage. The specific site of battle thus makes best sense if the fort was in existence, but in more general terms, Heronbridge, with its gentle slopes, is the first site on the Roman road beyond the Dee to offer a potentially good field for combat. The English would want to stop on the plateau just north of Heronbridge and urge the British to attack them uphill; the British would try to do the same in reverse, stopping at Eccleston. The skeletons are buried much closer to Heronbridge, suggesting, if this overall scenario is correct, that the English lured the British on, or that the British were so intent upon attack as to ignore their disadvantage; the apparent site of the battle is quite a distance on foot from Eccleston.

The distance from Bangor, and the fact that many of the monks from there decided to go to the battle site, fasting for three days beforehand, indicates that the community must have received news of the English force some days in advance: they were not precisely surprised. Bede relates that the contingent of monks from Bangor joined others who seem already to have been on site, which fits with the idea of the *eglēs* of Eccleston having been a daughter-house to Bangor itself, with its topography thus familiar to the Bangor community. This implies that the choice of where to make their stand lay in the hands of the British, who knew the area, even if the decision to launch into battle there was taken by Æthelfrith.

The monks would have been in an ecclesiastical compound whose existence is commemorated in the name Eccleston. This could have been in the fort, which may indeed have been constructed as an ecclesiastical compound, or somewhere in the area of present-day Eccleston. However, in the latter case they would not have been visible to Æthelfrith if he stopped on the plateau just north of Heronbridge, as is likely, so the presence of the fort at the time of battle again makes better sense, assuming we accept Æthelfrith's glimpse of the monks as having some factual basis.

If Æthelfrith's foes were stormed within their fort at Heronbridge, it might be inferred that they were at a disadvantage and were adopting a defensive position. However, the fort would have been reckoned both strong enough to resist attack and able to contain considerable numbers of troops who could easily sally forth to lead an attack, so occupying it may not have seemed markedly defensive to its garrison. Nonetheless, viewed over a shorter time-span of a couple of days or so, Æthelfrith may still have surprised his enemy, even though they were expecting him imminently.

Consequences of the battle

In the longer term the battle may have had little impact from a Northumbrian perspective. Cadwallon, the king of Gwynedd, was able to overrun Northumbria in 633, and it was not until his defeat in 634 by Æthelfrith's son Oswald that Northumbrian, as opposed to Welsh, control of much of northern England can be described as secure. From the mid-seventh century, it is clear that the Chester area fell under Mercian control and was never again ruled by Northumbria.

The shorter-term consequences are less clear. Æthelfrith must have stayed long enough to perform obsequies for the fallen warriors, but he may then have departed in view of his heavy losses. Alternatively, he may have left a Northumbrian presence, possibly constructing the Heronbridge fort on the site of the battle for this purpose. How great the Northumbrian control was cannot be ascertained but it is probable that the battle at least destabilised the region: Cearl, Edwin's patron, died at the battle or at about the same time, and Mercia was unable to exert any influence for some decades, either on the Chester area or against Northumbria, and may have had a king friendly to Æthelfrith forced upon it. It is probable that the region's instability forced Edwin to flee to Rædwald, who, after the death of Æthelberht, helped him onto the throne of Northumbria (Higham 1995, 78–9).

Edwin's subjugation of the area around the Irish Sea may not have been a direct result of Æthelfrith's campaign – Bede after all seems to regard Edwin's success as his own. Yet it would at the least have built on Æthelfrith's victory indirectly, as a response to the instability that followed the battle.

The context of the battle: a summary

The summary that follows sets out the most likely-seeming interpretations of the battle and its context. Yet, in reality, there is too little firm evidence to be able to draw satisfactory conclusions on any aspect of the events and their causes, so every interpretation is contentious. Some of the chief issues that have a major bearing on our interpretations, but which cannot be answered as yet, are:

a   Was the fort at Heronbridge in existence at the time of the battle? This alters both our interpretation of what the battle itself involved, and the reason for it taking place precisely at Heronbridge.

b   Was Æthelfrith's victory the result of a spontaneous attack aimed at securing Northumbrian control of the area, or was he responding to forces already ranged against him?

c   Were Æthelfrith's opponents local British forces (Tegeingl/Powys/Cornovii), or did they represent a wider Mercian–British alliance that was intent on toppling him (and perhaps placing Edwin on the throne)?

d   Did the battle achieve anything more than a temporary victory for the Northumbrians; in particular, was Edwin's later subjugation of the area, including the Irish Sea, the result of a sustained (if superficial) Northumbrian presence in the region?

The date of the battle. The battle took place between *c* 610 and 615, with 614 or 615 being perhaps the most probable date.

The fort. The fort could have been a fairly recent construction by the British; it could equally well have been an ecclesiastical enclosure under the control of Bangor. It would have represented a centre of power and possibly a mustering ground for warriors, which would have made it a direct focus of Æthelfrith's campaign. Almost as likely is that it was a later construction undertaken by Edwin in his subjugation of the region. Less likely is that it was constructed by Æthelfrith, unless we assume he occupied the area for some time after the battle.

The aims. Æthelfrith's objective was to establish a Northumbrian bridgehead in the Chester area by defeating local chieftains (though not, initially, more distant powers such as Gwynedd and Mercia); his opponents need not have been drawn from a wider area than Tegeingl and Powys, including the monastery of Bangor and its holdings. The purpose was similar to that of his son Oswald a few decades later: to defeat Powys/Tegeingl and thus undermine the Mercian–British alliance that could threaten Northumbria; this would be achieved by extending Northumbrian power into the Marches. A secondary aim was to control the port and access to the Irish Sea, an objective that Æthelfrith's successor Edwin achieved. Possibly, a more direct aim may have been to defeat an already existing Mercian–British allied force that was intent on overthrowing Æthelfrith and perhaps putting Edwin on the throne.

Æthelfrith's route and destination. Æthelfrith set out from Deira (Yorkshire), taking the shortest route to Chester through Elmet, over the Pennines to Manchester and then on to Chester. At Chester, he passed through the city (the Roman fortress), or else skirted it, then crossed the Dee over the extant Roman bridge and proceeded down the Roman road towards Wroxeter. His destination was Powys/Tegeingl, perhaps crystallised as the fort at Heronbridge itself, a local centre of power which may in some way also have been closely connected with the monastery of Bangor.

The size of the forces. Æthelfrith led a swift but nonetheless mighty army by the standards of the time, with upwards of five hundred troops. The opponents must have had similar numbers. The battle therefore represented a conflict between major powers.

The site of the battle. There is nothing to indicate that any defence was made of Chester itself. The choice of Heronbridge at the monks' behest indicates a desire to stop the pagan forces proceeding any further towards Bangor or into Powys/Tegeingl. The fort, if it was in existence, would have controlled access to these along the Dee valley and would have acted as a focus both for local forces to put up a stand at and for Æthelfrith to vanquish.

The strategy and course of the battle. The battle site either represents the storming of the fort by English forces sweeping down on it from the Heronbridge ridge, or else it marks the site of the clash between English warriors descending from the north (the plateau north of Heronbridge) and British opponents from the south (the rise of Eccleston). The three-day fast of the monks implies that the British forces were expecting Æthelfrith. The battle strategy may have been broadly similar to that of Rædwald's attack against Æthelfrith in 616: the attacker makes a swift incursion into enemy territory; his opponents rally and

move to counter the attack but are rather unprepared and essentially are surprised, leading to their defeat but not without their inflicting heavy losses on the attacking forces.

The aftermath. Æthelfrith probably stayed long enough to perform obsequies for the fallen warriors, but his heavy losses, and the lack of evidence for immediate Northumbrian subjugation of the region, suggest that he soon withdrew; in this case, Edwin's subjugation of the area and the Irish Sea reflects a separate campaign but it is just possible that Æthelfrith established a presence sufficient to continue into Edwin's reign.

Political consequences. Cearl of Mercia, Edwin's patron, died at the battle or at about this time and Æthelfrith's incursion enabled him to place a friendly leader on the throne of Mercia, forcing Edwin to flee to Rædwald, who eventually (after the death of Æthelberht) supported his venture to depose Æthelfrith. The whole region was destabilised by Æthelfrith's incursion (Higham 1995, 78–9) and the threat of Northumbrian domination, which in itself would have induced Edwin to move elsewhere. Mercian overlordship of regions close to the Irish Sea must have been prevented long enough for Edwin to exercise control over them, although in the long run Cheshire fell under Mercian suzerainty.

Conclusion

This paper has had three chief aims. The first has been to pursue a more nuanced approach to evaluating the written medieval sources on the battle of Chester. We have one account, by Bede, that could be termed 'reliable' – although even this is biased to serve his particular ecclesiastical purposes and is highly selective in what it tells; all other mentions or descriptions of the battle are, to varying degrees, untrustworthy as sources of historical fact and could go back to Bede along with a peppering of inference from Welsh heroic tradition. The second aim has been to consider the historical background and likely motivations behind Æthelfrith's expedition to Chester. While a general picture can be drawn, there are huge uncertainties, given our lack of information about the balances of power at the time. I have tried to outline some alternatives but many possibilities remain. The third aim has been to highlight a few areas where there is still scope for further archaeological investigation. We await the final report on the most recent Heronbridge excavations but it is already clear that this will open as many questions as it will answer. In particular, the rampart and its enclosure will need further excavation in the future: in principle it should be possible to assign a more precise date to it and to distinguish between its possible origins and uses, which include a protected seasonal trading emporium site, a British 'hillfort', a British ecclesiastical compound, a fort built by Æthelfrith (a pagan) or one built by Edwin (a Christian) – none of these can reasonably be excluded on the basis of current research or the archaeological investigation so far carried out. The skeletons also need further research at some point: a radio-isotope analysis of just two of them does not lead to conclusive proof of where the army came from; as reported at present, a non-local origin is indicated, but this might include Mercian as well as Northumbrian areas, which would put a very different light on the interpretation of the battle.

Appendix:
The idealisation of history in two ancient sources
relating to the battle of Chester

It is a commonplace that to medieval people history did not mean what it does to us: we strive to establish objective assessments of what took place and what people's motivations at the time actually were, whereas to the medieval mind history was more a manifestation of the order of the cosmos, or an unfolding of a divine plan (for example, for Bede, of how salvation came to the English nation). For us, the similar patterns found in saints' Lives are a sign of plagiarism and unreliability; to the medieval mind, they would demonstrate the adherence to a pattern of divine grace, and thus reveal an essential truth about sainthood. A poet would see historical events in symbolic or metaphorical terms, and would see some truth revealed in the connections in lexis or imagery between different events. The difficulty these sorts of understanding of history pose for the modern historian has been mentioned, but I wish here to look at two examples in more detail: what the monks of Bangor may have understood to have taken place in the battle of Chester, and what the battle may have been understood to have meant within the ecclesiastically informed Welsh poetic tradition.

The monks in battle

Bede's focus is on the monks in the battle. Even if he has recast its bias, his source, ultimately from Bangor itself, must have had the same focus. Ascribing to the English king a desire to make a special point of attacking the monks first must therefore have been surmise on the part of the brethren who escaped slaughter, a reflection upon the failure of the English forces to recognise their non-combatant role and the consequent massacre of their peers. It may well be, of course, that the 'monks' included lay workers loosely associated with the monastery, but the purpose of the account is to evoke the extreme savagery directed at a group of undifferentiated 'innocent' religious (regardless of whether some may have been warrior lay brothers). There is no interest in non-monastics, other than in their guardian Brocmail, who betrayed them, and their pagan tormentor.

The 'monks in battle' motif may reflect a general notion of the victory of the cross over pagan enemies, epitomised in the emperor Constantine's victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312 after his vision that he would conquer with the sign of the cross, yet a more specific tradition may underlie the account of the battle of Chester: the Alleluia victory of St Germanus of Auxerre. St Germanus came to Britain around 429 to preach against the Pelagian heresy. His *Life* was composed in Gaul around 480 by Constantius and was well known to Bede, who quotes large portions of it, but was almost certainly also known in monasteries such as Bangor: events from St Germanus's life featured centrally in the ninth-century Gwynedd composition, the *Historia Brittonum*. The *Life's* account of the Alleluia victory, as recorded by Bede (*Historia ecclesiastica* I.20; Colgrave & Mynors eds 1992, 62–5), reads:

> So, still soaked in the waters of baptism, the army set out. The people's faith was fervent and putting no trust in their arms they expectantly awaited the help of God. The disposition and arrangement of the army was reported to the enemy; they were as sure of victory as though they were attacking an unarmed foe and hastened forward with renewed eagerness; but their approach was observed by the British scouts. […] Germanus

himself offered to be their leader. He picked out the most active and, having explored the surrounding country, he saw a valley surrounded by hills of moderate height lying in the direction from which the enemy was expected to approach. In this place he stationed his untried army and himself took command. The fierce enemy forces approached, plainly visible as they drew near to the army which was lying in ambush. Germanus, who was bearing the standard, thereupon ordered his men to repeat his call in one great shout; as the enemy approached confidently, believing that their coming was unexpected, the bishops shouted 'Alleluia' three times. A universal shout of 'Alleluia' followed, and the echoes from the surrounding hills multiplied and increased the sound. The enemy forces were smitten with dread, fearing that not only the surrounding rocks but even the very frame of heaven itself would fall upon them. They were so filled with terror that they could not run fast enough. They fled hither and thither casting away their weapons and glad even to escape naked from the danger. Many of them rushed headlong back in panic and were drowned in the river which they had just crossed. The army, without striking a blow, saw themselves avenged and became inactive spectators of the victory freely offered to them. […] They won a victory by faith and not by might.

The Alleluia victory was one of believers over unbelievers, composed of Picts and Saxons. While such a perspective would have been meaningless to Æthelfrith, it would certainly have been uppermost in the minds of the Bangor monks (we need only think of Gildas, at the time of the battle a fairly recent writer, seeing the persecution of the British by the English as punishment for their profligacy). St Germanus arrayed his newly baptised troops – who are presented as being almost like monks, inexperienced, as if unarmed – in the area of a valley surrounded by hills, much like the Heronbridge basin, and awaited the pagan hordes coming from the direction of the sea and crossing a river, just as Æthelfrith approached from Chester and crossed the Dee. Germanus led his army himself, even though he was a churchman, just as Bede's account singles out the churchmen as playing a prominent role in the battle (and ignores the other troops). The high point of the encounter, which secured victory for the Christians, was the loud shouting of 'Alleluia'; the Colgrave and Mynors translation unfortunately obscures a parallel here with the actions of the monks of Bangor: Æthelfrith is made to say 'si aduersum nos ad Deum suum clamant […]', 'if they *shout out* to their God against us […]', then they should be attacked first, which could almost be a riposte to the request of Germanus that his men should 'uno clamore respondeant', 'answer with one *shout*', at which the priests shouted out the Alleluia, 'alleluiam […] sacerdotes *exclamabant*'. Here the two histories diverge: for Germanus, the Alleluia chorus resounded in the hills and terrified the pagans, securing a bloodless victory, whereas against Æthelfrith the tactic, far from working, is presented as enraging him, resulting in a very bloody massacre of the 'innocent' monks. The reason for featuring Brocmail so prominently could be to contrast him implicitly with someone who did just the opposite, leading churchmen to victory instead of defeat, namely the legendary St Germanus.

Although it did not work out for the monks of Bangor, St Germanus's victory may provide the template they hoped to follow in the battle. If a connection is admitted between the Alleluia victory and the battle of Chester, it is unlikely to be the creation of Bede: the verbal parallels between the accounts are not great, focusing solely on the 'shouting' of

prayers, and the circumstantial geographical and other features that link the accounts would have been unknown to Bede but would have been obvious to a monk of Bangor involved in the battle or informed about it. It suited Bede to have an account of a battle in which British churchmen were the object of aggression, but viewed objectively the account of the battle is very odd in its purely ecclesiastical focus. What, really, was a large group of monks doing participating in a battle (even if secluded some distance from it)? Arguing that they were predominantly laybrethren sidesteps the issue (and is not directly supported by the text): the monks had a religious purpose in being there, and their numbers suggest this purpose was more than to act as chaplains to the troops; and victory could have been prayed for just as well from Bangor. St Germanus's band of inexperienced neophytes' winning of a victory for Christ against the Saxons offers a model they may have hoped to follow.

Moreover, Plummer (ed 1896, **2**, 34) notes that in local tradition St Germanus was held to have won his Alleluia victory near Mold, just fifteen kilometres from Chester, at Maes Garmon (the field of Germanus); while Constantius appears to have had no such place in mind (his mix of Saxon and Pictish pirates implies an east-coast setting), it is certainly the case that Germanus is widely commemorated in church foundations and place names in Wales such as Maes Garmon. Traditions associating him with the area may well be ancient, and, whether historically accurate or not, could have inspired followers in such districts to follow his example. At the very least, both the Alleluia victory and the defeat at Chester illustrate the central combat role taken in tradition by British religious, which is likely to be based on some historical truth. What we see through Æthelfrith's eyes in Bede's recasting of the story in fact represents a British perspective on the enmeshed involvement of religious in battle.

It is difficult to corroborate the suspicion that St Germanus was an important inspiration to the actions of the monks of Bangor, but some further circumstantial evidence is worth presenting. One of the earliest concrete pieces of evidence for the early realm of Powys is the Pillar of Eliseg in Valle Crucis, erected by Cyngen, king of Powys, who died in 854. Its purpose was to proclaim the might of Cyngen's ancestors, and it did this in part by bringing in a series of legendary figures, among them Britu (Brydw), son of Vortigern, a child blessed by Germanus (who is named in the inscription). The legends accruing around St Germanus were therefore part of the legendary history of Powys by the mid-ninth century. In fact, the story of the child blessed by Germanus, along with a series of other legends about the saint, are given in a somewhat different form in the contemporary *Historia Brittonum*, and indeed are central to its narrative. It is impossible to say how far back this adoption of the legends of St Germanus as political propaganda for the realm of Powys may go, but it is by no means impossible that it existed already at the time of the battle of Chester; indeed, the monastery of Bangor is likely to have been a place that such hagiographical legends were fostered. In terms of the pillar, Charles-Edwards notes (2013, 451) that the postulated book of St Germanus, which the *Historia Brittonum* made use of, was likely to have been composed for a church dedicated to St Germanus; Llanarmon-yn-Iâl was quite close to the pillar. Moreover, Llanarmon-yn-Iâl is not much more distant from Bangor; and Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog is also only slightly further, to the south-west from the monastery. Selyf, who according to the *Annales Cambriae* fell in the battle of

Chester, was a descendant of Cadell Ddyrnllug (the Catel dunlurc of Harleian genealogy 22: Bartrum 1966, 12); his and his descendants' authority over Powys was given a founding legend in the *Historia Brittonum* (ch 35), where he hosts St Germanus, who then blesses him for rule. In sending monks to support the British forces at Heronbridge, the monastery of Bangor was standing in the role of St Germanus, blessing the successor of Cadell for victory and rule. It is also notable – though perhaps too much should not be made of a saint exerting power through fasting – that in the *Historia Brittonum* (ch 47) St Germanus along with his clergy fasted for three nights, after which the fortress of Vortigern was suddenly destroyed by heavenly fire along with all its denizens; the monks of Bangor were no doubt hoping for something similar after their three-day fast.

Thus the topography of the battle, and their own hagiographical warrior traditions, may have led the monks of Bangor to see the battle in terms of the Alleluia victory of St Germanus, which took place in a valley surrounded by hills, with which, on a moderate scale, the landscape of Heronbridge is comparable. Unfortunately, instead of being led to victory by their leader, as had happened with Germanus, they were betrayed by Brocmail, and defeat followed; however, in hagiographical terms they had still won the victory of martyrdom in this Orchard of Bangor.

The Orchard of Bangor in Welsh Triad 60

Triad 60 is discussed in depth by Bromwich (ed 2014, 171–4). She argues that 'gweith Perllan Vangor', 'the battle of the Orchard of Bangor', could be the traditional Welsh desig-nation of the battle of Chester although, as a major defeat, it does not get a great deal of mention. The triad mentions the three *porthawr*, gate-keepers, at the *gweith* as Gwgon Red Sword, Madawg son of Rhun and Gwiawn son of Cyndrwyn, while the three others on the side of Lloegr (England) were Hawystyl the Arrogant, Gwaetcym Herwuden and Gwiner.

The information contained within the triad, it must be remembered, is found within a poetic tradition marked by strong symbolism and allusion. Thus Bromwich points out that *porthawr* could also be interpreted as 'supporter, assistant', and the choice of ambivalent word was deliberate: the warriors were both gate-keepers of the orchard and supporters in the *gweith*, the action (fighting).

Two of the three gate-keepers, Gwiawn and Madawg, are associated with minor dynasties of Powys, and were contemporaries of Selyf, who according to the *Annales Cambriae* fell at the battle; they probably held authority under Selyf and hence assisted at the battle (or were imagined to have done so in poetic tradition); from genealogies it is clear that Selyf belonged to the Cadelling dynasty, but here the rival Cyndrwynyn, to which Cynddylan also belonged (*see above*), are made his assistants through their representative Gwiawn (Rowland 1990, 126). Gwgon is a known character from a later time and a different area; he may be one of a small set of such characters deliberately interposed among the heroes of yesteryear in the triads. Yet the sixteenth-century antiquarian Leland records Porth Hwgan, the Gate of Gwgan, as one of the gateways of Bangor monastery, which may suggest Gwgan was an otherwise unknown contemporary of Selyf (though this 'tradition' of the Bangor gate name could surely be derived from a version of the triad in question).

Bromwich finds the coupling of three Welsh with three English gate-keepers historically rather unlikely, implying they shifted places during the action. Yet this could be a poetic way of saying the English took control of the orchard, which is to say the battle field. Alternatively, it could represent an alliance, the Englishmen here being Mercians working alongside the Welsh. The names of the English refer to their being hostages (*gwystyl*) and exiles (*herw*), designations which characterise them as being far from their own lands, which could apply both to Northumbrians and Mercians around Chester at this date.

Bromwich does not suggest further ambivalences beyond the *porthawr*, but they are not far to seek.

As the *porthawr* are gate-keepers and supporters at the *gweith*, the *gweith* can be interpreted both as action, battle (the word is used regularly in titles of battles in early Welsh sources), and as labour, (the result of) mental or physical effort; this in turn leads to a dual interpretation of what the orchard is. First, however, yet another recorded meaning of *gweith* should be mentioned: fortification, earthwork, fort; in this sense it is directly comparable with Old English *geweorc*, 'work, accomplishment', often used in poetry to describe monumental Roman remains. (Relevant are these entries from *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, *sv* 'gwaith[1]' masc.: 1a, labour, 1b, product of a mental or physical effort, 2, fortification, earthwork, fort; 'gwaith[2]' fem.: 2b, action, battle.)

The orchard could have been a real orchard, owned by the monastery of Bangor. Yet orchards suggest the intertwined Christian and pre-Christian motifs of the Celtic Otherworld. The most notable memorable example is the isle of Avalon of the Arthurian legends, to which the king retires (understood to imply his death) in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History* (XI, ch 2); this is the equivalent of his 'isle of apples which is called Fortunate' ('insula pomorum que Fortunata vocatur') in his *Vita Merlini*. The *Brut y tywysogion* has 'enys Auallach' for Geoffrey's 'insula Avallonis', referring to the abundant apples that mark out the Celtic otherworld; Geoffrey's form is influenced by the town of Avallon in Burgundy, whose name derives from the Gaulish Aballone, 'place of apples'. *Abhlach* occurs in Irish in reference to an Otherworld island, home to the god Manannán mac Lir; the Irish form was probably borrowed into Welsh. The glorious trees form a notable feature in the depictions of the Otherworld in medieval Irish literature (*see* Koch ed 2006, *sv* 'Otherworld').

Otherworld images are, however, invariably intertwined with Christian symbolism. Most relevant here is the orchard of pomegranates of the Song of Solomon 4: 13 ('perllan o Bomgranadau' in the Welsh Bible of 1588). The Song of Solomon was widely taken, from Origen onwards, as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the Church. The patristic interpretation of 'thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates' is distinctly relevant (Littledale 1869, 184):

> *Thy plants.* More exactly, *thy shoots*, and accordingly the Septuagint and Vulgate read *thy sendings-forth* (ἀποστολαί, *emissiones*). Further, the word translated *orchard* in the Authorised Version is *paradise* […] The apostolates, then, or emissions of the Bride, are her augments of faith and spreading of preaching, that is her planting local Churches throughout the world, each of which is a *paradise*, resembling that first and central one

which is their source and model. Or you may take them to be the Apostles themselves, ruddy, like the pomegranates, with the blood of martyrdom, and bringing forth many spiritual children to Christ by their toils and sufferings.

The 'orchard' could thus be a symbolic representation of the place where the monks of Bangor achieved their passage to the Otherworld through their glorious martyrdom, without this being the actual name of the place where it occurred – though the allusive symbolism is, I think, stronger if the orchard was at once both real and metaphorical.

A further hint at the Otherworld connections of Bangor occurs in Triad 90 (Bromwich ed 2014, 232–3), the only other one the monastery is mentioned in; here, the topic is the three places (monasteries) where perpetual harmony is heard, these being the Island of Afallach, Caer Garadawg, and Bangor. Caer Garadawg is uncertain, but the Island of Afallach is Glastonbury – but it is referred to under the term that links it with the traditions of Avalon and the isle of apples. The perpetual harmony, then, is one that characterises the monasteries as places of Otherworld peace, in the intertwined Christian and Celtic symbolism described above.

Just how much historical fact lies behind Triad 60 is difficult to say, but in principle we may have a reminiscence of a battle at an orchard of Bangor monastery – something which might well, in the vocabulary of the early seventh century, be called an *eglēs* – which is also characterised as an earthwork or fortification. It is guarded by gate-keepers, who are also supporters, we are to understand of the king of Powys (Selyf); yet these gate-keepers are either ousted or assisted by English counterparts, characterised as exiles. The gate-keepers are also assistants in the labour of the orchard, understood in a metaphorical sense as helping the monks in the achievement of their work of martyrdom, by which they win through to the Otherworld symbolically represented by the orchard they toil in.

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For purposes of publication, the original Latin texts and the footnotes to this article have been omitted. The author is happy to supply a version which includes these to any readers wishing to have a copy upon application to him.

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