



This battle was researched and assessed against the criteria for inclusion on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields set out in Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement June 2016 <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/>.

The results of this research are presented in this report.

The site does not meet the criteria at the current time as outlined below (see reason for exclusion).

Athelstaneford

Alternative Names: None

832 A.D

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Overview

Tradition has it that a battle took place in 832 A.D. at the place now known as Athelstaneford, near Haddington, East Lothian. The battle was fought between an army of Picts and Scots, under the Pictish king, Hungus (also known as Angus, Oengus or Unust), and an English army from Northumberland, led by Athelstan. Hungus won a resounding victory, against superior numbers, but the significance of the battle lies chiefly in the story that St Andrew appeared to Hungus in a dream or vision the night before the battle and promised him victory. He was able to use this to inspire his army, and on the day of the battle a diagonal cross (the symbol of St Andrew), shone in the sky until victory had been won. This is claimed by some writers to have led to St Andrew being adopted as the patron saint of Scotland and the saltire being adopted as the flag of Scotland.

However, although there seems to be an acceptance that a substantial battle was fought and won by the Picts under Hungus, whom he fought against, where and when is far from clear.

Reason for exclusion

There is no certainty about the historicity of the battle. There are considerable problems concerning historical accuracy in the account of the battle in the *Scotichronicon*, one of the earliest sources, and there are a range of dates given for the fighting. The principal figures in the battle were not alive at the same time, and there are suggestions that the story of the battle was created as a counterweight to the disastrous battle of Brunanburh. However, should new evidence come to light that confirms the existence and location of the



battle it is of sufficient significance to be included on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields.

Historical Background to the Battle

Athelstan, 'King of England' came with an army into the lands of 'Mers and Berwik', which belonged to the Picts and 'alleged them to belong to his empire of Northumberland.' The Picts stood to arms and decided to fight the next day.

Knowing he was outnumbered in comparison to Athelstan's forces, Hungus would have prayed to god and his saints, and especially St Andrew. The saint appeared to Hungus and promised victory. The following day, a shining cross, like that of St Andrew, appeared in the sky. With their morale boosted by this apparition, the far smaller Pictish army attacked the English who broke in panic, apart from the king and a few others who were overwhelmed. The Picts were victorious and the dead included Athelstan, whose body was pierced by a spear and slain, as were other English nobles. His body was buried in the nearest kirk with funeral triumphs.

Following the victory, Hungus went bare foot to the Kirk of St Andrew to give thanks and undertook to use the cross of St Andrew as the symbol of Scotland.

The Armies

Hungus

Boece says that in addition to the Picts, for whom he gives no numbers, Hungus had been sent 10,000 Scots by Achaius, the King of Scots, who was married to his sister.

Athelstan

No numbers are available, although Buchanan says that Hungus prayed for divine aid because he knew he was outnumbered, suggesting that Athelstan had a very sizeable force.

Numbers

No further information.

Losses

According to Boece, in the 1821 edition of his *History* only ten of the English army survived; their dead included Athelstan and other English nobles. However an earlier edition of 1531 says the slaughter was so huge that scarcely 500 men survived. No other information on losses by either side has been found.



Action

Fordun (died 1384 or 1385), in his *Chronicle of the Scottish People*, gives an account of a battle taking place between the Picts under Hungus, who had been laying waste to Northumbria, and King Athelstan, but does not mention Athelstaneford, saying only that it took place 'in a certain pleasant plain in Lothian, not far from the river Tyne, two miles from Haddington.' In his account 'King Athelstan massing together the strength of the whole English nation both of the north and of the south...came upon Hungus unexpectedly with his columns and so beset on every side the place the latter was encamped in, that no outlet lay open to him for escape.' He recounts that Hungus prayed to god and his saints, and especially St Andrew. He also vowed to give 'to the honour of God and the blessed Virgin Mary, a tenth part of his kingdom to the blessed Andrew, provided he brought him home and his army safely back home.' Andrew appeared to him the following night and assured him of victory 'for an angel, bearing the banner of the Lord's cross, shall go before thee in the sight of many'. Inspired by this apparent divine intervention, the Picts attacked the larger English army who quickly broke in panic, apart from the king and a few others who were overwhelmed. The king's head was cut off and taken away by Hungus. Fordun gives no date for the battle.

Bower (1385-1449), whose *Scotichronicon* is based on Fordun (and whose account of the battle is very similar) is the first chronicler to record that a battle had taken place at Athelstaneford and he dates the battle to 802. He says that at the same time as Hungus was king, King Aethelwulf was reigning in Wessex, having conferred on his son Athelstan all the regions of the English people, apart from Wessex. 'In 802 his eldest son Athelstan had his head impaled on a stake and King Hungus carried it away to his kingdom with him, after he had been victorious in battle...' He goes on to say that 'Hungus king of the Picts led a great army to lay waste the nations of the Angles nearest to him, the Northumbrians'. After various days' marches he came to 'a pleasant plain in Lothian' 'at a place now called Athelstaneford'. In his account too, St Andrew appears to Hungus and promises victory but Bower says that the cross, in the shape of St Andrew's cross, appears in the sky.

In Boece's account, in *The History and Chronicle of Scotland*, written in 1527 (and which itself builds on Bower's) Athelstan, 'King of England' came with an army into the lands of 'Mers and Berwik', which belonged to the Picts and 'alleged them to belong to his empire of Northumberland.' He laid waste to the land and then withdrew to Northumberland. Hungus sought the support of Achaius, whose wife, Fergusiane, was his sister and he gave him 10,000 men. Hungus invaded Northumberland 'with sundry crueltis' and then returned with his loot to Lothian.

Athelstan pursued 'hot foot', 'with more diligence than can be believed.' He came upon the Picts (Boece uses the term to describe the whole army, including the Scots) camped about two miles from Haddington, dividing the spoils, and swore that none would be spared. The Picts stood to arms and decided to fight the next day. Hungus prayed to Christ and St Andrew and St Andrew appeared and promised him victory. Hungus related his vision to his

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followers who were inspired. A shining cross, like that of St Andrew, appeared in the sky and stayed there until the Picts had the victory. The English saw the cross too, but for them it was an evil sign. The battle took place, with the Picts and Scots fighting together with such fury that they pushed back the English and 'made more slaughter than was made afore in the battal.' Prisoners taken by the English turned upon them with great cruelty and only ten men were left alive.

Boece gives no date for the battle. Buchanan in his *History of Scotland*, written in the 1570's, draws upon Boece's account of the battle but adds that Athelstan was slain at the place which is now called 'Athelstan's Ford'. He too gives no date.

There are a number of problems with these accounts. The most obvious one, common to all them, is that Athelstan, the king of England, was not born until 895. Although there were two Pictish kings named Hungus, the latest reigned from 820-834, long before King Athelstan's birth. Buchanan asserts that the Athelstan against whom Hungus fought was a Dane to whom Northumberland had been granted by Alfred. However, Alfred was not born until 849, and it is clear from all the accounts that the Athelstan referred to was not a Dane. Skene, a 19th-century historian, claimed that there was a captain or dux from Northumbria called Athelstan, but he was not a king or prince. The dating of the battle to 832 appears to have originated with him.

The other issue is that if a major battle was fought between the Picts and the English, where did it actually take place. Professor Dauvit Brown says that there is an account written in or shortly after 1101 which gives what looks like the earliest account of such a battle, but places it in Mercia, part of England. It does not say that a saltire was seen in the sky (which he says is a much later detail), but it does describe a cross.

'... a king of the Picts called Ungus son of Uргуist, rising up with a great army, killing with the cruellest devastation the British nations living in the south part of this island, finally reached the plain of Mercia and wintered there. Then all the peoples of nearly the whole island, coming with a united force, surrounded him, intending to destroy him and his army completely. Next day, the aforementioned king went out for a walk with his seven most intimate companions, and a divine light shone around them, and they fell forward onto their faces, unable to bear it [the light]. And lo!, a voice was heard from heaven: 'Ungus, Ungus, hear me, an apostle of Christ, Andrew by name, who am sent to defend and protect you. Get up; behold the sign of the cross of Christ which stands in the sky and will go before you against your enemies: nevertheless, offer a tenth part of your inheritance in alms to God Almighty and in honour of St Andrew His apostle'. Now on the third day, advised by the divine voice, [Ungus] divided his army into thirteen troops, and the image of the cross went in front of each division, and a divine light shone from the top of each and every sign. Thereupon they became victors'

There are other views of what lies behind the story of the battle. One is that it was an earlier Pictish King Unust who was visited by St Andrew in a dream,



and who saw a cloud formation in the shape of a cross, prior to a battle with Northumbrians in the area in 761. Another possibility is that Angus, king of Picts and son of Fergus, is recorded as having defeated Eadbert of Northumbria in the 8th century at Niwambirg, with the total destruction of Eadbert's army. A third is that Athelstan, the king of England, who was not born until 895, did fight a battle in the area of Athelstaneford, probably in 934, in which he was defeated, but won a much more significant victory at Brunanburh in 937. This has led to the suggestion that the legend of the foundation of the Saltire 'looks a little like spin-doctoring in the centuries that followed, in an effort (very successfully) to airbrush the disastrous Battle of Brunanburh out of history in favour of a story that showed Athelstan in a much worse light: and the Scots more favourably.'

The name Athelstaneford may in fact have nothing to do with Athelstan. *The National Gazetteer* (1868) says 'Athelstaneford is said to have taken its name from Athelstan, a Danish chief who fell in battle near the ford in 815, and was here interred. Probably, however, it is derived from *ath-ail*, the Gaelic for "stone ford," a ford of this nature called "Lug Burn" existing at the spot where the battle was fought. Remains of a Pictish town exist, and traces of an entrenchment near which some Roman relics have been found.'

Athelstaneford, the place, is seemingly first mentioned in the 12th century when a church was built there - so it dates from then or possibly earlier. As described above, the first mention of the battle between the Picts and the English taking place at Athelstaneford comes from Bower. Bower was born in Haddington in East Lothian near to Athelstaneford and it has been suggested that he might have been creating a story around a battle which did actually take place at some time to explain the name of the place.

In summary, there does seem to have been a battle between the Picts, led by Hungus/Angus /Unust, and the English, which was won by the Picts against the odds, but where it took place, when it took place and who commanded the English cannot be determined with any confidence.

Aftermath and Consequences

There seems to be no decisive military or political change resulting from the battle. It is remembered primarily for the story of the shining cross appearing and the symbol being subsequently taken up as the flag of Scotland.

Events & Participants

It is unclear who the main participants of the battle were because there are some contradictions in the sources, as discussed above.

There were two Pictish kings named Hungus, one reigning from 820-834, long before King Athelstan's birth.

There is also some uncertainty about Athelstan. Buchanan asserts that the Athelstan against whom Hungus fought was a Dane to whom Northumberland had been granted by Alfred. However, Alfred was not born until 849, and it is

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clear from all the accounts that the Athelstan referred to was not a Dane. Skene, a 19th-century historian, claimed that there was a captain or dux from Northumbria called Athelstan, but he was not a king or prince.

In Bower's account, King Athelstane is also on record as having existed at the end of the following century, and that he won a great battle against the Scots under their King Constantine at Brunanburh

Context

Scotland did not exist as a unified nation in the 9th century. The Picts ruled over much of the east and north, while the Scots ruled out of the Kingdom of Dalriada (now Argyll) in the west. What is now known as the Lothians belonged to neither Scots nor Picts and was in a constant state of flux between the Angles and the "Picto-Scots".

Battlefield Landscape and Location

Various views have been put forward on where the battle of Athelstaneford (if battle there was) took place, but they have much in common. The Picts and Scots were caught and stood to face their pursuers in the approximate area of Markle, near East Linton. This is to the north of the modern village of Athelstaneford (which was resited on higher ground in the 18th century), where the Peffer, which flows into the Firth of Forth at Aberlady, forms a wide vale. Being then wholly undrained, the Peffer presented a major obstacle to crossing, and the two armies came together at the ford near the present day farm of Prora (one of the field names there is still the Bloody Lands). In the pursuit, so the tradition goes on, the Northumbrian leader Athelstan was slain at the crossing of the Peffer or Cogtail Burn, the site of which is marked by Athelstaneford Mains Farm, about half a mile south-east of the village.

The Historic Environment Scotland Canmore website gives the date of the battle as 815, and that the northern and southern limits of the battlefield are marked by standing stones. The source of this appears to be the Ordnance Survey Name Book from 1853, and the veracity of the claim around these standing stones is doubtful.

Location

No further information

Terrain

No further information

Condition

No further information



Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential

There are currently no artefactual remains known from the battle, and no human remains that can be associated with the fighting. This is not unusual for battles of this early historic period, because the only known examples of weapons from the period come from sites such as forts and duns. There is the potential of artefacts from the battle: hand-to-hand fighting would result in the deposition of a variety of physical remains: e.g arrowheads, damaged weapons and personal accoutrements like belt-buckles, scabbard and sword fittings, and horse-harness would have been lost or abandoned during the action and subsequent flight and pursuit. However, much of this material will have been ferrous and is unlikely to have survived well in the soil.

Cultural Association

Whether or not there was ever a battle at Athelstaneford is debatable, but there is no doubt that great play has been made of the events in the chronicles, preceding and during the battle, as the origin of the saltire as the flag of Scotland and the establishment of St Andrew as the patron saint of Scotland. Athelstaneford is known today as 'the birthplace of Scotland's flag'. The belief that the Scottish Flag had its origin at Athelstaneford in 832, was commemorated there on 30 November 1965 when a plaque was unveiled, and the Flag of St. Andrew unfurled to fly permanently. It was stated that the Scottish Flag is the oldest flag in the British Commonwealth. The Scottish Flag Heritage Centre there tells the story of King Aengus, St Andrew and the Saltire. A plaque there says;

"Tradition says that near this place in times remote Pictish and Scottish warriors about to defeat an army of Northumbrians, saw against a blue sky a great white cross like Saint Andrew's, and in its image made a banner which became the flag of Scotland."

This tradition of course is based on the accounts written in the 15th and 16th centuries and even if a battle did take place at Athelstaneford in 832 it was several hundred years before St Andrew was recognised as the patron saint of Scotland, and the saltire recognised as the national emblem.

Commemoration & Interpretation

According to the National Archives of Scotland the story that St Andrew was crucified on a 'crux decussata' (an X –shaped cross) is a 12th-century legend. The Scottish heraldic term for such a cross is a 'saltire', from the old French word 'saultoir', meaning a type of stirrup. It was used on seals in Scotland from about 1180 onwards, sometimes along with the lion rampant, which was the heraldic symbol of the Scottish crown. In 1286, when Scotland was ruled by the Guardians of Scotland in the absence of a king, the saint was depicted on the Guardians' seal, used to authenticate their legal documents and communications to the rest of Europe. The seal included the inscription: "Andrea Scotis dux esto compatriotis" (Andrew be leader of the compatriot

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Scots). By promoting the story of Saint Regulus bringing relics of St Andrew to Scotland in the 4th century, 'the Scots acquired a top-rank patron saint, a separate identity from England, and a date for the supposed foundation of the Scottish Church, pre-dating the conversion of England and Ireland to Christianity by several centuries.'

In the Wars of Independence, fought by Scotland in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Scots used the story as part of the diplomatic battle to persuade the papacy to recognise Scotland as an independent kingdom. Pope Boniface, in a papal bull of 1299, demanded that Edward I of England end the war against Scotland, and reminded Edward how Scotland "was converted, and won to the unity of the Christian faith, by the venerable relics of the blessed Apostle Andrew, with a great outpouring of the divine power."

In the 14th century Scottish soldiers began to wear a simple Saltire cross so that they could tell friend from foe in battle. The St Andrew's cross first appeared on coins during the reign of King Robert III. In 1503 the first certain use of a plain St. Andrew's Cross flag was recorded in the Vienna Book of Hours, but the field was red, not blue. By the middle of the 16th century, when the legend of King Aengus and the white St Andrew's cross against the sky at the battle of Athelstaneford was well established, Saltire flags with a white or silver cross on a blue background began to appear. The shade of blue has varied over the centuries since and it was only in 2003 that the Scottish Government decided to standardise the colour of blue on the flag, agreeing on Pantone 300.

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Full Bibliography

Information on Sources and Publications

John of Fordun was a priest in the cathedral of Aberdeen who died in 1385. His *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (Chronicle of the Scottish Nation) has been described as 'a seminal contribution' to 'the first literary expressions of a new

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spirit of Scottish national identity, and the first stages in the deliberate creation of a national self-image to sustain it.' Fordun died before bringing his history down to his own time, though in the 1440s Walter Bower incorporated the *Chronica* into his *Scotichronicon*, in which he continued the story to the murder of James I.

Walter Bower, (1385-1449) a Scots Augustinian monk from Haddington, wrote a history of Scotland in Latin called the *Scotichronicon*, in an Augustinian monastery on the isle of Inchcolm. St Andrews University had been founded in 1410, and he had been amongst the earliest students to graduate. He had also been attached to St Andrews Cathedral. In 1417 he became the Abbot of Inchcolm monastery and commenced his great work using and building on the earlier work of Fordun, who died in 1384. Bower was the first person to identify Athelstaneford as the site of a battle between Picts and English.

Hector Boece (1465-1536), first Principal of the University of Aberdeen, lectured in philosophy, divinity and medicine and wrote his *Historia Gentis Scotorum* 'History of the Scottish People' in 1527. It has been said that he was 'a man of high talent, and one of the best Latin scholars which his country has at any period produced; but he was credulous in a high degree, and most unquestionably has given his authority, such as it was, to many fables, if he did not himself absolutely invent them; and he has rested the truth of his facts upon authors that never existed except in his own imagination.'

George Buchanan (1506-1582), a Protestant, was an opponent of Mary, Queen of Scots. He evolved a concept of 'popular sovereignty' as a safeguard against tyranny. A distinguished scholar in various European universities, he was at various times in his life tutor to James V's son, denounced as a heretic for satires on the friars, which James V encouraged him to write, imprisoned by the Inquisition in Portugal, classical tutor to Mary, against whom he later gave evidence, Moderator of the General Assembly and Lord Privy Seal. His *History*, which relates the history of Scotland from its origins to the death of the Regent Lennox in 1571, was dedicated to James VI with whose education he had been entrusted and was completed in the year of his death.

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Cartographic and Illustrative Sources

None

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