

= Battle of Dun Nechtain =

The Battle of Dun Nechtain or Battle of Nechtansmere (Scottish Gaelic : Blàr Dhùn Neachdain , Old Irish : Dún Nechtain , Old Welsh : Linn Garan , Old English : Nechtansmere) was fought between the Picts , led by King Bridei Mac Bili , and the Northumbrians , led by King Ecgrith on 20 May 685 .

The Northumbrian hegemony over Northern Britain , won by Ecgrith 's predecessors , had begun to disintegrate . Several of Northumbria 's subject nations had rebelled in recent years , leading to a number of large @-@ scale battles against the Picts , Mercians , and Irish , with varied success . Following sieges on neighbouring territories carried out by the Picts , Ecgrith led his forces against them , despite advice to the contrary , in an effort to reassert his suzerainty over the Pictish nations .

A feigned retreat by the Picts drew the Northumbrians into an ambush at Dun Nechtain near the lake of Linn Garan . The battle site has long been thought to have been near the present @-@ day village of Dunnichen in Angus . Recent research , however , has suggested a more northerly location near Dunachton , on the shores of Loch Insh in Badenoch and Strathspey .

The battle ended with a decisive Pictish victory which severely weakened Northumbria 's power in northern Britain . Ecgrith was killed in battle , along with the greater part of his army . The Pictish victory marked their independence from Northumbria , who never regained their dominance in the north .

= = Background = =

During the seventh century , the Northumbrians gradually extended their territory to the north . The Annals of Tigernach record a siege of " Etain " in 638 , which has been interpreted as Northumbria 's conquest of Din Eidyn (Edinburgh) during the reign of Oswald , marking the annexation of Gododdin territories to the south of the River Forth .

To the north of the Forth , the Pictish nations consisted at this time of the kingdom of Fortriu to the north of the Mounth , and a " Southern Pictish Zone " between there and the Forth . Evidence from the eighth century Anglo @-@ Saxon historian , Bede points to the Picts also being subjugated by the Northumbrians during Oswald 's reign , and that this subjugation continued into the reign of his successor , Oswiu .

Ecgrith succeeded Oswiu as king of Northumbria in 670 . Soon after , the Picts rose in rebellion against Northumbrian subjugation at the Battle of Two Rivers , recorded in the 8th century by Stephen of Ripon , hagiographer of Wilfrid . Ecgrith was aided by a sub @-@ king , Beornhæth , who may have been a leader of the Southern Picts , and the rebellion ended in disaster for the Northern Picts of Fortriu . Their king , Drest mac Donuel , was deposed and was replaced by Bridei mac Bili .

By 679 , the Northumbrian hegemony was beginning to fall apart . The Irish annals record a Mercian victory over Ecgrith at which Ecgrith 's brother , Ælfwine of Deira was killed . Sieges were recorded at Dunnottar , in the northern @-@ most region of the " Southern Pictish Zone " near Stonehaven in 680 and at Dundurn in Strathearn in 682 . The antagonists in these sieges are not recorded , but the most reasonable interpretation is thought to be that Bridei 's forces were the assailants .

Bridei is also recorded as having " destroyed " the Orkney Islands in 681 , at a time when the Northumbrian church was undergoing major religious reform . It had followed the traditions of the Columban church of Iona until the Synod of Whitby in 664 at which it pledged loyalty to the Roman Church . The Northumbrian diocese was divided and a number of new episcopal sees created . One of these was founded at Abercorn on the south coast of the Firth of Forth , and Trumwine was consecrated as Bishop of the Picts . Bridei , who was enthusiastically involved with the church of Iona , is unlikely to have viewed an encroachment of the Northumbrian @-@ sponsored Roman church favourably .

The attacks on the Southern Pictish Zone at Dunnottar and Dundurn represented a major threat to

Ecgrith 's suzerainty . Ecgrith was contending with other challenges to his overlordship . In June 684 , countering a Gaelic @-@ Briton alliance , he sent his armies , led by Berhtred , son of Beornhæth , to Brega in Ireland . Ecgrith 's force decimated the local population and destroyed many churches , actions which are treated with scorn by Bede .

= = Account of the battle = =

While none of the historical sources explicitly state Ecgrith 's reason for attacking Fortriu in 685 , the consensus is that it was to reassert Northumbria 's eroded hegemony over the Picts . The most thorough description of the battle is given by Bede in his 8th century work *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People) (completed c731) , but this is still brief . Additional detail is given in the Irish annals of Ulster and Tigernach , and by the early Welsh historian Nennius in his *Historia Brittonum* (written c830) .

Ecgrith 's attack on Fortriu was made against the counsel of his advisors , including Cuthbert , who had recently been made Bishop of Lindisfarne . The Picts under leadership of Bridei , feigned retreat and drew Ecgrith 's Northumbrian force into an ambush on Saturday 20 May 685 at a lake in mountains near Duin Nechtain . The Northumbrian army was defeated and Ecgrith slain .

= = Location = =

The site of the battle is uncertain . Until relatively recently the battle was most commonly known by its Northumbrian name , the Battle of Nechtansmere , from the Old English for ' Nechtan 's lake ' , following 12th @-@ century English historian Symeon of Durham . The location of the battle near a lake is reinforced by Nennius ' record of the conflict as Gueith Linn Garan , Old Welsh for ' Battle of Crane Lake ' . It is likely that Linn Garan was the original Pictish name for the lake .

The most complete narrative of the battle itself is given by Bede , who nevertheless fails to inform us of the location other than his mention that it took place ' in straits of inaccessible mountains ' .

The Irish Annals have provided perhaps the most useful resource for identifying the battle site , giving the location as Dún Nechtain , ' Nechtan 's Fort ' , a name that has survived into modern usage in two separate instances .

= = = Dunnichen = = =

Dunnichen in Angus was first identified as a possible location for the battle by antiquarian George Chalmers in the early 19th century . Chalmers notes that the name ' Dunnichen ' can be found in early charters of Arbroath Abbey as ' Dun Nechtan ' . He further suggests a site , ' Dunnichen Moss ' (grid reference NO516489) , to the east of the village , which he informs us had recently been drained but can be seen in old maps as a small lake . Earlier local tradition , related by Headrick in the Second Statistical Account , claimed that the site was the location of the Battle of Camlann , where King Arthur fought Mordred .

More recent suggestions for the battle site include the valley to the north of Dunnichen Hill , centering on Rescobie Loch (grid reference NO512518) and Restenneth Loch (grid reference NO483518) , which is now much reduced following drainage in the 18th century .

The battle scene inscribed on the Aberlemno kirk yard stone is often cited as evidence for the battle site . This interpretation was made based on the stone 's proximity to Dunnichen , only 3 miles (5 km) to the north , but while the short distance seems compelling , the stone is unlikely to be any earlier than mid @-@ 8th century , and the ornamentation of the stone , including the animal forms used and the style of weaponry depicted , suggests it may be as late as the mid @-@ 9th century . Prior to being linked with the Battle of Nechtansmere , the Aberlemno stone had been cited as evidence for the Battle of Barry (now known to be historically inauthentic) , and there are a number of other possible interpretations for the carving .

= = = Dunachton = = =

In a recently published paper , historian Alex Woolf gives a number of reasons for doubting Dunnichen as the battle site , most notably the absence of " inaccessible mountains " in mid @-@ Angus . He makes a case for an alternative site at Dunachton in Badenoch (grid reference NH820047) , on the north @-@ western shore of Loch Insh , which shares Dunnichen 's toponomical origin of Dún Nechtain . James Fraser of Edinburgh University suggests that , while it is too early to discount Dunnichen as a potential battle site , locating it there requires an amount of " special pleading " that Dunachton does not need .

= = Aftermath = =

Ecgrith 's defeat at Dun Nechtain devastated Northumbria 's power and influence in the North of Britain . Bede recounts that the Picts recovered their lands that had been held by the Northumbrians and Dál Riata Scots . He goes on to tell how the Northumbrians who did not flee the Pictish territory were killed or enslaved .

The Northumbrian / Roman diocese of the Picts was abandoned , with Trumwine and his monks fleeing to Whitby , stalling Roman Catholic expansion in Scotland .

While further battles between the Northumbrians and Picts are recorded , for example in 697 when Beornhæth 's son Berhtred was killed , the Battle of Dunnichen marks the point in which Pictish independence from Northumbria was permanently secured .