Battle Area search - the meaning of Assandun

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Arising from an ongoing Battlefields Trust (East Anglia) project aimed at locating the site of the battle of Assandun fought in Essex in 1016AD, this paper examines published work on the place name meanings of Assandun and the alternative place name forms of Assatun and Aescenedun. The paper concludes that new information on Anglo-Saxon personal names in place names weakens the case for an interpretation of Assandun as 'the hill of Assa'. The case for Assandun meaning 'hill of ash trees' is strengthened by knowledge that the Flemish monk, who first explained the ash tree connection, must have had access to informants in Emma's English court, including Emma herself and possibly, the priest Stigand, the priest put in charge of the battle site minster in 1020 AD. Stigand was chief advisor to Queen Emma on her return from exile in Flanders.

1. Introduction

In the search for the site of the battle of Assandun in 1016AD, several authors have discussed place name evidence, but the first comprehensive study was that by Cyril Hart in 1968 (1), followed up and expanded in 1992 (2). He reviewed place name meanings of Old English (OE) Assandun and the name forms of two candidate battle areas in Essex, namely Ashingdon and Ashdon, but concluded that the evidence had too many interpretations and was of limited use in locating the battlefield.

Warwick Rodwell in 1993 (3) argued that etymology did provide clues to the battle site in that it supported the location of Ashdon but did not rule out Ashingdon. He compared three possible interpretations of OE Assandun and concluded the 'hill of the ash trees' was the most plausible, a description found in the Encomium Emmae Reginae (4) dated c1040-1042AD which named Aescenedun as the battle site.

In 1998, Matthew Townend, an expert in Skaldic verse and English place names, disagreed with Hart, arguing that the most likely site was Ashingdon (5). He concluded that the Danish skaldic poem in praise of Cnut's victory, written in c1027AD and naming the site as Assatun (6), was a more dependable source than the Encomium Emmae.

This paper looks again at place name evidence in the light of new information on Anglo-Saxon personal names and re-examines the arguments about the linguistic competence of the Encomiast.

It focuses only on the place name meanings of OE Assandun, Old Norse (ON) Assatun and the Latin name form Aescenedun and leaves a discussion on the etymology of candidate place names, such as Ashingdon and Ashdon, for a future publication.

2. Battle names, Scribes and Dates

Hart discussed three early accounts which gave a place name for the battle:

Assandun, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Texts C, D and E, (7)
Assatun, Knutsdrapa, (6)
Aescenedun, Encomium Emmae Reginae (4)

He argued that Assandun should not be the only name allowed for the battle site, and that the other two forms were equally admissible, even though slightly later in date.

The date sequence in which these place names entered the early accounts is important to understanding their relevance, as is the background to the scribes and where the document was created. These issues are now discussed for each of the three place names.

Assandun

This place name first emerged in Text C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Text C is usually attributed to Abingdon Abbey and is now held at the British Museum in London. Widely considered to have been first compiled in the late 1040s, the Text is made up of several main blocks of text. It includes annals copied from both Texts A and B from 60BC to 977AD, and a second block dating from 983AD to 1022AD which came from a lost ancestral text. A third block was composed at Abingdon abbey from 1023AD to 1049AD and then periodically updated with annals to 1066AD.

Based on the detailed content of events around London in this period and with no mention of Abingdon specific happenings, Whitelock (8) and Hart (1) have argued that the entries in Text C for the middle block of 983-1022AD were probably composed in London or Wessex, and this includes the annals for Cnut's victory over Ironside.

Hart recognised this by dating the annals which contain the place name Assandun (1016AD and 1020AD) as 1023AD. This is the earliest possible date for the 983-1022AD block, although it could have been written a few years later.

So, it is probable the place name Assandun came from a scribe writing in Old English in London or Wessex in 1023AD or shortly after.

Assatun

Ottarr Svarti 'the black' wrote a praise poem, Knutsdrapa, about Cnut's campaign in England (6). This consists of 9 stanzas and 2 half stanzas, with stanza 10 describing the final battle on October 16th in 1016AD which he named as Assatun. It was written in Old Norse.

He was an Icelander and one of several skalds in the Danish Court. He served several royal patrons over a 15year period, including Cnut, and his praise poems would have been performed in Denmark and in the presence of the patron addressed in the poem.

We don't know if he came to Cnut's Court in England, but he must have relied heavily on Danish witnesses for information. Based on the content of the poem dedicated to Cnut, Townend has dated the writing to c1027AD (5), not c1050AD as given by Hart (2).

Aescenedun

Aescenedun was named as the battle site in the Encomium Emmae Reginae, and the writer, known as the Encomiast, explained the place name as 'the hill of the ash trees'. Keynes deduced he was a monk based on an illustration in the Encomium, (9). He was Flemish, probably from the Abbey of St Bertin, and was in Flanders in 1037AD when Queen Emma went there in exile after Cnut, her husband, had died. Emma stayed in Bruges for three years.

Her commission to the monk to write the Encomium Emmae was almost certainly made in this exile period. She returned to England in 1040AD after King Harold (Harefoot) had died, and the Encomiast is believed to have travelled with her Court back to Winchester. The Encomiast's move to England is supported by Campbell (4), who in his detailed introduction to the Encomium concluded that the Encomiast had received help from English informants on historical events.

The completed manuscript was given to Emma by the Encomiast shortly before her son Harthacnut 's death in June 1042. The document, written in Latin, is therefore dated as 1041-1042AD.

This shows that the Encomiast was close to or part of Emma' s Court for a considerable period, both in Flanders after the commissioning and early writing, and then in Winchester for more writing and completion.

3. The meaning of the Battle site names

Hart discussed the etymology of the place names Assandun, Aescenedun and Assatun (2), and considered there were only two plausible interpretations for Assandun and Aescenedun (i) 'the hill of Assa' or (ii) the 'hill of the ash trees'. He noted a third possibility given in the later chronicle of Florence of Worcester (10) in which Assandun is explained as 'Asses hill', but dismissed this, as did Rodwell (3), because the Encomium was written 60 years earlier and had much greater authority.

Each name breaks down into two elements. The second element for Assandun and Aescenedun is -dun with a widely accepted interpretation of a hill. However, landscape etymologists (11) consider that -dun has a wider meaning and have defined it as 'a low hill with a fairly level and fairly extensive summit which provided a good settlement-site in open country'. This wider definition needs to be born in mind in reviewing candidate battle sites.

The element -tun in Assatun is discussed in detail by Townend (5), who explains there was no cognate for -dun in Old Norse although Scandinavians living in England

were familiar with place names ending in -tun. In his view, it was not unexpected for Ottarr to have used this element.

The meaning of the first element, Assan- or Aescene- is the main issue for discussion in the following sections.

Hill of Assa

If Assandun meant 'the hill of Assa', it implies Assa was a personal name associated with the hill close to the battle site, but Hart noted that Sir Frank Stenton (an expert in Anglo-Saxon history d.1967), had told him that no parallel personal name was known at the time.

More than 50 years later, we now have an index of 'Personal names in place names' published online through the English Place Names Society in 2024 by Briggs (12). This index has 12,693 names covering the years 597-2000AD and contains 3 places which use the name form 'Assa'. It includes all the Anglo-Saxon names from the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England. The relevant extract from the index is shown in Fig 1, together with an illustration showing the three place locations linked to the name Assa.

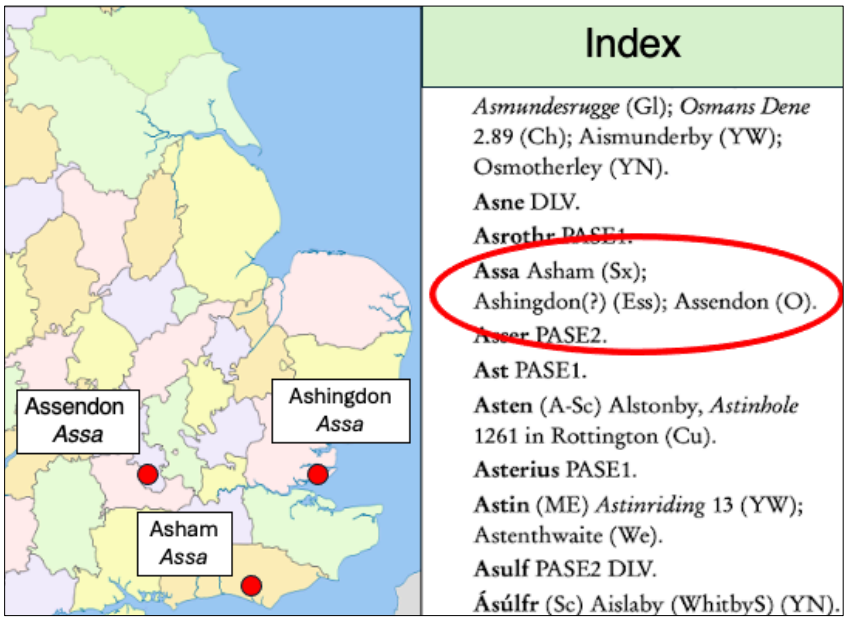

Fig 1. Extract from index of 'Personal names in Place names', Briggs, 2024 (12)

However, if the index to Anglo-Saxon personal names is narrowed to names before 1066AD, the name Assa is not found, the implication being that the name came into use in England only after the Norman Conquest. So, this casts doubt on 'the hill of Assa' interpretation.

Is Ottarr's Assatun linked in some way to the place name Assandun? The manuscript dating in section 2 above showed that Ottarr wrote his praise poem to Cnut around 1027AD, just a few years after the ancestral London text (later copied into Text C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) had first used the name Assandun. It is therefore quite

possible that he had heard the battle site name Assandun from informers at Cnut's Court, or indeed from witnesses at the battle itself.

Townend's detailed analysis of the etymology of Assatun (5) concluded it was entirely plausible that Ottarr would have written Assatun as the nearest Old Norse equivalent to Assandun, whether Assa was a personal name or not.

Hill of the Ash trees

The Encomiast writing nearly 25yrs after the Danish victory at Assandun, appears confident that the battle site name was Aescenedun. He explained that the place name meaning was 'hill of the ash trees', although whether the place was a nearby pre-existing settlement or perhaps a notable landscape feature, is not clear.

In his introduction to the Encomium Emmae (4), Campbell considered it significant that the Encomiast, having listened to informants, had written down Aescenedun, not Assandun, otherwise he would not have used the gloss 'hill of the ash trees'. He also thought it was evident that the Encomiast had seen a copy of Asser's 'Life of Alfred' written in 875AD, where chapter 37 describes the battle of Ashdown in 871AD, and Asser glosses the battle site name Aescesdun as mons fraxini, 'hill of the ash tree'. Campbell believed the Encomiast assumed that Aescenedun was the genitive plural of Aescesdun and had adapted Asser's gloss to read 'of the ash trees', Hart supported this analysis (2).

However, Townend questioned the competence of the Encomiast regarding Old English names and grammar (5). While the genitive singular of the noun Aesc (ash tree) is Aesces-, the genitive plural is Aesca-, not Aescen-. So, the correct grammar for the genitive plural case would have been 'Aescadun', not Aescenedun. For this and other reasons, he felt the name Aescenedun, and the associated gloss given by the Encomiast, should be regarded with scepticism.

Given the commission from Emma, how did the Encomiast set about gather his information? Emma herself was surely one source and most other informants must have been in and around her Court, but, concerning Assandun, the majority could only have provided him with second or third hand accounts because the conversations were 20 years after the battle.

Emma's Court was clearly multilingual with English, Flemish, Norse, French and Latin represented (13), and Emma herself spoke French and English and probably some Norse and Flemish. In discussions on Assandun with English speakers, the Encomiast would have heard Ash-en-dun, since aesc- was pronounced ash- in old English, but if the informant was Danish, then the Encomiast may have heard ask-en-dun, since the ash in old Norse was askr.

So why did he write Aescene-. There are several possible explanations.

First, he recognised and understood the sounds ash- or ask- to be aesc- in old English, because of his German, Flemish and Latin background. Ask- would have certainly meant ash tree to him since this is an old Flemish word. So, he wrote Aesc-ene- as the first two elements of the place name he had heard from the informant. However, the addition of the final 'e' is a puzzle for which there is no agreed explanation by experts.

Second, he did not recognise or understand ash- to mean aesc- and was also not familiar with the correct genitive case for the noun aesc which would have been written Aesca-dun in the genitive plural. He therefore sought clarification from his informant or from other members of Emma's court and wrote as he was advised.

Third, he copied the name from a document, now lost.

The stronger of the three arguments must be that he was given information on the battle site name and meaning by court members. This could have come from Emma herself, from others with knowledge of written English place names, and possibly from the priest Stigand, who was Queen Emma's chief advisor while she was at Winchester in the period 1040-1043AD (7)

He was Cnut's priest given charge of the Assandun memorial church, and must have visited the Assandun site, perhaps several times. As Emma's chief advisor, Stigand had to be one of very few attending regularly at her court who had first-hand knowledge of the site and the minster.

The most probable meaning of Assandun

From 1023-1025AD, Assandun was the earliest and only written name form for the battle site. Assandun had one plausible interpretation, the hill of Assa, but this looks unlikely in the light of the recently compiled index of Personal names in Place names which shows the name Assa only came into use in Norman times.

Nevertheless, Assandun remained the only written record of the battle name until around 1027AD when Ottarr named the same battle site as Assatun.

Townend's view is that ON Assatun could have been readily derived from OE Assandun, so it seems probable that Ottarr had either seen the relevant annals from Text C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, or he had understood the OE name being told to him and adapted it for his praise poem Knutsdrapa.

Aescenedun emerged as the third written name form of the battle site in c1041AD. It has a different etymology to Assandun but with the better understanding of the Encomiast's connections in Emma's Winchester court during the period 1040-1042AD, it now looks a more reliable name form and description of the 1016AD battle location.

Could the battle site have been known as Aescenedun before 1020AD? In c1023AD the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle scribe could have simply misheard the word Aescenedun and wrote Assandun instead.

Campbell and Hart discussed a possible early C11 confusion in the spoken language between Assan- and Aescen-. The first elements of each word are Assan- and Aescen- and these elements could have been difficult to distinguish in conversations between English and Anglo-Danish speakers.

Townend disagreed noting he knew of no evidence in Old English for any confusion between Aescen- and Assan-, and he felt that in spoken language, Aescendun would have been heard as 'Ashendun' and this was distinctly different from hearing Assandun.

Using a similar argument, he noted that Assatun could not have been derived from Aescenedun, because Old English Aesc- would have been pronounced Ask-, not Ash-, by a Danish informant and this would have been obvious to Ottarr.

This latter proposition seems reasonable but a clear distinction between Assandun and 'Ashendun' in conversations is a less strong argument.

Whether or not there was confusion, the key finding in this paper is that the Encomiast's gloss of the name Aescenedun as 'hill with ash trees', is the strongest of the two most plausible interpretations.

Was Assandun a named hill or settlement before the battle?

The wording in Text C of the AS Chronicle says that the battle site was '*a hill in Essex called Assandun'.* and is repeated in Texts D (Worcester) and E (Peterborough). Text F (Canterbury) on the other hand states that the battle site was '*at Assandun*' with no information that it was in Essex or associated with a hill.

Text F, written in Canterbury around 1100AD, is known to be a compressed bi-lingual version of Text E and many of its annals have been shortened although there are some with added information (see below). It appears that the detail explaining that the site was in Essex and associated with a hill as seen in Text E was redacted by the scribe.

Overall, the phrasing in the Chronicle texts implies that a landscape feature carried the name Assandun, not a nearby settlement. This is supported by John of Worcester writing in the early C12 who wrote that '*Ironside…...came up with them, as they were retreating, at a hill called Assandun'*.

Ottarr svarrti's poem reads '*you performed a feat of battle ….at Assatun*'. It does not mention a hill, but stanzas are very compressed with minimum detail. The phrasing leaves open whether Assatun could be a named landscape feature or a nearby settlement.

The Encomiast wrote '*the Danes……encountered the enemy in the place called Aescenedun'*, and then glossed this as '*hill of ash trees'*. (Latin: montem fraxinorum). This could mean a settlement which took its name from a memorable area of landscape nearby, or it could be a named landscape feature.

In summary, it is not clear from the ASC Texts C, D, E, the Encomiast and John of Worcester whether the battle site name is a landscape feature or a pre-existing nearby settlement. The name 'Assandun' probably existed before the battle, a landscape feature or settlement which was well known to the local population. It is also plausible that naming of the Assandun site did not occur until after the battle when survivors sought to explain the location.

Specific features at the battle site, such as hills, rivers, lakes, unusual woodlands etc., would have been memorable to witnesses, and a hill full of ash trees would have been a distinctive landscape feature in any part of medieval England, and particularly in Essex.

Clearly any searches of maps, charters, or wills which turn up name forms in Essex which could relate to Assandun or Aescenedun are potentially important clues in the search for the Assandun battle site. Recorded names from such sources may have been written down centuries after the battle date of 1016AD, but they certainly merit further investigation.

Battle site and Minster

The battle site was certainly linked to a nearby settlement four years later because AS Chronicle Texts C and D tell us that '*the king went … and consecrated the minster there*'. Text E simply states that the king went to Assandun in that year, while Text F adds new information that he '*had a minster built there of stone and lime……and gave it to his own priest whose name was Stigand*'.

Text F was written in Canterbury in around 1100AD, and Stigand had been Archbishop of Canterbury between 1052-1070AD, so the detail was probably included in Text F because of local knowledge about Stigand and the minster which had been preserved at Canterbury since 1070AD.

The building of a minster will have nucleated nearby housing to accommodate the trades people involved in its construction. While the site will have been chosen for dominance in the landscape as close to the battlefield as possible, accessibility by road for building materials was crucial along with an adequate water supply for the workforce and for construction. So, the minster site will have been a compromise in location and this project is currently working to an assumption that the battlefield could be up to a mile from the minster site.

4. Conclusions

The element -dun in Assandun and Aescenedun is usually defined as 'hill' but a wider definition also includes an area of rising ground with a flat and extensive summit.

A recent index of personal names in place names weakens the case for the interpretation of Assandun being 'the hill of Assa'.

The case for a second interpretation, 'hill of ash trees', as written in the Encomium Emmae dated 1041-1042AD, is strengthened by the knowledge that the Encomiast had access to informants in Emma's English court, including Emma herself and possibly, the priest Stigand. The battle site minster in 1020 AD was in the charge of Stigand and he became Emma's chief advisor in the same period that the Encomiast was associated with her court.

Ottarr 'the black' probably wrote Assatun in his poem following conversations with Danish Court informers or witnesses who knew that the battle site had previously been recorded as Assandun.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Texts C, D, E, the Encomiast and John of Worcester are not clear whether the battle site was named after a hill in Essex, i.e. a landscape feature, or a pre-existing settlement. It is also plausible that Assandun was named because of the battle location.

The minster site would have chosen for dominance in the landscape, accessibility by road of building materials along with an adequate water supply, and as close to the battlefield as feasible.

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