

THE BATTLE OF NEWMOUTH AND THE LOST VIKING HISTORY OF SUDBOURNE, WITH A POSTSCRIPT ON THE PLACE-NAME ORFORD

by SAM NEWTON

This short essay examines the case for identifying the site of an almost forgotten battle between the English and the Danes at a place near Orford called Newmouth.

IN HIS *Saga of Olaf the Holy*, written c. 1225, the Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturluson refers to a battle in the career of young Olaf Haraldsson, future king and patron saint of Norway, at a place called *Nýjamóða*, ‘Newmouth’.¹ Snorri’s source for this, which he cites, is the Old Norse poem *Vikingarvísur*, ‘Viking Verses’ by Sigvatr Thórðarson. Sigvatr the Skald, as he is usually known, was a skald, or court poet, in the service of King Olaf, so his verses must have some authority. *Vikingarvísur* is a battle-listing poem commemorating Prince Olaf’s early military experiences and Newmouth is numbered as his ninth battle.

*Vann ungr konungr Englum
ótrauðr skarar rauðar.
Endr kom brúnt á branda
blóð í Nýjamóðu.
Nú hefi eg orustur, austan
ögnbaldr, níu talðar.
Herr fell danskr, þar’s dörnum
dreif mest að Óleifi.*

[The young king reddened the hair of the English unsparingly. Red-brown blood streaked the swords once more at *Nýjamóða*. Now, [man] bold in battle from the east, I have tallied nine battles. The Danish army fell there, where spears were hurled at Óláfr most of all.]²

When Sigvatr first uttered these lines in King Olaf’s hall, the king and many who heard them would have understood who was fighting whom, but to us it is far from clear. Olaf is said to have reddened English heads, that is, he fought hand-to-hand against the English, but the Danish army fell there. The implication is that the young Norwegian prince was at the time allied to the Danes, who suffered serious losses there.

THE NAME AND LOCATION OF THE BATTLE (Fig. 85)

The Old Norse form *Nýjamóða* is the equivalent to the Old English **níwe-múða* and means ‘new [river] mouth’, which the Swedish philologist Eilert Ekwall showed was identifiable with the almost forgotten Middle English names *Newemouth* (1286) and *Niwemewe* (1295–96) on the Suffolk coast near Orford.³ We also have a reference in a Dunwich inquisition of 1237 on the rights of wreck along the Suffolk coast in which the bailiffs of Orford ‘have [the right of] *Wrec* in the name of the lord king’s name in all the town of Orford, viz. from the Ness to *Newmore*’.⁴ *Newmore* seems to be a variant form for *Niwemewe*, which may be explained as the Anglo-Norman spelling of the Middle English *Newemouth*, ‘Newmouth’.⁵

Looking at the extraordinary geography of this part of the East Anglian shoreline, we can

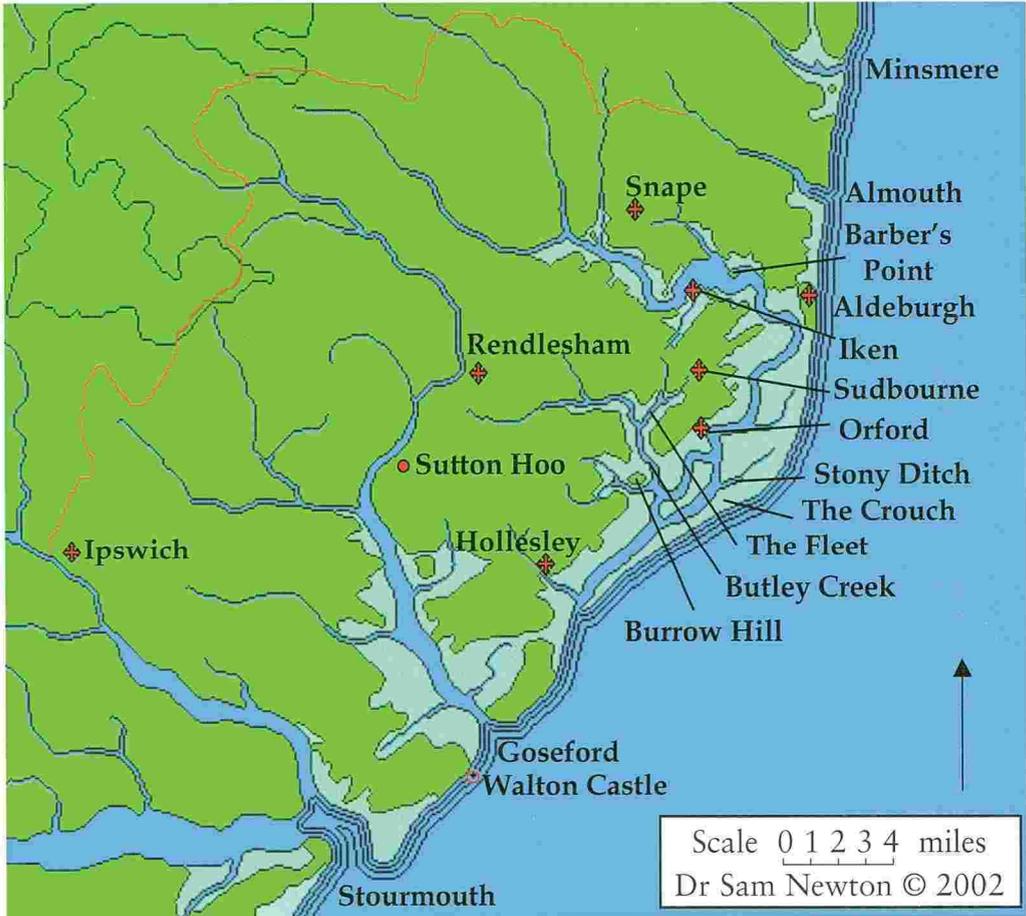


FIG. 85 – South-east Suffolk showing the border of the Wicklaw and the places named in the text (after Arnott 1950, 1952; Scarfe 1972).

perhaps be more specific about its location. The great serpent-like shingle peninsula of Orford Ness, a magnificent example of what geographers call a cusate spit, has grown some ten miles (15km) southwards along the shoreline from Aldeburgh through the combination of wave action and longshore drift.⁶ In so doing, the shingle has deflected the mouth of the River Alde, or Ore, ever further south, so that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the river reaches the sea at North Weir Point opposite Shingle Street near Hollesley. The implication is that the name *Nýamóða* arose as a result of the formation of a new river mouth at some stage in the course of the general southerly growth of the spit.

However, the cusate pattern spit is a complex landform which has not necessarily grown steadily southwards over time.⁷ As it grew, the long shingle nose would have become vulnerable to storms and thus liable to breaching, especially at its narrow ('distal') end. When breached, a new river mouth would be formed to the north of the distal point, as at North Weir Point in the storms of 1897.⁸ Its development is thus more complicated than might at first appear. Some of its history, however, can be partly traced through the patterns of shingle ridges preserved in places along the spit, which mark old shore lines.⁹ For example, south-west of the lighthouse, near Stony Ditch Point,¹⁰ one series of older shingle ridges can be seen to end, whilst another of newer ridges begins. This shift in the pattern of the ridges implies that

the river mouth stabilised at this point for a time, which might have been what led to the establishment of the haven of Orford,¹¹ and it is here that we may locate the name *Nýamóða*.

George Arnott, the great historian of Suffolk's estuaries, similarly deduced that the name (though he preferred the Middle English form *Newmere*) applied here and that it came to be known as the Crouch.¹² This name probably derives from Old English *crúc*, 'cross', as in the name of the River Crouch in Essex.¹³ The implied standing cross no longer stands, but if and when it did it could have functioned as one of the navigation markers for the approaches to river's old entrance. It might even be just possible that such a cross may have been associated with the cult of St Olaf.¹⁴

THE DATE OF THE BATTLE (Fig. 86)



FIG. 86 – Young Olaf's battles in England

We may reason from the order of the entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that the battle probably took place in 1011 or 1012. The *Chronicle* mentions attacks on London in 1009,¹⁵ which appear to coincide with Sigvatr's verse praising Olaf's tactical prowess in the breaking down of London Bridge. This is said to have been Olaf's sixth battle, when he seems to have been fighting in the great ship-borne army led by the famous Danish general Thorkell the Tall.¹⁶

The *Chronicle* also describes a major battle on 5 May 1010 when Thorkell's forces advancing inland from Ipswich defeated the army led by the East Anglian general Ulfcytel.¹⁷ This battle, number seven in the verse-tally, is said by Sigvatr to have been at *Hringmaraheiðr*, 'Ringmere Heath', and appears to have taken place south of Thetford at a place now called Rymer Point.¹⁸ Battle number eight was at Canterbury in 1011, when the city was taken and Archbishop Ælfheah captured.¹⁹

The Battle of *Nýamóða*, number nine in the verse-tally, follows the fighting at Canterbury but is not mentioned by the *Chronicle*. Some time after the murder of the Archbishop Ælfheah at Greenwich on 10 April 1012, Thorkell transferred his allegiance to the English king, Æthelræd.²⁰ He took with him forty-five ships and their experienced crews. If Olaf's ship was one of them, then his ninth battle, where he 'bloodied English heads', probably took place before the martyrdom of the archbishop, perhaps earlier in 1012 or in the latter part of 1011.

THE POSSIBLE CONTEXT OF THE BATTLE

Having suggested a possible location and date of the battle, the next question is, why would there be a battle here? The twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, 'Book of Ely', refers to the important estate of nearby Sudbourne, which, 'together with the charter for the land', was held by a Danish jarl named Scule in the 940s before it came into the possession of King Edgar (ruled 959–75).²¹

The reference to Jarl Scule at Sudbourne gives us a rare glimpse into the lost history of Danish power in East Anglia. Danish kings and jarls had ruled the old Wuffing kingdom of East Anglia since settling here in 879, but in 917 the leading Danes of East Anglia accepted the overlordship of the West Saxon king Edward the Elder and thus retained their lands, as Dr Lucy Marten has shown.²² The entry for the year 917 (ms.A 921) in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes clear that the Danes also kept control of their military power, and that included that essential Viking war-asset, their ships.

... *ond eal se here on Éast Englum him swór ánnesse,*
 ... and all the [Danish] army in East Anglia with him [Edward] swore oneness,
þæt hie eal þæt woldon þæt hé wolde,
 that they all that would do that he would do,
eall þæt friþian woldon þæt se cyng friþian wolde,
 [and] all that would protect that the king would protect,
ægþer ge on sá, ge on lande.
 either on sea, or on land.

[... and all the [Danish] army in East Anglia swore union with him [Edward], that they would do all that that he would do, and would protect all that which the king would protect, either on sea, or on land (author's translation).]

One of Jarl Scule's predecessors at Sudbourne may have been among the leaders of East Anglian Danes who, as an entire army, swore allegiance to Edward in 917.

Either way, the reference in the Book of Ely to Sudbourne's 'charter for the land' appears to refer to its jurisdiction in the tenth century over the ancient territory of the Five (or Five and a Half) Hundreds of Wicklaw, also known as the Liberty of St Etheldreda, which appears originally to have been the heartland of the old kingdom of the Wuffings.²³ Today, it might seem curious that Sudbourne was once a centre of regional authority, unless we bear in mind its relation to its surrounding waters (see Fig. 85). To the south and west is the Butley River, leading inland towards the former royal site at Rendlesham. This river and its tributary, the Fleet,²⁴ together would once have made a fine haven, with a narrow entrance guarded by the former island-fortress of Burrow Hill,²⁵ enabling easy passage to the sea before the growth of Havergate Island and the shingle spit of Orford Ness across its mouth. To the north the 'burn' of Sudbourne runs into the River Alde at Iken near the former island site where St Botulf founded his famous minster in 654.²⁶ The River Alde was one of the main arteries of the ancient territory of the Wicklaw mentioned above. It rises far inland and its welling tides flow round the northern and eastern sides of the Sudbourne peninsula in a broad estuary, providing further anchorages.²⁷

All of this suggests that one of the reasons why Sudbourne was a centre of authority in the tenth century, and perhaps earlier, was because its surrounding havens and its location by the mouth of an arterial river made it suitable as a base for naval power. Similar strategic considerations can be seen to have led Henry II (ruled 1154–89) to build his splendid citadel palace and castle of Orford in the 1160s.²⁸

As to the question the Battle of Newmouth, we can now see that Thorkell the Tall and his fleet might have raided the estuary in 1011 or 1012 because it was of strategic significance. If captured, it would have provided Thorkell with a good base for further operations by land and sea against Ulfcytel and East Anglia.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the ninth battle in the career of prince Olaf Haraldsson, future king and patron saint of Norway, named by Snorri Sturluson and Sigvatr Thórðarson as *Nýjamóða*, 'Newmouth', may be located, with more precision than has been previously realised, at the old river mouth near the point on the great shingle spit of Orford Ness known as the Crouch. The chronology of the entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which refer to the movements of the fleet and army of Thorkell the Tall, with whom young Olaf fought, suggests that this battle probably took place almost exactly one thousand years ago in 1011 or 1012. The estuary may then have had strategic significance as part of a naval anchorage belonging to the centre of authority of Sudbourne and that this may have been why it became a target for Thorkell.

POSTSCRIPT ON THE PLACE-NAME ORFORD

The earliest surviving form of the name of the town, which does not appear in King William's Domesday Survey of 1086, occurs in a grant by his nephew King Stephen of the rights of the monks of Eye, dated 1137 or 1138, as *Orefort*.²⁹ Ekwall cites the form *Oreford* from the Pipe Roll for 1163/4 and interprets this spelling as deriving from the Old English words, *óra*, 'border', 'bank', or 'shore', and *ford*, 'ford', thus meaning, he suggests, 'ford at the sea-shore'.³⁰

Looking at the landscape history of Orford and its estuary, this interpretation has always struck me as odd. We can see from the surviving early maps that Orford was once at the mouth of the river, but it is difficult to imagine that there was ever a ford across the estuary there.³¹ As nearby Sudbourne appears to have been a centre of authority for the Danish

nobility settled in East Anglia (see above), the possibility arises that the name might have been of Scandinavian origin. If so, the suggestion would be that Orford was not a *ford* but a *fjord*, from the Old Norse *ffjorthr*, meaning geographically a flooded estuary, like the lowland examples in Denmark such as Roskilde Fjord.

Other examples of place names where the second element *-ford* was derived from Old Norse *-ffjorthr* would be Waterford and Wexford in Ireland.³² Similarly, the second element of the name of the lost port at the mouth of the River Deben in Suffolk, *Goseford*,³³ as well as Hamford Water just to south beyond Stourmouth, may be explained as having been of Scandinavian derivation.

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NOTES

- 1 *The Saga of Olaf the Holy* is one of the principal sagas of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* (Home's Little Ring), or *History of the Norse Kings* (Aðalbjarnarson 1945).
- 2 I cite the edition and translation of Poole 1987, 268.
- 3 Ekwall 1944a, 1944b; Townend 1998, 61–62; Poole 1987, 268–69.
- 4 Cited by Gardner 1754, 115–17; Arnott 1952, 10.
- 5 I follow here the etymology of Townend (1998, 61, n.55), rather than Arnott, who argued that *Newmore* derived from *Newmere*, 'meaning a new "mere" or boundary of the shingle spit' (Arnott 1952, 7).
- 6 Steers 1927, 41.
- 7 A.P. Carr concluded that 'Historical evidence suggests rapid growth of the spit towards the south-west in the later sixteenth century ... From the nineteenth century both cartographic and documentary information demonstrate that the distal point of the spit has fluctuated widely and its rate of growth during periods of accretion has been very variable' (Carr 1969, 38).
- 8 'In that year the spit attained its greatest known length, but during a severe storm about one mile of it was cut off, and the dead shingle was swept southwards and partly piled up at Shingle Street' (Steers 1953, 155).
- 9 Steers 1927, 39–42; 1953, 52–156.
- 10 An interesting name – Stony Ditch is *Stone Eye Ditch* on Norden's map of 1601 (Anon. 1966). The name would thus appear to have originally meant 'Stone Island Ditch', which would not be at all inappropriate on an ever-changing shingle spit.
- 11 Steers suggests that it implies 'a long halt in the general southward growth of the spit' (1953, 155) and Stony Ditch Point 'is a place of no little significance in the evolution of the spit in relation to the history of the port of Orford' (1953, 154).
- 12 Arnott 1952, 7; see also note 5 above.
- 13 Ekwall 1960, 132.
- 14 Or with St Botulf, part of whose cross was discovered upriver at Iken by Dr Stanley West in 1977. See West, Scarfe, and Cramp 1984; Scarfe 1986; and Plunkett and West 1998, 328, 344–45. Another possibility is that the suggested cross was associated with the cult of St Bartholomew, to whom Orford church is dedicated.
- 15 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms.E, 1009. References to *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are to author's translation from the edition of the text by Plummer and Earle 1892. See also Swanton 1996 and 2000.
- 16 On the use of Sigvatr's verse and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to chart Olaf's movements, see Turville-Petre 1976, 141–43; and Campbell 1971, 8–12.
- 17 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms.E, 1010.
- 18 This battle is often confused with Ulfcytel's heroic defeat in 1004, which appears to have been fought at another place also called Ringmere, this one near Wretham, north of Thetford. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ms.E, 1004) tells how Ulfcytel attempted to intercept the Danes, led by their king, Sweyn Forkbeard, as they were returning to their ships, anchored near Norwich, the morning after they had sacked and burned

Thetford. A hard battle followed and, although he could not prevent the Danes from getting back their ships, Ulfcytel earned the respect of the Danes that day, as two manuscripts of the *Chronicle* add to their description of the battle with the statement, *swá hí sylfe sæðon, þæt hí náfre wyrson hand plegan on Angelcynne ne gemitton þonne Ulfcytel him tó bróhte.*, [As they themselves said, that they never worse hand play in [the] English kind met than Ulfcytel to them brought.] (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, mss.C&D, 1004). This suggests how Ulfcytel earned his nickname *Snillingr* ['Bold' or 'Valiant'] in Scandinavian sources, and why East Anglia came to be known as 'Ulfkell's Land'.

- 19 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms.E, 1011; Jones 1984, 366–67.
- 20 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ms.E, 1012.
- 21 Fairweather 2005, 134–35; see also Scarfe 1986, 48–49. Around 970, King Edgar gave it all to Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester (in exchange for the bishop's translation into Old English of *The Rule of St Benedict*), who in turn gave it to St Etheldreda's refounded abbey at Ely.
- 22 Marten 2008. This seminal paper also shows that the division of East Anglia and the creation of the two counties of Norfolk and Suffolk was imposed by King Cnut in the 1020s to 'divide and rule' the region which had been such a strong centre of resistance to the Danish power during the wars culminating in his kingdom-winning victory at *Assandún* in Essex on 18 October, 1016.
- 23 This interesting group of hundreds is mentioned in the grants to St Etheldreda's at Ely by King Edgar (Sawyer 1968, no. 779) and by King Edward the Confessor (Sawyer 1968, no. 1051). The latter refers to Sudbourne *ad Wichelau quinque et dimidium centuriatum*. See Scarfe 1972, 40–41; Hart 1992, 47, 577, 595; Warner 1996, 152–56; and Newton 2003, 23–24.
The discovery near Sudbourne church in 1961 or 1962 of what is now recognised as an Anglo-Saxon bronze stylus of pre-Viking date provides slight, but potentially significant, archaeological evidence for Wuffing literary activity here (Suffolk County Council Monument Full Report SUE 005). Anglo-Saxon pottery shards of pre-Viking date and later have also been found near the church (Suffolk County Council Monument Full Report SUE 007). I am indebted to Edward Martin for these references.
- 24 The river walls enclosing the Fleet were not built until the late 16th century, for Norden on his map of 1601 labels it as 'newly inned' (Anon. 1966).
- 25 Fenwick 1984.
- 26 *Hér ... Bótuulf ongon minster timbran æt Icanhó*, [Here ... Borwulf began [his] minster to build at Iken Hoo] (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* ms.A, 654 – author's translation). See Stevenson 1924, as well as the references cited in note 14 above.
- 27 As can be seen in the number of vessels pictured at anchor in series of sixteenth-century maps of Orford Ness in the British Library reproduced by Arnott 1952.
- 28 Potter, Poulter, and Allen 2002; on the citadel palace, see Heslop 1991.
- 29 Brown 1992, no. 15, p. 25. The reference to Orford is as follows: *et mercatum et theloneum de Orefort, preter navium que pertinent ad firmam de Donewico p(ro)p(ter) + xxx solidos*, [and market and toll of Orford except for the ships which pertain to the farm of Dunwich for 30s] (p. 27). I am further indebted to Edward Martin for this reference.
- 30 Ekwall 1960, 350; Potter, Poulter, and Allen 2002, 13.
- 31 Arnott 1952; Carr 1969, 28–39.
- 32 *Waterford* seems to have derived from the Old Norse *Vadre-fjord*, 'Wether Fjord', and *Wexford* from the Old Irish *escir* 'sandbank' and Old Norse *fjorthr* 'fjord' (Everett-Heath 2005).
- 33 Rather than from the Old English *góse-ford*, 'goose ford' (Arnott 1950, 54).

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