**The Battle of Carham – 1018**

At the time of the battle the village of Carham was the site of an important minster founded by St Cuthbert. This would have been on or very close to the site of the present parish church. Cuthbert was an important cultural icon in the North and his minster would have made the site a place worth attacking, and also worth defending.

Carham is on the line of an ancient Roman road linking Tweedmouth to Dere Street (A69 at St Boswells) and there was an important river crossing at Carham evidenced by the name of Birgham, the village on the northern side of the Tweed. An ancient pathway, which is still visible and often used, leads southwards from Birgham Church to a ford across the Tweed and a crossing of the river can still be made at low summer water levels. It is thought that a Roman patrol camp existed at or very close to Carham. Although the course of the Tweed has moved, and can be seen to be still moving within this area, the hard limestone rocks have kept this movement to a minimum. The flat, fertile and well drained flood plain to the south of the Tweed suggest a suitable place for battle and Carham is certainly a plausible site for the battle.

To date there has been no serious archaeology done to look for the battle site, but the existence of Cuthbert’s Minster and the ecclesiastical importance of Carham are the most important factors that make this the more likely site for the battle of 1018. If we accept Simeon's account the Uhtred was killed in 1016 then obviously he did not command the Northumbrian forces. His brother was known as Eadwulf Cudel, Cudel meaning 'Cuttlefish', a medieval insult meaning coward.

History is written by the victors, and it would therefore be a better story for the victors to have defeated the well-known and respected warrior Uhtred, rather than his weak, vacillating and cowardly brother. Malcolm II would also have expunged his defeat of 1006 at Durham by defeating his one-time vanquisher. Simeon describes the Battle of Carham as a massive victory for Malcolm and Owen, and bewails the loss of the male population between Tees and Tweed, However the academic Meehan of Edinburgh observes that only Simeon makes this assumption of such massive losses.

A picture containing text, map

Description automatically generatedThere are no surviving accounts of the battle itself, but we can make an educated guess based on other similar conflicts of that era. Armies were much smaller than in later battles, the numbers of soldiers more likely to be in hundreds rather than thousands.

The route that the combined army would have taken as they made their way eastwards is unclear. It would seem sensible that they took a route south of the Tweed along the Roman road to Carham as no similar route was available north of the Tweed. However, this would have brought the combined army into enemy territory and more liable to attack by Northumbrian forces. An approach on the northern bank of the Tweed to Birgham would have afforded the river as a defensive barrier against such an attack.

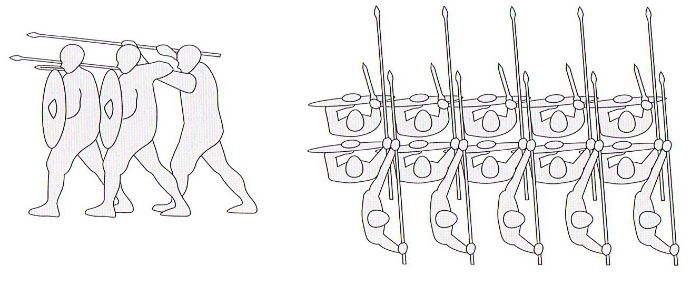
River crossings were, and to this day are still military obstacles which can cause problems. A good defensive position can often be taken along a river bank and many battles were fought in these locations. The name Birgham indicates the existence of a river crossing point, in fact it is still possible (with great care) to cross the Tweed between Birgham and Carham at low summer water levels, However if Malcolm II and Owen arrived at Birgham before the Northumbrians had set up a defensive position, or if they had sufficient numbers to overcome such a position the Tweed might not have proved to be an insurmountable problem.

**Battle**

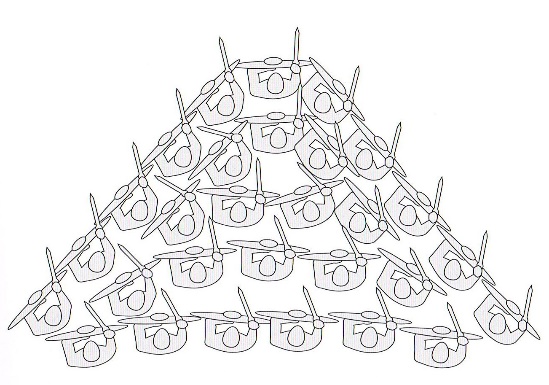
There are no surviving accounts of the Battle of Carham, but we know the weapons and the tactics of the times and can deduce a likely scenario. Armies of the day were small, combatants usually numbered in hundreds rather than thousands. They travelled light, carried all there armaments and lived off the land by scavenging and plunder. Scouts would have noted the progress of threats or invasion, but response times might have been slow due to distances that had to be covered, first to get to muster points and then to march as a cohesive force to counter the enemy incursion.

The weapons of war were very basic, hand held or thrown, and therefore causing close quarter fighting. The first weapons used in a battle were missiles; spear, javelin and arrows, but as battle proper was joined, heavy sword, axe and seax, a long dagger, were used in close quarter, face to face and hand to hand fighting. Defensive personal armour was heavy, but surprisingly similar to the weight carried by the modern infantryman. It consisted of a large metal rimmed wooden shield, steel helmet and mail tunic, leather and linen padding. Using these weapons while carrying the weight of the armour required prodigious personal strength and stamina, but ensured that battles were relatively short in duration as exhaustion would inevitably overcome ambition. Battles were short, sharp, bloody and brutal.



The normal battle tactic was to form a shield wall, three or more ranks packed closely together, protected by shield, spear and sword. This formation allows for a gap in the front rank caused by a fallen warrior to be quickly filled from the second rank - and so on. This is a nominally a defensive formation, but when one shield wall is set in opposition to a second shield wall there are two potentially immovable objects and somethings gotta give! Much, if not all, depends on holding the line of the shield wall, so initially neither side would want to make the first move.

Battle would likely have started with the hurling of javelins and exchange of arrow storms, and then the two shield walls would approach each other with the great noise of, banging of sword on shield, shouting and screaming of insults and each side looking for a weak point in the opposition wall which might be exploited.

The larger force of Malcolm and Owen might have attempted to overcome the Northumbrians by sheer force of numbers and use their superiority to crush the line or outflank the defenders and attack into their rear. Another tactic was to use the Boar’s Head formation to break through the Northumbrian defensive line by sheer force of numbers using the Boar's Head formation. This concentrates the attack at a point and drives a wedge through the defenders’ line which can then be exploited to great advantage.

The superior numbers of Owen and Malcolm made the outcome of this battle inevitable. The Northumbrians were defeated with heavy losses but Malcolm made no attempt to proceed further south to Durham to avenge his defeat of 1006.

This was the last mention in history of Owen of Strathclyde. He died in 1018 but we do not know whether he was killed in battle or died of wounds sustained. The Northumbrians suffered a sufficiently heavy defeat as to be unable to retaliate, but were the Northumbrian losses as excessive as Simeon of Durham claimed? Certainly the Northumbrians were in no position to retaliate and counter attack and Lothian, the land on the north side of the River Tweed was not regained. Owen and Malcolm must also have suffered casualties, but were these sufficient to dissuade them from further advance? Surely Malcolm would have been eager to avenge his defeat of 1006 at Durham, but serious attempts at further southerly gains did not materialise until an attack on Alnwick in 1093.

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