

# Was St. Edmund killed by the Vikings in Essex?

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Keith Briggs, a visiting research fellow in linguistics at the University of the West of England, has proposed a new site for the battle in which King Edmund of East Anglia was killed in 869. If confirmed, the new proposal would change our understanding of the early history of Suffolk and especially of the town and abbey of Bury St. Edmunds.

The story of Edmund, king and martyr, has become a kind of foundation myth for the county of Suffolk, but contains at least one element of truth - in 869 there was a battle between the East Anglians and the [Vikings](#); Edmund was captured and later killed. About [100 years](#) later the story was written down - soon after, Edmund came to be considered a Christian martyr and the new abbey (founded about 1020) at Bury St Edmunds was dedicated to him. Edmund's remains were believed to be housed in the abbey, miracles were attributed to him, and Bury thus became a major pilgrimage site and a rich and powerful abbey for the next 500 years.

However, the site of the battle (recorded as Hægelisdun) was forgotten, and different modern historians have suggested that it was at Hoxne in Suffolk, Hellesdon in Norfolk, or at Bradfield St Clare near Bury. The new proposal by Dr. Briggs is unusual in that it is based on a detailed analysis of the linguistic structure of the various place-names involved. UWE Bristol has several experts among its staff in the study of both place-names and personal names from the viewpoint of historical [linguistics](#). The use of place-names has long been recognized as an essential input into the broad study of settlement and migration, but the

current work is an intriguing example of a precise conclusion about one historical event being drawn purely from place-name research.

Dr. Briggs makes a strong case that Hægelisdun is actually the name of a hill in Essex, in fact the hill on which the town of Maldon is now situated. The argument uses historical documents which show that this hill was called Hailesdon, and moreover was the headquarters of a local chieftain in the ninth century, showing that this place was of strategic importance and likely to be a target of the Vikings. Maldon is one of the East Anglian estuaries which allowed Viking ships to penetrate the hinterland, and these estuaries were always vulnerable. Maldon is known to be the site of another major Viking battle, in the year 991.

Dr. Briggs said, “In 869 the Vikings were proceeding in the direction of London; soon afterwards King Alfred the Great halted their advance and took the English throne, while the rule of the Vikings, the Danelaw, was established in the north and east. This was thus a crucial time in English history, making the role of Edmund in these events of especial interest.

“It was never likely that Edmund was really buried in his eponymous abbey. Probably the whole legend which makes him a hero and martyr is manufactured, as were many other similar stories in the Middle Ages. But any progress towards confirming the germ of truth which started this process is worthwhile. And it does now seem that Edmund ranged more widely than just Suffolk, and probably had an Essex ally against the Vikings.”

Provided by University of the West of England

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