

The Battle of Maldon

One thousand years ago
the Anglo-Saxon army was defeated
by the Vikings.

* * *

DAVE BEARD

reappraises the significance of the battle.

THE BATTLE OF MALDON was fought in 991,¹ and is reported in a number of sources: versions A, C, D, E and F of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles,² a Latin version of the life of St Oswald,³ the *Liber Eliensis*,⁴ and a lengthy fragment of an Old English poem.⁵ Historically, the battle was not a particularly strategic or important one; however, the survival of the poem has meant that Maldon must rank as one of the best known Anglo-Saxon battles.

The poem's survival is most fortunate as the only manuscript containing it was almost totally destroyed. This manuscript, which contained several other texts including the sole copy of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, once

belonged to John Leland, the Antiquary. It later came into the possession of Archbishop Parker, who published the text of Asser's *Life*. The manuscript did not pass to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, with the rest of Parker's manuscripts after his death; instead, it became part of the library of Lord Lumley, where it was described in a catalogue by Dr Thomas James. Early in the seventeenth century it passed to the Cotton Library where it was almost completely destroyed by the tragic fire of 1731.⁶ It is possible that *The Battle of Maldon* was not bound in as part of the manuscript until it was acquired by Cotton.⁷ Nothing of the poem remains in the few fragments of the manuscript that survived the fire; our knowledge of the poem is entirely due to a copy made by John Elphinston some years before the fire.

1. The battle took place on 10 August according to the obit for Byrhtnoth in a 12th-century Ely Calendar (Library of Trinity College, Cambridge). For a comment see B. Dickins, 'The Day of Byrhtnoth's Death and Other Obits from a Twelfth-Century Ely Kalendar,' *Leeds Studies in English* vi. (1937), pp. 14–24.

The date is given as 11 August in an early eleventh-century Winchester Calendar (British Library, Cotton Titus D xxvii).

The poem that appeared in the manuscript was itself a fragment consisting of 325 lines. Both the beginning and the end is missing, and it is not certain just how much of the poem has been lost.⁸ Fortunately, the part that does survive begins with a description of the English troops being arrayed for battle, and seems to recount most of the actual battle. The fragment ends with a speech from one of the faithful retainers exhorting the remaining warriors to fight on to the death.

The poem tells how Byrhtnoth, the leader of the Anglo-Saxon army in Essex, met an invading force of Vikings at a crossing point on the river Blackwater. The Vikings sent a messenger to ask for Danegeld but, in an impressive speech, Byrhtnoth said that the English refused to come to terms, saying that they would rather fight:

Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
ættryne ord and ealde swurd,
þa heregeatu ðe eow æt hilde ne deah (lines 45–48)

Do you hear, seaman, what this people says?
They plan to give you nought but spears for tribute,
Poisonous point and edge of tried old sword
War-tax that will not help you in the fight.⁹

The poem makes it clear that the English were able to defend the narrow crossing point (lines 74–83); nevertheless, Byrhtnoth was persuaded to allow the Vikings to cross the river and prepare for battle (lines 86–95). In the fight that followed, Byrhtnoth was killed (lines 159–181) and many of the English fled from the battle (lines 185–201). Byrhtnoth's loyal followers, however, chose to die on the battlefield in an attempt to avenge the death of their lord. The remainder of the poem is concerned with the speeches made by the faithful retainers exhorting the army to greater valour, and the accounts of their glorious deaths in the service

of their lord.

The description of the battle in the poem is the most complete of the various versions that have survived, and would appear to be the most accurate. The accounts given in versions C, D, E and F of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are brief and, for the most part, give little more detail than the fact that Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon. The account in version A is almost certainly corrupt and is discussed in more detail below.

The *Vita Oswaldi*, which can be shown to have been written by the monk Byrhtferth at the Abbey of Ramsey between 997 and 1005,¹⁰ gives a short, but lively, picture of the battle that agrees in principle with the account in the poem.

The description in the *Liber Eliensis* is much more detailed, but far less accurate. This work was written in c.1170 by Thomas, a monk of Ely, who drew heavily on the history of Richard, written in c.1130.¹¹ In the *Liber Eliensis* Byrhtnoth is described as *Northanimbrorum dux*, and he is credited with fighting two battles at Maldon. In the first battle he successfully defends the crossing of the river, and kills almost all the Vikings. In the second battle, which is described as taking place four years later, the Vikings return to seek out the person who defeated them on the previous occasion and to challenge him to another battle. Byrhtnoth accepts the challenge, and a fierce battle ensues which lasts for fourteen days. Eventually Byrhtnoth is killed by the Vikings who cut off his head and take it away with them. After the battle the body of Byrhtnoth is retrieved by the Abbot of Ely who buries it in the church with a ball of wax in place of the head.

The fact that the body of Byrhtnoth was buried at Ely is confirmed by the will of his widow, Ælflæd.¹² The possibility that the body

2. The relevant versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are: (A) The Parker Chronicle, Corpus Christi College MS 173, *sub anno* 993 (C) The Abingdon Chronicle, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B, *sub anno* 991 (D) The Worcester Ch Tiberius Biv, *sub anno* 991 British Library, Cotton MS (E) The Laud Chronicle, Bodleian MS. Laud 636 *sub anno* 991 (F) The Bilingual Canterbury Epitome: British Library, Cotton MS Domitian A viii, *sub anno* 991

3. *Vita Oswaldi* quoted in 'Historians of the Church of York,' ed J. Raine (1886), 1, p.455

4. *Liber Eliensis*, 11, 62 f; ed D.J. Stewart pp.180–3

5. British Museum Cotton MS Ortho A xii (burned 1731)

6. The poem appears in Thomas Smith's 1696 catalogue of the Cotton Library: 3. Fragmentum quoddam Historicum de Eadrico &c., Saxonice
More information is given in 1705 by Humfrey Wanley: Fragmentum capite et calce mutilum, sex foliis constans, quo Poetice et Stylo Caedmoniano celebratur virtus bellica BEORHTNOTHI Ealdormanni OFFAE et aliorum AngloSaxonum, in praelio cum Danis (Wanley, H., *Librorum Vett. Septentrionalium*, Oxford, 1705)

7. Scragg, D.G. *The Battle of Maldon*, 1981, p.2

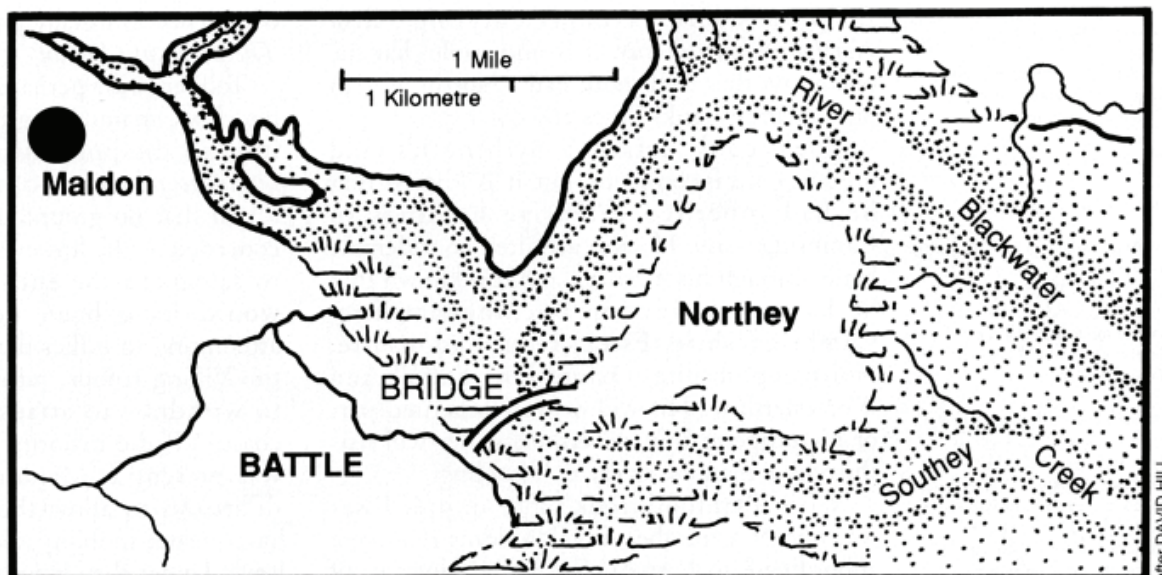
8. Scragg estimates that c. 50 or 60 lines are missing from the beginning of the poem and only little more from the end: Scragg, op cit., 1981, p.4

9. Translations from *The Battle of Maldon* are taken from the excellent parallel text version by Richard Hamer: Hamer, R., *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, 1970, pp.51–69

10. Lapidge, M., 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-century Anglo-Latin Literature,' *Anglo-Saxon England* 4, 1975, pp.91–94

11. Lieberman F., 'Zur Geschichte Byrhtnoth's des Helden von Maldon,' *Archiv* ci, 26

12. Birch, W de Gray (ed), *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1885, 1289 and Whitelock, D (ed), *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, 1930, xv, 40/5



was, indeed, without a head is raised in the account by James Bentham of the opening of Byrhtnoth's tomb in 1769 when a number of tombs were moved from the north wall of the choir to Bishop West's chapel. A letter read before the Society of Antiquaries in 1772 states:

I apprised those who attended on that occasion, May 18, 1769, that if my surmises were well founded no head would be found in the cell which contained the bones of Byrhtnoth, Duke of Northumberland ...there were no remains of the head, though we searched diligently, and found most, if not all his other bones almost entire, and those remarkable for their length... It was observed that the collar-bone had been nearly cut through, as by a battle-axe, or two handed sword.¹³

These apparently confirmatory facts do not necessarily give credence to the story in the *Liber Eliensis*. It must be remembered that the translation of the supposed remains of Byrhtnoth from the Saxon church to the Norman cathedral took place in 1154, several years before the account was written. Thomas, the writer of the account, was possibly referring to this event when he says that Byrhtnoth's body was recognised long afterward by the fact that it had no head, and his knowledge of the existence of a headless corpse may have influenced his account. Moreover, even if the corpse were that of Byrhtnoth it does not, of course, imply trophy-hunting on behalf of the Vikings. Examination of one of the skeletons from the Eccles Anglo-Saxon cemetery has shown that virtual decapitation was a possibility during the course of an Anglo-Saxon battle,¹⁴ particularly if the victim had been rendered incapable of defending himself,¹⁵ as the poet tells us was the case with Byrhtnoth (lines 164–168).

Byrhtnoth was certainly one of the great men of his generation. He became ealdorman of Essex in 956, and was one of the most powerful ealdormen in the kingdom. It is likely that Byrhtnoth had some Northumbrian connection¹⁶, which may have resulted in the *Liber Eliensis* wrongly styling him *Northanimbrorum dux*. It is noticeable that the poem says that Byrhtnoth had a Northumbrian hostage in his ranks (lines 265–7).

The records detailing Byrhtnoth's land holdings are incomplete, but it is known that he had inherited extensive holdings in Cambridgeshire. He also acquired considerable lands through his marriage and it is known that he had possessions in Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Suffolk and Worcestershire. His widow only inherited part of his property but, nevertheless, her will lists thirtynine manors, a very rich holding.

When Byrhtnoth took office in 956, Essex was one of a number of ealdordoms that were subordinate to East Anglia. The ealdorman of

East Anglia from 932 to 956 was the powerful Athelstan 'Half King'.¹⁷ In 956 Athelstan was succeeded by his youngest son, Athelwine, and from this time he and Byrhtnoth appeared to have worked closely together. Both were strong supporters of the monastic reforms during the reign of King Edgar; Athelwine made substantial grants to Ramsey, while Byrhtnoth assisted Ely. After Edgar's death in 975, ealdorman Alfhre of Mercia led a reaction against the monasteries, gaining much support from the many ealdormen who felt that the wealth of the church had increased at their expense. Support for the monasteries was led by Byrhtnoth and Athelwine, and the *Liber Eliensis* recounts how Byrhtnoth spoke out in the *witan* against those who wished to undo the work of the monastic reforms out of greed.¹⁸ It is likely that this support for the monasteries was instrumental in ensuring the survival (almost certainly in a monastic library) of the manuscript of the poem.

In 991 Athelwine lay seriously ill and Byrhtnoth was the foremost active ealdorman in England. *Liber Eliensis*¹⁹ states that all those responsible for local defence formed allegiance with him, so that it is probably, as leader of the defences for the whole east coast, that he appears at Maldon. If this was indeed the case, the disruption caused by Byrhtnoth's death at Maldon could have been sufficient reason for the decision to pay a Danegeld of ten thousand pounds that year.²⁰

Byrhtnoth's status at the time of the battle of Maldon may also have had an effect on the strategy that he employed. Many commentators have been critical of his decision to allow the Viking forces to cross the river (lines 86–95), and considerable discussion has centred around the exact meaning of the word *ofermod* in line 89. This word is usually translated as 'pride' (certainly this is its use in *The Fall of the Angels* (line 48) where it describes the nature of Satan's sin of pride) although an alternative gloss of 'over-confidence' is usually given in most editions of *The Battle of Maldon*.

Tolkien was, perhaps, the most extreme in his views, maintaining that the use of *ofermod* implied disapproval by the poet, and that *landes to fela* (line 90) meant 'in Old English idiom that no ground at all should have been conceded'.²¹ If, however, Byrhtnoth's role was to safeguard the entire east coast, then he would have been perfectly justified in attempting to inflict the maximum damage on the Viking troops, rather than allowing them to withdraw to attack other places on the coast.²² If the majority of the English defence was present at Maldon it would have been disastrous to allow the Vikings (who would have greater mobility because of their ships) to leave. Under the circumstances it is difficult to

13. Bentham's comments were made in a letter which was read to the Society of Antiquaries, 6 February 1772, it was also printed in: Bentham, J., *History and Antiquities of the Cathedral and Conventual Church of Ely* (2nd edition), 1812, p.23

14. Wenham, S.J., *Anatomical interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Weapon Injuries*, in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon England* (ed) S. Chadwick Hawkes, 1989, pp.123–139.

15. *ibid.*, p.131

16. Gordon, E.V., *The Battle of Maldon*, 1937, p.16.

17. Hart, C., 'Athelstan 'Half King' and his family,' *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2, 1973, pp.115–44.

18. *Liber Eliensis*, 11, 62.

19. *Liber Eliensis*, 11, 62.

20. Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (C) *sub anno* 991

21. Tolkien, J.R.R., 'The homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhtelm's Son,' *Essays and Studies*, 6, 1953, pp.1–18

22. For a comment on this view see: Samouco, W.A., 'General Byrhtnoth,' *Journal of English and German Philology*, 62, 1963, pp.129–135; and Macrae-Gibson, O.D., 'How Historical is the Battle of Maldon?' *Medium Aevum*, 39, 1970, pp.89–107.

see what alternatives were open to Byrhtnoth.

The Battle of Maldon makes no attempt to name the leaders of the Viking army, although the *Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*,²³ which is probably based on a lost version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, states that the Viking leaders were Justin and Guthmund. Version A of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* claims that the Vikings were led by Anlaf, that is Olaf Tryggvason, but there are a number of inconsistencies in this entry that suggest that the scribe has compounded the entries for two separate years. Firstly, the entry referring to Maldon has been wrongly dated to 993; secondly, it is obvious that, perhaps as a result of the mistake in date, these events are mingled with events that appear in the other *Chronicles* under the year 994. On the whole, it seems unlikely that Olaf was present at the battle of Maldon.²⁴

None of the sources mention a specific location for the battle. Identification of the probable site relies on evidence provided by the poem. It is obvious that the encounter takes place by the river Blackwater, alongside a tidal ford:

Ne mihte ðær for wætere werod to ðam oðrum
ðær com flowende flod æfter ebban
lucon lagustreamas; to lang hit him ruhte
hwænne hi togædere garas beron (lines 64–67)

But neither side might there approach the other
For water: the tide rose after the ebb,
The streaming waters joined. It seemed too long
Before they could engage in deadly combat.

When the Vikings finally cross the river they came *west ofer Pantan* (westward over the Pante, now the river Blackwater). The most generally accepted location for the battle is that given by Laborde in 1925,²⁵ who suggested that the Vikings were camped on Northey Island, less than two miles below Maldon. Northey Island is certainly a likely site for the encounter. It is linked to the southern bank by a tidal causeway, which would explain why neither side could approach the other (lines 64–65) and why the crossing point is described both as a *bricge* (bridge) in line 74, and as a *ford* in line 81 and line 88, over which the Vikings had to wade (line 96). The causeway runs roughly north-east to south-west, so that the Vikings would cross *west ofer Pantan*, and the meeting of the tidal streams flowing around the island could be aptly described by the phrase *lucon lagustreamas* (line 66).

The considerable degree of realism which the poet has introduced into his subject has led some commentators to assume that the poet was faithfully recording events of which he had direct knowledge.²⁶ A more detailed examination of the structure of the poem has shown

23. *Florenti Wigorniensis Monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis*. (ed) B. Thorpe, 1848, p.149.

24. This question is discussed at considerable length in Gordon, op cit., pp.10–15.

25. Laborde, E.D., 'The Site of the Battle of Maldon.' *English Historical Review*, 40, 1925, pp.161–173.

26. Gordon, op cit., p.22.



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that this is not the case;²⁷ the poet has carefully controlled both the order and the nature of the speeches to ensure that they are suited to the status of the speaker.

The Battle of Maldon has been described as 'the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English',²⁸ and attention has been drawn to the number of similarities in expression with Old Norse heroic poems.²⁹ Much of the content of the poem is concerned with how the faithful retainers of Byrhtnoth honour their obligations under the *comitatus* – the Germanic bond of loyalty between the retainer and his lord.

Under the terms of the *comitatus* the lord promises to offer his protection to his thane; to feed and house him and to reward his deeds with suitable gifts. In return, the thane promises to fight for his lord, if necessary dying in the attempt to avenge him. It was considered a grave dishonour to flee from battle if one's lord had been killed – hence the comment made by the poet when Godrich flees from the battle after Byrhtnoth's death (line 190). The basis of the *comitatus* can be found in pre-Migration period Germanic society, and is described by Tacitus,³⁰ but the extent to which such a code still operated in tenth-century society has long been a subject of discussion.

The *comitatus* naturally features heavily in the early heroic literature and, with the conversion to Christianity, was absorbed into the poetic repertoire of the later poets. In the poem *The Fall of the Angels*, for example, the bound and helpless Satan reminds his 'retainers' (the other angels cast into Hell along with him) of the gifts that he previously gave them as lord to thane and their consequent obligations to him now that their fortunes are so changed (lines 164–189). The poetic vocabulary uses a number of synonyms for 'lord' that reflect the *comitatus* bond. For example *beahgiefa* (ring giver); *goldgiefa* (gold giver) and *sincgiefa* (treasure giver) all reflect the obligations of the *comitatus* lord to reward his thanes with costly gifts for their services. The word *hlaford* (modern English 'Lord') comes from *hlafweard*, 'loaf guardian', a reminder of the important obligation of the *comitatus* lord to provide feasting and drinking for his retainers.

It is not just in the literature that the code of the *comitatus* is followed. A number of examples occur in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles; nevertheless, it must be admitted that they tend to date to the seventh and eighth centuries, rather than to the tenth:

In 625 Lilla, a thane of King Edwin, sacrificed his own life to save that of his lord by thrusting his own body in front of the king to protect him from an assassin's blow.

In 666 Bishop Wilfrid's retinue swore to fight to the death, if necessary, when outnumbered by a large force of heathen South Saxons.

In 685 King Egfrith was killed at Nechtansmere 'all his bodyguard having been killed' – the absence of comment from the chronicle entry may indicate that this sacrifice was what was expected from them.

In 786 when the thanes of Cynewulf of Essex were roused from sleep to find that the king had been ambushed and killed, they refused all offer of terms despite the fact that several had kinsmen in the attacking party. They fought until all were killed, except for one Welsh hostage who was severely wounded. When Cynewulf's main force arrived the ambushing party similarly refused any offer of terms, saying that they preferred to die with their lord.

Against these early examples of loyalty, the recorded events of the later tenth century present a dark contrast. Ethelred came to the throne after the murder of his half-brother Edward, under circumstances that seem to incriminate Ethelred's mother,³¹ and it is clear that the contemporary chronicler 'clearly loathed Ethelred and was heavily inclined to attribute English disaster to lack of good faith, sheer treachery and perfidy, starting in the royal person and spreading throughout the body politic'.³²

The contemporary pun on the king's name reflected popular opinion: Ethel-red 'noble council' became Un-read 'No council'. It is against this background that we should view the content of *The Battle of Maldon*.

At such a time, the cowardly flight of Godrich and his followers might have been seen to have considerable relevance beyond the battle of Maldon itself. The Chronicle accounts for 992, 993, 998 and 999 all contain descriptions of treachery and desertion on the battlefield. When such actions seemed commonplace, the loyalty shown by warriors such as Byrhtwold must have appeared all the more desirable:

Byrhtwold mærelode, bord hafenode
se wæs eald geneat, æsc acwehte
he ful baldlice beornas lærde:
'Hige sceal ðe heardra, heorte ðe cenre,
mod sceal ðe mare, ðe ure mægen lytlað.
Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawan,
god on greote; a mæg gnornian
se ðe nu fram ðis wigplegan wendan ðenceð
Ic eom frod feores: fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men licgan ðence.' (lines 309–319)

Byrhtwold spoke out, he raised his shield aloft
And shook his spear; an elderly retainer,
Courageously he taught the warriors:
Mind must be the harder, spirit must be bolder
And heart the greater, as our might grows less.
Here lies our leader in the dust, the hero
Cut down in battle. Ever must he mourn
Who thinks to go home from this battle-play.
I am an aged man. Hence I will not,
But I intend to die beside my lord,
Give up my life beside so dear a chief.

27. Scragg, *op cit.*, p.36.

28. Gordon, *op cit.*, p.24.

29. Phillpotts, B.S., 'The Battle of Maldon: some Danish Affinities,' *Modern Language Review*, xxiv, 1929, pp.172–90.

30. Tacitus, *Germania*, vii and xiv.

31. Loyn, H.R., *The Vikings in Britain*, 1977, p.82.

32. *Ibid* p.82.