The Battle of Maldon


Hyperlinks to annotations are added in-line in the text, in bolded brackets. See also my notes on The Battle of Maldon.

Text

. . . would be broken. [1]
Then he commanded each young man
To leave his horse, to drive it far off,
and to go forth, with mind turned
to strong hands and good thoughts.5
Then Offa's kinsman first discovered
that the great earl suffered no slackness;
he let from his hand, then, loved one fly,
hawk to the holt, and he stepped to battle. [2]
So one could know that the lad wished not10
to weaken in war, when he seized weapons.
And as for him, Eadric would follow his prince,
his lord to the fight; he bore forth, then,
spear to the battle. He had good thought
as long as he with hands could hold [3]15
board [4] and bright sword: his boast he performed
when to the fight he came with his lord. [5]

Then Byrhtnoth began to array men there,
rode and gave counsel, taught warriors
how they must stand and that stead [6] hold,20
bade them their round-shields rightly hold
fast with hands, not at all frightened.
When he had fairly arrayed that folk,
he dismounted among them where it most pleased him,
where he knew his hearth-band [?] most loyal.25

Then on the bank stood a Viking messenger,
called out stoutly, spoke with words,
boastfully [8] brought the seafarers' errand
to that land's earl where he stood on shore:
"Seamen sent me quickly to you,30
ordered me tell you to send rings at once,
wealth for defense: better for all of you
that you with tribute this spear-rush forgo [9]
than that we share so bitter a war.
Nor need we kill each other if you perform it;35
for gold we will fasten a truce with you.
If you determine it, the mightiest here,
that you for your people ransom will pay--
give to the seamen at their own choosing
wealth for a truce and take peace from us--40
we with that payment shall to our ships,
on ocean fare, hold peace with you."

Byrhtnoth spoke, lifted shield,
shook slender ash-spear, with words spoke,
angry and one-minded gave him answer:45
"Hear you, seafarer, what this folk says?
Spears will they give you, ash-spears as tribute,
poisonous point, old sword--
an armor-tax useless to you in war.
Seamen's messenger, bear word back again;50
tell your people much loathlier tale:
that here stands a good [10] earl with his war-band,
who will defend this homeland,
Aethelred's land, land of my prince,
folk and fold. [11] At battle, now,55
heathen must fall. Too shameful it seems
that you, unfought, should go to ship
bearing our wealth, now that thus far
you have come into our land.
Not so softly shall you carry off riches:60
point must, and edge, reconcile us first,
grim battle-play, before we give tribute."

He bade them take shield then, go
so that warriors all stood on the bank.
One band could not to the other for water:65
there came flowing the flood after ebb-tide;
streams locked. Too long it seemed
till they might bear spears together.
With tumult [12] they stood along Pante's stream,
the van of the East-Saxons and the ash-army [13];70
nor might any bring harm to the other,

The flood went out. The seamen stood ready,
many a Viking, eager for war.
Then bade men's protector to hold the bridge75
a war-hardened hero--he was called Wulfstan--
who with his spear slew the first man
who most boldly there on the bridge stepped.
There with Wulfstan stood warriors unfrightened,
Aelfere and Maccus, brave twain,80
who would not at the ford flight work,
but fast against fiends defended themselves,
the while they could wield weapons.
When they perceived and saw clearly
that they found the bridge-wards there bitter,85
those loathly strangers [15] began to use guile,
asked for free landing, passage to shore,
to fare over the ford leading foot-troops.

Then the earl for his arrogance [16]
left too much land [17] to a hostile people.90
Then over cold water Byrthhelm's son
began to call (men listened):
"Now you have room: come quickly to us,
warriors to war. God alone knows
who may master this battlefield." [18]95

Slaughter-wolves waded then, heeded not water;
the Viking band, west over Pante,
over bright water, bore their shields; 
seamen to land linden [19] bore. 
There against anger [20] Byrhtnoth stood ready, 100
surrounded by warriors. He bade them with shields 
build the battle-hedge, hold that troop 
fast against foes. Then was the fight near, 
glory in battle. The time had come 
when fey men must fall there. 105
Clamor was raised there. Ravens circled, 
eagles, eager for carrion. [21] There was uproar on earth. 
From hands then they released file-hard spears; 
ground spears [, grim ones,] flew. [22]
Bows were busy; shield took spear-point. 110
Bitter that battle-rush! Warriors fell;
on either hand young men lay. 
Wounded was Wulfmaer, chose slaughter-bed, 
Byrhtnoth's kinsman; he was with swords, 
his sister-son, badly hewn. 115
There to the Vikings requital was given: 
I heard that Eadweard slew one 
fiercely with sword, withheld not its swinging, 
that at his feet a fey warrior fell; 
for that his lord thanked him, 120
his bower-thegn, when he could.
So the stout-thinkers stood firm, 
young men at battle, eagerly vied 
who with spear-point soonest might 
in fey man life conquer there, 125
warrior with weapons. Slain fell on earth. 
Steadfast they stood. Byrhtnoth directed them, 
bade each young man think on the battle, 
who against Danes would win glory in fight.

Then one strode, battle-hard, lifted his weapon, 130 
his shield as defense, and against that man stepped. 
So the earl moved toward the churl: 
either to other evil intended. 
Then hurled the sea-warrior a southern spear [23] 
so that wounded was warrior's lord. 135
He shoved then with shield so the shaft burst-- 
the spear broke and sprang back.
Enraged was that warrior: he with spear stung
the proud Viking who gave him the wound.
Wise was that fyrd-warrior: he let his spear wade through the youth's neck, hand guided it, so that it reached life in the ravager.
Then he another speedily shot
so that the byrnie burst; he was wounded in breast through the ring-locked mail; in him at heart stood poisoned point. The earl was the blither:
the brave man laughed then, said thanks to Metod for the day-work God gave him.
Then a certain warrior let a hand-dart
fly from his hand, so that it went forth through that noble, Aethelred's thegn.
By his side stood an ungrown youth, a lad in the battle, who full valiantly drew from the man the bloody spear, Wulfstan's son, Wulfmaer the Young. He let tempered shaft fare back again: the point sank in so he on earth lay who had his lord so grievously reached.
An armed man then went to the earl:
he wished to fetch wealth of that warrior--spoil and rings and adorned sword.

Then Byrhtnoth drew his bill from its sheath, broad and bright-edged, and struck against byrnie. Too quickly one of the seamen stopped him when he marred the earl's arm.
Then to the ground fell the fallow-hilt sword, nor could he hold hard blade, wield weapon. Then yet this word spoke that hoar battler, encouraged the young men, bade them go forth with good company.
He could not stand fast on foot any longer; he looked to the heavens:
"I thank thee, Wielder of peoples,
for all those joys I had in the world.
Now have I, mild Measurer, most need that you grant to my spirit goodness,
that my soul may journey now to thee,
into thy wielding, Lord of the angels,
depart in peace. I am entreating thee
that no hell-scathers harm it." 180
Then heathen men hewed him,
and the men who had stood by him,
Aelfnoth and Wulfmaer, both lay there,
when close to their lord they their lives gave.

Then they turned from battle who wished not to be there: 185
there were Odda's sons first in flight:
Godric turned from battle and left that good one
who many a horse often gave him.
He leapt on a horse which his lord owned,
on those trappings where he had no right, 190
and his brothers both ran with him,
Godwin and Godwig, heeded not battle
but turned from that war and the woods sought,
fled to that fastness, their lives saved,
and more men than was fitting 195
if they all remembered those favors
that he for their profit had done.
So Offa earlier that day had said to him
in the methel-stead, [ 28 ] when he held moot, [ 29 ]
that many spoke boldly there 200
who after, at need, would not endure.
Then was the folk's prince fallen,
Aethelred's earl. All saw there,
his hearth-companions, that their lord lay. [ 30 ]
Then valiant thegns went forth there, 205
men undaunted eagerly hastened:
they all wished, then, one of two things--
to leave life or loved one avenge.
So the son of Aelfric boldened them forth,
winter-young warrior words spoke. 210
Aelfwine spoke then, valiantly said:
"Remember the speeches we spoke at mead,
when we our boast on the bench raised,
heroes in hall about hard fight:
now I may test who is keen. [ 31 ] 215
I will make my nobility known to all,
that I was of great kin among Mercians;
my old-father [32] Ealhhelm was called, wise aldorman, [33] world-happy. Nor among the people shall thegns blame me
that I from this fyrd wish to flee, seek home, now that my prince lies hewn at the fight. That harm is most to me: he was both my kin and my lord." Then he went forth, mindful of battle, with spear-point pierced one, a seaman among the folk, that he on fold lay, destroyed with his weapon. His friends he exhorted, friends and companions, that they go forth. Offa answered, shook ash-wood: "Indeed, you, Aelfwine, have all thegns exhorted at need. [34] Now that our lord lies, earl on earth, to all of us need is that each of us embolden the other, warrior to war, the while he weapon may have yet and hold, hard blade, spear and good sword. Us Godric has, Odda's craven son, betrayed altogether. When he on horse rode, on proud steed, too many men thought that it was our lord. Therefore here on field the folk was divided, shield-defense broken. Fail his beginning! [35] since he so many men put to flight." Leofsunu spoke and his linden raised, shield for safety; to Offa he said: "I vow it, that hence I will not flee a foot's length, but will advance, avenge in strife my lord-friend. Steadfast heroes need not reproach me with words around Sturmere, now my friend fell, [36]
that I journeyed home lordless, turned from the battle; but weapon must take me, spear-point and iron." He went full angry, fought stoutly, flight he rejected. Dunnere spoke then, brandished a dart, the humble churl [37] over all called, bade that each man avenge Byrhtnoth: "He may not flinch, who thinks to avenge
his lord among folk, nor for fear mourn."
Then they went forth, recked nothing of fear.
Household retainers began to fight stoutly,
fierce spear-bearers, and prayed God
they might avenge their lord-friend,
and a fall [38] work on their foes.
The hostage began eagerly helping them;
he was of brave kin among the Northumbrians,
Ecglaf's son; Aescferth was name to him.
He flinched not at battle-play,
but again and again shot forth arrow:
sometimes he shot against shield, sometimes a man tore;
ever and anon he inflicted some wound
while he could weapons wield.

Then yet in the van stood Eadweard the Long,
ready and eager, vaunting words spoke,
that he would not flee a foot-space of land,
bend at all back when his better lay slain.
He broke the shield-wall and fought with those warriors,
until on those seamen his wealth-giver
he worthily wreaked, before he with the slain lay.
So did Aetheric, noble companion,
eager and forth-yearning, fought earnestly, [39]
Sigebyrht's brother, and many others,
clove cellod [40] shield, keenly defended them.
Shield's rim burst, and the byrnie sang
a terrible song. [41] Then Offa at battle
struck the seaman, that he on earth fell,
and there Gadda's kinsman sought ground.
Quickly at fight Offa was hewn;
he had, though, furthered what he promised his lord,
as he boasted before with his ring-giver,
that they should both into burg [42] ride
hale [43] home or in battle fall,
on the corpse-field with wounds perish.
He lay thegnly, his lord near.

Then there was shield's clash. [44] Seamen advanced,
burning with battle-rage. Spear often pierced through
a fey one's soul-house. Forth then went Wistan,
Thurstan's son, fought against warriors.
He was in throng the bane of three of them,
before Wig(h)elm's son lay slain with him. 300
There was a harsh meeting. They stood fast,
warriors in conflict. Warriors fell,
weary with wounds. The slain fell on earth.
Oswold and Eadwold all the while,
both those brothers, strengthened the men, 305
with words bade their kin-friends
that they should endure at need,
unweakly use weapons.
Byrhtwold spoke, raised his shield--
he was an old retainer--shook his ash-spear; 310
full boldly he taught warriors:
"Thought must be the harder, heart be the keener,
mind must be the greater, while our strength lessens. [45]
Here lies our prince all hewn,
good one on grit. He may always mourn 315
who from this war-play thinks now to turn.
My life is old [46]: I will not away;
but I myself beside my lord,
by so loved a man, think to lie."
So Aethelgar's son emboldened them all, 320
Godric to battle. Often he let spear,
slaughter-spear, speed into those Vikings;
so among folk he went first,
hewed and humbled, [47] until he in fight fell.
(That was not the Godric who fled from battle.) 325

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Annotations

[1] We are missing up to three leaves at the beginning of the poem and something like one leaf at the end. [Return to text]

[2] battle. The poem uses a variety of words--some evidently full synonyms, others indicating shades of meaning--for war/battle/fight: beadu, beaduræs,
(ge)feoht, garræs, guðplega, hild, wig, wigplega, (ge)win. Clearly NE does not offer this range of sound and subtle meaning difference. [Return to text]

[3] as long . . . hold. This formula (and variations of it) functions throughout the poem, indicating the warriors' complete devotion to lord and land. [Return to text]

[4] board. OE bord is one of several words used in the poem for 'shield.' [Return to text]

[5] when . . . lord. Literally, "when he had to fight before his lord," i.e., was required by law to perform military service. [Return to text]

[6] stead. As in homestead; the word means 'place.' [Return to text]

[7] hearth-band. OE heorðwerod 'the body of household retainers,' i.e., his personal followers as distinguished from the folc (see Scragg 21-22 for a qualification of the importance of this distinction). [Return to text]

[8] boastfully. OE on beot may also mean 'threateningly.' [Return to text]

[9] forgo. OE forgyldon 'foryield' (for which see the OED) or 'buy off.' [Return to text]

[10] good. This translates OE unforcuð 'reputable, honorable, noble, brave, undisgraced.' [Return to text]


[12] tumult. Scragg glosses this 'array, military force.' [Return to text]

[13] ash-army. Of the OE æschere, here translated literally, Gordon notes: "thehere or raiding force from the æscas, distinctively Scandinavian ships built of ash wood. The OE word is an anglicization of ON askr. The askr was the usual Scandinavian warship. . . ." In OE poetry the word æsc most frequently means 'ash(-spear).' [Return to text]

[14] flane-flight. OE flanes flyht 'flight of an arrow.' [Return to text]

[15] loathly strangers. OE laðe gystas 'loathed guests.' [Return to text]

[16] arrogance. OE ofermod, the most discussed word in the poem. A great deal of critical discussion of the poem in the past fifty years or so has been devoted
to arguing whether the poem views Byrhtnoth as blameworthy for his action. [Return to text]

[17] too much land. OE landes to fela. Tolkien argued that this meant that Byrhtnoth should have yielded no land at all to the Vikings. [Return to text]

[18] battlefield. OE wælstowe 'corpse-place.' [Return to text]

[19] linden. Shields were often made of linden wood. OE poetry often designates items by synecdoche: æsc for spears made of ash wood, lind for shields made of linden wood, rond for round shields, etc. [Return to text]

[20] anger. OE gramum 'fierce, angry (ones).' [Return to text]

[21] Ravens . . . carrion. This is the traditional Birds (or Beasts) of Battle Motif. Frequently a wulf is mentioned as well. See Beowulf 3024-27. [Return to text]

[22] ground . . . flew. The line is defective in the original. Editors have supplied grimme 'grim' at the beginning of the first half-line for metrical reasons. [Return to text]

[23] southern spear. I.e., of southern (English or French) make (Gordon). [Return to text]

[24] fyrd-warrior. The fyrd was the national levy or army, or any military expedition. [Return to text]

[25] Metod. Lit. 'measurer' (i.e., fate). [Return to text]

[26] bill. This is the original term here and apparently simply varies swurd. See Stone's Glossary of the Construction, Decoration, and Use of Arms and Armor (1924; rpt. New York: Jack Brussel, 1961) for its more exact denotation of one of the family of pole arms. [Return to text]

[27] A half-line is missing here. [Return to text]

[28] methel-stead. The term means 'speaking place, counsel chamber.' [Return to text]

[29] moot. OE gemot 'meeting, council, assembly.' [Return to text]

[30] lay. I.e., lay slain. [Return to text]
[31] keen. OE cene 'brave.' [Return to text]

[32] old-father. OE ealda fæder 'grandfather.' [Return to text]

[33] alderman. OE ealdorman designates a nobleman of the highest rank. [Return to text]

[34] at need. OE to beartfe 'at need; for (their) good; for (this) need.' [Return to text]

[35] Fail his beginning. OE abreode his angin 'may his beginning fail,' i.e., "may his conduct have an evil end" (Gordon). [Return to text]

[36] fell. OE gecranc, a much better (at least stronger) word than NE fell for disaster in battle. [Return to text]

[37] churl. OE ceorl 'freeman, yeoman, peasant.' [Return to text]

[38] fall. OE fyl 'fall, death, destruction.' [Return to text]

[39] earnestly. OE eornoste 'earnestly, courageously.' [Return to text]

[40] cellod. Nobody knows what this word means. Bosworth-Toller glosses it 'shaped like a shield.' [Return to text]

[41] a terrible song. OE gryreleoðe sum 'a certain one of terrible songs.' [Return to text]

[42] burg. OE burh. Probably Byrhtnoth's chief residence; possibly Maldon itself (Gordon). [Return to text]

[43] hale. An adjective, as in "hale and hearty." [Return to text]

[44] clash. OE gebræc, possibly 'breaking.' [Return to text]

[45] Thought . . . lessens. Probably the most famous lines in OE and, thus, even more difficult than others to translate satisfactorily. The OE text reads: "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlæð." [Return to text]

[46] My life is old. Lit. 'I am old of (or as regards) life.' [Return to text]

[47] humbled. OE hynde 'crushed, felled, insulted, humbled.' [Return to text]