

The Battle of Maldon

Manuscript: British Library, MS Cotton Otho A.xii (destroyed by fire in 1731). The printed text of Thomas Hearne (1726) remained until recently the only known source for the poem. Ca. 1935, a transcript of the Cotton MS by John Elphinston was found in Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B 203. The date of the composition is uncertain, but on linguistic evidence Scragg places the poem as we have it in the late tenth or early eleventh century (28). **Editions:** Dobbie, Elliot Van Kirk, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*. ASPR 6. New York: Columbia UP, 1942. Scragg, D. G., ed. *The Battle of Maldon*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1981. For the purpose of reviewing earlier criticism of the poem, E. V. Gordon's 1937 edition, republished in 1976 with a supplement by Scragg, is most helpful.

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 not**10** 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 [7] 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, but those who through flane-flight [14] took death.

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 Byrthelm'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 [**24**]: he let his spear wade **140** 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 **145** poisoned point. The earl was the blither: the brave man laughed then, said thanks to Metod [**25**] for the day-work God gave him. Then a certain warrior let a hand-dart fly from his hand, so that it went forth **150** 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. **155** 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-- **160** spoil and rings and adorned sword.

Then Byrhtnoth drew his bill [**26**] 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. **165** 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. **170** He could not stand fast on foot any longer; he looked to the heavens [[27](#)]: "I thank thee, Wielder of peoples, for all those joys I had in the world. Now have I, mild Measurer, most need **175** 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 **220** 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, **225** 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: **230** "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 **235** 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. **240** 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: **245** "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**] **250** 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, **255** 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. **260** 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; **265** 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; **270** 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, **275** 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,**280** 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**285** 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,**290** 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,**295** 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.

[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.

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

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

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

[6] **stead.** As in *homestead*; the word means 'place.'

[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).

[8] **boastfully.** OE *on beot* may also mean 'threateningly.'

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

[10] **good.** This translates OE *unforcuð* 'reputable, honorable,

noble, brave, undisgraced.'

[11] **fold.** OE *folde* 'earth, land.'

[12] **tumult.** Scragg glosses this 'array, military force.'

[13] **ash-army.** Of the OE *æschere*, here translated literally, Gordon notes: "the *here* 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).'

[14] **flame-flight.** OE *flanes flyht* 'flight of an arrow.'

[15] **loathly strangers.** OE *laðe gystas* 'loathed guests.'

[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.

[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.

[18] **battlefield.** OE *wælstowe* 'corpse-place.'

[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, *round* for round shields, etc.

[20] **anger.** OE *gramum* 'fierce, angry (ones).'

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

[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.

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

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

[25] **Metod.** Lit. 'measurer' (i.e., fate).

[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.

[27] A half-line is missing here.

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

[29] **moot.** OE *gemot* 'meeting, council, assembly.'

[30] **lay.** I.e., lay slain.

[31] **keen.** OE *cene* 'brave.'

[32] **old-father.** OE *ealda fæder* 'grandfather.'

[33] **alderman.** OE *ealdorman* designates a nobleman of the highest rank.

[34] **at need.** OE *to þearfe* 'at need; for (their) good; for (this) need.'

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

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

[37] **churl.** OE *ceorl* 'freeman, yeoman, peasant.'

[38] **fall.** OE *fyl* 'fall, death, destruction.'

[39] **earnestly.** OE *eornoste* 'earnestly, courageously.'

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

[41] **a terrible song.** OE *gryreleoðe sum* 'a certain one of terrible songs.'

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

[43] **hale.** An adjective, as in "hale and hearty."

[44] **clash.** OE *gebræc*, possibly 'breaking.'

[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 lytlað."

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

[47] **humbled.** OE *hynde* 'crushed, felled, insulted, humbled.'