

THE BATTLE OF MALDON

During the reign of King Æthelred “the Unready” (978–1016), England experienced a renewed campaign of Viking attacks, which increased in strength and effect until the Danish King Cnut became King of England in 1016. Æthelred apparently lacked the resources, financial and otherwise, to repel the Vikings, and sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* depict his nobles and advisors as a treacherous, fragmented, and demoralized gang (the King’s nickname, which may be a later invention, is in Old English *Un-ræd*, “no counsel,” a pun on the name *Æthel-ræd* “noble counsel”).

Though the last decade of the tenth century was a period of remarkable literary production by writers such as Ælfric, Wulfstan, and Byrhtferth of Ramsey, and saw the creation of many *de luxe* manuscripts and works of art, it is better remembered for the abysmal failure of Æthelred’s policy of Viking appeasement. This began with a payment of £10,000 in 991, followed by £16,000 in 994, £24,000 in 1002, £36,000 in 1007, and £48,000 in 1012; finally, in 1013, the king was forced into exile in Normandy. The idea of buying off the Vikings with “Danegeld” was apparently inspired by the arrival in August of 991 of a fleet of 93 Viking ships; according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the Viking army sacked Ipswich, sailed up the river Blackwater (Panta) to Maldon in Essex, and defeated the English army led by Byrhtnoth, ealdorman of Essex. Whether or not this battle was in fact the turning-point in Anglo-Danish relations, a poem was composed to commemorate the battle and the leader of the English army.

The manuscript of *The Battle of Maldon* was apparently already missing its beginning and end before the remaining pages were destroyed in a fire which devastated a portion of the British Library’s manuscripts in 1731. Fortunately a transcript had been made before the fire, and this transcript is the only source for the poem. 325 lines of the poem survive, and while we do not know how much has been lost, the main action of the battle is complete and fairly clear. The Vikings have beached their boats on a spit of land that is cut off from the shore when the tide is in, but accessible via a causeway at low tide. The English army, ranged on the shore opposite the Vikings, is depicted as being composed of Byrhtnoth’s own troops—his “retainers”—and a more or less trained local militia drawn from all ranks of society; a Viking messenger cannily tries to exploit potential differences in class or status among the troops, but the narrator portrays them as united by loyalty to their leader and a desire for honor.

The poem’s attitude towards its hero, however, is not entirely celebratory; Byrhtnoth is praised for his bravery and strength, but his decision to allow the Vikings passage across the causeway (so that they might have more room to fight) is said to arise from his *ofermod*, a word which can mean either “pride” or “great courage.” Byrhtnoth’s loyalty to his King, Æthelred, and his ringing refusal to pay tribute to the Vikings must have had provocative resonance in the last years of the King’s reign, assuming the poem was written shortly after the battle. Byrhtnoth fights well but dies quickly, with a desperate prayer on his lips; upon his death the treacherous retainer Godric leaps on Byrhtnoth’s horse and gallops away. The men further away from Byrhtnoth assume that it is he who is fleeing, so they do the same, and the army falls apart; the rest of the poem depicts the brave speeches and noble deaths of the men who remain.

The Battle of Maldon is not a news report but a reflection on the complex relation between military victory and moral triumph; it draws on the conventions of heroic poetry to give motive and meaning to the historical facts, and turns the humiliation of Byrhtnoth’s death and defeat into a celebration of other virtues such as courage and steadfastness. The poem may idealize the voices and actions of ordinary soldiers facing certain death, but it does not glorify their leaders or their cause; though the Vikings are by no means depicted as heroic, or even for the most part as individuals, the

poem's moral absolutes are not arranged as an English "us" against a Viking "them," but as a stark personal choice between courage and cowardice, truth and treachery, which is only made clearer by the impossibility of victory.



*The Battle of Maldon*¹

...was broken.
 Then he ordered every young soldier to send off his
 horse,
 drive it far off and go forward,
 pay heed to hands and high courage.
 5 When the kinsman of Offa first discovered
 that the earl would not suffer slackness,
 he let fly from his hands his favorite hawk
 off to the woods, and advanced to the battle;
 by that you knew that the young warrior
 10 would not weaken at battle, when he took up weapons.
 Likewise Eadric wished to support his leader,
 the lord in the fight; forward he went
 with his spear to battle. He had a stout heart
 as long as he might hold in his hands
 15 board and broad sword; he fulfilled his boast
 when he had to fight before his lord.
 Then Byrhtnoth began to array the troops,
 ordered, instructed, and showed the soldiers
 how they should stand and hold the field,
 20 told them to hold their shields securely,
 firm in their fists, and never be afraid.
 When he had properly organized all those men,
 he dismounted among the men where he most wanted
 to be, where he knew his retinue most loyal and brave.
 25 Then on the riverbank, stoutly shouting,
 stood a Viking messenger who made a speech,
 broadcast the boast of the seafarers
 to the earl where he stood on the shore:
 "Bold seamen have sent me to thee,
 30 commanded me to say that thou must quickly
 send us rings for protection; and it is better for you
 to buy off this spear-storm with tribute

than for us to share such a hard battle.²
 We needn't ruin one another, if you're rich enough;
 35 we'll call a truce in exchange for gold.
 If thou, the richest here, agree to this,
 that thou wilt ransom thy people,
 give to the seamen all the money they want
 in exchange for peace, and take a truce with us,
 40 we'll go back to our ships with your gold coins,
 sail off on the sea, and hold you in peace."
 Byrhtnoth spoke out, raised his shield,
 shook his slender spear and made a speech,
 angry and resolute, he gave this answer:
 45 "Do you hear, seafarer, what this people says?
 they will give you spears for your tribute,
 poisoned points and ancient swords,
 the heriot that will not help you in battle.
 Messenger of the sailors, take back a message,
 50 tell your people much more hateful news:
 here stands an undisgraced earl with his army,
 who will defend this homeland,
 the land of Æthelred, my own lord,
 the folk and the fields. Fated are heathens
 55 to fall in battle—it seems too shameful to me
 to let you go with our gold to your ships
 without a fight, now that you have come
 this far into our country.
 You shall get your treasure so easily;
 60 points and blades will settle this business,
 grim war-play, before we pay tribute."
 Then he commanded his men to carry their shields
 until they all stood on the river's edge.
 The water kept each troop from the other
 65 when the flood came flowing after the ebb,

¹ Translated by R.M. Liuzza for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*. The Old English text that has come down to us is a seventeenth-century transcript of a manuscript destroyed in 1731.

² *Bold seamen ... hard battle* The translation preserves the use of singular (*thou, thee*) and plural (*you*) pronouns in the original, which may be a deliberate device to indicate that the messenger is trying to drive a wedge between Byrhtnoth and his army.

locking the water-streams.¹ It seemed too long
 until they could bring their spears together.
 They stood arrayed on the shores of the Panta,
 the East-Saxon vanguard and the Viking army;
 70 neither side could strike at the other,
 unless one might fall from an arrow's flight.
 The tide receded; the sailors stood ready,
 a great many Vikings eager for battle.
 The protector of heroes² ordered a hardened warrior
 75 to hold the causeway; he was called Wulfstan,
 the son of Ceol, brave among his kinsmen;
 he shot with his Frankish spear the first man
 who stepped most boldly across the bridge.
 Beside Wulfstan stood fearless warriors,
 80 Aelfere and Maccus, two valiant men
 who would not take flight at the ford,
 but stoutly defended themselves against the foe
 as long as they might wield weapons.
 When they perceived this, and clearly saw
 85 that they would meet bitter bridge-wardens there,
 the hateful visitors hatched a plot—
 they asked if they could have access
 to lead their footsoldiers across the ford.
 Then the earl in his overconfidence³ began
 90 to allow too much land to that hateful people.
 Over the cold water he called out then,
 the son of Byrthelm, while the soldiers listened:
 "Here's room enough—now come quickly to us,
 bring on the battle; God alone knows

¹ *locking the water-streams* The Blackwater (OE Panta) is a tidal river; when the tide came in the island on which the Vikings have landed was cut off from the shore. Later, at low tide, a stone causeway connects it to the shore.

² *The protector of heroes* Byrhtnoth.

³ *overconfidence* The Old English word "ofermod" is notoriously ambiguous in this passage—literally it means "too much *mod*" (spirit, courage), implying a degree of reckless excess in what might still be an admirable quality, but in later Old English prose it often translates Latin *superbia* "pride," a deadly sin. It is difficult to argue that the hero of the poem—if that is what Byrhtnoth is—is guilty of a deadly sin in deciding to engage the Vikings in battle where they stood; but part of the poem's enduring interest is its undertone which qualifies the moral absolutes in which battles are usually recounted. Whatever the precise meaning of the word "ofermod," and whatever the military necessities under which Byrhtnoth reaches his decision, his act proves to be a fatal error, as even he seems to recognize.

95 who will hold this place of slaughter."
 On came the slaughter-wolves, not minding the water,
 the Viking troop went west over the Panta,
 carried their shields over the shining water,
 the seamen bore their linden shields⁴ to land.
 100 Against the attackers Byrhtnoth and his men
 stood ready; he ordered them to raise
 the battle-wall with their shields, and stand
 fast against the foe. The fight was near,
 glory in combat; the time had come
 105 when fated men should fall.
 The cry was raised, ravens circled,
 the eagle longed for prey, and panic was on earth.
 They let fly the file-hard spears,
 grimly ground spearheads from their grip;
 110 the bows were busy, the shield-boards took the arrows.
 The attack was bitter, on either hand
 warriors fell, young men lay dead.
 Wulfmar was wounded, chose his bed of slaughter;
 the kinsman of Byrhtnoth, savagely cut
 115 to pieces with swords, his sister's son.
 Payback was brought to the Vikings for that:
 I heard that Edward struck one fiercely
 with his sword—not stingy with strokes—
 until at his feet fell the doomed soldier;
 120 his leader gave thanks for that
 to his chamberlain^o when he had the chance. *attendant*
 And so they stood their ground, stouthearted
 young men at war, eagerly worked
 to see who might be the first to win
 125 the life of a doomed man with his spear,
 soldiers with weapons; slaughter fell on earth.
 They stood steadfast; Byrhtnoth encouraged them,
 ordered each young warrior to give thought to war
 if he hoped to earn fame from the Danes in the fight.
 130 Then came a tough warrior, weapon raised,
 his shield for protection, and stepped toward him.⁵
 Just as firmly went the earl to the churl;⁶
 each of them thought to harm the other.
 The sailor sent off his southern spear
 135 so that the lord of warriors was wounded;

⁴ *linden shields* Shields of lime-tree wood.

⁵ *him* I.e., Byrhtnoth.

⁶ *churl* Man without noble rank.

he shoved with his shield so that the shaft broke in two,
and sprung out the spear when the point sprang back.
The warrior was furious—he stabbed with his spear
the proud Viking who gave him that wound.
140 The battle-leader was bold—he let his spear go forth,
his hand threaded it through the young man’s neck
and he took the life of his attacker.
Then without waiting he stabbed another
so his armor burst; he was wounded in the breast
145 through his ring-mail, a deadly point
stood at his heart. The earl was the happier;
he laughed, brave man, and thanked his Maker
for the day’s work the Lord had allowed him.

Then one of the Vikings threw a spear from his
hand,
150 let it fly from his fingers so it went too far,
through the noble thane of Aethelred.¹
By his side stood a half-grown young warrior,
a boy in the battle, who very boldly
drew out the blood-drenched spear from the man—
155 Wulfstan’s son, Wulfmar the young—
and sent the hard spear flying back again;
the point went in, so he lay on the earth,
the one who had grievously wounded his lord.
Then an armored man went to the earl,
160 he wanted to plunder the warrior’s gear,
his robes and rings and decorated sword.
Byrhtnoth drew his sword, broad, bright-edged,
from its sheath, and swung at his mail-coat.
Too soon one of the seafarers stopped him
165 with a wound in the earl’s arm.
The gold-hilted sword fell to the ground;
he could no longer hold the hardened blade,
or wield a weapon. But still the old warrior
said what he could, encouraged the young men
170 and bade them go forth as good companions.
He could no longer stand steady on his feet;
he gazed up to heaven:

“I give thee thanks, O Lord of Nations,
for all the joys I have had in this world.
175 Now, gracious Maker, I have most desperate need
that Thou grant grace to my spirit,
so that my soul may journey to Thee
into Thy keeping, King of Angels,

¹ *throne of Aethelred* I.e., Byrhtnoth.

and depart in peace. I implore Thee
180 that the fiends of Hell may not harm it.”
Then the heathen savages hacked him up,
and both the men who stood beside him,
Aelfnoth and Wulmær both lay dead,
and gave up their lives with their lord.
185 Then some unwilling ones bowed out of the battle:
the sons of Odda were the first in the flight,
Godric left the battle, and abandoned the good man
who had often given him many horses;
he leapt on the horse that belonged to his lord,
190 in his riding gear—which was not right!—
and his brothers with him both ran away,
Godwine and Godweg didn’t care for battle,
but turned from the war and took to the woods,
fled to safety and saved their lives,
195 and many more beyond any good measure,
if they had remembered all the rewards
he had given them for their services.
So Offa had said, earlier that day
in the assembly, when he held a meeting,
200 that many a man spoke bravely there
who later would not stand firm at need.

Then the people’s leader lay fallen,
Aethelred’s earl; all the house-troops
saw that their lord lay dead.²
205 Then forward pressed the proud thanes,
uncowardly men hastened eagerly;
they all wanted one of two things—
to give up their lives or avenge their dear lord.
So the son of Aelfric urged them forward,
210 a warrior young in years spoke his words,
Aelfwine spoke, and bravely said:
“I remember the speeches we made over mead
when we raised our boasts on the benches,
heroes in the hall, about hard struggle;
215 now he who is bold has to prove it.
I will make known my noble descent to all:
I come from a famous family among the Mercians,
my ancestor was called Ealhelm,
a wise nobleman, and prosperous in the world.
220 Thanes will not mock me among my people,

² *all the ... lay dead* I.e., the troops closest to Byrhtnoth (cf. 23–5) see that he is dead; those further away mistake the fleeing Godric for their lord (236–41).

that I would go away from this army,
 seek my homeland, now that my lord lies
 cut down in battle. Mine is the greatest grief:
 he was both my kinsman and my master.’
 225 He went forth, remembering revenge,
 until with the point of his spear he struck one
 of the seamen so that he lay dead on the ground,
 cut down by his weapon. He urged his comrades,
 friends and companions, to go forth.
 230 Offa spoke, shook his ashen spear:
 “Indeed, Aelfwine, you have reminded all
 the thanes at need, now that our lord lies dead,
 the earl on the earth. Each of us
 needs to encourage every other
 235 warrior to war, as long as his weapon
 he can have and hold, the hard blade,
 the spear and the good sword. Godric,
 wretched son of Odda, has betrayed us all.
 When he rode off on that horse, that proud steed,
 240 too many men thought that it was our lord;
 and so our forces were divided on this field,
 the shield-wall broken. Shame on his deed,
 by which he caused so many men to flee!”
 Leofsunu spoke and raised his shield,
 245 his board for protection, and replied to him:
 “I hereby promise that from hence I will not
 flee the space of a single foot, but will go further,
 avenge in the battle my beloved lord.
 The steadfast men of Sturmer need not
 250 mock me, now that my lord has fallen,
 saying I would go home without my lord,
 turn away from war—instead weapons shall take me,
 point and iron.” Full of ire he went forth,
 fought tenaciously; he scorned flight.
 255 Dunnere then spoke, shook his spear,
 a humble churl, cried out over all,
 urged each man to avenge Byrhtnoth:
 “He must never weaken, who hopes to revenge
 his lord on this people, nor care for his life!”
 260 Then they went forth, not fearing for their lives;
 the retainers set about fighting fiercely,
 the grim spear-bearers, and asked God
 that they might avenge their dear lord

and bring about the downfall of their foe.
 265 The hostage began to help them eagerly;
 he was from a strong family of Northumbrians,
 the son of Ecglaf—his name was Aescferth.
 He never weakened at the war-play,
 but he shot forth arrows ceaselessly;
 270 sometimes he struck a shield, sometimes a man,
 again and again he gave one a wound,
 as long as he was able to wield weapons.
 Still in the front stood Edward the Long,
 brave and eager, spoke boastful words
 275 that he would not flee a single foot’s space,
 or turn back now that his better lay dead.
 He broke through the shield-wall and did battle
 with the seamen, until he had worthily avenged
 his treasure-giver, then took his place among the slain.
 280 Likewise Aetheric, excellent comrade,
 eager, death-ready, fought earnestly.
 Sibyrht’s brother and many another
 split banded shields,¹ boldly defended themselves—
 the shield-rim burst, and the byrnie² sang
 285 its grim horrible song. Then Offa struck
 a seafarer in the fight³ so that he fell to the earth,
 and there Gadd’s kinsman sought the ground.
 In the heat of battle Offa was hacked up,
 but he had lived up to his promise to his lord—
 290 he had boasted before his ring-giver
 that they would ride together into the stronghold,
 get home safely, or fall in the slaughter,
 die of wounds on the field of war:
 he lay like a thane^o at his lord’s side. *nobleman*
 295 Then shields were shattered, the sailors advanced,
 enraged by battle; spears broke open
 many a doomed man’s life-house. Then Wistan went
 forth,
 Thurstan’s son, and fought with them;
 he was the killer of three in that crowd,

¹ *shields* The precise meaning of the OE adjective “cellod,” which appears only here, is not known.

² *byrnie* Coat of mail.

³ *The Offa ... fight* The Old English specifically says “*the seafarer*,” as if some particular opponent had already been pointed out; there may be a line or two missing, indicating that Offa stepped forward, fought against an attacker, etc.

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300 before Wigelin's son lay down in the slaughter.¹
There was keen conflict; the men stood
firm in the struggle, warriors fell,
weary with wounds. Slaughter fell on earth.
Oswold and Eadwold all the while,
305 two brothers, exhorted the troops,
bade their band of brothers with their words
that they had to stand steady there at need,
use their weapons without weakness.
Byrhtwold spoke, raised his shield—
310 he was an old retainer—and shook his ash-spear;
he most boldly gave the men a lesson:
“Spirits must be the harder, hearts the keener,
courage the greater, as our strength grows less.

Here lies our lord all hacked to pieces,
315 a good man in the dust. He will mourn evermore
who thinks to turn back from this war-play now.
I'm an old man; I will not leave,
but by the side of my lord—by such
a beloved man—I intend to lie.”
320 So also the son of Aethelgar urged them all,
Godric, to the battle. Often he let go a spear,
sent a slaughter-shaft whirling to the Vikings,
as he advanced foremost among the folk,
hacked and laid low, until he fell on the field.
325 That was not the Godric who turned away from
the battle ...
—C. 1000

¹ *Wigelin's son ... slaughter* It is not clear how Wistan is both the son of Thurstan and of Wigelin, unless Wigelin is his mother. “Matronymic” epithets are virtually unknown in Old English, but this may be a rare instance of one.