

UNIT 4

The Heroic and Battle Literature

This unit asks you to read and consider two Anglo-Saxon battle poems and the differences in the nature of the Christian perspective in both texts.

The earlier of the two poems is *The Battle of Brunanburh* which forms the entry for **937** – the year of the battle – in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Historians have never been able to decide on the precise location of Brunnanburh, but the area around the Solway Firth has been suggested. The later of the two battle poems is *The Battle of Maldon* which took place at Maldon in Essex in 991. I have included with these documents a page headed 'The Battle of Brunanburh' which sets out the political events between **937** and **991** (Maldon), and up to **1016**.

The Battle of Brunanburgh is a celebration of an important Anglo-Saxon victory in what was a long campaign to recover the Danelaw. It is militaristic in its emphasis and tone, but in the midst of this the poet introduces a Christian perspective. In this text, in what ways and to what effect is heroic given a Christian perspective?

The Battle of Maldon commemorates a battle fought in 991 at Maldon in Essex in which the Anglo-Saxon forces (who were, of course, Christian) were defeated by a Viking raiding force. The Vikings were pagan, and are referred to in this way in the text. *The Battle of Maldon* dramatizes the battle in strikingly heroic terms from the point of view of the Anglo-Saxons: the Anglo-Saxon force is defeated, it would seem, down to the last man after their leader, Byrhtnoth (one of the four chief nobles in Anglo-Saxon England, the 'ealdorman' of Essex) has been killed. The latter part of the poem focusses on Byrhtnoth's men making speeches in which they declare their loyalty to their leader and vow to die fighting the Vikings to avenge the death of Byrhtnoth. This theme is remarkably similar to the account of Germanic heroic values given by Tacitus in the *Germania* (see **Document 6**). Although it is tempting to say that this is evidence of the persistence of an heroic ideal in Germanic culture from the 1st century to the late 10th century, there are no other examples in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature, not

even *Beowulf*, which articulate the theme of men dying for their lord. The conclusion that scholars have drawn is that the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* has taken this idea probably directly from Tacitus and incorporated it into his poem to heighten the heroic character of the text and to provide an explanation for the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon army and the death of one of King Æthelred's four chief nobles.

One of the intriguing features of *The Battle of Maldon* is the way in which the poet, who clearly would have been Christian, uses the Christian perspective in the narrative. Early in the poem Byrhtnoth declares that the heathen Vikings must die in battle, and says that God alone knows who will control the battlefield. But, the contemporary audience would have known that the Vikings, who were not Christian, would at the end of the day control the battlefield, and it would not be the ('heathen') Vikings who would fall in battle but the Christian Anglo-Saxons. When Byrhtnoth kills one of the Vikings the poem says that he thanked God 'for the day's work that the Lord had given him' (see lines 146–8); it is at this point that the events leading to Byrhtnoth's death begin. There is, it would seem, a degree of ambiguity in the way in which the poet uses the Christian perspective, and this is a subject for debate. Might the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* be aiming to suggest something about his own people, the Anglo-Saxons, at this point in their history? One thinks back to the way in which King Alfred in his *Preface* characterized the earlier Viking invasion and settlement in the Danelaw in the 9th century.

In your reading of *The Battle of Maldon* consider the nature of heroism and the way in which it is presented. Although this is a late Anglo-Saxon text, it has been argued that it articulates more clearly than almost any other text Anglo-Saxon heroic ethics and ideals. In that sense, it may be an attempt to recreate something that has been lost from the culture. Whatever is the case, the text is a useful point of reference for secular, heroic ideals and a system of heroic values.

To what extent does *The Battle of Maldon* give a Christian perspective on heroic ethics and ideals? How does this presentation of heroism differ from that in Ælfric's *Life of Oswald*?

The Battle of Brunanburh

The date of the battle is 937. The Anglo-Saxon forces were under the leadership of Athelstan (Æpelstan), king of Wessex.

King Alfred of Wessex; reigned: 871-899

Edward the Elder; reigned 899-924. Edward was the eldest son of Alfred.

Athelstan (Æpelstan); reigned 924-939. Athelstan was the eldest son of Edward the Elder. He had been brought up in Mercia, and he was recognized as king of Wessex and Mercia. Athelstan had a stronger base of power than his father, and in 927 his supremacy was recognized by the kings of Scotland and Strathclyde and the English lord of Bamburgh. Over the next four years his supremacy was extended over the western and northern kings of Britain, and many of the Welsh princes. The Battle of Brunanburh (937) began as the result of an alliance of Olaf (Anlaf; Norse king of Dublin), the king of Scotland, and the king of Strathclyde; the latter two were threatened by English domination, while Olaf's father had been expelled by Athelstan from Northumbria in 927. Athelstan's army was drawn from Wessex and Mercia. The battle destroyed the alliance of Anlaf and the kings of Strathclyde and Scotland. The victory of the Anglo-Saxons achieved for them a certain sense of political identity, and the state over which Athelstan was king included peoples descended from the Danish settlers who had been enemies of King Alfred of Wessex.

Edmund; reigned 939-946. He was brother of Athelstan and had fought at Brunanburh. In the text he is referred to as Edmund Ætheling.

Eadred; reigned 946-955. He was brother of Athelstan and Edmund.

Eadwig; reigned 955-959. Eadred had died without children, so Eadwig, the elder son of Edmund, became king. Eadwig's reign begins a period of peace which lasts to 980; during this time Anglo-Saxon England was free from the threat of foreign invasion. It was in 980 that the series of Danish raids and attacks on Anglo-Saxon England began, which led to the Battle of Maldon in 991, and the eventual conquest of England by the Scandinavians. Also, it was during this period that Byrhtnoth of Essex came to power along with ealdormen of Mercia and East Anglia.

Edgar; reigned (957) 959-975. Edgar was the second son of Edmund. In 957 the Mercians and the Northumbrians renounced the allegiance that they had given in 955 to Eadwig, and shifted their allegiance to Edgar. On the death of Eadwig in 959 Edgar was accepted as king of Wessex.

Edward; reigned 975-978. Edward was the son of Edgar by his first marriage.

Æthelred (the Unready); reigned 978-1016. He was the son of Edgar by his second marriage and half-brother of Edward. He became king under suspicious circumstances and seems never to have felt secure and confident as king. It was in 980 that the Danish attacks on Anglo-Saxon England began again, so destroying the peace that had existed since 955. It is during the reign of Æthelred, in 991, that the Battle of Maldon occurs and the death of the ealdorman Byrhtnoth, who was one of the four most powerful nobles in Anglo-Saxon England.

Edmund; reigned April to November 1016. He was the son of Æthelred.

Cnut: Danish; he was accepted as king in 1016.

5 Æþelstan cýning, eorla dryhten,
 beorna beahgifa, and his broþor eac,
 Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
 geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
 ymbe Brunanburh; bordweal clufan,
 heowan heapolinde hamora lafan
 aþaran Eadweardes; swa him geæpele wæs
 from cneomægum, þæt hi æt campe oft
 wip lapra gehwæne land ealgodon,
 10 hord and hamas. Hettend crungun,
 Sceotta leoda and scipflotan
 fæge feollan. Feld dunnade
 seaga swate, siðþan sunne up
 on morgentid, mære tungol,
 15 glad ofer grundas, Godes condel beorht,
 eces Drihtnes, oð sio æþele gesceaft
 sað to setle. þær læg secg mænig
 garum ageted, guma norþerna
 ofer scild scoten, swilce Scittisc eac
 20 werig, wiges sæd. Wesseaxe forð
 onðlongne dæg eorodcistum
 on last legdun lapum þeodum,
 heowan herefleman hindan þearle
 mecum mylensecarpan. Myrce ne wyrndon
 25 heardes hondplegan hælepa nanum
 þæra þe mid Anlafe ofer eargebland
 on lides bosme land gesohtun
 fæge to gefeohte. Fife lægun
 on þam campstede cýningas giunge
 30 sweordum aswefede, swilce seofene eac
 eorlas Anlafes, unrim heriges,
 flotena and Sceotta. þær geflemed wearð
 Norðmanna bregu, nede gebeded
 to lides stefne litte weorode;
 35 cread cnear on flot, cýning ut gewat
 on fealene flod, feorh generede.
 Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
 on his cyppe norð, Costontinus,

[1-5a] King Ethelstan, lord of warriors, ring-giver (*beahgifa*) to men, and his brother also, Edmund Ætheling, won at battle (*geslogon æt sæcce*) life-long glory with the edges of their swords around Brunanburh. [5b-12a] They, the sons of Edward, cut through the shield-wall (*bordweal*) with their forged swords (*hamora lafan*), cut down the linden-shields. Such was their nobility (*geæpele*) from youth, that they at battle often defended (*ealgodon*) their land, treasure-hoard and homes against all of the enemies (*lapra gehwæne*). Their foes fell dead, the Scots and the Vikings (*scipflotan*); these were fated to die. [12b-17a] The battle-field became dark with the blood of men from the time when the sun, the glorious star, arose in the morning; the bright candel of God, the eternal Lord, passed over the land until the noble creation [i.e., the sun] sank to its resting-place. [17b-24a] There many men lay dead, destroyed (*ageted*, from *agietan*) by spears: the Vikings (*guma norþerna*) were shot down despite their shields, and also the Scots, weary and exhausted by battle. Throughout the whole day, the West Saxons, with the troop of their best warriors (*eorodcistum*), pursued the hostile people, and fiercely cut down the fleeing army from behind with well-ground swords. [24b-32a] The Mercians did not refuse fierce battle with any of the warriors who had come with Anlaf over the rolling waves and sought this land in their ships, fated to die in battle. Five young kings lay dead on the battle-field, destroyed by swords, and also seven of the chief warriors of Anlaf, and unnumbered of the army of the Vikings and the Scots. [32b-44a] There the chief of the Norsemen was put to flight, driven by necessity to take to his ship with a small troop. The ship [*cnear*, a Norse word for a '(Viking) ship'] pressed on out to sea; the king departed out onto the yellow sea and saved his life. Also there, the wise old Constantinus [king of the Scots], the grey-haired warrior, came by flight into his native land (*cyppe*) in the north;

40 har hildering; hreman ne þorftie
 meca gemanan: he wæs his mæga sceard,
 freonda befylded on folcstede,
 beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
 on wælstowe wundum forgrunden,
 45 giungne æt guðe. Gelpan ne þorftie
 beorn blandenfeax bilgeslehtes,
 eald inwidda, ne Anlaf þy ma;
 mid heora herlafum hlehhān ne þorftun,
 þæt heo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
 on campstede, cumbolgehnastes,
 50 garmittinge, gumena gemotes,
 wæpengewrixles, þæs hi on wælfelda
 wip Eadweardes afaran plegodan.
 Gewitan him þa Norðmen næglednearrum,
 dreorig daraða laf, on Dingesmere,
 55 ofere deop wæter Difelin secan,
 eft Ira land, æwiscmode.
 Swicle þa gebroþer began ætsamne,
 cuning and æbeling, cyppe sohton,
 Wesseaxena land, wiges hiremge.
 60 Letan him behindan hræe bryttian
 saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn,
 hymnednebban, and þane hasupadan,
 earn æftan hwit, æses brucan
 grædigne guðhafoc and þæt græge deor,
 65 wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wæl mare
 on þis eighlande æfre gieta
 folces gefylded beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgaoð bec,
 ealde uðwitan, sibban eastan hider
 70 Engle and Seaxe up becoman,
 ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
 wlanc wigsmiþas, Wealas ofercoman,
 eorlas arhwate, eard begeatan.

he had no reason to exult in that encounter (*gemanan*) of warriors (*mæga*): he was deprived of his kinsmen (*mæga*) and bereft of his friends on the battle-field; he left behind his son on the place of slaughter, destroyed by his wounds, a young man at battle. The grey-haired warrior, the old adversary, had no need to boast about the battle, any more than Anlaf. They could not with their troop of those who had survived the battle laugh (and say) that they were better on the battle-field (*on campstede*), in the clash of battle-standards (*cumbolgehnastes*), in the meeting of spears (*garmittinge*), the coming together of men (*gumena gemotes*), the exchange of weapons (*wæpengewrixles*) when they fought (*plegodan*) on the field of slaughter with the sons (*afaran*) more commonly (*eafora(n)*) of Edward. The Northmen, sad survivors of the spears, with shameful heart (*æwiscmode*), departed in their well nailed ships (*næglednearrum*) on Dingesmere over the deep water to seek out Dublin, to return to (*eft*) Ireland.

Also the brothers, both together, the king and noble (*æbeling*), set out for their homeland (*cyppe*), the land of the West Saxons, exulting in the battle. Behind them they let the dark-coated (*saluwigpadan*), black raven with horned beak and the dusky-coated eagle (*earn*) with white backed (*æftan hwit*) to share (*bryttian*) the corpses (*hræe*), the greedy battle-hawk (*guðhafoc*) and that grey beast (*deor*), the wolf in the forest, to enjoy the carrion (*æses*).

Nor has there ever yet been slain (*wearð ... gefyllid*) before on this island a greater slaughter of people by the edges of the sword, as (*þes þe*) books tell us, old wisemen (*ealde uðwitan*), after to this place came from the east Angles and Saxons, over the broad sea and sought out the land of Britain, proud warmakers (*wigsmiþas*), glorious (*arhwate*) warriors, conquered the Welsh and obtained this land (*earð*).

brocen wurde.

Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forlætan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,
hucgan to handum and to hige godum.
5 Þa þæt Offan mæg ærest onfunde,
þæt se eorl nólde yrhðo gepolian,
he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan
hafoc wið þæs holtes, and to þære hilde stop;
be þam man mihte oncnawan þæt se cniht nolde
wacian æt þam wige, þa he to wæpnum feng.
10 Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelæstan,
fæan to gefeohte, ongan þa forð beran
gar to gube. He hæfde god gepanc
þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
bord and brad swurd; beot he gelæste
15 þa he ætforan his fæan feohtan sceolde.

Ða þær Byrhtnoo ongan beornas trymian,
rad and rædde, rincum tæhte
hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
and bæd þæt hyra randas rihte heoldon
fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na.
20 Þa he hæfde þæt folc fægere getrymmed,
he lihte þa mid leondon þær him leofost wæs,

... would be broken (*brocen wurde*) [line 1]
Then he [Byrhtnoth] commanded each of the young men to let go of his horse, to drive it away, and to advance; and to take heed to his hands and to strong courage. When the kinsman of Offa first realized that the leader was not willing to tolerate cowardice, he then let his beloved hawk fly from his hands to the woods, and he advanced to the battle. By that gesture they could all understand that the young man was resolved not to weaken at the battle when he took up his weapons. Also, Eadric was intent upon supporting his leader; his lord at the fight, and he began to bear his spear to battle. He had good resolve as long as he was able to hold with his hands shield and broad sword; he fulfilled his vow when he had to fight before his lord. [2-16]

Then Byrhtnoth began to encourage his warriors; he rode (up and down the battle-line) and advised them; he instructed the men how they should stand and hold the place, and he bade that they should hold their shields correctly, firmly with their hands, and not be afraid. When he had properly organized his people (in the battle-line), he alighted (from his horse) among those where he was most beloved,

- 25 þær he his heorðwerod holdost wiste.
 þa stod on stæðe, stiðlice clypode
 wicinga ar, wordum mælde,
 se on beot ahead brimlǫpendra
 ærende to þam eorle, þær he on ofre stod:
 "Me sendon to þe sæmen snelle,
 30 heton ðe secgan þæt þu most sendan raðe
 beagas wið gebeorge; and eow betere is
 þæt ge þisne garraes mid gafole forgyldon,
 þon we swa hearde hilde dælon.
 Ne purfe we us spillan, gif ge spedap to þam;
 35 we willað wið þam golde grið fæstnian.
 Gyf þu þat gerædest, þe her ricost eart,
 þæt þu pine leoda lysan wille,
 syllan semannum on hyra sylfra dom
 feoh wið freode, and niman frið æt us,
 40 we willap mid þam scaetum us to scype gangan,
 on flot feran, and eow friþes healdan."
 Byrhtnoð mæpelode, bord hafenode,
 wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde,
 45 yre and anræd ageaf him andsware:
 "Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
 Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
 ættrinne ord and ealde swurd,
 þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.
 50 Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,
 sege þinum leodum miccle lāpre spell,
 þæt her styt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
 þe wile gealgean eþel pysne,
 Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
 folc and foldan. Feallan sceolon
 55 hæþene æt hilde. To heanlic me þinceð
 þæt ge mid urum scaetum to scype gangon
 unbefohtene, nu ge þus feor hider
 on urne eard in becomon.
 Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan;

and where he knew his hearth-troop to be most loyal. [17-24]

Then the messenger of the Vikings (*wicinga ar*) stood on the bank and firmly called out; he delivered his speech; in a threatening way (*on beot*) he delivered the message of the Vikings to the leader [i.e. Byrhtnoth] where he stood on the shore. 'The swift seamen have sent me to you; they have commanded me to say to you that you must send quickly rings in return for peace. And it will be better for you that you buy off this battle with treasure than we engage in such a fierce conflict. We need not kill each other, if you have enough treasure to meet our demands. We will affirm the truce in return for the gold. If you who are the leader here decide that you will ransom your people and give to the Vikings according to their own judgement money in return for peace, and maintain the peace with us, we will take ship with that treasure, travel away on the sea, and maintain the peace with you.' [25-41]

Byrhtnoth spoke; he raised up his shield and shook his slender ash spear; he made a speech; angry and resolute he gave (to the Viking messenger his) answer: 'Seafarer, do you hear what this people says? They will give you spears as tribute, the poisoned spear and old sword; the war-equipment that will profit you nothing in battle. Messenger of the Vikings, report back again; tell your people a much more hostile message, that here stands a noble leader with his troop who intends to defend this homeland, the country of Æþelrede, my lord, his people and land. The heathen must fall at battle. It seems to me too shameful that you should go to your ship unopposed now you have come so far into our country. You must not get our treasure so easily;

- 60 us sceal ord and, ecg ær geseman,
grim guðplega, ær we gofol sylloŋ."
Het þa bord beran, beornas gangan,
þæt hi on þam eastede ealle stodon.
Ne mihte þær for wætere werod to þam oðrum;
65 þær com flowende flod æfter ebban,
lucon lagustreamas. To lang hit him puhte,
hwænne hi togædere garas beron.
Hi þær Pantan stream mid prasse bestodon,
Eastseaxena ord and se æschere.
70 Ne mihte hyra ænig oþrum derian,
buton hwa þurh flanes flyht fyl gename.
Se flod ut gewat; þa flotan stodon gearowe,
wicinga fela, wiges georne.
Het þa hæleða hleo healdan þa brige
75 wigan wigheardne, se wæs haten Wulfstan,
caŋe mid his cyme, þæt wæs Ceolan sunu,
þe ðone forman man mid his francan ofsceat
þe þær baldlicost on þa brige stop.
80 Þær stodon mid Wulfstane wigan unforhte,
Ælfere and Maccus, modige twegen,
þa noldon æt þam forða fleam gewyrcean,
ac hi fæstlice wið ða fynd weredon,
þa hwile þe hi wæpna wealdan moston.
85 þa hi þæt ongeaton and georne gesawon
þæt hi þær bricgweardas bitere fundon,
ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas,
bædon þæt hi upgangan agan moston,
ofer þone ford faran, feþan lædan.
90 Ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode
alyfan landes to fela lābere ðeode.
Ongan ceallian þa ofer cald wæter

spear and sword, fierce battle, must settle the matter first before we give tribute.' [42-61]

Then he commanded the warriors to bear their shields and to advance so that they all stood on the river-bank. Because of the water, neither troop was able to advance to the other. There came flowing in the flood after the ebb-tide, and the ocean-currents merged. It seemed too long to them before they might bear arms together. They stood around the Pante [the river Blackwater] in battle-formation, the East-Saxon vanguard and the Viking army. Nor might anyone of them harm another except for those whom death took through the flight of an arrow. The flood went out; the seafarers stood ready, the many Vikings, eager for battle. Then the leader of warriors [Byrhtnoth] ordered a battle-hardened warrior to hold the bridge; he was called Wulfstan, a brave man among his family, the son of Ceola. With his spear he shot the first man who, very boldly, advanced onto the bridge. There stood with Wulfstan two proud and fearless warriors, Ælfere and Maccus, who were unwilling to flee at the ford, but they firmly defended against the enemies as long as they were able to control their weapons. [62-83]

When the hateful strangers (*laðe gystas*, the Vikings) realized and clearly saw that they had encountered fierce guardians of the bridge, they began to use cunning, and they asked that they be allowed to have passage to the land across the ford, to lead their troops. [84-88]

Then the leader (*eorl*, i.e. Byrhtnoth), because of his great zeal (or overconfidence, or pride -- *ofermode*) began to allow too much land (*landes to fela* = 'too much of the land') to the hateful people (Vikings). Then the son of Byrhtelm (i.e. Byrhtnoth) began to call over the cold water

- Byrhtelmes beam (beornas gehlyston):
 "Nu eow is gerymed, gað ricene to us,
 guman to gube; God ana wat
 hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote."
 95 Wodon þa wælwulfas (for wætere ne murnon),
 wicinga werod, west ofer Pantan,
 ofer scir wæter scyldas wegon,
 lidmen to lande linde bæron.
 100 Þær ongean gramum gearowe stodon
 Byrhtnoð mid beornum; he mid bordum het
 wyrcean þone wihagan, and þæt werod healdan
 fæste wið feondum. Þa wæs feohte neh,
 tir æt getohte. Wæs seo tid cumen
 105 þæt þær fæge men feallan sceoldon.
 Þær wearð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon,
 eam ases georn; wæs on eorþan cyrm.
 Hi leton þa of folman feolhearde speru,
 grimme gegrundene garas fleogan;
 110 bogan wæron bysige, bord ord onfeng.
 Biter wæs se beaduræs, beornas feollon
 on gehwæðere hand, hyssas lagon.
 Wund wearð Wulfmæ, wælræste geceas,
 Byrhtnoðes mæg; he mid billum wearð,
 115 his swustersunu, swiðe forheawen.
 Þær wearð wicingum wiberlean agyfen.
 Gehyrde ic þæt Eadweard anne sloge
 swiðe mid his swurde, swenges ne wyrnde,
 þæt him æt fotum feoll fæge cempa;
 120 þæs him his ðeoden þanc gesæde,
 þam burþene, þa he byre hæfde.
 Swa sternnetton siðhigende
 hysas æt hilde, hogodon georne
 hwa þær mid orde ærost mihte
 125 on fagean men feorh gewinnan,
 wigan mid wæpnum; wæl feol on eorðan.
 Stodon stæðefæste; stihte hi Byrhtnoð,
 bæd þæt hysa gehwylc hogode to wige
 þe on Denon wolde dom gefeohtan.

(the warriors listened): 'Now the way is open to you; come quickly to us, men to battle. God alone knows who will be able to control this battle-field (*wælstowe*, 'place of slaughter')'. [89-95]

The wolves of slaughter (*wælwulfas* = Vikings), the troop of Vikings (*wicinga werod*) advanced west over the Panta - they did not mind the water; they carried their shields (*scyldas*) over the bright water; the seamen bore their shields to land. [96-99]

There before the hostile ones Byrhtnoth stood ready with his warriors. He commanded them with their shields to form the shield-wall and that troop to hold firm against the enemy. Then was fighting imminent, glory at battle. The time had come when fated men should fall at battle. A cry was raised up; ravens circled, the eagle eager for carrion. There was a cry on the earth. They let fly from their hands spears made hard by files, fiercely ground spears; bows were busy; shield received point. [100-10]

Fierce was the rush of battle; warriors fell on both sides and young men lay dead. Wulfmæ, kinsman of Byrhtnoth, was wounded; he chose his place of rest among the dead; he, Byrhtnoth's sister's son, was violently cut down. For that the Vikings were given requital. I heard that Eadweard attacked one violently with his sword - he did not restrain his blows - so that at his feet the warrior fell fated to die. For that his lord gave thanks to him, his chamberlain, when he had opportunity. [111-21]

So the resolute young men stood firm at the battle; these warriors with their weapons were intent upon which one of them might with his spear be the first to take life from the men fated to die. There was slaughter on the earth. They stood firm; Byrhtnoth encouraged them and bade each of the young men to think only of the battle and who in the fight would win glory against the Danes. [122-29]

- 130 Wod þa wiges heard, wæpen up ahof,
bord to gebeorge, and wið þæs beornes stop.
Eode swa anræd eorl to þam ceorle,
ægber hyra oðrum yfeles hogode.
Sende ða se særinc superne gar,
135 þæt gewundod wearð wigena hlaforð;
he sceaf þa mid ðam scylde, þæt se sceaf to bærst,
and þæt spere sprengde, þæt hit sprang ongean.
Gegremod wearð se guðrinc; he mid gare stang
wlanche wicing, þe him þa wunde forgeaf.
140 Frod wæs se fyrdrinc; he let his francan wadan
purh ðæs hysses hals, hand wisode
þæt he on þam færsceaðan feorh geræhte.
Ða he oþerne ofstlice sceat,
þæt seo byrne tobærst; he wæs on breostum wund
145 þurh ða hringlocan, him æt heortan stod
ætterne ord. Se eorl wæs þe bliþra,
hlloh þa, modi man, sæde Metode þanc
ðæs dægweorces þe him Drihten forgeaf.
Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
150 fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat
purh ðone æpelan Æþelredes þegen.
Him be healfre stod hyse unweaxen,
cniht on gecampe, se full cafllice
bræd of þam beorne boldigne gar,
155 Wulfstanes bearn, Wulfmæc se geonga,
forlet forheardne faran eft ongean;
ord in gewod, þæt se on eorþan læg
þe his peoden ær þearle geræhte.
Eode þa gesyrwed secg to þam eorle;

Then a warrior hardened in battle came forward; he raised up his weapon and his shield for protection, and he advanced against the warrior [i.e. Byrhtnoth]. So, the resolute leader advanced to the churl, and both were intent on doing evil to the other. Then the Viking threw his spear of southern design so that the lord of warriors [Byrhtnoth] was wounded. He pushed then with his shield so that the shaft broke; and the spear quivered (*sprengde*), and it sprang back again. The warrior was enraged; with his spear he stabbed the proud Viking who had given him the wound. The warrior was experienced in battle, and he let his spear go through the neck of the young man; he directed his hand so that he touched life in the Viking. Then he quickly shot another so that the coat of mail burst; he was wounded in the chest through his ring-mail shirt and the poisoned point of the spear stood in his heart. The warrior was happier because of that; the proud man laughed and said thanks to God for the day's work that the Lord had given him. [130-48]

Then a certain Viking warrior let fly a spear from his hand, so that it went too far into the noble thane of Æþelrede. Beside him on the battlefield stood a young man, not fully grown, a young warrior who very bravely drew the bloody spear from the warrior. He was the son of Wulfstan, the young Wulfmæc; he let go back again the very hard spear. The point penetrated so that the one who had previously wounded his lord lay dead on the ground. Then an armoured warrior advanced to the leader;

- 160 he wolde þæs beornes beagas gefeggan,
 reaf and bringas and gerenod swurd.
 Ða Byrhtnoð bræd bill of sceðe,
 brad and bruneceg, and on þa byrman sloh.
 To raþe hine gelette lidmanna sum,
 165 þa he þæs eorles earm amyrde.
 Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd;
 ne mihte he gehealdan heardne mece,
 wæpnes wealdan. Ða gyt þæt word gecwæð
 har hilderinc, hyssas bylde,
 170 bæd gangan forð gode geferan;
 ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gestandan
 He to heofenum wlat:
 "Gepancie þe, ðeoda Waldend,
 ealra þæra wynna þe ic on worulde gebad.
 175 Nu ic ha, milde Metod, mæste þearfe
 þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,
 þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote
 on þin gewæld, þeoden engla,
 mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymði to þe
 180 þæt hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton."
 Ða hine heowon hæðene scealcas
 and begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
 Ælfrnoð and Wulmæc begen lagon,
 185 ða onenn hyra frean feorh gesealdon.
 Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þær beon noldon.
 Þær wearð Oddan bearn ærest on fleame,
 Godric fram gupe, and þone godan forlet
 þe him mænigne oft mearh gesealde;
 he gehleop þone eoh þe ahte his hlaforð,
 190 on þam geredum þe hit riht ne wæs,
 and his broðru mid him begen ærndon,
 Godwine and Godwig, gupe ne gymdon,
 ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,
 flugon on þæt fæsten and hyra feore burgon,

he intended to take his treasure, armour, ring-mail, and decorated sword. Then Byrhtnoth drew his sword, broad and bright-edged, from its scabbard, and struck at the coat of mail. Too quickly one of the Vikings stopped him and wounded the leader's arm. The gold-hilted sword fell to the earth; he was not able to hold his hard sword and to wield his weapon. Yet still the gray-haired warrior spoke words, and encouraged the young warriors and urged them to go forth as good comrades-in-arms. He might not any longer stand firm on his feet; he looked to the heavens and said, 'I thank you, Lord of the peoples, for all the joys that I have experienced in the world. Now, merciful Lord, I have the greatest need that you grant favour to my spirit so that my soul may travel to you, into your power, Lord of angels, and may go with peace. I beg you that the fiends of hell may not harm it.' [149-80]

Then the heathen warriors cut him down and both the warriors who stood beside him; Ælfrnoð and Wulmæc both lay dead, who gave up their lives beside their lord. They turned then from the battle those who did not wish to be there. The son of Odda was first in flight; Godric went from the battle, and abandoned the good man who had given him many a horse. He leapt onto the horse which his Lord owned, into the trappings -- which it was not proper for him to do --, and his two brothers, Godwin and Godwig, galloped away with him; they did not care for the battle, but turned from the fight and sought the woods; they fled into safety and saved their lives,

- 195 and manna ma þonne hit ænig mæð wære,
gyf hi þa geeamunga ealle gemundon
þe he him to dugube gedon hæfde.
Swa him Offa on dæg ær asæde
on þam meþelstede, þa he gemot hæfde,
200 þæt þær modelice manega spræcon
þe eft æt þearfe þolian noldon.
þa wearð afeallen þæs folces ealdor,
Æþelredes eorl; ealle gesawon
heorðgeneatas þæt hyra heorra læg.
205 þa ðær wendon forð wlanca þegenas,
unearge men efston georne;
hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega,
lif forlætan oððe leofne gewrecan.
Swa hi bylde forð bearn Ælfrices,
210 wiga wintrum geong, wordum mælde,
Ælfwine þa cwæð, he on ellen spræc:
"Gemunu þa mæla þe we oft æt meodo spræcon,
þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
215 hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn;
Ic wylle mine æþelo eallum gecypan,
þæt ic wæs on Myrcon miccles cynnes;
wæs min ealda fæder Ealhelm haten,
wis ealdorman, woruldgesælig.
220 Ne sceolon me on þære þeode þegenas ætwitan
þæt ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
eard gesecan, nu min ealdor ligeð
forheawen æt hilde. Me is þæt hearma mæst;
he wæs ægðer min mæg and min hlaford."

and many more than it was at all proper, if they had remembered all the worthy things that he had done for their benefit. So Offa had said to them on the day before, in the meeting place, when they held the council, that many spoke bravely there who would not be prepared to endure hardship when it was necessary. [181-201]

Then was the leader of the people fallen, the warrior of Æþelred; all his close companions saw that their leader lay dead. Then, from there, went forward the proud thanes; the men, undaunted, advanced eagerly. They all wished one of two things, to lose life or to avenge their beloved leader. So the son of Ælfric, a warrior young in years, encouraged them forth; he, Ælfwine, then said and spoke courageously: 'Remember the times when we often spoke at the mead-drinking, when we made our vows on the mead-benches, warriors in the hall, about hard battle. Now we may find out who is brave. I want to make known to you all my lineage, that I am descended from a great family in Mercia; my grandfather was called Ealhelm; he was a wise nobleman and prosperous in the world. Warriors will not reproach me among those people and say that I wanted to go from this army, to seek my own country, now my leader lies dead, cut down at battle. It is the greatest sorrow for me; he was both my kinsman and my lord.' [202-224]

- 225 þa he forð eode, fæhðe gemunde,
 þæt he mid orde anne geræhte
 flotan on þam folce, þæt se on foldan læg
 forwegen mid his wæpne. Ongan þa winas manian,
 frynd and geferan, þæt hi forð eodon.
- 230 Offa gemælde, æscholt asceoc:
 "Hwæt þu, Ælfwine, hafast ealle gemanode
 þegenas to þearfe, nu ure þeoden lið,
 eorl on eorðan. Us is eallum þearf
 þæt ure æghwylc oþerne bylde
 wigan to wige, þa hwile þe he wæpen mæge
 habban and healdan, heardne mece,
 gar and god swurd. Us Godric hærfð,
 earth Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene.
- 240 Wende þæs formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
 forþan wearð hier on felda folc totwæmed,
 scyldburh tobrocen. Abreoðe his angin,
 þæt he her swa manigne man aflymde!"
 Leofsunu gemælde and his linde ahof,
 bord to gebeorge; he þam beorne oncwæð:
 "Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle
 fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
 wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten.
- 250 Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hælæð
 wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
 þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie,
 wende fram wige, ac me sceal wæpen niman,
 ord and iren." He ful yre wod,
 feagt fæstlice, fleam he forhogode.
- 255 Dunnere þa cwæð, daroð acwehte,
 unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
 bæd þæt beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wræce:
 "Ne mæg na wanhian se þe wrecan þenceð
 frean on folce, ne for feore muman."
- 260 Þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton;
 ongunnon þa hiredmen heardlice feohtan,
 grame garberend, and God bædon

Then he went forth, intent on the battle, so that with his spear he killed one Viking among those people so that he lay dead on the ground, cut down by his weapon. Then the comrades, the friends and close companions, began to urge each other that they should advance. Offa spoke, and shook his ash spear: 'Indeed, you, Ælfwine, have encouraged all the thanes at this time of crisis, now our lord lies dead, a warrior dead on the ground. It is necessary for all of us that each warrior should encourage the other to the battle, as long as he is able to hold and control his weapon, hard sword, spear and good sword. Godric, the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us all. Very many men believed, when he rode away on the horse, on that proud horse, that it was our leader; therefore, the people were divided on the field, the shield-wall was broken. May his work come to nothing because he put so many men to flight!' [225-43]

Leofsunu spoke and raised up his linden-wood shield, his shield for protection; he spoke to the warrior: 'I promise this, that I will not flee from here the space of one foot, but will go forward and avenge my dear lord in battle. Resolute warriors around Sturmere will have no reason to reproach me in words now my lord lies dead and say that I returned home lordless, went from the battle; but weapons must take me, spear and iron sword.' He advanced, very angry, and fought resolutely; he did not think about flight. Dunnere, a simple churl, then spoke; he shook his spear, and called out over all, and asked that all of the warriors avenge Byrhtnoth: 'He may not flinch nor fear for his life, he who wants to avenge his lord on these people.' [244-59]

Then they went forth into battle; they did not care about their lives. The warriors (*hiredmen*) fought fiercely, fierce spear-bearers, and prayed to God

þæt hi moston gewreca hƳra winedrihten
and on hƳra feondum fyl gewrycan.

265 Him se gysel ongan geomlice fylstan;
he wæs on Norðhymbron heardes cynnes,
Ecglafes bearn, him wæs Æscferð nama.
He ne wandode na æt þam wigplegan,
ac he fƳsde forð flan genehe;

270 hwilon he on bord sceat, hwilon beorn tæse,
æfre embe stunde he sealde sume wunde,
þa hwile ðe he wæpna wealdan moste.

þa gyt on orde stod Eadweard se langa,
gearo and geomful, gylpwordum spræc
275 þæt he nolde fleogan fotnæl landes,
ofer bæc bugan, þa his betera leg.
He bræc þone bordweall and wið þa beornas feaht,
oðþæt he his singcyfan on þam sæmannum
wurðlice wrec, æt he on wæle læge,

280 Swa dyde Æþeric, æþele gefera,
fus and forðgeom, feaht eornoste.

Sibyrhtes broðor and swiðe mænig oþer
clufon celled bord, cene hi weredon;
bærst bordes lærig, and seo byrne sang
285 gryreleoða sum. þa æt guðe sloh
Offa þone sælidan, þæt he on eorðan feoll,
and ðær Gaddes mæg grund gesolhte.
Raðe wearð æt hilde Offa forheawen;

290 he hæfde ðeah geforþod þæt he his frean gehet,
swa he beotode ær wið his beahgifu
þæt hi sceoldon begen on burh ridan,
hale to hame, oððe on here crincgan,
on wælstowe / wundum sweltan;
he læg ðegenlice ðeodne gehende.

that they would be able to avenge their dear lord and bring death on their enemies. The hostage (*gysel*) began to help them eagerly; he was from a fierce tribe in Northumbria; he was the son of Ecglaf; Æscferð was his name. He did not waver at the battle but he shot forth arrows repeatedly; sometimes he struck the shield, sometimes he killed a warrior; time and again he gave some wound as long as he was able to wield weapons.
[260-72]

Still in the front line stood Eadweard the tall, ready and eager; he spoke the words of his vow, that he was unwilling to flee the space of one foot; to turn back again; when his leader lay dead. He broke through the shield-wall and fought against the warriors until he honourably avenged his treasure-giver on the Vikings, before he lay dead on the field of slaughter. Æþeric, a noble companion, did the same; he was ready and eager to advance, and he fought fiercely. The brother of Sibyrhte and very many others cut through the hollow rim of the shield; they defended themselves bravely; the rim of the shield broke, and the coat of mail sang a song of terror. Then in the battle Offa struck that Viking so that he lay on the earth, and there the kinsman of Gadd sought the ground. Quickly Offa was cut down at battle; nevertheless, he had fulfilled what he had promised to his lord, when he had vowed with his ring-giver that they should both ride into the town, safe to home, or perish among the army, die from their wounds on the place of slaughter. He lay nobly beside his lord. [273-94]

295

Ða wearð borda gebræc. Brimmen wodon,

guð gegremode; gar oft þurhwod

fæges feorhhus. Forð þa eode Wistan,

Þurstanes sunu, wið þas seggas feaht;

he wæs on geþrange hyra þreora bana,

ær him Wigelines bearn on pam wæle læge.

300 Þær wæs stið gemot; stodon fæste

wigan on gewinne, wigend cruncon,

wundum werige. Wæl feol on eorþan.

Oswold and Eadwold ealle hwile,

305 begen þa gebroþru, beornas trymedon,

hyra winemagas wordon bædon

þæt hi þær æt ðearfe þolian sceoldon,

unwaclice wæpna neotan.

Byrhtwold mæpelode, bord hafenode

310 (se wæs eald geneat), æsc acwehte;

he ful baldlice beornas lærde:

"Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,

mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lyfðað.

Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen,

315 god on greote. A mæg gnumian

se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan penceð.

Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,

ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,

be swa leofan men, licgan þence."

320 Swa hi Æþelgares bearn ealle bylde,

Godtric to guþe. Oft he gar forlet,

wælspere windan on þa wicingas,

swa he on þam folce fýrmest eode,

heow and hynde, oðþæt he on hilde gecranc.

325 Næs þæt na se Godtric þe ða guðe forbeah

* * *

Then was there a clash of shields. The Vikings advanced, enraged for battle; again and again spears passed through the bodies of those fated to die. Wistan, the son of Þurstan, advanced, and fought against those warriors; in the throng he was the slayer of three of them before this son of Wigelin lay dead on the field of slaughter. The encounter was fierce; warriors stood firm on the battle; warriors fell dead exhausted by their wounds. Slaughter fell on the earth. Oswold and Eadwold all the while, both those brothers, encouraged the warriors, their close kinsmen, and urged them through their words that they should endure at this crisis, and wield their weapons bravely. Byrhtwold spoke, raised up his shield – he was an old retainer; he brandished his ash-spear; very boldly he urged the warriors: 'Our resolve must be the firmer, our heart the keener, our spirit the greater, as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord violently cut down, a brave man on the earth. Always will he grieve, he who decides to turn away from this battle. I am wise in this life. I do not intend to go from here, but I intend to lie dead beside my lord, beside so beloved a man.' In the same way the son of Æþelgar, Godric, encouraged them all to battle. Often he let fly a spear of slaughter among the Vikings as he advanced most resolutely on those people; he cut them down and killed them until he lay dead in the battle. That was not the Godric who fled the battle. ...

THE BATTLE OF MALDON

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