

Never yet within this island has there been a greater slaughter of folk felled by the sword's edges before this one, according to what books tell us, and ancient authorities, since when from the east the Angles and Saxons arrived here, sought out Britain across the broad ocean, proud craftsmen of war, overcame the Welshmen and, being men keen after glory, conquered the country.

## The Battle of Maldon

[London, British Library, Cotton Otho A xii (burnt)]

The unique MS of the poem was destroyed in 1731 in the fire at Ashburnham House, Westminster, in which the *Beowulf* MS was charred and others in Sir Robert Cotton's seventeenth-century collection lost and damaged. All editions stem from John Elphinstone's transcript of about 1724. The beginning was then already missing; so was the ending, though the final remark comparing the two Godrics, one of whom treacherously flees, the other of whom stays and dies with Byrthnoth, appositely states the choice that is at the heart of this poem and, perhaps, of the whole AS heroic ethos.

The annal for 991 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (versions C, D, E, F) recording the death of Byrthnoth, caldorman of Essex, in a skirmish with a Danish raiding-force at Maldon in Essex, is laconic and maybe ironic in its juxtaposition of his death with the first payment, later that year, of Danegeld. Behind it, perhaps, lay the disquiet which called forth the poem. Since there was no discernible strategic gain, was not the loss of so distinguished a servant of the Crown and protector and benefactor of the Church, with so many soldiers, an insupportable price to pay for a gesture of unmoded heroics? Subsequent legend-history did not see it so. The *Latin Life of Oswald*, composed probably at nearby Ramsey within a decade of the battle, represents Byrthnoth as an Old Testament patriarch in bearing and as a Christian martyr in his death. The *Latin Book of Ely*, compiled in Ely about 1170 but based upon an older work and ultimately, it seems, upon oral tradition, bids so far for Byrthnoth's reputation as to feature two battles at Maldon, the first a triumphant victory over the heathens, the second a fortnight-long struggle against overwhelming odds. In both

works are the makings of a martyr-cult; Ely in fact claimed possession of the body of Byrthnoth and owned a tapestry depicting his deeds, made by his widow Ælfled in commemoration of his probity. Nor, presumably, would archbishop Wulfstan of York have deemed Byrthnoth's death futile. In his *Sermon of Wulf to the English* (1014) he castigates the English for stampeding like sheep before a handful of Danes and, so that God may have cause to revoke the curse he has loosed upon them, he urges them to return to old ideals of public and private integrity, since mutual good faith between kin and kin and lord and retainer and subject and sovereign is one with good faith between man and God which will surely win its reward. There is, then, as various annals expressively confirm over these years, a polemical and propagandist context current, treating the Danes as a trial of the nation, into which it is not implausible to fit the poem.

The poet's case is plainly that this strategic defeat of the English was a victory of the national spirit. Byrthnoth testifies to his oneness with his people, with his land, with his lord the king; he witnesses to his Christian faith in defiance of heathendom and, dying, commends his soul to God. His men in turn testify to their oneness with him and thereby witness to their participation in the same total integrity of secular and spiritual values. Thus is defined an exemplary dynamic of warfare – one, we might note, which is far more complex than that attributed by Tacitus to the Germanic world in the first century after Christ, where the retainers fought for the chieftain, the chieftain for victory. If the *ofermod* in which Byrthnoth yields equal footing to the Danes is 'pride', the poet is far from seeing it as the sin of Lucifer: it is nearer Beowulf's *welencu*, a superb *superbia*, derided by Unferth who explicitly lacks it, but a pride justified when Beowulf backs up words with deeds. In this respect the values of the poem are traditional, secular and heroic, as quintessentially declared in Byrthwold's speech (lines 312–19). But though, perhaps for calculated propagandist reasons, the poet appeals to the heroics of Germanic antiquity – and thus sends scholars looking to the *Germania* of Tacitus – he is even more strikingly forward-looking, even medieval, in his integration of these heroics with the motives of Church, Crown and country.

... should be broken. Then he commanded each one of the soldiers to set his horse loose, to drive it far away and to

proceed on foot, and to turn his mind to his hands and a doughty disposition. As soon as Offa's relative observed that the earl was not willing to put up with slackness then from off his hand he let his beloved hawk fly towards the forest and addressed himself to the fighting. By that it could be understood that the young man had no intention of flinching at the fray when he took up weapons. Besides him, Eadric too had a desire to serve his chief and lord in the conflict, so he proceeded to carry his spear forward into battle. He was possessed of a doughty will – as long as he was able to hold with his hands shield and broad sword: he was fulfilling a pledge when he was called on to fight in front of his lord.

Then Byrhtnoth began to place the men in array there; he rode about and gave instructions, taught the soldiers how they were to stand and maintain the position and urged them that they should hold their shields properly, securely with their fists, and that they should not feel scared at all. When he had suitably placed the army in array he then dismounted among the people where it pleased him best to be, where he knew his troop of household retainers to be most loyal.

Then there appeared at the waterside and fiercely shouted out a messenger from the vikings who swaggeringly announced a message from the ocean-wanderers to the earl where he was standing on the foreshore.

'Bold seamen have sent me to you. They have bidden me tell you that you must speedily send rings in return for protection and it will be better for you that you should buy off this armed assault with tribute than that we should participate in such cruel conflict. There is no need for us to kill each other: if you are wealthy enough for the purpose, we are willing to fix a truce in exchange for the gold. If you, who are most influential here, decide upon this, that you are willing to ransom your people, pay the seamen a sum of money – upon their own assessment – in exchange for quiet, and accept peace at our hands, we will take to our ships with the levied moneys, set sail and keep the peace with you.'

42 Out spoke Byrhtnoth; he lifted his shield, shook his slim ash spear, held forth with his words and, angry and single-minded, gave him answer:

45 'Do you hear, sea-wanderer, what this nation says? They will give you spears as tribute, the poison-tipped javelin and ancient swords, those warlike accoutrements which will profit you nothing in battle. Seamen's spokesmen, report back again; tell your people much more distasteful news: that here stands a worthy earl with his troop of men who is willing to defend this his ancestral home, the country of Æthelræd, my lord's nation and land. The heathens shall perish in battle. It seems to me too despicable that you should take to your ships with our riches, unfought, now that you have intruded this far hither into our country. Not so smoothly shall you get gold. First point and edge shall sort things out between us, the fierce exchange of fighting, before we pay tribute.'

62 Then he commanded the soldiers to advance, bearing shields, so that they were all standing on the river bank. The one troop was unable to get at the other on account of the water there, where the flood tide came flowing after the ebb: streams of water cut them off. Too long it seemed to them until the time they should carry spears against each other. There they stood by the River Pante in a state of uproar, the spearhead of the East Saxons and the ship army: none of them was able to harm another unless someone took his death from the flight of an arrow.

72 The flood tide went out. The seafarers were standing ready, many vikings eager for war. Then the lord of the English heroes commanded a warrior hardy in war to hold the causeway – he was called Wulfstan, a man valiant by virtue of his family. He was son of Ceola who with his spear fatally shot the first man who very rashly stepped on to the causeway there. With Wulfstan there stood two brave undaunted warriors, Ælfere and Maccus, who had no intention of making a retreat at the water-crossing, but rather they strove steadfastly against the enemy as long as they were able to wield their weapons.

84 When they realized this and clearly saw that they had encountered there furious guardians of the causeway, the despicable strangers began to cheat: they demanded that they should be allowed to have access to go leading their soldiers across the ford.

89 Then the earl, because of his extravagant spirit, yielded too much terrain to a more despicable people. Across the chill water, then, Byrhtelm's son called out – the men listened:

93 'It is cleared for you now; come on quickly to us, you men, and to the battle. God alone knows who will be allowed to control the place of slaughter.'

96 The slaughterous wolves advanced; they gave no heed to the water, that troop of vikings. Westwards across the Pante, across the gleaming water they carried their shields; the men from the fleet bore their linden targets ashore. There, confronting the fierce foe, Byrhtnoth stood ready with his men. He ordered the army to form the defensive barrier with shields and to hold steadfastly against their enemies.

103 The fighting was now imminent, glory was at hand; the time was come when doomed men were to perish there. A din was upraised there; ravens wheeled about, and the eagle greedy for carrion. There was uproar on the earth.

108 Then from their fists they let fly spears hard as a file, cruelly sharpened javelins. Bows were busy, shield caught point. The onslaught was furious. Warriors fell, soldiers lay dead on either side. Wulfmær was wounded. He had chosen death in battle, this relative of Byrhtnoth, son of his sister: he was violently hacked down by swords. Retribution was paid to the vikings for that. I heard that Eadweard violently struck one with his sword – he did not skimp the blow – so that the doomed fighter fell dead at his feet; for this his lord declared his thanks to the chamberlain when he had the chance.

122 So they stood firm, stubborn soldiers in battle; eagerly they set their minds on seeing who there could first win the life of a doomed man with his spear, those soldiers with their weapons. The slaughtered man would fall on the ground. Steadfast they stood; Byrhtnoth was in command of them; he urged that each soldier should set his mind on the warfare, who wanted to gain glory by fighting against the Danes.

130 Then one ruthless in warfare advanced, raised up his weapon and his shield for protection and moved towards that man. Just as resolutely the earl went towards the commoner: each of them intended harm to the other. Then the seaman dispatched a spear of southern design so that the warriors' lord was wounded. Then he gave a thrust with the shield so that the shaft broke and he shattered the javelin so that it sprang back out. The warrior was enraged; with a spear he struck the presumptuous viking who had given him the wound. He was experienced, that soldier: he made his lance pass right through the man's neck; his hand steered it so that he struck the vitals in his sudden assailant. Then he rapidly hurled a second, so that the mail-coat burst: he was wounded in the breast through the linked rings – at his heart stood the poisonous point. The earl was all the happier; he laughed then, a man of spirit, and said thanks to the Ordainer for the day's work the Lord had granted him.

139 Then one of the viking warriors let go a spear from his hands, let it fly from his fist so that it went all too deeply into Æthelred's noblethane. By his side a youth not grown to manhood was standing, a boy in the battle, who very bravely plucked the bloody spear out of the man, the son of Wulfstan, young Wulfmær. He made the extremely hard spear return again. The point penetrated so that he who had just now severely struck his lord lay dead on the ground.

Then an armed fellow went towards the earl – he wanted to take the man's valuables, his armour, and rings, and ornamented sword. Then Byrhtnoth drew sword from sheath,

broad and bright of blade, and struck against the corslet. All too quickly one of the shipmen hindered him, since he crippled the earl's arm. The golden hilted sword then fell to the earth: he was unable to hold the hard blade, or wield a weapon. Even then, the grey-haired warrior delivered a harangue, emboldened the young men and urged them to press onwards as good comrades. Then he was unable to stand steadily on his feet any longer. He looked up to the heavens.

173 'I thank you, Ruler of nations, for all of those joys which I have experienced in the world. Now, merciful Ordainer, I have the greatest need that you should grant my spirit the benefit that my soul be allowed to journey to you, into your keeping, Lord of the angels, to pass in peace. I beseech you that hellish assailants be not allowed to harm it.'

181 Then heathen warriors hacked him down, and both the men who were standing by him, *Elfnioth* and *Wulmar* both lay dead, who gave up their lives at the side of their lord.

185 Then those who had no will to stay there made off from the conflict. The sons of *Odda* first took flight there; *Godric* took flight from the battle and deserted the good man who had often given him many a horse. He leapt on to that mount which belonged to his lord, into those trappings, as it was not proper for him to do, and both his brothers ran away with him, *Godwine* and *Godwig*: they had no taste for fighting, but turned away from the battle and made for the forest; they fled into that secure place and saved their lives – and more men than it was in any way fitting, if they had called to mind all the favours which *Byrthnoth* had done for their benefit. *Offa* had said as much to them earlier that day in the place of assembly when he had held a council – that many there were speaking boldly who would later be unwilling to suffer at time of need.

202 So the leader of that people was laid low in death. Those of his personal retinue all saw that their lord lay dead. Then, proud thanes, they went on forwards; eagerly they pressed on,

men without fear. At that point they all desired one of two things – to render up their life or to avenge the man they had loved.

209 The son of *Elfric* urged them onwards in these terms; a soldier young in years, he addressed his words to them. *Elfwine*, then, spoke out and valiantly declared:

212 'Let us call to mind those declarations we often uttered over mead, when from our seat we heroes in hall would put up pledges about tough fighting; now it can be proved who is brave. I am willing to make my lineage known to all, that I was from a substantial family in *Mercia*. My grandfather was called *Ealhelm*, a wise nobleman blessed with worldly wealth. The thanes among that people shall not reproach me for my wanting to get out of this army, to make my way home, now that my leader is lying hacked down in battle. To me that is the greatest grief: he was both my kinsman and my lord.'

225 Then he moved forward and turned his attention to revenge, so that with his spear he struck a seaman among the army so that he lay dead on the ground, destroyed by his weapon. Then he exhorted his comrades, his friends and companions, that they should advance.

230 *Offa* spoke out and shook his ash spear:

231 'Yes, *Elfwine*! you have exhorted all the thanes at time of need. Now that our lord the earl lies dead on the ground it is incumbent upon us all that each of us should encourage the others, as soldiers into battle, as long as he is able to keep and hold a weapon, a tough blade, a spear and a good sword. *Godric*, the cowardly son of *Odda*, has betrayed us all. Too many a man thought when he rode off on horseback, on that splendid mount, that it was our lord. Because of that the army here in the field was split and the shield barrier broken. May his conduct, in that he put so many a man here to flight, end wretchedly for him.'

244 Leofsunu spoke out and raised up his linden shield, his targe,  
as protection; he answered the warrior:

246 'I vow it, that I shall not retreat from here the space of a foot,  
but rather I mean to go on further, to avenge my lord and friend  
in battle. The stalwart men around Sturmer will have no cause  
to reproach me with their words, now that my lord has fallen,  
that I travel lordless home, and turn back from warfare; rather  
shall weapon dispatch me, spear point and iron sword.'

253 He pressed on, furious in the extreme, and fought resolutely:  
flight he scorned.

255 Then Dunmere spoke and brandished his lance; an elderly  
freeman, he called out above it all, and urged that each one of  
the warriors should avenge Byrthnoth:

258 'He who thinks to avenge his lord upon that people, he may  
not flinch nor fret about his life.'

260 They pressed ahead then; they had no regard for life.

261 The men of the household, fierce spear-bearers, fought  
toughly then, and prayed God that they might be allowed to  
avenge their lord and friend, and wreak destruction upon their  
enemies. The hostage eagerly supported them; he was of sturdy  
stock in Northumbria, the son of Ecglað: his name was  
Æscferth. He did not flinch in the give and take of battle, but he  
repeatedly fired off darts. Sometimes he landed a shot in a  
shield, sometimes he lacerated a warrior; constantly at brief  
intervals he inflicted some wound, as long as he was able to  
wield weapons.

273 Also in the spearhead stood Eadweard the tall, alert, and  
eager; he spoke words of declaration that he would not flee a  
foot's measurement of ground and fall back, since his superior  
lay dead. He broke through the shield-barrier and fought with  
the warriors until he had worthily avenged his treasure-giving  
lord upon the seamen, before he lay dead among the slain.

280 So too did Ætheric, an aristocratic companion, brother of  
Sibyrht; willing and eager to advance he fought zealously and  
very many another – they split the curved shield; the fierce men  
defended themselves. Shield rim smashed and mail-coat sang a  
certain terrible song.

285 Then in the fray Offa struck the sea-wanderer so that he fell  
dead to the earth; and there Gad's kinsman, Offa, found his  
way to the ground: he was rapidly hacked down in the battle.  
Nonetheless he had accomplished what he had promised his  
lord, according as he had previously pledged to his ring-giving  
master that they should both ride home sound to the manor or  
else both perish in war, to die from wounds in the place of  
carnage. He lay like a thane close to his lord.

295 Then there was a smashing of shields. The men from the sea  
advanced, infuriated by the fray. Spear often pierced the  
doomed man's body. Then Wistan went forward, the son of  
Thurstan fought against the men. He was the killer of three of  
them in the crush before Wigelm's son laid himself down  
among the slain. It was a stern encounter there. The soldiers  
stood firm in the struggle; fighting men dropped down dead,  
exhausted by wounds. The slain fell to the ground.

294 All this while both the brothers Oswold and Eadwold  
encouraged the warriors; by their words they urged their dear  
kinsmen that they should hold out there in the time of need and  
use their weapons unflinching.

299 Byrthwold held forth, heaved up his shield – he was an aged  
companion – he shook his ash-spear. Most courageously he  
enjoined the warriors:

302 'Resolution must be the tougher, hearts the keener, courage  
must be the more as our strength grows less. Here lies our lord  
all hacked down, the good man in the dirt. He who now thinks  
of getting out of this fighting will have cause to regret it for  
ever. I am grown old in life. I will not go away, but I mean to lie  
at the side of my lord, by the man so dear to me.'



Ethelgar's son, Godric, also encouraged them all to the fray. Repeatedly he let fly a spear, a murderous javelin among the vikings. So he advanced, foremost into that body of men. He hewed and struck until he dropped dead in the battle. He was not that Godric who fled from the fray.

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## Judgment Day II

[Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 201, pp. 161-5]

'Consummatio timoris dei sapientia. *Gefyllednyss eges godes ys wisdom* (The consummation of a fear of God is wisdom). This axiom, attributed to Jesus son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) in the OE-glossed LSc (p. 67), states a central truth of a number of OE poems (*Wan, Str, Rsg, DrR*, the epilogue to *Chr III*) whose mood is elegiac and penitential and whose subject-matter concerns the grace of enlightenment which follows a man's acknowledgement, through experience and contemplation, of a fear of God. 'Whoever fears the Lord receives his guidance and whoever wakes to him meets with his blessing,' says Defensor (LSc, p. 67). Often this salutary fear of God is shown to be stirred by God himself as an act of grace (see the headnotes to *Wan*), and so it is in this poem. The narrator, the man set apart from worldly obsessions who is so often the recipient of grace in Christian visionary literature, is in a glade redolent of the Earthly Paradise when a rough wind shatters its tranquillity, as man's first disobedience shattered the tranquillity of Eden; and the narrator wakes to a consciousness of the fallen state of Man, his mortality, the world's mutability, impending Judgment – and a fear of God. Addressing his own will, his flesh, and at last, out of his wisdom, all mankind, he pictures Doomsday, hell's horrors and the ecstasies of heaven in a *tour de force* of compunction-rousing imagery.

The poet's chosen device of a first-person narrator – a device enhanced in the live oral performance of the poem when the singer assumes the narrator's identity – intensifies the emotive power of this meditation, whose purpose is to open an audience to the grace of tears – to tears of contrition before Christ the Saviour and the King and to

penitence before Christ the Physician and the Judge. 'Truly, penitence is the wound's medicament, the chance of deliverance; through it God is called to mercy,' quotes Defensor from Isidore, a chief authority for Bede and the Middle Ages (LSc, p. 47); and the message of the poem also echoes Isidore: 'If in tranquillity we will not fear God, when his Judgment is at hand or we are trampled down by torments we shall be afraid' (LSc, p. 68). Here, then, poetry serves as a conducted therapeutic exercise in meditation. *Jgd II*, like *DrR* (though with a different story-line), amounts to an imaginative embodiment of the spiritual processing described by Gregory the Great (who sent Christianity to the English in 597 and was thenceforth a writer especially revered in England) in the third of his *Dialogues* (see introduction to *DrR*).

The poem, which bears little specific relation beyond theme to *Jgd I* in the Exeter Book, is an anonymous creative translation of the Latin *De Die Iudicii* traditionally attributed to Bede, whose authorship would well account for the patristic orthodoxy informing the work.

Listen! alone I sat within a grove canopied over with a sheltering roof in the forest's midst where the streams of water murmured and ran amid the glade, exactly as I say. There too delightful herbs, flourished and blossomed round about within that unparagoned place. And the trees stirred and murmured at the roughness of the winds, the sky was churned up and my miserable spirit was quite thrown into confusion. Then forthwith, frightened and unhappy, these fearsome verses I raised up in song, all as you declared it. I remembered my sins, the crimes of my life and the long-drawn-out time of dark death's advent upon earth, and I was afraid of the great judgment because of my wicked deeds upon earth, and I was afraid too of everlasting wrath from God's own self, upon me and each one of the sinful, and how the mighty Lord will divide and sentence all humankind according to his mysterious might. I remembered too the glory of the Lord and of the saints in the kingdom of heaven as well as the misery and the torment of those doomed to wretchedness. This I remembered within myself and I was greatly fearful and, grieving, I declared, troubled in spirit: