

Please note: The beginning and end of this ancient poem are lost. The only manuscript was partially destroyed by fire in 1731.

Battle of Maldon

“...should it become broken.”

Then Byrhtnoth ordered each of his warriors to release their horses, to hurry them far away, and to go forwards, mindful of their hands and their stout courage.

When Offa’s kinsman first understood that the earl would not suffer cowardice, he let his beloved hawk fly from his hands away into the woods and then he advanced to the battle—that was a gesture one could recognize: the young warrior did not wish waver at war, when he took up his weapons.

Also Eadric wanted to support his lord, his master in battle so he bore his spear forth to the fight. He had good intentions so long as he could hold with his hands a shield and broad sword—he would validate his vow when the time came to fight before his lord.

Then Byrhtnoth encouraged his warriors there, riding and ruling, directing his soldiers how they must stand and keep that place, and gave them

instruction as to how they should hold their shields correctly, fast with their hands—that they should fear nothing.

When he had fortified his *fyrð*-men graciously, then he alighted amid the ranks, where it most pleased him, in the place where he knew his most loyal hearth-guard to be.

Then one stood on the shore, sternly calling out, a Viking herald, conversing in many words, he delivered in a vaunt the message of the brim-sailors to that nobleman where he stood on the riverbank:

“They have sent me to you, the hardy sea-men—they bid you be informed that you must quickly send rings in exchange for protection, and it would be better for you to buy off with tribute this storm of spears, otherwise we should deal in such a hard battle.

We needn’t destroy ourselves if you are sufficiently rich—we wish to establish a safeguard in exchange for gold. If you decide this, you who are most powerful here, and you wish to ransom your people and give to the sea-men, according to their own discretion, money in exchange for peace, and take a truce at our hands, we will go back to our ships with our payment, and sail away, holding the peace with you.”

Byrhtnoth spoke back, raising up his shield, waving his slender spear, speaking in words, angry and resolute, giving them answer:

“Have you heard, sailor, what these people say?
They wish to give you spears as tribute,
the poisonous points and ancient swords,
this tackle of war that will do you no good in battle.
Herald of the brim-men, deliver this again,
say unto your people a more unpleasant report:
here stands with his troops a renowned earl
who wishes to defend this homeland,
the country of Æthelred, my own lord,
and his citizens and territory. The heathens
shall perish in battle. It seems a humiliation
to let you go to your ships with our treasures
unfought—now you have come thus far
into our country. You must not get our gold
so softly. Points and edges must reconcile us first,
a grim war-playing, before we give you any tribute.”

Then, bearing his shield, he ordered his warriors to
advance,
all those who stood on the riverbank.
Nor could that army go unto the other because of the
water;
where the flood came flowing after the ebb-tide.
The watery streams separated them. It seemed to them
too long
before they could muster their spears together.
There they stood in press alongside Pante’s stream,
the greatest of the East-Saxons and the spear-hordes.
Nor could any of them afflict the other side,
except those who were felled by the showering of arrows.

The tide went out—the float-men stood ready,
the many Vikings, eager warriors.

Then the shelter of heroes ordered his war-hardened
warriors

to keep the bridge. One was named Wulfstan,
keen amongst his kin, he was the son of Ceola,
who with his spear shot down the first man
who was boldest and stepped onto the bridge.

There stood with Wulfstan warriors unafraid,
Ælfhere and Maccus, two proud men,
they did not wish to flee from the ford,
yet they fixedly defended it against their foes,
as long as they were allowed to wield their weapons.

When they perceived this and keenly observed
that they had encountered bitter bridge-wardens there,
then the Vikings began to use guile, the hated guests,
asking that they be allowed to have free passage,
faring across the ford, leading their foot-soldiers.

This the nobleman allowed, due to his overweening
pride—

he gave up too much land to those hated people.

He shouted across the cold water then,
Byrthelm's son, while his warriors listened:

“Now is passage granted to you, come quickly to us,
as men to the fight: God alone knows
who will be allowed to control the field of slaughter.”

Then the slaughter-wolves waded—caring not for the
water—

the Viking army, westward across the Pante,

across the bright waters, carrying their board-shields,
sailing-men to the shore, bearing yellow linden.
There they stood ready against the ferocious one,
Byrhtnoth and his warriors. He ordered them
to form a shield-wall with their shields and for the army
to hold fast against their foes. Then was the fighting near,
glory in battle. The time was coming
that fated men must fall there.

There was shouting heaved up, and ravens circling,
eagles eager for carrion—an uproar was on the earth.
Then they let fly from their hands spears file-hardened,
the spears grimly ground down, bows were busy—
shields were peppered with points.

Bitter was the onslaught, warriors fell
on either side, the young men lying down.
Wulfmær was wounded, choosing a slaughter-rest,
Byrhtnoth's kinsman—he was mightily cut down
with a sword, his sister-son.

There requital was given back to the Vikings—
as I heard it—Eadweard struck down one
mightily with his sword, not withholding his blow,
so that a fated champion fell down at his feet.
For this Byrhtnoth gave his thanks to him,
lord to chamberlain, when he had the chance.

They all stood so firmly stiff-minded,
the young warriors in the battle, thinking eagerly
who they could soonest conquer
with their swords, the life of fated men,
the warriors with their weapons. Slaughter fell upon the
earth.

They stood steadfast: Byrhtnoth exhorted them,
ordering every warrior to think upon the scrum,
who wished for glory in fighting the Danes.

Then one stern in war waded forth, heaving up his
weapon,

sheltered by his shield, stepped up against Byrhtnoth.

The earl went just as resolutely to the churl,
either of them intending evil to the other.

Then the sea-warrior sent a southern spear,
that wounded the lord of warriors.

Byrhtnoth shoved it with his shield, so that the shaft burst,
and that spear-head broke so that it sprang out again.

The fighting-warrior became infuriated; he stabbed with his
spear

the proud Viking, who had given him that wound.

Aged was the army-warrior; he let his spear go forth
through the neck of the younger warrior, guided by his
hand

so that he reached the life of that sudden attacker.

Then he swiftly pierced another Viking,

so that the mail-shirt burst—that one was wounded in the
breast

through the ring-locks, the poisonous point

stood at his heart. The earl was the happier,

then he laughed, the mindful man, said thanks to the
Measurer

for the day's work which the Lord had given him.

Then some Viking warrior let go a spear from his hand,
flying from his fist so that it went too deeply

through the noble thane of Æthelred.

One stood by his side, a young warrior not fully grown,
a boy in the battle, who very bravely
pulled the bloody spear out of the warrior,
the son of Wulfstan, Wulfmær the young,
let go the exceedingly hard spear go back again;
the point travelled in, so that he who had laid his lord
previously onto the earth was wounded sorely.

Then an armored man came up to the earl—
he wished to carry off the rings of the warrior,
the armor and the accoutrements and the ornamented
blade.

Then Byrhtnoth drew out his sword from its sheath,
broad and brown-edged, and struck him in the byrnie.

Too quickly some sail-man hindered him,
when he wounded the arm of that earl.

The golden-hilted sword fell to the ground—
neither could he hold the stern blade,
or wield his weapon. Nevertheless the hoary battle-warrior
spoke a word, emboldening his fighters,
ordered them to go forth as good comrades;
then he could not stand fast on his feet for long.

He looked to heaven:

“I thank you, Wielder of peoples,
for all these joys that I have experienced in the world.
Now I have, mild Measurer, the greatest need
that you should grant my spirit the good
that my soul may be allowed to venture unto you
into your keeping, Prince of Angels
ferrying with peace. I am a suppliant to you
that these hell-harmers shall not be allowed to injure it.”

Then the heathen warriors cut him down
and both of the men who stood beside him,
Ælfnoth and Wulfmær, both lay there,
when they gave up their lives beside their lord.

Then they retreated from the battle spineless in the fray.
There the son of Odda was first to flight,
Godric from the fight, and abandoned the good man
who many times often given him a horse;
he leapt on the steed which his lord owned,
in those trappings which he had no right to take,
and his brothers were with him, both running away,
Godwine and Godwig, caring not for the fight,
but they turned from the war and sought the forest,
flying into the fastness and protecting their lives,
and more men as well, more than was proper,
if they had remembered all their favors
that Byrhtnoth had done for them to their glory.

So Offa had told him earlier in the day
in the meeting-place when he held a moot,
that there were many speaking proudly
who would not endure the tough going.

Then the leader of the people was felled,
Æthelred's earl; all saw him,
his hearth-retainers, that their lord lay down.
Then there the proud thanes went forth
uncowardly men hastened eagerly;
they all wished one of two things—
to give up their lives or revenge their dear lord.

So the son of Ælfric encouraged them forwards,
a warrior young in winters, speaking in words,
Ælfwine then spoke, saying valiantly:

“I remember the occasions when we often spoke at mead,
when we heaved up boasts on the benches,
heroes in the hall, about the dire struggle;
now one can find out who is brave.

I am willing to reveal my lineage to all,
that I was from a great family in Mercia;
my old father was called Ealhelm,
a wise alderman, blessed with worldly things.
The thanes among that people must not reproach me,
that I wished to go from this army,
seeking my country, now my lord lies
cut down in the battle. To me that is the greatest harm—
he was both my kinsman and my lord.”

Then he went forwards, mindful of the feud,
so that with his spear he wounded one float-man
among his people, so that he lay upon the earth,
killed by his weapon. Then he urged on his comrades,
his friends and allies, to go forwards.

Offa spoke, shaking his spear-haft:
“So, Ælfwine, you have urged us all,
thanes at the need, now that our lord lies,
an earl upon the earth. There is a need
for all of us to exhort the other,
warriors into warfare, so long as he can
hold and keep his weapons: the stern sword,
the spear and the good blade. Godric,
the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us all.

Too many men believed, when he rode away on a horse,
upon that proud steed, that it was our lord.
Because of that our people are broken up here in the field,
the shield-wall is shattered. Damn his deeds,
which encouraged so many a man to flee!”

Leofsunu spoke next and heaved his shield up,
his shield as shelter; he said to the warrior:
“I promise that I will not flee from here
one step of the foot, but I will go further,
avenging in this struggle my friendly lord.
The steadfast men of Sturmere will not need
reproach me with words, now my friend has fallen,
that I should travel lordless home,
turned from the war, but I shall take up my weapon,
both point and iron.” He went forth full angry,
fought steadfastly, despising to flee.

Dunnere then spoke, brandishing his spear,
a humble churl, calling out over all,
asking that every warrior avenge Byrhtnoth:
“Nor can he flinch back at all who intends to avenge
his lord in these folk, nor mourn for his life.”

Then they went forth, reckoning not of their lives.
These retainers fought sternly, fierce spear-bearers,
and they asked God that they be allowed to avenge
their friendly lord and work downfall among their foes.

Then their hostage helped eagerly:
he was of sturdy stock from Northumbria,
Ecglaf’s son, he was named Æscferth.
He did not flinch back at all at the war-play,

but he sent forth arrows very frequently;
sometimes he shot into a shield, sometimes he skewered
a warrior,
more than once in awhile he gave someone a wound,
so long as he was allowed to wield weapons.

Still at the van stood Eadweard the tall,
ready and eager, speaking boastful words
that he would not flee a foot of land,
or bend backwards while his superior lay dead.
He broke the Viking shield-wall and with their warriors
fought.
until he had worthily avenged his treasure-giver
upon the sea-men, before he too lay dead among the
slain.

So did Ætheric, a noble comrade,
quick and eager to go forth and earnestly fight.
Sibyrht's brother and very many others
clove the curved shields, the fierce men defended
themselves—
they burst the rims of shields, and the byrnie sang out
a certain terror-song. Then in the battle
Offa struck a Viking, so that he fell to the earth,
and there the kinsman of Gad sought the ground.
Offa was rapidly hewn down in the battle—
though he had accomplished what he had promised his
lord,
as he earlier vowed to his ring-giver
that they should both ride to the city,
healthy to home, or in the battle perish,

in the place of slaughter, killed by wounds:
he lay like a true thane close to his lord.

There was a crashing of shields. Seafarers came forth
enraged in the fight; the spear often went right through
the life-houses of the fated. Then Wystan went forth,
Thurstan's son, he fought against the warriors—
he was in the press, the killer of three of them,
before Wigelin's son lay dead among the slain.
There was a stern moot there. They stood fast,
warriors in the warfare, warriors perishing,
warriors wearied by wounds.

The slain fell to the earth.

Oswold and Eadwold all the while
both of them brothers, encouraged the warriors,
their friendly companions they urged with their words
that they must endure there in their need,
not weakly, using their weapons.

Bryhtwold spoke out, heaving his shield
(he was an old comrade), brandishing his spear;
very boldly he advised the warriors:
“Resolution should be the tougher, keener the heart,
the mind should be greater when our power diminishes.
Here lies our lord, all chopped up,
a good man on the gravel. He will always regret it,
he who thinks to turn away from this war-play.
I am old in life—I don't wish to wander away,
but I'm going to lie down by the side of my lord,
beside these beloved men.”

So Æthelgar's son emboldened them all,
Godric to the fight. Often he let go of his spear,
the slaughtering spear flying into the Vikings,
so he went forth, first in that crowd,
hewing and maiming, until he perished in the battle.
This certainly was not the Godric who flew from the fight...
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