

FLORILEGIUM 11, 1992

## IN DEFENCE OF BYRHOTHO

I. J. Kirby

This paper has one occasion, one cause, and one objective. The occasion is the recently-commemorated millennium of the battle of Maldon, an appropriate time to review not only the events of August 991 but also the critical responses to them, including those of the millennial year. The cause is the all-too-prevalent scholarly opinion, expressed as often in the last decade as in previous ones, that Byrhtnoth cannot escape censure for the English defeat, whether that censure be gentle or virulent. My objective is to demonstrate that this opinion is mistaken.

A close examination of the articles written by Warren Samouce in 1963, Duncan Macrae-Gibson in 1970, and George Clark in 1979 might leave the reader with the impression that Byrhtnoth's honour needs little, if any, further defence. Not so. In 1982, Heather Stuart published a blistering attack on him and his followers: others have made milder but nonetheless critical comments on his decisions and actions, notably the granting to the Vikings of free passage across the *brycg*, which also seem to indicate that they have ignored, or rejected, the arguments of his earlier defenders. The relative frequency of such attacks makes it abundantly clear that for some literary scholars Byrhtnoth's reputation at the beginning of 1991 was still shaky.<sup>1</sup>

The millennial year began well with the appearance of Donald Scragg's imposing and impressive commemorative volume. By happy accident, or design, the articles it contains are refreshingly free of the anti-Byrhtnoth polemic of the eighties. In fact, only one article, that by Richard Abels, Associate Professor of History at the United States Naval Academy, is directly relevant to the present subject. Following Captain Warren Samouce's analysis of Byrhtnoth's options, it emphasizes the appropriateness of his strategy and the courageous example he gave his followers on the battlefield. Similarly positive approaches to Byrhtnoth are found in Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, and in Hans Erik Andersen's publication *The Battle of Maldon*, which came out at the end of 1991.

On the other hand, Richard North, in his article in *Medium Ævum*, is somewhat more hesitant: in his view, Byrhtnoth should have resisted the challenge to single combat which led to his death and, indirectly, to the English defeat.

Finally: in no fewer than three lectures, given variously at the ISAS conference at Stony Brook and at the millennium conference at the University of Essex, reference was made by three eminent Anglo-Saxonists to the Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava (the result, as Tennyson has it, of a strategic blunder); and one of the three made it abundantly clear that he shared the feelings of earlier critics of Byrhtnoth's decisions and actions in August 991.

It seems, then, that the battle for Byrhtnoth's honour is not yet won, and that further consideration may properly be given to a literary dispute which, in the words of Richard Abels, "at times has been as hotly contested as the battle itself" (148).

My argument will be based on three premises. The first of these is that the unknown poet of *The Battle of Maldon* has given an account of the events which in its broad outline, though not necessarily in detail, reflects what actually happened. My own position on this issue is that of many, though certainly not all, scholars: the broad historicity of the poem has not been successfully attacked, the attempts made in recent years have been attacked in their turn, while such scholars as Margaret Locherbie-Cameron continue to publish solidly-based investigations which reinforce the view that the poet wrote soon after the battle and was well informed about it. The second of my premises is that the battle took place where Laborde claimed it did, a point more generally accepted even though there is still no archeological evidence to substantiate his view (nor, sadly, is there likely to be in the foreseeable future, to judge from the pessimistic views expressed

by Essex archeologists who attended the millennial conference). My third premise is more controversial, and will need a modicum of comment, for it relates to the notorious adverbial phrase "*for his ofermode*" (*Maldon* 89).

Since Helmut Gneuss's 1976 paper on the implications of this phrase, it has been generally agreed (though one or two scholars, including, most recently, Andersen, have argued against it) that in the poem "*ofermod*" has a negative connotation. There is a good deal of evidence in favour of a negative sense in Old English in general, and very little against, and my own admittedly cursory examination of the materials available in the Dictionary of Old English project in Toronto does not lead me to challenge Gneuss's arguments and conclusions. However, there is (as Gneuss himself indicated) a very considerable difference between the possible extremes of interpretation of the phrase in a negative sense: it is one thing to read it as "Then Byrhtnoth, in his over-confidence, allowed too much land to the hateful people," quite another to interpret it as "Then Byrhtnoth, in his overweening pride, allowed too much land to the hateful people." In my view, if the phrase be critical, it should be read in the former sense — a Hardy-esque foreshadowing of tragedy, not a monkish fulmination against worldly pride. However, even if there is a modicum of criticism in the poet's comments, it is not necessary to accept that it is any more than the first known example of "wisdom after the event" in connection with Byrhtnoth's decision. Why should the Maldon poet, criticized as he sometimes is for his facts, be uncritically allowed the last word in his expression of his opinion on a question of military tactics? My final premise, then, is that Byrhtnoth should not be judged on the basis of hindsight, but on what can be determined of his objectives and his strategy in opting for pitched battle against the Vikings.

Byrhtnoth's principal objective in the military operation, as judged by his actions and the words attributed to him, was not to liberate Northey, or to keep the Vikings bottled up on it (which would serve no useful purpose, since, as Samouce and others have said, they could make their way back down the Blackwater to the open sea unopposed whenever they liked). Nor was it to defend the town of Maldon, for in that case he would have remained there. Rather, it was to defend England and its people *as a whole* against an enemy which specialized in sudden attacks on places where booty was likely to be obtained, and was in consequence not easy to bring to bay. This objective would not be served by purely defensive action: the mere repulse of the Vikings at the Northey causeway, or at Maldon itself, would be only an empty victory, resulting inevitably in attacks elsewhere — if we can trust

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it was this particular Viking force that had already attacked Ipswich, and probably Folkestone and Sandwich as well. Only by bringing the Vikings to battle in a situation advantageous for the English could Byrhtnoth hope to achieve his principal objective.

This, in my view, explains his strategy. The Vikings, who are no doubt encamped on the firm, slightly rising ground just back from the Northey end of the causeway, have already taken up a position ideal for defence but well suited as a base for an attack on Maldon if this should prove appropriate. Byrhtnoth, in turn, takes an initial position which is also well suited for defence in that it eliminates the Vikings' advantage in mounting an attack on Maldon. On the other hand, it is useless for an offensive action: had the men of Essex attempted to force the causeway, their fate would unquestionably have been comparable to that of the Vikings in the first part of the battle. We thus have the paradoxical situation that both sides need an offensive action to achieve their objectives (once protection money has been refused by Byrhtnoth), but hold positions appropriate to defence rather than attack.

Byrhtnoth's first achievement, then, is to be on the defending side in the first part of the action; it is the Vikings, not he, who demonstrate their over-confidence in the causeway episode. If his reply to the Viking messenger as recorded in the poem reflects what he said, he can be credited with having manoeuvred the Vikings into the position of attackers by his reference to the defensive role he was appearing to adopt; but in any case the result was the same, and prudent generalship has its just reward—the enemy is repulsed. Unfortunately for the men of Essex, however, common sense returns too quickly to the Vikings: realizing that they cannot force the causeway, or only with unacceptably heavy loss, they revert to strategy. And Byrhtnoth makes his fateful decision.

In order to understand the strategic reasons for Byrhtnoth's decision, we must begin by recognizing that, once the Vikings had stopped trying to force a passage across Southey Creek, the defensive advantage of the English position disappeared. As I have already argued, it was not Byrhtnoth's principal objective to keep the Vikings from the south bank of the Blackwater; in consequence, a refusal on his part to let them cross the causeway would merely have condemned other parts of the coast to what Ipswich had already suffered. Contrary to what is still being stated by some critics, Byrhtnoth (as most recently indicated by Richard Abels in the millennial volume) did not give up a strong defensive position, but rather a strong

defensive position that had served its purpose and was now no more than a deterrent. And a stand-off was not what England needed.

It follows, then, that if a negative answer to the Vikings' request would have served no ultimately useful purpose, it could only be justified if an English victory could be judged to be against the odds. In determining this issue, Byrhtnoth would have had to take two principal factors into consideration: the relative size of the opposing forces, and any strategic advantage which might accrue to him as a result of a positive answer.

From the information we have about the battle, it seems impossible to calculate with any precision the size of the English army: George Clark's estimate, for example, ranges from some 550 to 2,500 or more. As regards the Vikings, the figure of 93 ships given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is considered unreliable by many critics; but Helmut Gneuss ventured the opinion that the Viking force may not have been much smaller than the 2,000 to 2,500 these ships could have held. However, I think due weight should be given to Clark's arguments on this point, that since the Viking fleets mentioned in Norse texts, including those relating to Olaf Tryggvason, are on the whole considerably smaller, the one that sailed up the Blackwater is likely to have been so also. But this is, in the final analysis, guesswork: the essential point, it seems to me, is that Byrhtnoth, who is likely to have obtained a rough estimate of the force opposing him from observers along the route of the Viking approach, confirmed perhaps by his view across the mud flats of the ships beached on Northey, and the Vikings, who could see from the firm ground on Northey just above the causeway what sort of force was marching to oppose them, both considered that victory was on the cards, and acted accordingly.

What, then, of the strategic significance of the English withdrawal? We have seen that Byrhtnoth's position alongside the Blackwater lost its defensive advantage as soon as the Vikings gave up trying to force the causeway; falling back gave no corresponding advantage to the English force since there was at the time no artificial river bank and the land was (and is) more or less flat for a considerable distance back from the river.<sup>2</sup> For the English themselves, then, withdrawal was neither advantageous nor disadvantageous. But what of the Vikings? It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that by crossing the causeway they gave up the security against attack that Northey offered, they cut themselves off from their ships, and they took up a position from which there could be no easy means of retreat if the battle were to fail to go their way—the causeway would not easily have been re-crossed, as Macrae-Gibson pointed out, while George and Susan Petty,

in preparing their description of the site of the battle as it was a thousand years ago, demonstrated particularly well the present-day difficulties of making one's way through the mud and the water. While the English, in the last resort, still had the option of fight or flight, as events proved, the Vikings lost the second option by their action: it was again they, not the English, whose action can rightly be described as over-confident. It is, I think, reasonable to assume that Byrhtnoth did not march his army back several furlongs, but only just so much of a distance as would permit the Vikings to cross without fear of being attacked as they did so. In consequence, when battle was joined the Vikings had their backs to the river; there was now, therefore, no likelihood of their getting away safely in any numbers, and Byrhtnoth had given himself and his army the best chance of eliminating this particular threat to their fellowcountrymen, as was patently their principal duty.

In his article in the millennial volume, Richard Abels cites the battle of Wednesfield (fought in 909 or 910) as an example of comparable tactics on the part of a Mercian and West Saxon force which in this case led to a quick victory against a Viking war band. But there is a closer, though fictitious, parallel to this situation in a work written some two centuries after Maldon, Lazamon's *Brut*. At lines 10,012–67 we have an account of the battle at the river Duglas, the details of which seem to be original to Lazamon (neither Geoffrey of Monmouth nor Robert Wace of Jersey have more than a brief and unelaborated account of the battle). According to Lazamon, the Christian Britons under King Arthur, defending their homeland against the heathen Saxon invaders led by Colgrim (a decidedly Viking name at that!), meet their enemies at a ford over the river, where the first part of the battle takes place. This is indecisive: and after consideration Arthur decides to pull his army back to what Lazamon describes as a broad plain (10023). The Saxons interpret this as cowardice<sup>3</sup> on Arthur's part; scenting victory, they rush across the river. But as soon as they are across Arthur, having addressed his men appropriately, leads them in a fierce attack, gets the better of his enemies, encircles them so as to block their retreat by the ford (10059), cuts down large numbers of them on land, and watches more than seven thousand others drown in the river — one of the few to escape is the Saxon leader Colgrim, whose horse, the only one mentioned, bears him safely back across the river (10056–57).

This account of Arthur's legendary victory at the river Duglas<sup>4</sup> is, I believe, the key to what Byrhtnoth hoped for at Maldon. His first decision, to defend the causeway as long as the Vikings were prepared to try to force

it, was correct in strategic terms and had the hoped-for success. His second decision, to abandon a defensive position whose usefulness had ended, and by withdrawing to put his enemies into a position from which they could not readily escape, while maintaining this latter option for his own forces, was also prudent and strategically justifiable. Yet while Lazamon invites us to admire Arthur for his tactics, some present-day scholars, following what they consider to be the example of the unknown poet of *The Battle of Maldon*, continue to criticize Byrhtnoth for adopting essentially the same strategy — a strategy, moreover, which has been commended by military experts who have written about it. Why this armchair criticism? Because Arthur won and Byrhtnoth lost? This, obviously, will not do; anyone can be clever with the benefit of hindsight. It is, I suggest, far more appropriate that as we look back on the millennial year we acclaim Byrhtnoth for following the right policy throughout, and place the blame for the ultimate failure where it properly belongs: with Godric and his minions. For his part, Byrhtnoth made the right decisions and, leading from the front, gave a splendid example to the men under his command. The defeat of the English at Maldon came about in spite of, not because of, his leadership.

University of Lausanne

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It was to meet their reservations that an earlier version of the present paper was delivered at the ESSE conference at Norwich in September 1991.

<sup>2</sup> The idea suggested by Macrae-Gibson, and taken up by others, that the Vikings would have had to attack uphill is thus invalid, except in the most technical of senses.

<sup>3</sup> The word Lazamon uses, *arhðe* (10026), is the very word used at *Maldon*, line 6.

<sup>4</sup> By an odd coincidence, the name *Duglas* apparently means "black (or dark) stream," see Roland Blenner-Hassett (33). In *Maldon*, of course, the name *Panta* is used: the river today is still called the *Pant* in its higher reaches.

#### WORKS CITED

- Abels, R. "English Tactics, Strategy and Military Organization in the Late Tenth Century." In *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*. Ed. D. Scragg. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. 143-55.
- Andersen, H.E. *The Battle of Maldon*. Copenhagen: Department of English, University of Copenhagen, 1991.
- Blenner-Hassett, R. *A Study of the Place-Names in Lawman's Brut*. Stanford and London, 1950.
- Clark, G. "The Hero of *Maldon*: Vir Pius et Strenuus." *Speculum* 54 (1979): 257-82.

- Gneuss, H. "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnōð's ofermod Once Again." *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 117-37.
- Laborde, E.D. "The Site of the Battle of Maldon." *English Historical Review* 40 (1925): 161-73.
- Lazamon: Brut*. Ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie. London: Oxford UP, Vol. 1, 1963, Vol. 2, 1978 (EETS vols. 250, 277).
- Macrae-Gibson, O.D. "How Historical is *The Battle of Maldon*?" *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970): 89-105.
- North, R. "Getting to Know the General in *The Battle of Maldon*." *Medium Ævum* 60.1 (1991): 1-15.
- O'Keeffe, K. O'Brien. "Heroic Values and Christian Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. 107-25.
- Petty, G. and S. "Geology and *The Battle of Maldon*." *Speculum* 51 (1976): 435-46.
- Samouce, W.A. "General Byrhtnoth." *JEGP* 62 (1963): 129-35.
- Stuart, H. "The Meaning of *Maldon*." *Neophilologus* 66 (1982): 126-39.