

Vikings & Anglo-Saxons: The Battle of Maldon

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In August AD 991, a large fleet of Viking ships, led by the Norwegian Olaf Trygvasson, came to the River Blackwater, near Maldon in Essex, to be met by a smaller force of Englishmen. A record of this event is contained in the fragmented Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. It tells how the Vikings crossed the causeway over the river, and in the ensuing fight, the leader of the English, Eardorman Byrhtnoth, was killed, and the English force defeated. The English defeat is not difficult to explain. They were outnumbered, Byrhtnoth allowed the Vikings to cross the causeway, and many of the English forces fled when Byrhtnoth was killed.

There are only two contemporary sources relating to this topic: a short reference in each of the five surviving Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, and an incomplete poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, which is thought to have been written soon after the battle took place. There is some confusion in the AS Chronicles as to when the battle was fought (991 or 993), but after analysis it is generally believed that 991 is the correct year. Unfortunately, the only information these references provide is that Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon in 991/3. There is also controversy about the poem - when it was written, and whether it was just a literary piece and not a factual account. If it was a literary piece then much of the information may be fictional; as it is, the speeches contained in it must be in some way fabricated, because the poet was unlikely to have been able to hear all the speeches on the battlefield. On the whole, much of the information given must be considered sceptically.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Corpus Christi College manuscript) states that for the year AD 993 (991 in most manuscripts):

"Here in this year Olaf came with ninety-three ships to Folkstone . . . and so on to Maldon" (Scragg, 1991, p 37).

According to www.ringnett, depending on how big the ships were, the Vikings would have had a force of between 1800 and 3700 warriors. Neither of the contemporary sources state how many warriors there were in the English army, but a source from the twelfth century, *Liber Eliensis*, written by monks at Ely, indicates that Byrhtnoth had only a small number of men: "he was neither shaken by the small number of his men, nor fearful of the multitude of the enemy." In a note, J Campbell suggest that if Byrhtnoth's host was recruited from Essex on the five hide system, then there would have been about 600-700 men (Cooper, 1993, p 9). This contrast in force of numbers must have contributed to the defeat of Eardorman Byrhtnoth and his men. Analysis of the poem and archaeology reveals that most of the fighting was around the mouth of the causeway over the River Pante between the mainland and Northey Island in the Blackwater estuary. The Vikings had landed and disembarked on Northey Island. This indicates that most of the fighting would have been in a relatively small area, and this would have been a disadvantage for the defending English.

The main factor that cost the English the battle was that Byrhtnoth invited the Vikings to cross the ford, a seemingly reckless thing to do. The poem states that it was 'foolhardy pride' that made him invite the enemy onto firm ground (line 89). However, www.ringnett suggests that because of the shallow draughts of the Viking ships, Byrhtnoth may have thought that in the dark they would be able to go further upriver and put in there, and so get around him and his troops. Scragg agrees with this. He says that Byrhtnoth's forces in their original position

had stalemated the Vikings. He could keep them on the island, but could not force them to engage nor prevent them from evacuating by ship. Withdrawing and letting the Vikings over the causeway was the only way to bring them to battle, thus to a certain extent securing the safety of the town of Maldon (Scragg, 1991, p 148). R. Elliott suggests that it may have "Byrhtnoth's very English belief in fair play, that it wasn't cricket to let the other side just sit there, that made him take this fatal step". Had Byrhtnoth not invited the enemy onto the battle ground and waited until the tide had gone out to before starting the battle, reinforcements may have had time to arrive, helping to balance the forces. Nevertheless, for whatever reason he did it, inviting the Vikings onto the mainland sacrificed a very good position, and gave up what small advantage that the English had.

In the poem *The Battle of Maldon*, there is a passage that states:

"the sons of Odda were first to take flight; Godric . . . leaped into the saddle of his lord's own horse . . . and more men followed than was at all right had they remembered the former rewards that the prince had given them" (lines 186-197)

This indicates that quite a lot of soldiers fled the battle after Byrhtnoth's death, and this certainly would have helped to increase the odds against an English victory. The reason for the men fleeing was not necessarily cowardice, but more probably because they saw a man fleeing on their lord's horse and presumed it was him. Doubtless commanders would only have left the field of battle when defeat was obvious and a retreat ordered. D.G. Scragg agrees with this view, and says in his book on the subject: "The fighting was inconclusive until Byrhtnoth was struck down and a large portion of the English forces fled, destroying the cohesion of the battle-line and guaranteeing defeat" (Scragg, 1991, p 147). Scattergood points out that the flight of Godric and the others would also have broken the shield wall which been formed to protect the English, and would have lessened the morale of the troops (Scattergood, 1984, p 21). The poem makes effective use of this disaster by using the now hopeless position to display the heroic qualities of the warriors. One of the thanes, Offa, 'branished his ashen spear' and encourages the others with these words:

"You, Aelfwine, have spurred all the thanes as is needed. Now that our prince is slain, the earl on the earth, we must all incite one another to fight, for as long as we can wield our weapons, pierce with our spears, and lunge and parry with our swords. Godric, the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us all. When he rode on the horse, the proud steed, all too many men thought it was our lord; and so they followed him, and here on the field the shield wall was broken; may fortune frown on him, whose cowardice has caused this catastrophe."

One of the other warriors answers his encouragement with equally warlike words:

"Then Leofsunu spoke. He raised his shield for protection, and replied to Offa: "I give you my word that I will not retreat so much as one foot, but I will go forward and avenge my lord in battle. Now that he has fallen in the fight, no loyal warrior living at Sturmere need reproach me for returning home lordless in unworthy retreat, for the weapon shall take me, the iron sword.' He strode forward angrily, and fought bravely; he spurned escape."

The poem describes how fierce the surviving warriors became in the face of defeat:

"Eadweard the tall, eager and ready, did not stray from the line of battle. He boasted that he would not shrink so much as a footstep, or seek safety in flight, now that his lord lay dead.

He smashed the shield-wall, and attacked the seafarers until he worthily avenged his ring-giver's death. He sold his life dearly in the storm of battle. So did Aetheric, a stalwart companion; eager and thrusting, he fought fiercely, the brother of Sibrht, both he and many others split the hollow shields and warded off the seafarers.."

Finally, towards the end, an aged warrior named Byrhtwold utters the most inspiring words of the whole poem, words which have been described as the 'last clarion call of old England', and were quoted during the dark days of the Battle of Britain in 1940. Byrhtwold banishes his ash-spear and says to his fellow warriors:

"Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce, courage the greater, as our strength diminishes.. ."

The poem breaks off at this point, and the last fragments have not survived. It contains no analysis of the battle itself, but has used the disaster to affirm the heroic qualities of courage in the face of defeat. However, with imagination, we can reconstruct the circumstances that led to this defeat. The major factors that caused the defeat of Byrhtnoth and his men at Maldon in AD 991 were that he did not have enough men with which to fight the larger force of Vikings, his decision to allow the Vikings onto the mainland (for whatever reason) and the flight of even more of the force after Byrhtnoth was killed.

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