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978-1-107-41923-0 - English and Norse Documents: Relating to the Reign of

Ethelred the Unready

Margaret Ashdown

Excerpt

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PART I

ENGLISH TEXTS

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INTRODUCTION

1. The poem of the *Battle of Maldon* deals with the event thus recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

*Hér wæs Gypeswic gehegrod, and æfter þon swiðe raðe wæs
Brihtnoð ealdorman ofslegen æt Mældune, and on þam geare man
gerædde þæt man geald ærest gafol Denescum mannum for ðam
miclan brogan þé hi worhton be ðam sáriman*¹.

The *Chronicle* does not suggest that the battle was considered of the first importance, and in this there is no clash between the prose and the verse account. The author of the poem, while not indifferent to political issues, is more concerned with such heroic qualities as reveal themselves no less in a petty skirmish than in a 'decisive battle.' The standpoint of the chroniclers is different, and it would be unreasonable to blame them for admitting into their annals the less memorable poem on the Battle of Brunanburh, while dealing so laconically with the event of the Battle of Maldon. It is, no doubt, an appreciation of the less political character of the later poem that has led some editors to adopt the title of *Byrhtnoth's Death*².

There is no evidence that the writers of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were aware of the existence of the poem and no convincing evidence that it was known to any of the later chroniclers. Liebermann³, indeed, detects an echo of the poem in the *Vita Oswaldi*, yet the words *et Byrhtnothus cecidit et reliqui fugerunt* might almost be used as evidence that the writer of the *Vita* was ignorant of the poem, so little do they accord with its picture of the loyal retainers. Henry of Huntingdon is nearer to the spirit of the poem in his *et phalanges ejus in perniciem redactæ sunt*. Several points of likeness between the poem and the *Historia Eliensis*, to which Liebermann draws attention, are noteworthy, but do not conclusively prove interdependence. The opening passage of the section which deals with Byrhtnoth⁴ does,

¹ 991 (C); see note on this annal. Cf. 993 (A).

² E.g. Conybeare, Ettmüller, Zernial and others.

³ E. Liebermann, 'Zur Geschichte Byrhtnoths,' *Archiv*, CI, p. 24, 1898. The whole article should be read.

⁴ Ed. D. J. Stewart, II, 62, 1848.

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however, suggest that the writer was familiar with some account of Byrhtnoth other than the meagre annal of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*:

De Brithnotho viro singulari et glorioso succedit memoranda relatio, cujus vitam justam et gesta non parvis præconiis Anglicæ commendant Historiæ, de quibus pauca qualicumque stylo cum venia lectoris excepimus. Res enim magna est, et major relatio dignissima, quam nos exigui et elingues arido sermone non sine pudore narramus.

It seems, then, impossible to decide whether the poem ever won more than a local hearing, and of the history of the manuscript we know nothing, except the fact that it eventually found its way into the Cottonian collection, after lying, we may presume, in some monastic library for about five centuries¹.

2. The *Battle of Maldon*, like the *Finn Fragment*, is no longer to be read in manuscript. In 1696 Thomas Smith in his *Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum Bibliothecæ Cottonianæ* describes the third item of Otho A XII as *Fragmentum quoddam Historicum de Eadrico, etc., Saxonice*. Nine years later Wanley's *Catalogue*² describes the poem as follows: *Fragmentum capite & calce mutilum, sex foliis constans, quo Poetice & Stylo Cædmoniano celebratur virtus bellica Beorhtnothi Ealdormanni Offæ & aliorum Anglo-Saxonum in proelio cum Danis*, and adds that the same Beorhtnoth is referred to in the *Historia Eliensis Ecclesiæ*. But it was not until 1726 that the poem found an editor. In this year the antiquarian, Thomas Hearne, inserted the poem among the appendices of his edition of the *Chronicle of John of Glastonbury*, introducing it with the headings both of Smith and Wanley quoted above. It is difficult to see Hearne's exact intention when he inserted the poem in this setting, but Hearne's mis-

¹ According to Smith's *Catalogue* one of the items of the volume, the *Passio undecim mille virginum*, by Roger Ford, was written in 1181, but since it is not clear that Otho A XII is really a single ms. and not a collection of mss. bound together, this date cannot be used in determining the date of the ms. of *Maldon*. It would, indeed, be surprising to find an Old English poem being copied at so late a date. Liebermann notes that the ms. includes the lives of two saints, Eorcenwald and Wulfhild, both closely connected with Barking, and suggests that Barking was the original home of the manuscript. It is to be noted that Byrhtnoth's wife was a patron of this foundation.

² *Antiquæ Litteraturæ Septentrionalis Liber Alter, seu Humphredi Wanleii... Catalogus*, 1705, p. 232.

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cellaneous habit of mind led him in this instance to confer a signal benefit upon posterity, for in 1734 the great Cottonian fire destroyed the manuscript, and Hearne's transcript remains our sole authority for the text of *Maldon*.

3. Study of Hearne's text confirms Luard's statement¹ that Hearne's 'accuracy is generally to be depended on.' In several cases where emendation is obviously called for, the errors involved, such as the writing of *u* for *a*, can be paralleled in many Old English manuscripts, and in other cases it seems better to give Hearne the benefit of the doubt. In this edition, therefore, Hearne's text has been treated with as much respect as if it had been a manuscript authority², and all emendations are marked with brackets, and referred to in the notes. Since a full record of suggested emendations is to be found in the editions of Grein-Wülcker and Sedgefield, it has not seemed necessary to repeat them here³.

Hearne's punctuation, presumably that of the ms., has been discarded; this seems in some cases to mark metrical rather than sense pause, but as a rule the lines and half lines are not indicated. The paragraphing is also modern, though in some cases it corresponds with that of Hearne's text. The common abbreviations of Old English manuscripts have been expanded, the expansion being marked with italics.

The diacritical marks recorded by Hearne have been preserved in this text, and no attempt has been made by the editor, either here or in the text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, to mark vowel length. In the Old English texts of an earlier period quantity may be determined with some degree of certainty, but the late date of our texts brings us into a period in which certain quantitative changes, assigned by earlier scholars to the Middle

¹ *D.N.B.*

² Although it is convenient to speak of 'Hearne's Text,' the actual copyist, according to Hearne's Introduction, p. LI, was John Elphinston, who made the copy at the instigation of Richard Graves.

³ Two curious 'ghost' readings have crept into the editions of the *Battle of Maldon*. In l. 45 Hearne has quite clearly the reading *gehyrst*, yet Wülcker and other editors credit Hearne with the reading *gehyrt*, and emend either to *gehyre* or *gehyrst*. Sedgefield established the correct reading in this case, but followed earlier editors in crediting Hearne with the reading *bremmas* in l. 106. This obviously calls for emendation to *hremmas*, but in the three copies of Hearne's text which I have consulted this reading is actually found.

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English Period, had probably begun to operate, and any attempt to indicate quantity is likely to mislead more than to enlighten.

It may be noted that Hearne marks in the margin the pagination of the manuscript, from which it appears that the poem occupied folios 57 b to 62 b.

4. Concerning the author of the poem we have no external evidence, and no internal evidence of value. On the negative side, it is hardly conceivable that one of Byrhtnoth's bodyguard or indeed any person present at the battle would draw attention to the fact that he had survived his lord by composing a poem of just this heroic temper—

A mæg gnornian

se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð (ll. 315–16)—

and, if we may attach any precise meaning to the phrase, this view is supported by the *gehyrde ic* of l. 117.

We have, then, to choose between a member of Byrhtnoth's bodyguard, absent, like Hallfreth from Swold or Sigvat from Sticklestath, in the hour of his lord's need, and some person outside the bodyguard, interested enough in the event and the characters to undertake the composition of the poem, and in a position to learn particulars of the course of the battle. In the second possibility, the further question arises whether the author was a cleric or a layman, a question which reveals our almost complete ignorance of the conditions of poetic composition at this period.

It is difficult to follow up the former possibility, not because it is in itself incredible but because the poem as we have it contains no scrap of evidence, nothing, certainly, comparable to Hallfreth's lament: 'An ill thing was it that I was far from the appeaser of the wolves' hunger, where many a spear was breaking¹.'

Concerning the second possibility, we have to consider whether the poem bears any internal marks of clerical origin. The conclusion will probably be reached that if the author was a cleric he has left upon the poem curiously little trace of his calling. One may even question Prof. Sedgfield's statement that while

¹ See p. 135.

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the poem is 'entirely secular and heroic' the poet 'shows a Christian spirit¹.'

Of the four passages in which the language of Christianity is used², three are associated with Byrhtnoth himself, and Byrhtnoth, as we learn from other sources, was known as a faithful son of the Church. Specific reference to his benefactions would be out of place in a poem of this nature³, yet Byrhtnoth's dying speech affords an opportunity to a clerical author of which full advantage has not been taken. The Christian colouring is, indeed, as slight as is consistent with the character of the hero, and cannot be used as evidence for the position of the author.

If the author was a cleric we must imagine him as one whose life had brought him into touch with affairs of court and field, and one who was also familiar with the old non-Christian poetry. Liebermann's suggestion that the author may have been chaplain to Byrhtnoth's wife, and have composed the poem at her instigation is an attractive one, and seems to fit the facts more happily than Sedgefield's suggestion that he may have been one of 'those Ely monks to whom Byrhtnoth had been so good a friend and patron⁴.'

Yet it is possible that the author of *Maldon* was not a cleric at all, but rather a man well versed in the old poetic tradition, who, like the Beowulfian Wulfgar, *cuþe . . . duguðe þeaw*⁵, with only a layman's acquaintance with Latin learning. In spite of the lack of evidence, it is surely not improbable that such a class of secular poets, comparable to the *scop* of an earlier period and to the *skald*⁶ of Scandinavian countries, was to be found at the English court and in the households of the more important English nobles, celebrating their lords' praises in verse which conformed to the pattern of the old traditional poetry.

It is more than probable that Scandinavian rulers in England had their own court poets⁷, and the story of the Icelandic skald

¹ *Battle of Maldon*, p. x.

² Ll. 94, 148, 173–180, 262.

³ The absence of such a reference is noted by Liebermann, *op. cit.* p. 19.

⁴ *Battle of Maldon*, p. viii.

⁵ *Beow.* l. 359.

⁶ No comparison is of course implied between the *form* of *Maldon* and of Scandinavian skaldic verse. They represent in this respect divergent lines of development.

⁷ The composition of the *Hǫfuðlausn* at the court of Eric Bloodaxe in Northumbria does not, of course, prove this, but the whole story gives the impression

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Gunnlaug at the court of King Ethelred¹ would suggest that the English king himself, in contrast with King Sigtrygg of Dublin, was used to dealing with such poets. This incident, which, although probably imaginary, may well reflect the customs of the English court, can, of course, be interpreted as suggesting merely the frequent presence of Scandinavian skalds, not the survival or revival² of a class of native court poets. It may be noted, however, that Brandl³ tacitly admits the existence of such a class in connection with the lines on the freeing of the Five Towns⁴, which occur in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (A) under the year 941, lines which he appears to regard as political propaganda.

Poems composed by secular poets would be less likely to be committed at once to writing than the compositions of clerics, so that the possibility of disappearance would be proportionately greater, though less, perhaps, than that of popular 'ballad' poetry. Whether, however, the author of *Maldon* was cleric or layman, it is easier to assume that the poem is a chance survivor of a group of lost poems⁵, which would, had they been preserved,

that the king was accustomed to listening to complimentary verses. *Egils*, ed. F. Jónsson, cc. LIX–LXI (*Altn. Saga-Bib.*), 3rd ed.

¹ See p. 190.

² The revival of the secular *scop*, if the class had disappeared, under Scandinavian influence is not impossible. Scandinavian influence at the English court from the time of King Edward onwards must have been considerable; witness the *A.S.C.* 959 (C, E). The present volume had gone to press before the appearance of Dame B. S. Phillpotts' illuminating article '*The Battle of Maldon*': *Some Danish Affinities* in *M.L.R.* xxiv, April, 1929, pp. 172–190, in which a number of striking parallels are pointed out between the Danish *Bjarkamál* and the *Battle of Maldon*. The conclusions reached are summarised on p. 188: 'We must therefore assume that *Maldon* was composed by some one whose native language was Anglo-Saxon, who was well acquainted with Anglo-Saxon—mainly religious—verse, but who was also able to draw on Danish poetical tradition, and whose ear was so much attuned to Danish verse that he could tolerate combinations of stress and alliteration repugnant to the traditions of the tongue in which he was composing. Presumably his home was in Essex or East Anglia.'

Separate points in this article are referred to and discussed in the notes.

³ Paul's *Grundriss*, *Eng. Lit.* § 79, 1908.

⁴ 942 (B, C and D).

⁵ The possibility of loss both through the destruction of mss. and through the fact that many poems were never committed to writing at all has been recently emphasised in *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*, R. W. Chambers, *Library*, 4th series, v, pp. 293–321, 1925. The precariousness of theories based upon 'lost literature' is obvious. O. Cargill, discussing the appearance of

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have shown us the line of development from the early heroic poetry to this late but authentic representative of the same type, than that the poem is an attempt to imitate or revive a *genre* long dead at the time of its composition, and that it thus constitutes a literary *tour de force*. The question is not capable of conclusive proof, but careful study of the poem itself has led the present editor to reject this second alternative with some assurance.

5. Whatever view is adopted concerning its authorship, it is generally agreed that *Maldon* was composed soon after the event which it commemorates¹. If this is the case, there is a possibility that the details of the battle are recorded with some accuracy. Even if we assume that the whole bodyguard fell, the author of the poem may have learnt something of the actions, bearing, and even of the words of individual heroes from surviving members of the *fyrð*.

It may indeed be assumed that the author's difficulty lay less in obtaining his information than in moulding his facts into the artistic form that the canons of his art required. This applies particularly to the speeches. These obviously contain much that belongs to the common stock of Germanic poetic expression, but it does not follow that the author has indiscriminately assigned heroic commonplaces to the various characters; the speeches, indeed, suggest a serious attempt at characterisation², and may well reflect the personalities of the actual members of Byrhtnoth's bodyguard, and in this sense deserve to be described

alliterative poetry in the West Midlands in the fourteenth century, writes: 'Bridging such a gap by lost documents affords too treacherous a crossing... for even a theory to pass safely over' (*P.M.L.A.A.* 41, p. 815, 1926). Yet the risk must sometimes be taken.

¹ This view depends rather upon the general impression made by the poem than by the argument (see Sweet's *A.S. Reader*, 9th ed. 1922, p. 120) that the poem was composed so soon after the battle that the poet did not even know the name of the Norse leader. This argument is in any case unsafe, in view of the lost beginning and end. The conditions suggested by *Beow.* ll. 867-874 may be compared.

² Of a simple kind, of course. The following remarks on the *Chanson de Roland* apply equally to *Maldon*: 'Il y a des physionomies diverses et vivantes dans le *Roland*, mais elles n'y sont qu'esquissées... Le poète ignore l'art de les grouper dans un tableau d'ensemble; toutes défilent comme dans une longue frise' (*La Chanson de Roland*, L. Petit de Julleville, p. 46, 1878). The presentation of a battle as a series of individual exploits, rather than as concerted action, is no doubt to some extent an artistic device, and is the method proper to heroic poetry. The encounters of the *Iliad* may be compared.

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as ‘historical.’ Most readers will probably share Liebermann’s impression that the poem bears the mark of historical truth¹.

The *Battle of Maldon* has not lacked critical appreciation, but on the question of structure² something remains to be said. The structural design is clear in spite of the loss of beginning and end. Enough remains to enable us to judge the scale of the poem and to class it, to use a convenient comparison, rather with the *Finn Fragment* than with *Beowulf*. It is hard to believe that the lost portions were of any great length, or that, had they survived, the poem would have been very differently balanced.

It is probable that the lost opening would make clear the exact significance of ll. 1–16, which describe the reaction of two of Byrhtnoth’s followers to the summons to battle. Ll. 17–24 relate how Byrhtnoth arrayed his host, emphasising the difference between the *folc* and the *heorð-werod*, Byrhtnoth’s immediate retainers. Ll. 25–61 contain the dialogue between the Viking Messenger and Byrhtnoth and the heroic note is struck in Byrhtnoth’s speech:

*us sceal ord and ecg ær geseman,
grim guþplega ær (w)e g(a)fol sylton.*

But the battle is delayed, and ll. 62–99 describe the impatience of both parties, the Vikings’ impudent demand and Byrhtnoth’s ‘tragic error’ in letting them cross the ford.

The hosts are now at close quarters, but the poet, evidently aware of the dramatic value of suspense, holds up the narrative with general comments and the use of the old *motif* of birds and beasts of prey, clinching the whole with the effective

wæs on eorþan cyrm:

With l. 108 begins the account of the battle proper, partly general, partly descriptive of the deeds of individual heroes, ending again with an emphatic half-line,

wæl feol on eorðan.

From l. 127 the attention is focussed on Byrhtnoth until his death is recorded in l. 181. Then follows an account of the withdrawal of the disloyal retainers, with its disastrous effect on the

¹ *Archiv*, CI, pp. 18–20.

² Prof. Sedgfield has made an analysis of the poem, but not from the point of view of structure and style.