

Introduction

...it was shattered.¹

Then Byrhtnoth² ordered every warrior to dismount, let loose his horse and go forward into battle with faith in his own skills and bravery.

Thus Offa's young son could see for himself that the earl was no man to suffer cowardice.

He sent his best falcon flying from his wrist to the safety of the forest and strode into the fight; the boy's behavior was a testament

that he would not be weak in the turmoil of battle.

Eadric too was firmly resolved to follow his leader into the fight. At once he hurried forward with his spear. He feared no foe

for as long as he could hold board

and bright sword:³ he kept his word that he would fight before his prince.

Part One

Then Byrhtnoth began to martial his men.

He rode about, issuing instructions

as to how they should stand firm, not yielding an inch,

and how they should tightly grip their round-shields,

forgetting their qualms and pangs of fear.

And when he had arrayed the warriors' ranks,

he dismounted with his escort at a carefully chosen place

where his finest hearth-band⁴ stood prepared for the fight.

Then a spokesman for the Vikings stood on the river

and aggressively shouted a message from the seafarers

to Byrhtnoth, the earl, on the opposite bank.

"The brave seafarers have sent me to say to you

that they will be so good as to let you give gold rings

in return for peace. It is better for you

to buy off our raid with gold

than that we should cut you down in this spear-rush.

Why destroy one another?

If you are good for a certain sum,

we will settle for peace in exchange for gold,

if you, most powerful over there, agree to this

and wisely decide to disband your men,

giving gold to the seafarers on their own terms.

In return for a truce

we will take to the sea with the tribute you pay

and keep our promise of peace."

Then Byrhtnoth spoke. He grasped his shield

and brandished his slender ash-spear, resentful and resolute he shouted his reply:

"Can you hear, you pirate, what these people say?"

They will pay you a tribute of ash-spears,

of poisonous points and old swords,

an armor-tax useless to you in war.

Listen, messenger! Take back this reply;

tell your people the unpleasant tale

that over here there stands a good⁵ earl with his war-band

who will defend this land,

The land of Æthelred, land of my prince

folk and fold.⁶ We will sever the heathens' heads

from their shoulders. It would be much to our shame

if you took our tribute and embarked without battle

since you have intruded so far and so rudely into this country.

No! You will not get your treasure so easily.

The spear's point and the sword's edge, savage battle-play,

must teach us first that we have to give tribute."

Then Byrhtnoth gave word that all his warriors should walk

with their shields to the river bank.

The troops on either side could not get at one another,

for there the flood flowed after the turn of the tide;

the water streams ran together.⁷ Too long it seemed

as they waited to cross and clash their spears.

The East-Saxons and the ship-army

stood beside the River Panta in proud array.

But no warrior could work harm on another

except those who through arrow-flight took death.

The tide ebbd; the seamen stood ready,

many bold Vikings eager for war.

Then Byrhtnoth, brave protector of his men, ordered

a war-hardened hero— Wulfstan by name— to hold the bridge.

He was of bold lineage— he was Ceola's son—

and struck the first seafarer who fearlessly

stepped onto the bridge with his spear.

Two experienced warriors stood with Wulfstan,

Ælfere and Maccus, both brave men.

Nothing could have made them take flight at the bridge.

They would have defended it

for as long as they could wield their weapons.

But as it was, the Vikings found the bitter

bridge-wardens too fierce for their liking.

The hateful strangers hatched a plot —

they asked if they could have access

to lead their foot-troops across the bridge.

Then, with arrogance,⁸ the earl permitted

those hateful strangers to have access to the bridge.

The son of Byrthelm began to call out

across the cold water (the warriors listened):

"Now the way is clear for you. Come over to us quickly,

come to the slaughter. God alone can say

who of us that fight today will win this corpse-place."

Then the slaughter-wolves,⁹ not minding the water,

waded to the west across the River Panta;

the Viking band hoisted their shields on high

and carried them over the gleaming water.

⁸ **arrogance:** OE *ofermod*; also translated as "overconfidence," "spirit," "and even "pulsing blood-mood" is the most discussed word in the poem. A great deal of critical discussion in the past fifty years has been devoted to arguing whether the poem views Byrhtnoth as blameworthy for his action.

⁹ **slaughter-wolves:** Vikings

There are up to three pages missing at the beginning of the poem and something like one page at the end.

Byrhtnoth: Byrhtnoð; for ease of reading, the Modern English spellings of names will be used.

as long as...sword: This formula functions throughout the poem, indicating the warriors' complete devotion to lord and land.

hearth-band: OE *heorðwerod* 'the body of household retainers,' i.e., his personal followers

good: OE *unforcuð* 'reputable, honorable, noble, brave, undisgraced.'

fold: OE *folde* 'earth, land' Fold is used here to maintain alliteration

The River Panta (now called Blackwater located in Essex) is a tidal river; when the tide comes in, the island where the Vikings landed is cut off from the shore.

ter, at low tide, a stone causeway allows the access.

Part Two

Byrhtnoth and his warriors awaited them,
ready for battle: he ordered his men
to form a battle-hedge with their shields, and to stand firm
against the onslaught of the enemy. Then the battle,
with its chance of glory, about to begin. The time had come
for all the doomed men to fall in the fight.
The clamor began; the ravens wheeled and the eagle
circled overhead, craving for carrion; there was shouting on earth.
From hands then they threw their file-hard spears
and sent sharp darts flying from their hands.
Bow strings were busy, shields took spear-point,
bitter was the battle-rush! Brave men fell
on both sides, young men lay dead.
Byrhtnoth's sister-son, Wulfmær, was wounded;
slashed by the sword, he decided
to sleep on the bed of death.
This was violently requited, the Vikings were repaid in kind.
I heard that Eadweard swung his sword
so savagely, a full-blooded blow,
that a fated warrior fell lifeless at his feet.
Byrhtnoth shouted out his thanks to him,
His hearth-companion, as soon as he had a chance to do so.
The brave men stood resolute, rock-firm
young men at war, eagerly worked
to see who might be the first to win
the life of a doomed man with his spear,
soldiers with weapons; slaughter fell on earth.
But the rest stood battle-hard and Byrhtnoth spurred them on,
inciting each man to fight ferociously
who wished to gain glory against the Danes.
Then a brave sea-warrior raised up his spear,
gripped his shield and advanced towards Byrhtnoth.
The resolute earl advanced towards the churl,¹⁰
each had evil intentions for the other.
The sea-warrior was the quicker he hurled his foreign spear,
wounding the lord of the warriors.
Byrhtnoth broke the shaft with the edge of his shield;
the imbedded spear-head sprang out of his wound.
Then he flung his spear in fury
at the sea-warrior who dared inflict such pain.
His aim was skillful. The spear
slit open the proud Viking's neck.
Thus Byrhtnoth took the life of his attacker.
Then, for safety's sake, he swiftly hurled another
which burst the Viking's ring-locked mail, cruelly wounding him
in the chest; the deadly spear pierced his heart.
The brave earl, Byrhtnoth, delighted at this;
he laughed out loud and thanked his Maker
for the day-work God had given him.
But one of the Vikings sent a sharp hand-dart
speeding from his hand
that pierced the body of the noble thane of Æthelred.¹¹
By his side stood a young warrior,
Wulfmær by name, Wulfstan's son,
who without a moment's hesitation
drew out the blood-red spear from Byrhtnoth's side
and hurled it back as hard as he could
at the man who had grievously injured his prince.
The sharp point struck home; the Viking sank into the earth.

Another seafarer advanced on the earl, meaning to make
short work of him and snatch away his treasures
his armor and his rings and his ornamented sword.
Byrhtnoth drew out his sword from its sheath,
Broad and bright-edged, and struck against byrnies,¹²
but his enemy stopped him all too soon,
savagely striking Byrhtnoth's arm.
The golden-hilted sword dropped from his hand.
He could hold it no longer
nor wield a weapon of any kind. Then the old warrior
raised his men's morale with bold words,
called on his brave companions to do battle again.
He no longer stood firmly on his feet
but swayed, and raised his eyes to heaven:
"O Guardian of the people, let me praise and thank you
for all the real joys I received in this world.
Now, gracious Lord, as never before, I need your grace,
that my soul may set out on its journey to
You, O Prince of Angels, that my soul may depart
into Your power in peace. I pray
that the hell-scathers¹³ may never destroy it."
Then the heathens hewed him down
and the two men who had stood by him;
Ælfnoth and Wulfmær, fell to the ground,
both gave their lives in defense of their lord.
Then certain cowards beat a hasty retreat:
the sons of Odda were the first to take flight;
Godric fled from the battle, abandoning Byrhtnoth.
who had often given him many horses.
He leapt into the saddle
of his lord's own horse, where he had no right,
and both his brothers, Godwine and Godwig,
galloped beside him. Forgetting their duty,
they fled from the fight
and saved their lives in the silent wood.
And more men followed than was at all fitting
had they remembered the former rewards
that the prince had given them, generous presents.
It was just as Offa once said to Byrhtnoth
at an open council in the meeting place,
that many spoke proudly of their prowess
who would prove unworthy of their words under battle-stress.
So Æthelred's earl, the prince of those people,
fell; all his hearth-companions
could see for themselves that their lord lay low.¹⁴

Part Three

Then the proud thanes, with the utmost bravery,
threw themselves once more into the thick of the battle.
They all, without exception, strove to one of two ends:
to avenge their lord or to leave this world.
Ælfwine the son of Ælfric, a winter-young¹⁵ warrior,
shouted encouragement, urging them on.
He rallied them with valiant words:
"Think of all the times we boasted
At the mead-bench, heroes in the hall
predicting our own bravery in battle.
Now we shall see who meant what he said.

¹² byrnies: chainmail shirt

¹³ scathe: to harm or injure

¹⁴ The troops closest to Byrhtnoth could see that he was dead; those further
mistake the fleeing Godric for their lord.

¹⁵ winter-young: experienced few winters (years)

¹⁰ churl: OE *ceorl*; a rude ill-bred person; the lowest class of freeman

¹¹ the noble thane of Æthelred: Byrhtnoth

Let me announce my ancestry to one and all:
 I come from a mighty family of Mercian stock;
 My grandfather was Ealhelm,
 a wise ealdorman¹⁶ and prosperous in the world.
 No thane shall ever have reason to blame me
 for my desire to desert this troop
 and seek home, now that my prince has been cut down
 in battle. This is the most bitter sorrow of all.
 He was both my kinsman and my lord.”
 Then he went forward into the fight
 and pierced a Viking’s body with his spear-point.
 The man keeled over, dead,
 killed by Ælfwine’s weapon.
 Again he urged friends and companions
 to follow him into the fight.
 Then Offa spoke and shook his ash-spear:
 ‘Ælfwine, you have encouraged all the thanes
 at exactly the right time. Now that our prince
 is slain, the earl on the earth,
 we must all encourage each other
 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 hurried off toward the woods on our lord’s fine horse,
 he misled many men into believing it was Byrhtnoth himself;
 and so they followed him, and here on the field
 the shield-defense was broken: may fortune frown on him
 whose cowardice has caused this catastrophe.”
 Then Leofsunu spoke. He raised his shield
 for protection, and replied to Offa:
 “I give you my word that I will not retreat
 a foot’s length but will advance
 and avenge my lord-friend in battle.
 Now that he has fallen in the fight,
 no loyal warrior living at Sturmere¹⁷
 Need reproach me for returning home lordless
 in unworthy retreat, instead weapons shall take me,
 spear-point and iron.” He strode forward angrily,
 fighting furiously; he rejected escape.
 Then Dunnere spoke and shook his spear;
 a lowly churl, he cried out loud
 and asked every man to avenge Byrhtnoth’s death:
 “Whoever intends to avenge our prince
 must not flinch, nor care for his own life.”
 Then they hurried forward, heedless of their lives;
 The brave thanes, fierce spear-bearers,
 fought with great courage, and prayed to God
 that they might avenge their lord-friend
 by killing all his enemies.
 The hostage helped them with all his might
 His name was Æshferth, the son of Ecglafr;
 He came from a family renowned in Northumbria.
 In the battle-play he did not flinch,
 notching arrow after arrow as quickly as he could.
 Sometimes he hit a shield, sometimes he pierced a man,
 Again and again he inflicted wounds
 for as long as he could hold a bow in his hands.
 Eadweard the Long, eager and brave,
 did not stray from the line of battle. He boasted that he
 would not flee a foot-space of land,
 or seek safety by flight, now that his lord lay dead.
 He smashed the shield-wall, and attacked the seafarers

215 worthily avenging his ring-giver’s death.
 He sold his life dearly in the storm of battle.
 And so too did Ætheric, a noble companion.
 Eager and death-ready, he fought aggressively. 280
 The brother of Sibrht and many others
 split the hollow shields and warded off the sea-warriors.
 220 The rim of the shield broke and the byrnie sang
 a terrible song. Then in the turmoil
 Offa struck a seafarer; he fell dead to the earth. 285
 But the kinsman of Gadd was killed there too;
 Offa was quickly brought down in the battle.
 225 Yet he had kept his promise to his lord;
 he fulfilled his former boast to Byrhtnoth, the ring-giver,
 that they should both return unhurt, riding to the burg 290
 in victory together, or together surrender their lives,
 bleeding from wounds on the corpse-field.
 230 He lay near his lord as befits a thane.
 Then shields were shattered; the seafarers surged forward,
 burning with battle-rage. Often a spear pierced 295
 the soul-house of a fated warrior. Then Wistan advanced,
 235 the son of Thurstan; he fought with the Vikings
 slew three in the struggling throng
 before Wigelm’s brave son¹⁸ lay slain with him.
 That was a savage fight; the warriors stood firm 300
 in the struggle. Strong men fell,
 240 utterly worn out by wounds; the dead dropped to
 the earth. The brothers Oswold and Eadweard
 continuously encouraged the companions;
 they urged their kin-friends to use 305
 their weapons without slackening
 and endure the stress to the best of their strength.
 245 Byrhtwold grasped his shield and spoke.
 He was an old companion. He brandished his ash-spear
 and with wonderful courage taught the warriors, 310
 “Our thoughts will be the firmer, our hearts will be the keener,
 our spirits will be stronger as our strength diminishes.
 250 Here lies our leader, dead,
 a heroic man in the dirt. He will mourn
 who thinks to escape this war-play now. 315
 I am old. I will not go from here,
 255 but by the side of my lord—
 by such a beloved man— I intend to lie.”
 Godric, too, the son of Æthelgar, gave them courage
 to continue the fight. Often he let fly from his hand 320
 and sent a slaughter-spear, at the Vikings
 260 as he advanced at the head of the host.
 He humbled and hewed down until at last he fell himself.
 That was not the Godric who fled from battle...¹⁹ 325

18 It is not clear how Wistan is both the son of Thurstan and of Wigelin, unless
 265 Wigelin is his mother. ‘Matronymic’ epithets are virtually unknown in Old
 English, but this may be a rare instance of one.

19 The poem ends as it begins, fragmented. Perhaps not much of the poem is lost
 270 the rest of the battle (a complete rout by the Vikings) is easy to imagine, though
 one wonders what sort of moral, ideological, political, or spiritual point the poet

¹⁶ ealdorman: Modern English *alderman*; a high ranking official

¹⁷ Sturmere: a village and a parish in Essex