

Landes to fela: Geography, Topography and Place in The Battle of Maldon

Abstract

Modern readers of *The Battle of Maldon* are often confronted in editions and anthologies with explanatory notes or even maps connecting the events of the poem to the present-day topography of Northey Island, in the Blackwater estuary near Maldon, Essex. The presence of such critical apparatus makes tacit or overt claims regarding the poem's status as a witness to the historical battle fought in August 991. Yet the identification of Northey Island as either the location of the battle, or the location described by the poet, remains unproven. A too-ready acceptance of this hypothetical identification has unduly influenced the study of the poem, discouraging investigation into the poetic significance of the topography of the battlefield. In fact, the construction of a sense of local place is central to the poet's technique, relating the threat posed by the Viking forces to contemporary concerns about landownership in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

The anonymous and fragmentary Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* has generated a significant volume of scholarly activity relating to the site of the battle described, much of which has been predicated on the assumption that the description of the setting and course of the action in the poetic account is (and is intended to be) an accurate representation of the events of the battle fought in 991 and recorded in five texts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.¹ Reference in the poem to the river Blackwater (identified by the Old English toponym *Pantan stream*, l. 68a) accords with the statement in the *Chronicle* that the historical battle was fought close to the town of Maldon in Essex, and the poet's detailed description of the topography of the battlefield has frequently been cited as evidence that the poet was

¹ On the *Chronicle* accounts, see Bately.

describing a specific, well-known landscape.² This, together with the “powerful sense of verisimilitude” conveyed by the poem, has led scholars to consult the poet’s description of the battlefield for clues as to the precise site of the battle.³

Since 1925, attention has been focused primarily on the Northey Island site first proposed by E. D. Laborde.⁴ Located some two miles downriver from the town of Maldon itself, in the tidal estuary of the Blackwater, the island is entirely cut off from the mainland at high-tide. At low-tide, access to the island from its south-western tip is afforded by a raised causeway. Such a causeway seemingly corresponds well with the feature described in the poem as both *ford* (“ford”, ll. 81a, 88a) and *bricg* (“bridge”, ll. 74b, 78b; cf. *bricgweardas* [“bridge-guardians”, l. 85a]), and both the topography and the geography of the Northey Island site have been held to fit the poet’s description of the location of the battle—to the extent that the present-day appearance of this site is frequently referred to in order to explicate the action of the poem.⁵

It is the contention of this article, however, that the widespread acceptance of Laborde’s identification amongst scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature may in fact have tended to impede critical appreciation of the poem as much as to facilitate it. The degree to which the poet either attempts or achieves historical accuracy is, of course, a central debate in scholarship on

² References to the poem are from Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon*. All other Old English poems are cited from Krapp and Dobbie, with the exception of *Beowulf*, which is from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles. Translations are my own.

³ Irving, 458.

⁴ Laborde, “Site of the Battle”; Laborde, *Byrhtnoth and Maldon*, 39–43.

⁵ See, for example, Mitchell and Robinson, 249 (and the accompanying map of Northey Island on the facing page): “To understand the action of the poem...one must have some idea of the geography of the battle.”

the poem.⁶ In what follows, however, I shall touch on this issue only obliquely. My main interest here is not on the question of whether or not the poet was indeed thinking of the Northey Island site when composing the poem, nor on the further question of whether this was the actual site on which the battle was fought more than a thousand years ago.⁷ Rather, my concern is, in the first place, to demonstrate that the ready acceptance of the Northey Island hypothesis has impacted upon critical interpretations of the poem in ways that have not always been fully acknowledged, and, secondly, to suggest that an implicit corollary of the identification of the battle-site—namely, that the poet is *only* describing the actual terrain as it was known to him—has contributed to a lack of appreciation for the poet’s artistry in his use of techniques for the construction of a sense of place.⁸

Northey Island and “the excitement of exactitude”

The impulse to decode the locations supposedly described in *Maldon* is in large part motivated by the desire better to understand the historical and literary significance of the events described. Equally, though less frequently acknowledged, it is also motivated by the appeal of the tangible, of having some concrete place in which and through which to relate experientially to a much-studied and well-loved text. This desire is discussed by Gillian

⁶ For a range of opinions on this question, see Bessinger; Clark; MacRae-Gibson; Blake; Scattergood; Scragg, “Fact or Fiction?”.

⁷ It may be worth pointing out at this stage that there is no evidence beyond that which has been inferred from the poem to support the conclusion that a battle was fought on this spot in August 991, though this may not be surprising, given the ‘precarious nature of evidence’ for early medieval battlefields. Lavelle, 307.

⁸ My use of the term “artistry” gestures, of course, towards Fred C. Robinson’s important discussion of the poet’s achievement (Robinson, “Some Aspects”), but also towards the ‘artistic purpose’ at work in the poem identified by Scragg (Scragg, “Fact or Fiction?”, 22).

Overing and Marijane Osborn in the introduction to their account of their own attempts to match the events of both *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* to present-day locations in Scandinavia.⁹ Motivated by a belief in “the experience of place as a negotiative activity whereby we may extend, develop, or invent our dialogue with the past”, Overing and Osborn’s endeavours are predicated on the conviction that the value of such experiences is in spite of, rather than contingent upon, the accuracy of the association of present-day location with fictional place.¹⁰ In their attempt to replicate the voyages undertaken in the narratives in question, Overing and Osborn are avowedly “not attempting to prove anything about the texts themselves” and acknowledge the potential dangers of attempting to do so.¹¹ Discussing the “Eureka impulse” behind the desire to identify the “real” places referred to in medieval texts, Overing describes the restrictive tendencies of such an attitude in terms of a deconstructive approach to Old English literature:

The excitement of exactitude, or replication, is of course a variant on the search for origins, and as such it partakes of nostalgia and closure of meaning, not to mention illusion.¹²

The readiness with which Laborde’s identification has been accepted by subsequent scholars is perhaps testimony to the powerful desire of which Overing and Osborn speak.¹³ That this acceptance has been motivated in part by nostalgia is equally apparent, with the Northey site having been described as “a solid link in what otherwise is a chain of

⁹ Overing and Osborn, xiii–xxii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹² *Ibid.*, xvi.

¹³ Compare the statement by David Cartwright and Charles Abbott Conway that they accept the identification of Northey Island “since none better has been offered”. Cartwright and Conway, 180.

circumstances...for Anglo-Saxonists who need some palpable reassurance that the words they love were once spoken or shouted by flesh and blood Englishmen”.¹⁴ A worrying side-effect of this scholarly nostalgia, however, is the degree to which the characteristics of the proposed site have come to be implicated in critical interpretations of the poem.

An obvious example is the extent to which the vocabulary of Northey Island has become that of the text. So, reference to the Viking position on “the island” abounds in the secondary literature, despite the fact that at no point in the surviving fragment of the poem is an island mentioned.¹⁵ Likewise, the influence of the Northey site can be detected in the common use of the term “causeway” to describe the river-crossing that features in the poem—an influence that has even permeated the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English* in the form of a specialized poetic definition of the relatively common word *brycg*, for which the only evidence cited comes from this poem.¹⁶

Whilst such points may appear of little consequence, the use of these terms nevertheless indicates a move from supposition to certainty.¹⁷ Such a move precludes diverse

¹⁴ Petty and Petty, “Geology”, 436. See also Burchfield.

¹⁵ Cf. MacRae-Gibson, 91: “the evidence of the poem strongly suggests that the Danes has established themselves on an island”. By contrast, see Bessinger, 33: “*Maldon* nowhere mentions an island, but...an island has been supplied from modern topography to explicate the poem’s actions”.

¹⁶ Cameron, et al., s.v. “brycg”, 1.C: “thought to be used here with reference to a natural causeway”. Cf. Robinson’s warning of the potential danger when the lexicographer “slips unawares into the role of literary interpreter, recording a meaning for a word not on the basis of lexicographical evidence but purely because his particular critical interpretation of the passage requires such a meaning”. Robinson, “Lexicography”, 99.

¹⁷ See, for example, the headnote that introduces the poem to new students in Baker, 227: “In August 991 Byrhtnoth, *ealdorman* of Essex, encountered an army of Vikings camped on Northey Island in the estuary of the River Blackwater near the town of Maldon, Essex. This island was (as it still is) connected to the mainland by a causeway which was covered at high tide.”

interpretation of the poetic battlefield, and bears testimony to the potential for closure of meaning referred to by Overing and Osborn. This closure of meaning is yet more evident in the way in which the topography of Northey Island has come to influence key critical issues on which debate concerning *Maldon* has focused.

The identification of the Northey Island site has, for example, impacted upon arguments relating to the historicity and date of composition of the poem. Here again, the precision and sense of verisimilitude evident in the poetic account of the battle are of central importance. The detailed description of the battle by the river Blackwater has been taken to demonstrate the poet's accurate (perhaps first hand) knowledge of the course of the battle—and such knowledge has itself been cited as evidence for composition shortly after the events of 991. Margaret Locherbie-Cameron, for example, argues that:

the poet's description of the battle site is almost certainly accurate; he is unlikely to have invented a site corresponding so minutely to an actual location [*viz* the Northey Island site]; nor is it probable that he would have thought of separating the forces by the channel had this not happened; and we must further assume that his positioning of the forces is correct, and that so, therefore, is his account of the overall pattern of their movements.¹⁸

We may, perhaps, wish to object to the suggestion that the poet would have been incapable of imagining for himself the dramatic confrontation by the river-crossing.¹⁹ Putting this to one

¹⁸ Locherbie-Cameron, 161.

¹⁹ It may, of course, be suggested that the reference to an (earlier) battle on a bridge in the account of Byrhtnoth's death contained in the *Liber Eliensis* lends some support to the historicity of the poetic account, and some connection between the two texts cannot be wholly ruled out. However, the *Liber Eliensis* account—which cannot in any case have been composed earlier than the second half of the twelfth-century—is deeply implausible in many of its details and can hardly be used as a source of accurate information. The best that could

side, however, Locherbie-Cameron's "further assumption" is particularly striking. The poet's supposedly accurate knowledge regarding the location and topography of the battlefield, is here taken as proof of the wider historicity of the poetic account. And yet there is a strong hint of circularity in such an argument. Laborde's identification of Northey Island was founded on his view that the poem is "a plain account of a historical event", and that it therefore ought to be possible to retrace the location the poet describes.²⁰ To take the correspondence between the poetic landscape and a site identified for its resemblance to the details of this landscape as evidence of the historicity—and correspondingly early date—of the poetic account is to turn a premise into a conclusion.²¹

Moreover, the identification of the Northey site has also influenced the infamous critical debate regarding Byrhtnoth's *ofermod*: his culpability or otherwise for the defeat suffered by the Anglo-Saxon army.²² Following Laborde's work, strategic considerations suggested by the Northey Island site have formed the basis of numerous studies of the tactics adopted by Byrhtnoth, primarily by scholars wishing to exculpate the *ealdorman* from the criticism implicit in the statement that he allowed *landes to fela* ("too much land", l. 90a) to the Viking army. Assuming the Vikings to have been camped upon the island, and equipped there with

be argued is that the *Liber Eliensis* derives at considerable remove from traditions regarding Byrhtnoth's death that may also lie behind the poetic account—but nothing certain can be said about the historicity of any such common traditions. See further Hill.

²⁰ Laborde, *Byrhtnoth and Maldon*, 70.

²¹ For a curious counterpoint to this approach, see McKinnell, 129. Rejecting the idea of an early date for the poem, McKinnell highlights a perceived discrepancy between "the geography of the site" and the details of the poem. Thus, arguing for the inaccuracy of the poet's account ("[w]e should accept that he was simply using his imagination"), McKinnell nevertheless implicitly accepts the accuracy of Laborde's identification as regards the historical battle.

²² The literature on this subject is notoriously extensive. See especially Gneuss and Halbrooks.

sea-going vessels, several scholars have argued that Byrhtnoth was obliged to engage the enemy forthwith to prevent them from sailing away and raiding unopposed further down the coast.²³ The danger of such imaginative reconstructions becomes apparent, however, when critics allow themselves to privilege their own reconstructed narratives over that of the poem itself.

This danger is evident in the evaluation of Byrhtnoth's generalship undertaken by Richard North. Following earlier critics in assuming that Byrhtnoth's principal concern was indeed to prevent the Vikings from escaping by sea, North hypothesizes that the general's strategy was to trap the Viking force against the river bank and, ultimately, to "push them into the river and rout them".²⁴ Such an understanding of Byrhtnoth's actions should, North suggests, take precedence in any discussion of his role in the outcome of the battle:

If we credit the poet's words of blame, Byrhtnoð was a gullible general; if the local topography, then Byrhtnoð was competent, having no option but to let the Vikings cross, whether or not they requested it. The site of this battle is probably a better witness than the poet.²⁵

Again, there is something troubling about an argument that uses the details of a site identified from the witness of the poem as itself a better witness to the events that that poem describes. In this instance, however, the reliance on the Northey Island model not only restricts the

²³ Cf. MacRae-Gibson, 96–105; Samouce; Cartwright and Conway, 182–83; Kirby; Altman. See also Robinson, "Some Aspects", 32–3 for the suggestion that the island may have been regularly inhabited, and that it was the threat posed by the Vikings to this putative English population that motivated Byrhtnoth's decision. For an unfavourable evaluation of Byrhtnoth's use of the terrain, see Mills.

²⁴ North, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10. Cf. MacRae-Gibson, 101.

interpretative possibilities of the poem, but also specifically denies an interpretation offered by the text itself.

Moreover, if these responses to Laborde's identification of the Northey Island site demonstrate the potential for nostalgia and closure of meaning highlighted by Overing and Osborn, the possibility that such responses are also based on illusion needs to be seriously considered. Setting aside once more the question of whether it is reasonable to expect such high levels of historical and factual accuracy from a poetic account of the battle, it has been suggested that the Northey Island site does not, in fact, fit so comfortably with the details of the poem as Laborde and others have suggested. So, J. B. Bessinger and, following him, George Clark have argued that the breadth of the channel at high-tide at Northey causeway would prohibit the celebrated exchange of speeches between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger represented in the poem (ll. 25–61).²⁶ For the same reason, McKinnell dismisses the exchange of archery depicted by the poet (ll. 68–71) as “impossible”.²⁷ A further objection based on the literal detail of the text concerns the words *west ofer Pantan* (“west over the Blackwater”, l. 97b) used to describe the Viking's advance across the water, a phrase that has been seen as incompatible with the alignment of the Northey causeway, which in fact runs north-east to south-west.²⁸ At the same time, scholars have also objected to the identification for the very reason that it is based upon the present day topography of Northey Island, without reference to the possibility of major geological changes having affected the Blackwater estuary over the course of the preceding millennium:

²⁶ Bessinger, 34; Clark, 66–7.

²⁷ McKinnell, 29. For a counter argument, see Locherbie-Cameron, 160.

²⁸ Bessinger, 26–7.

Northey Island, other islands close to it, the river's bed, banks, surrounding mud-flats, and adjacent man-made structures have all been substantially changed in the past thousand years, chiefly through the action of tides, storms, floods, and normal erosion and silting. It is difficult, therefore, to speak with any confidence about realistic topographical details in the poem about the battle.²⁹

To date, the most comprehensive attempts to respond to these objections have been those based on the geological survey of Northey causeway undertaken by George Petty and Susan Petty in 1973.³⁰ From the evidence of this survey, Petty and Petty initially concluded that, whilst objections to the use of present-day topography as a guide to the site of the battle are justified, such changes as they believe to have occurred actually serve to make the site more plausible as the location described in the poem.³¹ In particular, their researches suggest that while the causeway joining Northey Island to the mainland would then have been in the same place as it is today, it would have been only about half as long as it is currently. Their estimate of 120 yards at mean high tide would both make the type of verbal exchange represented in the poem “a little easier on the lungs”, and bring the opposing forces within conceivable bow-range.³² Further, Petty and Petty's claim that the banks of the river in 991 would have consisted of “firm, regular red soil, unbroken by water channels” obviates the difficulty felt by previous scholars regarding the apparent ease with which Byrhtnoth

²⁹ Ibid., 34. Laborde was himself aware of this possible criticism, but argued that topographical changes would not have been “so great as to cause any important difference between the more prominent features, such as rivers with their fords, islands, &c., and relief in general, as they now exist and as they existed in the reign of Æpelred”. Laborde, “Site of the Battle”, 164.

³⁰ Petty and Petty, “Geology”; Petty and Petty, “Geological Reconstruction”.

³¹ Petty and Petty, “Geology”, 444–6.

³² Ibid. 443–4. Altman cites a range of about 200 yards for Anglo-Saxon bowmen. Altman, 4.

manoeuvres his troops on terrain that in modern times has consisted of almost impassable saltings.³³

Petty and Petty's response to the suggestion that the correspondence between the Northey Island site and the description of setting in *Maldon* is illusory is, therefore, to move the goalposts.³⁴ This is particularly evident in their subsequent reassessment of the original survey data. In this later study, Petty and Petty acknowledge that "the Northey Island site does not now correspond to the language of the poem", but simultaneously present a "reconstruction" of the battlefield, as they believe it would have looked in 991, which *does* fit the requirements of the text.³⁵ There is, again, a logical problem here. Laborde's identification of Northey Island was based on his belief that the site "fits in perfectly with the poet's account of the battle".³⁶ According to Petty and Petty, Laborde was overconfident in his assertion. Is it to be accepted, therefore, that arguing for a false association between the modern topography of the Northey environs and that suggested by the poem, Laborde nevertheless located a place whose topography was "so different" in 991 as to genuinely resemble the poetic account?³⁷

Petty and Petty conclude this later study by arguing that the reconstruction they present will serve to counter the false assumptions engendered by interpretative criticism founded on the present appearance of the causeway. According to Petty and Petty, future readers of the

³³ Petty and Petty, "Geology", 444. By contrast, see Hart, 188 for the suggestion that the local saltings were in existence at the time of the battle.

³⁴ Cf. MacRae-Gibson, 93: "If it be the case that the modern topography would not allow shouted exchanges across the channel...this may rather be offered as evidence that the topography then was different than that no shouting took place".

³⁵ Petty and Petty, "Geological Reconstruction", 161.

³⁶ Laborde, "Site of the Battle", 170.

³⁷ Petty and Petty, "Geological Reconstruction", 168.

poem “ought to begin by recognising the present ‘real’ appearance of the estuary of the Blackwater as a form of critical fiction, and should follow the text with the geological reconstruction of the area firmly in mind”.³⁸ Yet if the “real” appearance of the area today is a “critical fiction”, so surely is their own attempt to resurrect a landscape that no longer exists. That scholars will go to such lengths to uphold the connection between Northey Island and *Maldon* speaks eloquently of the nostalgic investment in the association of poem and place.³⁹ More worrying, however, is the extent to which critical interpretations of *Maldon* have at times been based upon assumptions regarding the site of the battle—as depicted in the poem—which seem to be built on less than secure foundations.

The *Maldon*-poet’s sense of place: inventing the battlefield

In response to claims concerning the historicity of *Maldon*, N. F. Blake has written that “we should always accept that a literary work is not a historical record until it is proved so”.⁴⁰ In the above discussion, I have intended to show that, although the association between the poem and Northey Island remains essentially unproven, it has nevertheless had a pervasive and perhaps unhelpful influence on scholarly responses to the poem. However, in arguing thus it is not my intention to downplay the importance of the detailed topographical

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁹ The continued desire for a tangible connection with the poem is evident in the fact that, having recreated the landscape of the poem at Northey Island, in the process effacing any link with the present-day topography of the site, Petty and Petty recommend to their audience another, nearby site on the banks of the river Chelmer where “the curious student may see what we think the Northey Island site looked like at the time of the battle”. Petty and Petty, “Geology and *Maldon*”, 445.

⁴⁰ Blake, 120.

description presented in the poem. Rather, as I hope now to show, sensitivity to ideas of place in fact constitutes a distinctive aspect of the *Maldon*-poet's artistry.

Reference to place in *Maldon* is insistent, and goes beyond the allusion to *Pantan stream* and the tidal crossing. The use of local adverbs, which continually tie action to place, is particularly striking. In direct speech, the adverb *her* ("here", ll. 36b, 51a, 241a, 243a, 314a) is used five times in this manner, and both *hider* ("hither", l. 57b) and *heonon* ("hence", l. 246b) are used once to describe movement (actual or potential) to or from the *her* of the poem. In the narrated text, the local adverb *þær* ("there") is used a total of nineteen times.⁴¹ Although comparisons based on word frequency can be misleading, the equivalent figure of only seventy-one occurrences in *Beowulf*, a narrative poem ten times the length of *Maldon*, perhaps indicates that the *Maldon*-poet's insistence on location is unusual.⁴²

The grouping of these adverbs in adjacent or near-adjacent lines also serves to foster a highly localized, deictic sense of place. The adverb *þær* occurs repeatedly in clusters of lines with reference to a particular location in the poetic topography: the barrier of water by which the armies are divided (ll. 64a, 65a, 68a), the bridge (ll. 78a, 79a, 85a), and the battlefield on which men die (ll. 100a, 105a, 106a) and from which men flee (ll. 185b, 186a). In direct speech, a similar clustering is evident in Offa's use of *her* twice in three lines in reference to the battlefield from which the deserters have fled (ll. 241a, 243a); it is perhaps also evident in the three occurrences in the poem of the conjunction *þær* ("where"), each of which refers to Byrhtnoth's position at the outset of the exchange with the Viking messenger (ll. 23b, 24a, 28b).

⁴¹ *The Battle of Maldon* ll. 17a, 64a, 65a, 68a, 78a, 79a, 85a, 100a, 105a, 106a, 116a, 124a, 185b, 186a, 200a, 205a, 287a, 301a, 307a.

⁴² In terms of averages, the adverb appears once for every 44.8 lines of *Beowulf*, compared to once every 17.1 lines in *Maldon*.

This concentration of local adverbs establishes the action of the poem firmly within a locative context, that of the *wælstow* (“slaughter-place”, ll. 95a, 293a).⁴³ The further description of this setting, I would suggest, sees the poet of *Maldon* drawing on established Anglo-Saxon traditions for the written invention of place to “map” the battlefield. Nicholas Howe has argued that Anglo-Saxon cartography was “far more narrative than visual”, and that language rather than image was the medium through which a sense of place was “created, transmitted, and preserved”.⁴⁴ Howe illustrates his point with reference to the practice of boundary clauses attached to Anglo-Saxon land charters, and it is the technique for the construction of place employed in these documents that provides, I suggest, the clearest model for how to read the landscape description in *Maldon*.⁴⁵

Howe points out that by their nature, boundary clauses are not concerned with the description of terrain, but with the demarcation of specific units of land: their purpose is “to invent a place for legal purposes”.⁴⁶ Boundary clauses accomplish this goal by describing a perambulation of the boundaries of the land unit, orientated by reference to man-made markers or natural topographical features. Two features of such clauses identified by Howe are particularly relevant here. Firstly, their vernacularity: although the majority of land charters containing boundary clauses are written in Latin, it is very common for the boundary

⁴³ Cf. Shippey’s claim that the use of “exophoric” words “whose meaning is determined by the viewpoint for the speaker” is a recurrent stylistic device in Old English verse whereby “strong generalization is combined with equally strong assertion of closeness, immediacy, particularity”. Shippey, 264.

⁴⁴ Howe, 16, 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29–46. For an introduction to Anglo-Saxon charters, see Whitelock, 369–82; Reed, 261–306. For a searchable database of Anglo-Saxon boundary clauses, see Nelson et al.

⁴⁶ Howe, 38.

clauses themselves to be composed in English, particularly in the later Anglo-Saxon period.⁴⁷ Secondly, their locality: descriptions of bounds are notoriously allusive, with references to “the stream”, “the hill”, or “the big oak” requiring and assuming a detailed local knowledge of the distinguishing features of the area being described. Many of the designated markers are also strikingly transient in nature. Gates may be moved or removed, streams may change their course, and trees may be felled. Clauses repeatedly refer to landmarks associated with specific individuals, who are referenced by name. Such a practice again assumes a local knowledge, and also situates the description in time as well as space.⁴⁸

Boundary clauses, therefore, construct a sense of place that is intrinsically local through the use of vernacular terminology in allusive references to topographical markers. A similar technique is evident in the setting of *Maldon*, in which the battlefield is populated by a profusion of topographical features described in terminology familiar from vernacular boundary clauses. With the exception of the *Panta* (“Blackwater”, ll. 68a, 97b), each of the features described is purely generic. We hear of a *holt* (“copse”, l. 8a) and a *wudu* (“wood”, l. 193b; also called a *fæsten* [“safe place”, l. 194a]), a *bricg(-)* (“bridge”, ll. 74b, 78b, 85a) or *ford* (“ford”, ll. 81a, 88a), the *ofer* (“bank”, l. 28b) on one side of the *(-)stream* (“river”, ll. 66a, 68a) and the *(-)stæð* (“shore”, ll. 25a, 63a) on both, and finally the *feld* (“field”, l. 241a) on which the fighting takes place.

These generic topographical references were interpreted by Laborde as evidence for first-hand knowledge of the battle-site on the part of both poet and, implicitly, the intended audience:

⁴⁷ Cf. Reed, 277: “by the middle years of the ninth century the use of Old English instead of Latin [in boundary clauses] has become established practice”.

⁴⁸ Howe, 33–4.

[the poet's] allusive reference to the wood, the river-crossing, and the peculiarity of the rising tide at this point are due to the assumption of common knowledge of these geographical details among his audience. An Essex man, composing his poem for Essex men, might thus omit all details which would be deemed superfluous.⁴⁹

The method of composition that Laborde theorizes here is largely that of a boundary clause: a written invention of a sense of place dependent upon explicitly local knowledge. I would argue, however, that the sense of locality engendered in the poem is imaginative rather than actual. In his analysis of the description of the landscape in the Exeter Book elegy *The Wife's Lament*, Howe argues that the terminology employed there points to "a kind of cultural familiarity with boundary clauses underlying the poem's description of place".⁵⁰ Howe suggests that through an engagement with the techniques of boundary clauses, the poet imbues the speaker's isolation with a sense of "local habitation".⁵¹ If, as I think, Howe means by this that the description of the speaker's dwelling invents a fictitious sense of familiarity on the part of the audience, then this is the same technique that I see in the description of the battle-site in *Maldon*. The poet is establishing a sense of locality that need not refer to external reality except in so far as it is placed in a conceptual geographical relation to the river Blackwater, in the vicinity of Maldon.

Moreover, the terminology employed by the poet in his depiction of the location of the battle combines to establish an implicit topography of the battle-site that is traced by the movements of men and animals across the ground. Following the exchange across the river, the Anglo-Saxon army moves forward "so that they all stood on that river bank" (*þæt hi on*

⁴⁹ Laborde, *Byrhtnoth and Maldon*, 70.

⁵⁰ Howe, 67.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

þam easteðe ealle stodon, 63). From this position the triumvirate of Wulfstan, Ælfere and Maccus “advanced to the bridge” they are charged with defending (*on þa bricge stop*, 78b). Subsequently Byrhtnoth’s infamous *ofermod* allows the Vikings to advance *west ofer Pantan* (“west over the Blackwater”, 97b), and after the death of the *ealdorman*, the cowardly sons of Odda “turned from the battle and sought the wood” (*wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton*, 193)—a movement which, as has been frequently noted, parallels the opening description of the horses being driven away from the location of the battle (ll. 2–4) and especially the flight of the hawk *wið þæs holtes* (“towards the wood”, l. 8a).⁵² The treachery of Godric and his brothers is a rejection of loyalty and obligation, but at the most immediate level it is a rejection of place: *Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þær beon noldon* (“they turned then from the battle who did not intend to be there”, 185).⁵³

This emphasis upon movement across the ground, in combination with the prominent use of words drawn from a topographical lexis, serves to “map” the battlefield in a way that strongly recalls the circumambulatory movement described in vernacular boundary clauses. In the delineation of a powerfully-felt sense of the place of the battlefield, therefore, the *Maldon*-poet can be seen to draw upon techniques for the invention of place equivalent to—and perhaps familiar from—contemporary legal documentation relating to landownership. Moreover, the *Maldon*-poet is not alone in thus engaging with the practices of vernacular

⁵² The prominence of the wood in the poem has interpreted by as further evidence in favour of the identification of the Northey site, on the basis of place-name evidence that suggests the former presence of woodland in the vicinity of Maldon. Dodgson, 175–6. However, compare *Beowulf* ll. 2596–2601 for the trope of cowardly retainers fleeing to the wood, and also the discussion below of the *Beowulf*-poet’s account of the battle of Ravenswood.

⁵³ It may not be a coincidence that the adverb *þær* occurs in the b-verse here; elsewhere in the poem it appears only in the a-verse.

boundary clauses. This analysis of the poet's technique accords well, for example, with Scott Thompson Smith's discussion of the way in which the depiction of troop movements in the annals for the years 912–20 in manuscript A of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* “maps” the expanding territorial authority of Edward the Elder.⁵⁴ For my immediate purposes, however, it may be more telling that an equivalent technique for the invention of place is evident in the *Beowulf*-poet's account of the battle of Ravenswood (ll. 2922–98).

The events of this passage—which has rightly been called the poem's “only fully-fledged battle scene”⁵⁵—were summarized by Klaeber thusly:

An expedition of revenge into the land of the Swedes undertaken by Hæðcyn and Hygelac, though at first successful (even Ongenþeow's queen is taken prisoner), seems destined to utter failure; the ‘old, terrible’ king of the Swedes falls upon Hæðcyn's army, rescues the queen, kills the Geat king and forces his troops to seek refuge in the woods (*Hrefnesholt* 2935), threatening them all night long with death in the morning by the sword and the gallows. But at dawn the valorous Hygelac appears with his division and inspires such a terror that the Swedes flee to their fastness, pursued by the Geats. Ongenþeow in a brave fight against two brothers, Eofor and Wulf, loses his life. Hygelac, now king of the Geats, after his homecoming richly repaid the brothers and gave his only daughter as wife to Eofor.⁵⁶

As in *Maldon*, the *Beowulf*-poet gives an unusually precise description of the site of the action in this episode. Most obviously, the battlefield is located in relation to the wood from

⁵⁴ Smith, 164: “Such a record of movement across the landscape creates not only an itinerary of military action, but also, like charter bounds, a network of place-names and landscape features which together represent the limits of territorial power.” See also Stodnick.

⁵⁵ Harris, 102.

⁵⁶ Klaeber, xxxix.

which the episode takes its habitual name: *Hrefna Wudu* (“Ravens’ Wood”, l. 2925b).⁵⁷ This obscure place-name functions both as a geographical and topographical term, locating the site of the battle on an imagined map of Sweden and populating the landscape with the topographical feature of the wood to which it applies. The imaginative geographical precision implied here is paralleled elsewhere in the poem in the references to another conflict fought around *Hreosna Beorh* (l. 2477b), the “Eagle’s Headland” on which the bodies of Beowulf and the dragon are displayed (*Earna Næs*, l. 3031b), and the “Whale’s Headland” on which Beowulf’s burial mound is constructed (*Hrones Næs*, ll. 2805b; 3136b), a fact which suggests that the technique was a familiar one for the poet.⁵⁸

In the following account, the topography of the battlefield is again traced by the movement of the two forces amongst the features of the terrain. The action opens with a description of the leaderless Geats fleeing *in Hrefnes Holt* (“into Raven’s Holt”, l. 2935a) and the Swedish king besieging them therein (*Besæt ða sinherge* [“he then besieged them with a huge army”, l. 2936a]). As dawn breaks the following day, Hygelac and his Geatish reinforcements appear on the horizon, following the bloody path taken by his countrymen and their Swedish pursuers (*on last* [“on the trail”, l. 2945b]; *sio swatswaðu* [“that bloody path”, l. 2946a]). Whether or not this path should be interpreted literally as a topographical feature, Hygelac’s approach adds a sense of perspective to the landscape as the view widens suddenly from a close focus on the wood and its immediate surroundings to a broad, panoramic view. Further detail is immediately added to the scene by the description of Ongentheow, in response to the new threat, moving to higher ground (*ufor oncirde* [“turned further away”, l. 2951b]). The Swedish king retreats to a stronghold (*fæsten*, l. 2950b), in the process moving *under*

⁵⁷ For the de-compounded form of the place names here, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, 327 and n. 3. This emendation does not imply any devaluation of the place names as geographical markers.

⁵⁸ The meaning of *Hreosna Beorh* is unclear. Cf. Klaeber, xlvi; Orchard, 172.

eorðweall (“within the earth-wall”, l. 2957a), presumably a reference to an outlying fortification. In pursuit, the Geats swarm against the enclosure (*to hagan þrungon*, l. 2960b) and overrun the protected area of land enclosed within (*freoðowong þone forð ofereodon*, l. 2959).

This catalogue of troop movements again establishes a strong sense of the place of the battle, here including depth of field and elevation, populated by the wood, the earthworks, the plain and the stronghold. The battlefield is conceptually mapped using a technique that is analogous to that of the *Maldon*-poet—movement over the ground tracing an allusive network of topographical features—and that again recalls the conventions of contemporary boundary clauses. The key difference, however, is that the invention of place in this episode from *Beowulf* relates to a clearly fictive location. Like *Maldon*, the setting of the Ravenswood episode has been praised for its “grimly realistic” presentation, none the less powerful for being wholly imaginative.⁵⁹ The example of Ravenswood, therefore, establishes a parallel for the use of techniques for the written invention of place in *Maldon* which bears no discernible relation to external topographical realities.

Land and ownership in *The Battle of Maldon*

This analysis suggests, I think, that a developed sense of the importance of place constitutes part of the narrative technique employed by the *Maldon*-poet—a technique that can be paralleled in the Ravenswood episode in *Beowulf*. It should, I think, also lead us to reappraise Hugh Magennis’ statement that “the interest in location in [*Maldon*] is never more than

⁵⁹ Carnicelli, 252.

incidental”.⁶⁰ For Magennis, the poet’s reliance on well-established poetic conventions renders any detailed account of the real or imagined scene unnecessary:

In presenting the conflict commemorated in the poem as a classic heroic battle it is not to the poet’s purpose to describe the particular setting at Maldon: the presentation of the battle is essentially traditional and bases itself upon a concept of the Germanic heroic background shared between poet and audience.⁶¹

Magennis’ suggestion that the poet is not concerned with the mimetic description of the actual tenth-century landscape around Maldon is perhaps not one that I would wish to dispute. However, notwithstanding the similarities of technique evident in the depiction of the battlefield in *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, there is, I would suggest, more specific resonance to the topographical description in *Maldon* than Magennis’ statement allows for.

Recent work by Scott Smith has drawn attention to a hitherto underappreciated discourse associated with possession and control of land that permeates much of the literature produced in both Latin and Old English in the late Anglo-Saxon period. Following developments in textual practices for expressing landownership in terms of an ideal of permanence and stability in the early-tenth century, Smith argues that the discourse of “land-as-property” forms “a conceptual locus around which clusters an array of cultural mores, ideals, and anxieties”.⁶² On the one hand, this discourse provided writers working within a range of different textual genres with “a means for articulating and maintaining identity over time”.⁶³ On the other hand, however, the discourse also encoded concomitant fears about the essential

⁶⁰ Magennis, 122.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123. Cf. Bessinger, 27.

⁶² Smith, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

instability of all landownership that was the reality in this period. In this way, the discourse of land-as-property “affirms and amplifies the value of property even as it returns again and again to the problem of dispute and the potential for loss”.⁶⁴ In the process, it offers writers with “a ready medium for engaging an impressive array of intellectual, spiritual, and political issues”.⁶⁵

In *The Battle of Maldon*, I suggest, the poet draws upon precisely such deep-seated concerns about possession and control of land in order to explore the meaning of the historical event that the poem depicts. As I have shown, the narrative strategies employed in the poem suggest a concern with the construction of a strongly-felt sense of local place in relation to the poetic battlefield. As I shall now argue, however, the poet further defines this sense of place in relation to concepts of landownership and concerns regarding potential threats to the notion of land-as-property. This is particularly evident during the course of the pivotal exchanges between Byrhtnoth and the Vikings that take place before the battle begins in earnest.

In the course of his justly celebrated response to the Viking messenger, Byrhtnoth notably refigures a threat expressed by the Viking in terms of tribute and loss of life (ll. 31b–5) in terms that relate specifically to the question of honour, but also to that of landownership:

Gehyrst þu, sælida,	hwæt þis folc segeð?
.
her stynt unforcuð	eorl mid his werode,
þe wile gealgean	eþel þysne,
Æþelredes eard,	ealdres mines
folc and foldan.	Feallan sceolan

⁶⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 236–7.

hæþene æt hilde. To heanlic me þinceð
 þæt ge mid urum sceattum to scype gangon
 unbefohtene, nu ge þus feor hider
 on urne eard in becomon. (ll. 45–58)

(Do you hear, sailor, what this people says?...here stands amongst his troop an irreproachable earl who intends to defend this homeland, the country of Æthelræd, my lord's people and land. Heathens must fall in battle. It seems to me too shameful that you should go unopposed to your ship with our coins, now that you have advanced so far hither into our country.)

Once again, we see in this passage the use of local adverbs to invoke a sense of place (*her*, *hider*). Here, however, the place in question is explicitly figured as a homeland (*epel þysne*), and throughout Byrhtnoth's words the impulse to resist the Vikings is expressed in terms of possession and control of land. Through the use of variation, the poet immediately defines the homeland in terms of possession: it is *Æþelredes eard*. The heavy use of the possessive in this line is striking, but the syntax is also potentially ambiguous. Initially, the phrase *ealdres mines* in the second half-line might most naturally be taken, again, as variation, here on the proper noun *Æþelredes*. Taken in this way, the line foregrounds the loyalties and obligations that lie behind Byrhtnoth's resolve, whilst at the same time stressing the status of the land as property. However, as Scragg's punctuation suggests, the phrase *ealdres mines* can also be taken to modify the following couplet, *folc and foldan*, also a parallel object of the verb *gealgean*.

The ambiguity is, I think, deliberate and artistic. Byrhtnoth's defiance is focused upon a nexus of concepts of homeland, land-as-property and loyalty, culminating in the explicit connection of people and land. Throughout *Maldon*, the word *folc* is a key term used by the poet to signal the ideal of collectivity and identity that should bind the English forces

together. It has already appeared prominently in the unifying reference to *þis folc* in the opening line of Byrhtnoth's speech. In the couplet *folc and foldan*, however, this common identity of the English forces is related to a shared territorial concern. In the lines that follow, possession is again foregrounded, first in relation to the wealth that the Vikings demand (*urum sceattum*), then in relation to the land itself (*urne eard*). Here, landownership is not reserved for the king, but is presented as common to the defenders—a point that is emphasized by the stress and alliteration that falls upon the possessive adjective *urne*. The prominence of this adjective has led John Dodgson to suggest that the phrase should be read literally to refer to land owned by Byrhtnoth and his men in the vicinity of the battlefield. However, I would suggest that Dodgson's sense of "something more than the general, national, possessive" reflects instead the power of the land-as-property discourse in Byrhtnoth's speech.⁶⁶

In these lines, then, the poet uses the land-as-property discourse to articulate a shared identity. By contrast, the use of the compound *sælida* to describe the messenger marks the exclusion of the Vikings from this land-based identity. As has been frequently noted, this compound is one of a succession of terms used in the poem to equate the Vikings with the sea.⁶⁷ This association with the sea not only stresses the alterity of the attackers, but also enforces the sense of the place of the battle as an English homeland. In this context, it is noticeable how vague the *Maldon*-poet is about the land occupied by the Vikings at the beginning of the extant narrative. The topographical prominence of the river Blackwater in

⁶⁶ Dodgson, 177.

⁶⁷ Cf. *brimlipend* ("sea-traveller", l. 27b), *brimman* ("sea-man", ll. 49a, 295b), *flota* ("sailor", ll. 72b, 227a), *lidman* ("sailor", ll. 99a, 164b), *sæman* ("sea-man", ll. 29b, 38a, 278b), *sælida* ("seafarer", ll. 45a, 286a), *særinc* ("sea-man", l. 134a). To this list might be added the *æschere* (l. 69b), a *hapax legomenon* the first element of which possibly means 'ship'. See further, Sayers.

the early part of the poem divides the landscape into “two very clearly demarcated geographical spaces”, but the point of view of the poem focuses solely on the side of the river occupied by the English forces.⁶⁸ Byrhtnoth’s statement that the Vikings have already penetrated some distance into *urne eard* suggests that the land they currently occupy is part of the homeland that the English are preparing to defend. However, while the terrain on the English side of the river is, as we have seen, “mapped” topographically, the space on the far bank is conceptually blank. Through a sort of poetic sleight of hand, the poet succeeds in both presenting the Viking attack—in reality part of a series of plundering raids—as a territorial incursion, and suggesting that the action of the poem is located at a significant territorial boundary.

Intersections of land and water in Anglo-Saxon literature frequently depict “permeable, dynamic boundaries”, and the river Blackwater is just such a boundary.⁶⁹ At high-tide, the river is impassable and its integrity is secure:

Ne mihte þær for wætere werod to þam oðrum:
 þær com flowende flod æfter ebban;
 lucon lagustreamas. (ll. 64–6a)

(Troop could not advance to the other there because of the water: the flood-tide came flowing there after the ebb; the sea-streams mingled.)

The precise movement of water implied in these lines has been contested. Laborde interpreted the phrase *lucon lagustreamas* as a reference to the confluence of the channels encircling

⁶⁸ Matto, 66.

⁶⁹ Wickham-Crowley, 105.

Northey Island.⁷⁰ This interpretation has been questioned, however, by Petty and Petty, whose own experience of the Northey site does not support Laborde's observations in this instance.⁷¹ A more plausible interpretation of the force of these lines is that of Neil Isaacs, who has highlighted the irony implicit in the way that the confluence of the water in these lines serves to prevent the two armies from coming into contact.⁷² The overwhelming sense in these lines, I suggest, is of the solidity of the body of water as a barrier between the different forces.

When the tide recedes (*flod ut gewat* ["the water went out", l. 72a]), the status of the river as boundary shifts. The introduction of the bridge at line 74 signals that the boundary is now, quite literally, negotiable. The dynamics of the river as boundary are not solely dependent upon the tidal confluence, therefore, but also on the action of the defenders. As the Vikings prepare to cross the river, the integrity of the boundary is dependent upon its continued reinforcement by the *bricgweardas* ("bridge-guardians", l. 85a).⁷³ So long as the Anglo-Saxon guards continue to defend the permeable boundary, the river is un-crossable. Once they are removed, however, the boundary is open for the Vikings to pass.

Rather than the mimetic description of a precise natural phenomena posited by Laborde, it is possible to read the shifting status of the river as a boundary in relation to contemporary concerns over the vulnerability of landed property. It might also function as a mirror for the changing role that Byrhtnoth himself plays in the early parts of the poem. Along with the

⁷⁰ Laborde, "Site of the Battle", 171 and n. 1.

⁷¹ Petty and Petty, "Geology", 446. Cf. Scragg's sceptical description of Laborde's interpretation as "almost too perfect". Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon*, 72 n. to l. 66.

⁷² Isaacs, 163.

⁷³ Compare Griffith's description of the bridge-guardians' actions as "almost a human re-creation of the tide that has now ebbed". Griffith, 184.

description of Byrhtnoth's *ofermod* and the nature of the guile employed by the Vikings (*ongunnon lytegian*, l. 86a), the statement that the *ealdorman* allowed the Vikings *landes to fela* ("too much land", l. 90a) at the crossing has been amongst the most hotly contested lines of the poem.⁷⁴ Interpretations of this phrase have generally focused upon tactical considerations, with critical opinion largely divided into two broad camps: those who read the words *to fela* as literally implying that Byrhtnoth was over-generous in allowing the Vikings room to manoeuvre,⁷⁵ and those who believe the words are a figure of *litotes* implying that the decision to allow the crossing in the first place was wrong.⁷⁶ I would suggest, though, that the anxiety of the phrase *landes to fela* transcends the immediate military considerations.

In his initial demand for tribute, the Viking messenger acts, as Edward Irving noted, "as if he and his men were the proprietors of the land".⁷⁷ So much is clear from Byrhtnoth's response, in which this tribute is ironically figured as "heriot":

Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
 ættrynne ord and ealde swurd,
 þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah. (ll. 46–8)

(They will give to you spears as a tribute, deadly point and ancient sword, the heriot which will not be of use to you in battle.)

⁷⁴ On the meaning of *ongunnon lytegian*, see *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Cf. Cavill, 152: "I take the poet to imply that Byrhtnoð allowed the Vikings the space they asked for, and that he gave them too much land, too much room to manoeuvre, and should have attacked them while they were down on the mud, or hemmed in around the causeway."

⁷⁶ Cf. Mills, 27: "His mistake in generalship was not that he failed to attack the Vikings after his promise of free passage, but that he allowed them a free passage in the first place."

⁷⁷ Irving, 460–1.

The poet's reference to heriot—the death-tax paid (usually in weaponry) to the lord of a dead thegn—may have been especially topical in the late-tenth or early-eleventh century. It was in this period, during the reigns of Æthelred and Cnut, that the practice appears to have been reformed and regularized, perhaps initially in response to the military demands posed by the Viking threat.⁷⁸ The reference may play specifically into the discourse of land-as-property evident in this section of the poem: it has been suggested that, in the late Anglo-Saxon period, payment of heriot was a means of ensuring tenorial succession and was a prerequisite for the inheritance of bookland.⁷⁹ Howsoever this may be, it is at least clear that Byrhtnoth responds to the Viking's initial demands as an arrogation of lordly privilege.

By the time that the Vikings again communicate with Byrhtnoth, following their failure to force the crossing, things have changed, and the Vikings apparently adopt an altogether less haughty demeanour:

Ða hi þæt ongeaton and georne gesawon,
 þæt hi þær bricgweardas bitere fundon,
 ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas:
 bædon þæt hi upgangan agan moston,
 ofer þone ford faran, feþan lædan. (ll. 84–8)

(When they perceived and readily saw that they encountered fierce bridge-guardians there, the hostile guests then began to use guile: they asked that they might have passage, travel across the ford, lead the troops.)

⁷⁸ Brooks, 90.

⁷⁹ Abels, *Military Obligation*, 137–8; Abels, 'Heriot'. On bookland, see most recently Smith, 8–14.

The description of the Vikings as *gystas* here is, I think, significant. The semantic range of this term includes the generic senses “visitors”, “strangers”, and “outsiders”, but most obviously the word means “guests”.⁸⁰ The use of the same word in *Genesis A* in a grimly ironic reference to the enemies of Abraham (*Genesis A* ll. 2052b–7a) might offer a parallel for its occurrence in *Maldon*, but its appearance here in collocation with the verb *biddan* may be telling. Like *gyst*, *biddan* has a wide semantic range, encompassing asking, begging, praying, and commanding. However, it is also well-attested in formal and legalistic contexts in relation to petitions and supplications.⁸¹ If, therefore, the Vikings initially present themselves as the proprietors of the land, it might be that the infamous Viking guile consists of their subsequent adoption of the role of supplicant guest.

The language used to describe Byrhtnoth’s response to the Viking petition certainly maintains the fiction of an interaction between a lord and a guest:

Da se eorl ongan	for his ofermode
alyfan landes to fela	laþere ðeode;
ongan ceallian þa	ofer cald wæter
Byrhtelmes bearn	(beornas gehlyston):
“Nu eow is gerymed:	gað ricene to us
guman to guþe.	God ana wat
hwa þære wælstowe	wealdan mote.” (ll. 89–95)

(Then the earl, for his pride, began to grant too much land to the hated people; Byrhtelm’s son began then to call over the cold water (the warriors listened): “Now room is made for you: advance quickly to us, men to battle. God alone knows who must possess the battlefield.”)

⁸⁰ Cameron, et al., s.v. “gyst”.

⁸¹ Cameron, et al., s.v. “biddan”, 3.

Like *biddan*, the verb *alyfan* has strong quasi-legalistic connotations of a formal grant.⁸² The combination of these two terms places Byrhtnoth in the position of a lord granting a petition. By way of comparison, we might note that *biddan* is the verb Beowulf uses when he requests Hrothgar’s permission to guard Heorot (*Ic þe nuða...biddan wille* [“I wish now to request of you”, ll. 426b–7]) and that *alyfan* is the verb Hroðgar subsequently uses to grant this request (*Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde...buton þe nuða* [“I never previously granted to any man...save you now”, ll. 655–7]).

This more specific interpretation of the verb *alyfan* is supported, moreover, by the appearance of the verb *geryman* in the same passage. Although the basic meaning of this verb is undoubtedly “to make room”, it seems also to have a secondary meaning “to allow” or “to grant”.⁸³ The verb is used twice in this sense in *Beowulf*.⁸⁴ Firstly, during the account of the battle of Ravenswood, the kinsmen of the Geatish warrior Wulf tend his wounds *ða him gerymed wearð, / þæt hie wælstowe wealdan moston* (“when it was granted to them that they could rule the battlefield”, 2983b–4).⁸⁵ Secondly, and more pertinently, in his speech to the cowardly retainers, Wiglaf describes how, after the battle with the dragon, he entered the barrow in order to inspect the treasure:

Ic wæs þær inne ond þæt eall geondseh,

⁸² Cameron, et al., s.v. “ā-lȳfan”, C.

⁸³ See Fulke, Bjork, and Niles, 425 s.v. “(ge-)rȳman”. The verb is used to describe a royal land grant in a charter describing the boundaries of the Old and New Minsters in Winchester dating from the second half of the tenth century (S 1449). See also, for example, *Genesis A* ll. 1485–7a.

⁸⁴ We might be tempted to see this meaning also in *Beowulf* ll. 1085b–7a. Cf. Sedgefield, 215 s.v. “gerȳman”.

⁸⁵ The use of *geryman* in collocation with the phrase for “ruling the battlefield” is striking, and perhaps hints at a conventional association also reflected in the lines from *Maldon*.

recedes geatwa, þa me gerymed wæs,
 nealles swæslice sið alyfed
 inn under eorðweall. (ll. 3087–90a)

(I was within and examined all the ornaments of the hall, when it was permitted to me,
 the journey inside under the earth-wall granted in a none-too-friendly fashion.)

The parallelism of the past participles *gerymed* and *alyfed* contributes brilliantly to the bitter irony of these lines. Wiglaf’s passage has in reality been won by force at great cost, but this is a reality at odds with the lexis of concession that he employs. The irony is underlined by the litotes *nealles swæslice*: whilst Wiglaf’s language establishes the fiction that he is a permitted guest in the dragon’s lair, it has not been a friendly invitation.

The evidence of this passage suggests a possible new interpretation for the phrase *nu eow is gerymed* in Byrhtnoth’s speech. The past participle may refer not—or not only—to the clearing of space for the Viking’s crossing (as has been generally assumed), but more specifically to Byrhtnoth’s accession to the enemy’s request (“it is now granted to you”).⁸⁶ Seen in this light, the passage from *Beowulf* provides a point of high contrast for Byrhtnoth’s actions. The *Maldon*-poet’s lexical choices frame Byrhtnoth’s decision within familiar discourses of petition and consent. However, in contrast to Wiglaf’s experiences in *Beowulf*, Byrhtnoth is depicted freely—perhaps aristocratically—granting to the enemy a passage that should be jealously guarded and hard-won.

In this way, Byrhtnoth’s approach compares unfavourably with that of the loyal warriors after his death, epitomized by *Eadweard se lange* (“Edward the tall”, l. 273b), who refuses to yield even a foot’s space (*he nolde fleogan fotmæl landes* [“he did not intend to flee a foot’s

⁸⁶ Compare the following translations: “It is cleared for you now”, Bradley, 522; “Now room is made for you”, Hamer, 55; “Now a path is opened for you”; Scragg, “*The Battle of Maldon*”, 23; “Now room is made for you”, North, Allard, and Gillies, 506. Cf. Treharne, 161: “Now a passage is granted to you”.

space of land”, l. 275]). More importantly, the decision to grant the Vikings’ request means that the river becomes fully permeable. The river still functions as a symbolic territorial boundary. As Matto points out, the preposition *ofer* occurs four times in the space of eleven lines in relation to the Vikings’ crossing (ll. 88a, 91b, 97b, 98a), a fact that clearly indicates the river’s importance as a frontier.⁸⁷ Due to Byrhtnoth’s decision, however, the river ceases to represent an obstacle for the Viking incursion (*for wætere ne murnon* [“they were not bothered by the water”, l. 96b]). The clear dichotomy previously established between the “land men” and the “sea men” is thus broken down as the Vikings cross the river (*lidmen to lande* [“sailors to land”, l. 99a]), threatening the connection of *folc and foldan* upon which, as we have seen, the identity of the English army is founded.

In acceding to their request, and in a parody of petitionary practices, Byrhtnoth inhabits the lordly role in which the Vikings casts him. By presenting the grant of *landes to fela* in this way, the poet invites the audience to view Byrhtnoth’s actions as an assertion of his rights of ownership over the land—rights that include alienation and disposal. The irony, however, is that by this same proprietary act the status of the land as an English possession is cast in doubt, so that “God only knows” (*God ana wat*) who the possessors will be. In this way, the threat posed by the Vikings to English identity and hegemony in the late tenth century is expressed by the poet in terms of contemporary anxieties about the security of landed property.

Conclusions

⁸⁷ Matto, 67.

It has not been my purpose in this paper to “discredit” the identification of Northey Island as the battle-site described in *The Battle of Maldon*. It is important to recognize the appeal of this identification. It must be emphasized, however, that it remains a matter of hypothesis rather than fact. Leaving aside the question of where the historical battle was fought, the assumption that the *Maldon*-poet was describing a specific, “real” location known to him, and that we know what that landscape was, has had a disproportionate influence upon critical study of the poem.

This influence has, I think, generally been of a negative kind—in that it has tended to discourage investigation of the poetic significance of the topographical details given in the poem. As I discuss above, reliance on the Northey Island model can tend towards the assumption that the poet’s topographical description of the battlefield is simply mimetic. Yet such an assumption fails to do justice to the poet’s highly developed—and, I think, poetic—sense of place. In this context, and to a large extent, it doesn’t really matter whether the poet knew the Northey Island site or not: even if he did, it is still a valid line of enquiry to examine the ways in which the poem renders this landscape poetic.

Central to the poet’s concern with place is the issue of the control and ownership of land. This is suggested by the techniques that are employed for the construction of place in *Maldon*, which bear comparison with the vernacular, written invention of place evident in surviving Anglo-Saxon boundary clauses—a context in which issues of landownership predominate. It is also evident in the presentation of the topography of the poetic battlefield. Through the localization of the conflict around the natural topographical boundary of the River Blackwater, the poet presents the conflict memorialized in the poem as a specifically territorial contest. Seen in this light, the use of petitionary language in Byrhtnoth’s exchanges with the Viking forces suggests that the decision to allow the Vikings *landes to fela* should be viewed in terms of contemporary concerns regarding precarious landownership.

The Battle of Maldon has frequently been read in the context of national politics and contemporary social disruption. Byrhtnoth's initially fierce determination to defend *Æþelredes eard* and his defiant rejection of the Viking demand for tribute, have, of course, been seen as a commentary on the policy of buying-off Viking raiders. Similarly, the divisions and tensions evident in the poet's presentation of the Anglo-Saxon forces have been read in the context of the wide-spread treachery, personal cowardice, and lack of military organization that (apparently) characterized much of Æthelræd's reign.⁸⁸ These contexts are, of course, valid and extremely important. The suggestion that I am offering here is that the poet also engages with deep-seated, cultural anxieties over the politics and practicalities of landownership in this period, and that he uses the discourse associated with these anxieties to interrogate the meaning of the battle and the threat posed by the Viking attacks in the late tenth century.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Keynes; Williams; Niles; Tyler.

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