The Battle of Maldon: the Guile of the Vikings explained

The Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* has attracted much debate for its presentation of a hero who is, perhaps, criticized by the poet for the way he conducts the battle in which he dies. The relevant lines tell us that Byrhtnoð gives too much land (90 *landes to fela*) to the Vikings crossing the causeway between the opposed forces because of his *ofermod* (89). The sense or senses of the affixed form have been discussed frequently and exhaustively.[1] In the immediately preceding lines (84-8), the poet appears to state that the Vikings somehow trick the hero into making this mistake:

> Þa 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.[2]

[“Once they realized and clearly saw this—that they met there fierce guardians of the causeway— then the hateful strangers proceeded with guile: they requested that they might have passage [and might] lead their troops across the ford.’]

The sense of *hapax legomena* must remain in some measure uncertain, but no sense for the verb *lytegian* has been proposed which is more plausible than ‘act

[1] See esp. H. Gneuss, ‘*The Battle of Maldon* 89: Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod* Once Again’, *SP* 73 (1976), 117-37. Grein, *Sprachschatz* renders it ‘*übermut*’ (‘high spirits’); B-T gives ‘pride, arrogance, over-confidence’. The censorious meaning was developed by J.R.R.Tolkien, ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorthelm’s Son’, *E&S* 6 (1953), 1-18.

[2] The text is that of D. G. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester, 1991).

cunningly', 'use guile', 'behave craftily', or something similar,[3] derived from the related and frequently-attested adjective *lytig* 'cunning, astute, sly, artful, crafty, wily'.[4] And yet this sense seems to be defied by the context: what could possibly be less guileful than the Vikings' open request, at least as reported by the poet, and how could anyone who was not an imbecile be deceived by such transparency?

Attempts to fill in the apparent gap in the narrative here and to explain what appears to be inexplicable have, of course, been made by editors and critics. Donald Scragg in the most modern edition of the poem, however, sidesteps the question:

'What the precise nature of the cunning was…is irrelevant. The poet tells us all that we are required to know, which is that the Vikings acted treacherously.'[5]

It is not easy to follow Scragg here. Whatever we take the meaning of *ofermod* to be, the poet's remarks in lines 89-90 clearly invite of us a moral appraisal of the hero's action, and the nature of the 'cunning' of the Vikings is surely relevant to that: the more diabolical, the less we might blame Byrhtnoð for being taken in, and vice versa, the less, the more. And it is hard to see how the

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[3] Scragg, *op. cit.*, Glossary, gives 'use guile'; E. D. Laborde, ed., *Byrhtnoth and Maldon* (London, 1936), Glossarial Index, has 'have recourse to trickery, try a ruse'; W. J. Sedgefield, ed., *The Battle of Maldon and Short Poems from the Saxon Chronicle* (Boston, 1904), Glossary, offers 'practise deceit'. Note also the *hapax* affixed form *belytigian*, attested at *Or* 3 7.62.13, and defined by DOE as 'to allure, seduce'. See J. E. Cross, 'Mainly on Philology and the Interpretative Criticism of *Maldon*', in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. R. B. Burlin and E. B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto, 1974), pp. 235-53, esp. pp. 235-40, for an overview of the relevant evidence for the sense of *lytegian*, almost all of it pointing to the traditional view. The suggestion of J.W. Earl that *lytegian* may derive from Latin *litigare* 'to litigate, dispute' (see "*The Battle of Maldon*, line 86: OE *lytegian* = Lat. *litigare*?' in *Old English and New Studies in Language and Linguistics in Honor of Frederic G. Cassidy*, ed. Joan H. Hall, *et al* (New York, 1992), pp. 76-82) fails to convince both evidentially and contextually. For a brief, but cogent, rebuttal of his view, see P. Pulsiano, '"Danish Men's Words are Worse than Murder": Viking Guile and *The Battle of Maldon*', *JEGP* 96 (1997), 13-25, at 14, n. 4.

[4] The list of meanings of *lytig* is from B-T.

[5] Scragg, *op. cit.*, 73. The idea is repeated in his introduction: the Danes are 'perfidious' in asking for passage (page 37).

Vikings' request might in any sense be understood as 'treacherous', for no contract exists between the two sides to be broken. Scragg's approach does not satisfy, but as I hope to show, he is nearly right to say that 'the poet tells us all that we are required to know'.

The critics' views have been various. Some have sought an explanation in Byrhtnoð's character and temperament, seeing him either as deceived by the Vikings because of gullibility,[6] or over-confidence [7]— or not deceived, but provoked by Viking taunts.[8] But, as relayed to us by the poet in lines 87-8, the Danish request seems neither deceptive, nor threatening, nor provocative. If anything, it appears simple and restrained—even, perhaps, well-mannered. Pulsiano has adduced considerable evidence (most of it later than the poem) to show that the Danes had a reputation in the medieval period for treachery, cunning and deceit, so that whatever it was that the Vikings said to Byrhtnoð was less important to the audience in his view than the knowledge of this stereotype 'sounding in its ears'.[9] He may well be right about the reputation—that a marauding enemy of long-standing would acquire such notoriety, whether justified or not, is quite credible—but, as with Scragg's approach, Pulsiano's view is a kind of non-answer to the problem: how is Byrhtnoð beguiled by a guileless request, even if that is uttered by guileful people. Gneuss wonders whether an explanation lurks in the account of the events in the *Liber Eliensis* in which the Danes send a message to Byrhtnoð before the second battle (in this version) saying that they would think him a coward if he were to decline to engage in battle:

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[6] See A. D. Mills, 'Byrhtnoð's Mistake in Generalship', *NM* 67 (1966), 14-27.
[7] Cross, *op. cit.* pp. 242-3, repeating his earlier argument in 'Oswald and Byrhtnoð: A Christian Saint and a Hero who is Christian', *ES* 46 (1965), 93-109, at 102.
[8] See R. W. V. Elliott, 'Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A Study in Heroic Technique' in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. S. B. Greenfield (Univ. of Oregon, 1963), pp. 53-70, at p. 59.
[9] Pulsiano, *op. cit*., esp. at 24: 'the audience, with the tradition of deceitful Danes sounding in its ears, is left to complete the scene; precisely what the Danes say is unimportant'.

> statim mandant se ad ulciscendos eos adventasse ipsumque inter ignavos habendum, si non audeat cum eis conferre manum
>
> ['they immediately sent word they had come to avenge their men and would consider Brihtnoth a coward if he did not dare fight them.'].[10]

To my mind this suggestion comes closer to the truth of the matter than any other, although it is not clear in the *Liber Eliensis* why Byrhtnoð should be at all concerned about Danish opinions of him. This interesting idea, however, is not based on the evidence of the poem but of another text of uncertain relation to the poem—albeit one that in some very curious particulars echoes its account.[11] It is my purpose here to try to explain the cunning of the Vikings and the decision of the hero to let the Vikings cross *solely* in terms of the words of the poet.

The narrative of the battle after the death of the hero is structured around a series of speeches and reported speeches from named followers of Byrhtnoð interspersed with accounts of ensuing action in which a number of them are slain. Their words are varied, but a common thread running through many is a promise to continue fighting to avenge their leader or to die in the attempt. Ælfwine promises that he will not return home now his lord is dead (220-4) and on finishing his speech immediately advances to battle (225 *Þa he forð eode*). Leofsunu vows to advance (247 *ac will furðor gan*) and then, straight after his speech, he does so (253 *He ful yrre wod*). The poet tells us that Edward the Tall refuses to turn back now that his superior lies dead (275-6) and then straightaway informs us of his attack on the Danish shield wall—one so savage

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[10] Gneuss, *op. cit.*, 132 and n. 55. For the text, see *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, Camden 3rd Series, vol. XCII (London, 1962), 135; the translation is from *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry: The Major Latin Texts in Translation*, trans. M. J. B. Allen and D. G. Calder (Cambridge, 1976), 191.

[11] On the similarities see T. D. Hill, 'The *Liber Eliensis* "Historical Selections" and the Old English *Battle of Maldon*', *JEGP* 96 (1997), 1-12; both the poem and the account in *Liber Eliensis*, in his view, derive from pre-existing 'oral Maldon saga material' (at page 9).

that he breaks through it and fights directly with the seamen until he is slain (277-9). And so likewise did Æþelric and very many others (280a….2b *Swa dyde Æþeric…and swiðe mænig oþer*). Offa lies dead beside Byrhtnoð (294) and it is there revealed to us, in a more private, even intimate, elaboration of this theme, that he had earlier promised him that they should both ride home safe together or both die on the field of battle (288-94). The 'pre-history' of the narrative is indeed littered with other speeches: Ælfwine alludes to past times in the hall over mead when the men frequently (212b *oft*) boasted of battle deeds to come; and in the assembly place where Byrhtnoð held a council, many, we are told by Offa, spoke boldly (200b *manega spræcon*) about what they would accomplish in the imminent encounter. In the world of this poem, no two thanes meet, it seems, without oaths uttered. And Ælfwine and Offa expect these vows to be kept. And because heroic intent and heroic action are so closely bound together, it is not always possible to distinguish them in the syntax:

Ongan þa winas manian,

frynd and geferan, þæt hi forð eodon [228-9]

Ælfwine admonishes or exhorts his companions either 'with the intention that they should advance' or 'with the result that they went forwards'. We cannot tell whether line 229b is a clause of intention with the verb in the subjunctive, or one of result with the verb in the indicative.[12] The editors agree on the former, but the spelling of the verb inflection, historically at least, is indicative.[13] Perhaps it is a syntactic pun. More likely, it really didn't matter to the poet or to

[12] On the general difficulties in distinguishing these types of clause, see B. Mitchell, *Old English Syntax* (Oxford, 1985), §2802-3006.

[13] In late OE texts, the historic morphological contrast of pret. pl. subj. *–en* beside indic. *–on* is not carefully maintained in the orthography, and quite possibly not in pronunciation. See A. H. Marckwardt, 'Verb Inflections in Late Old English, in *Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. T. A. Kirby and H. B. Woolf (Baltimore, 1949), pp. 79-88, and R. M. Hogg and R. D. Fulk, *A Grammar of Old English, Volume 2: Morphology* (Chichester, 2011), 6.23, p. 223.

the audience either way, because the one is ultimately the same as the other in the heroic ideology of this poem.

Two of the warriors, at least, Ælfwine and Leofsunu, are acutely alert to the shame that would be a consequence of breaking their vow and returning home alive after the death of their lord, and express this idea in similar syntax and wording:

> Ne sceolon me on þære þeode þegenas ætwitan
>
> Þæt ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
>
> eard gesecan, nu min ealdor ligeð [220-2]

['The thanes of that people (the Mercians) shall not reproach me for departing from this army and seeking my homeland, now my lord lies slain.']

> Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hæleð
>
> wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
>
> þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie [249-51]

['The steadfast men of Sturmer will have no need reproach me with their words, now my lord is dead, that I will travel home lordless.']

Shame is heaped by Offa on those who flee for the wood from the battle after Byrhtnoð's death, the sons of Odda and the many who follow them (237-43). These are the ones he warned his lord about, that they spoke boldly (200 *modelice*) in the meeting place, but could not be trusted to stand by their words when the crunch should come. And the poet agrees: of Godric's flight on Byrhtnoð's horse he comments, perhaps with emphasis,[14] that *hit riht ne wæs*

[14] Compare the better attested *swa hit riht ne wæs* (GenA 901, Vain 61) and similar, and see R. Quirk, *The Concessive Relation in Old English Poetry*, Yale Studies in English 124 (New Haven, 1954), pp. 110-11.

(190, ‘it was not right’) and many more follow him *þonne hit ænig mæð wære* (295 ‘ than was at all proper’) had they recalled their duty. It is clear from the poem, therefore, that this one ethic unites the poet and the men at the battle: words should be matched by deeds, promises before or during battle must be kept, or one must die in the attempt. This is what separates heroes from cowards. Praise and renown follow from the consonance of speech and action, shame and ignominy from the reverse.

Let us then apply this ethic to the hero. He gives three speeches. The third, his dying prayer for his soul, is not relevant here because by then he is beyond concern for earthly affairs. The first is his stirring response to the Viking messenger before the battle in a scene which on the one side appears to be a parley and on the other a flyting. The Dane offers a deal from the Vikings: if Byrhtnoð is willing to buy them off, then there will be no need to fight. In reply the hero scornfully rejects the option of Danegeld, echoing the words of the messenger, but turning them against him. It is a proud and powerful performance, and the details of it are important to the argument:

‘Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?

Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,

ættryne ord and ealde swurd,

þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.

Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,

sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell,

þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,

þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,

Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines

folc and foldan. Feallan sceolon

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.

Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan:

us sceal ord and ecg ær geseman,

grim guðplega, ær [w]e gofol syllon.' [45-61]

['Do you hear, seafarer, what these people are saying? They want to give you spears as tribute, deadly point and ancient sword, a tribute of weapons which will not profit you in battle. Herald of the seamen, take word back again, tell your people a much more hateful message, that here stands uncorrupt a noble man with his troop, who will defend this homeland, the country of my lord Æþelred, the people and land. The heathens must fall in battle. It seems to me too shameful that you should embark with our money un-fought, now you have come thus far here into our country. You shall not obtain treasure so easily: point and edge must first reconcile us, grim battle-play, before we give tribute.']

The speech situation is complex: the messenger relates to the English the message of the Danes, addressing the English and the ealdorman by turns;[15] in reply, Byrhtnoð conveys first the message of his people (at least as he sees it) and then his own response, to be conveyed by the messenger back to the Danes. Everyone is involved in these combinations of direct and reported speech. Where the herald speaks mainly of money (31 *beagas*, 35 *golde*, 39 *feoh*, 40

[15] His second person pronouns shift to and fro between singular (29 *þe*, 30 *ðe*, *þu*, 36 *þu*, 37 *þu*, *þine*) and plural (31 *eow*, 32 *ge*, 34 *ge*, 41 *eow*).

sceattum) and of peace (35 *grið*, 39 *freode*, 39 *frið*, 41 *friþes*), pairing some of these alliteratively in the line as well as causally in the syntax, Byrhtnoð replaces these with weapons (46 *garas*, 47 *ord*, 47 *swurd*, 60 *ord*, 60 *ecg*, with wordplay on both 'weapons' and 'money' in 48 *heregeatu*) and war (48 *hilde*, 55 *hilde*, 61 *guðplega*). The herald is trying to persuade, and so his register is inclusive (e.g. 34 *Ne þurfe we us spillan*…) and euphemistic (35 *wið þam golde*, 40 *mid þam sceattum*); the ealdorman's, conversely, is uncompromisingly combative. He asserts that his people want battle and that he wants battle. There will be no giving of tribute without battle. And so, by the ethic of the poem, this is what he must deliver. He has committed himself, and by proxy his men, to this course of action.

Yet battle does not immediately happen. At first for a reason beyond anyone's control. We are told that the tide has come in, so preventing battle (64-71). But when the tide goes out, Byrhtnoð does not attempt to cross the causeway to give battle, nor does he straightaway allow the Vikings to cross to battle on the mainland. Instead, he blockades the causeway sending three tough warriors (85 *bricgweardas*) to guard it (74 *healdan þa bricge*) in an act that is almost a human re-creation of the tide that has now ebbed, so preventing the Danes from crossing and stopping battle from taking place—ultimately, perhaps, with the aim of 'kettling' the Danes on Northey island. In this, he certainly does not abide by the express terms of his speech: his words and his actions are not consonant. His speech threatens to become empty rhetoric. The request of the Vikings to be allowed to cross is a request to Byrhtnoð to deliver what he has promised and to turn his words into actions. The Danes shrewdly expose the mismatch between Byrhtnoð's words and his deeds; they turn his words against him (just as he attempted the same with the herald's words). If he fails to agree, then he will be shamed in front of all his men: and, as we are told, this is a very public exchange with the men listening (92 *beornas gehlyston*),

and we know that the Vikings know that he is sensitive to the question of shame on this point, for he himself has told them so (55-7 *To heanlic me þinceð þæt ge…to scype gangon unbefohtene*: 'it seems to me too shameful that you…should embark un-fought'). The potential shame that worries Ælfwine and Leofsunu much more immediately now threatens to become a reality for the hero. His choice, such as it is, is an invidious one. Will he share the reputation of the first Godric or of the second? Is he a coward or a hero, a liar or a man of his word?

It could perhaps be objected that the stalemate on the causeway constitutes the promised battle. It is, after all, certainly fighting. But that this is incorrect is proved by the words of Byrhtnoð himself in his short second speech:

> 'Nu eow is gerymed: gað ricene to us
>
> guman *to guþe*. God ana wat
>
> hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote' [93-5]

['Now the way is open to you: come quickly to us, men *to battle*. God alone knows who may control the place of slaughter.']

His use of *guþ* reiterates the promised *guðplega* of his first speech. Were the men already *æt guþe* he could hardly invite them *to guþe*. We may conclude from this that the hero himself did not think of the blocking encounter on the causeway as *guþ*, 'battle'. He knows that he has not been carrying out the words of his promise and this has now been pointed out to the assembled men by the Vikings. How can their request to cross for battle be refused when he has promised it? He is not deceived, but, rather, out-manoeuvred by the Danes and is compelled in the face of imminent public humiliation to abide by those terms. We may, accordingly, render *lytegian* as 'to proceed cunningly, to act craftily'.

That the poet does not explicitly say ‘the Danes asked him to *do what he had said* and let them across to battle’ is because this is *entirely obvious* from the ethics and the narrative structure of the poem which defines heroism as heroic speech *enacted*. As we have seen, this is shown both in the remarks of the men and of the poet, and in the narrative juxtaposition of promises and of following actions delivering those promises. It is crystal clear that Byrhtnoð must do what he has promised after this public reminder, or be regarded by his men—and by the audience—as a man without integrity.

The key critical question, therefore, is not: why does Byrhtnoð allow the Vikings across the causeway, nor what is the guilefulness of the Vikings? It is rather: why does the hero promise battle and then not deliver on the promise at the first opportunity, as he knew must have been expected of him? Or to put the same question another way: what happens between the end of his first speech in line 61 and his order to Wulfstan and his two comrades to block the causeway in line 74 that might have caused him *to change his mind*? Here there is little to go on, and I cannot demonstrate my view solely from the words of the poet, but I would draw attention to two lines in this short section:

Hi þær Pantan stream mid prasse bestodon,

Eastseaxena ord and se æschere . [68-9]

[‘There they stood in array on either side of the stream of Pante, the East-Saxon vanguard and the ship-host.’]

The two forces face each other across the water. They are visible to one another. Before this point, such evidence as there is suggests that the Danish force has been at some remove. The kinsman of Offa would surely not have contemplated a play-time of hawking had the opposing army been already in view (5-8). The Viking messenger says he has been *sent* by the seamen to speak to Byrhtnoð (29 *Me sendon to þe…*) which would be an odd manner of expression if they were

right next to him on the shore. The phrasing is that of an ambassador on a mission speaking on behalf of those not present who cannot speak for themselves. And Byrhtnoð instructs him to 'announce back again' a message from him (49 *abeod eft ongean*), so that the Danes must at least be out of hearing range. Cumulatively, then, these little pieces of evidence give us the impression that until the end of the exchange with the herald, when Byrhtnoð has committed himself and his men to battle, the Viking force is out of sight. If that surmise is correct, then at this point in lines 68-9 Byrhtnoð can see the strength of the Viking force arrayed against him *for the first time* and—here I speculate— sees that it is *considerably more powerful than his own*.

If Hill's view that the poem and the account of the battle in the *Liber Eliensis* both descend from local saga material is correct, or, if it is not, but the later Latin derives from some earlier vernacular version of the poem,[16] then its evidence on this point is pertinent. In this story there are two battles, the first, on a 'bridge of water' (*super… pontem aque*),[17] is lost by the Vikings, the second, also at Maldon, but four years later, is won by them. These may be versions of the skirmish on the causeway and the main engagement in *Maldon*, respectively. The coincidence of the causeway and the *pons aquae* is certainly striking. In the section of the *Liber Eliensis* narrating the lead-up to the second encounter, it is evident that the Viking force is large and outnumbers the few Anglo-Saxons:

Et cum paucis bellatoribus, spe victorie et nimia ductus animositate, iter ad bellum suscepit et precavens et properans, ne hostilis exercitus saltem unum passum pedis se absente occuparet…Quo perveniens, nec suorum paucitate

[16] For this possibility, see Scragg, op. cit., pp. 11-13.
[17] Hill, *op. cit*., 5-6, speculates that the phrase is a latinisation of an OE **wæterbrycg* 'causeway across water'. Perhaps though, the phrase means 'upon the bridge over the river' (possibly with garbled allusion to its name, cf. 68 *Pantan stream*?).

movetur nec hostium multitudine terretur, sed statim eos adgregitur et per xiiii dies ardenter cum eis congreditur'.

['With a few warriors, and led by the hope of victory and his own over-great spirit, he [Byrhtnoð] marched to battle, both taking precautions and hurrying to prevent the enemy army from occupying even one foot of land in his absence… When he arrived, he was not worried by the small numbers in his own army, nor alarmed by the enemy's multitude. But he attacked the Danes at once and fought them savagely for a fortnight.'][18]

The common allusion to the protagonist's 'over-great courage' or 'excessive impetuosity' (*nimia…animositate* = *ofermod*)[19] at the parallel point in both narratives is a further shared feature that is striking and surely indicative of a relationship of some sort between these two accounts. [20] The relatively modest size and numerical inferiority of the English force was then, I believe, a feature of the original account.[21] And the phrasing of the *Liber Eliensis* (*quo perveniens…*) perhaps confirms that the ealdorman became aware of the superiority of the enemy only *after* his arrival at the battlefield. Obviously, in other ways, these accounts differ, for in the poem Byrhtnoð does not attack the Danes immediately and there is no sense there that the battle will last for days. But the speculation that lines 68-9 carry with them a shocking realisation for the hero that he has underestimated the strength of the foe would explain, and is

[18] Blake, *op. cit.*, 135-6, and Allen and Calder, *op. cit.*, 191-2, respectively.
[19] See DML *nimius* 'excessive' (rendered in OE by *þearle* and *swyþe*), and *animositas* 'courage' but also 'impetuosity'. Both the Latin phrase and the OE affixed form appear to denote an excess of virtue which might be interpreted as a flaw or defect of character.
[20] And in this section also *unum passum pedis* may be a reminiscence of a poetic idiom: cf. 247a (and *Beo* 2525a) *fotes trym* and 275b *fotmæl landes*.
[21] I do not make a historical claim here. There is no reliable information concerning the relative numbers of the opposed forces in the actual battle: the A text of the *Chronicle*, if its numbers can be believed, records a Viking force of ninety-three ships at Maldon, but does not include information on the size of Byrhtnoð's *fyrd*. The poem, in any case, works by the conventions of heroic poetry. The original heroic 'saga', if that was the form of the first account, presumably also followed a set of literary conventions.

perhaps the only plausible explanation for, the sudden shift in the poem from Byrhtnoð's extremely combative speech to his measured defensive action in securing the causeway just a very few lines later, a contrast which is sharp enough today, but which, one feels, for an audience steeped in heroic poetry, must have been a jaw-dropping moment. Nevertheless, putting this speculation on one side, the poet tells us enough to understand the request of the Vikings and the reaction of the ealdorman. In this interpretation, this reaction, in giving too much land to the Vikings, follows from having given them too many words. He 'mis-speaks'. Although he says what may have been expected of him—and what the situation seems to demand—it turns out to be a rhetorical error. Those who share his attitude to language and action do not blame him.

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