

Wicing Sceal on Wælstowe: The Viking Maxim in The Battle of Maldon

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ABSTRACT

In *The Battle of Maldon*, the valor of the English who fight is never in question. The infamy of the cowards who flee is evident. The way the poet views the Vikings, however, is slightly less obvious. The poet treats all characters who act within the contract of battle with a sort of biased equanimity—of course, the English are portrayed as more heroic and sympathetic, but the Vikings are referred to in a practical manner as seafarers or warriors. It is my contention that the *Maldon* poet treats the Vikings as natural parts of the battlefield, as if they had their own maxim pairing and were acting according to expectation. By defining how maxims function in the Old English corpus, illustrating the prevalence of Viking violence leading up to the battle, and presenting literary evidence of a Viking maxim in *Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*, I will define what I believe to be the integral parts of the "Viking maxim" and clarify how its presence in *The Battle of Maldon* informs the poem overall.

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Introduction

In *The Battle of Maldon*, the valor of the English who fight is never in question. The infamy of the cowards who flee is evident. The way the poet views the Vikings, however, is slightly less obvious. The poet treats all characters who act within the contract of battle with a sort of biased equanimity—of course, the English are portrayed as more heroic and sympathetic, but the Vikings are referred to in a practical manner as seafarers or warriors. The ones who violate this battle-contract—the kinsmen of Odda, for example—are the ones who receive the poet's approbation. If the Vikings are in fact the aggressors at Maldon, then why does the English poet not take this opportunity to show his distaste for them—especially in light of the devastating English loss?

It is my contention that the *Maldon* poet employed a well-known maxim concerning the Vikings' inherent nature in order to focus his efforts primarily on the actions of the English. In Old English, maxims are generalizations that "reflect the world view of the society which forms them; they epitomise the experience of that society and shape its expectations."¹ There are echoes of several proverbial statements in *The Battle of Maldon*, particularly from *Maxims II*, which include "the wolf belongs in the woods (*wulf sceal on bearowe*, 18b), the boar in the forest (*eofor sceal on holte*, 19b), the dragon in the cave (*Draca sceal on hringe standan*, 22b), and the fish in the water (*Fisc sceal on wætere*, 27b)."² These pairings not only show the natural state in which all these creatures should exist—their presence in this poem adds specific meaning to certain characters' actions and behavior that would have been apparent to an audience familiar

¹ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82.4 (1998), 632.

²Matto, Michael, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*." *Studia Neophilologica* 74 (2002), 63.

with the shared cultural knowledge. I contend that the *Maldon* poet treats the Vikings as natural parts of the battlefield, as if they had their own maxim pairing and were acting according to expectation.

At this point in history, the Vikings had repeatedly invaded England to pillage and raid. The first Viking raids after the English settlement in the British Isles came in 787 CE, with repeated raids and a full-scale invasion in 865, finally culminating in Oláfr Tryggvason's invasion in 991, the year of the actual battle in Maldon.³ A long history of invasions and raids would have created an expectation in the minds of the Englishmen who lived on the eastern coast. The poet's audience understood, from inherited knowledge, that the Vikings' arrival was like the onset of a storm—that their very presence heralded a battle, and their coming foretold vicious fighting and bitter blows. These things the English knew to be true: Vikings were fierce strangers from distant lands; they belonged on the battlefield, just as the wolf belongs in the woods; and they held a natural—almost supernatural—martial ability. In the eyes of the English, they were truly *wælwulfas*.

I will establish the framework for my argument in four parts. First, I will define maxims within the Old English corpus, relate how these proverbial statements function within narrative poetry, and describe how maxims function within my primary text, *The Battle of Maldon*. For the purposes of this paper, I will use Susan Deskis's definition of the maxim, which is "an independent (or potentially independent) present-tense declarative sentence of general applicability."⁴ Deskis grants a flexibility of use to the

³ Hadley, D.M., *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture*, New York: Manchester University Press, (2006), 16.

⁴ Deskis, Susan E., "Proverbs and Structure in *Maxims I.A.*," *Studies in Philology* 110.4 (Fall 2013), 667.

sententiae present in Anglo-Saxon texts that speaks to their potential universality and for which there is ample evidence.

Secondly, I will illustrate the prevalence of Viking violence leading up to the battle and supply several contemporary accounts of these attacks which illustrate commonplace beliefs. The frequency and prevalence of Viking raids in England and the Continent, as well as the amount of time from the earliest raids on the British Isles to the battle at Maldon, illustrates how this ongoing conflict was a shared experience of Anglo-Saxons all across the island. Several contemporary accounts of these attacks also point toward specific ideas being frequently associated with Vikings.

Thirdly, I will show literary evidence of a Viking maxim at play both in *Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Through textual analysis of these two primary works, I will apply the framework I have constructed and show how these two poems portray Vikings in similar ways and for similar reasons.

And finally, I will define what I believe to be integral parts of the "Viking maxim" and clarify how its presence in *The Battle of Maldon* informs the poem overall. This maxim, I believe, holds these three ideas: the Vikings as natural occupants of the battlefield (like *wulf sceal on bearowe, so wicing sceal on wælstowe*); the Vikings as hostile strangers that threaten English land (*lathere gystas*); and the Vikings as natural/supernatural warriors (*wælwulfas*). The *Maldon* poet aligns the Vikings with nature, which is significant in light of the broader Anglo-Saxon corpus, which portrays nature as a hostile and superior force and makes no distinction between the natural and the supernatural. If the Vikings are a natural part of the battlefield, they are also a super-human force which the English must face as a society—much as a ship's crew must work

together to weather a storm, or a community must work together to overcome the damage of a flood. Thus, the actions of Byrhtnoth and his retinue take on a different meaning, and their defeat comes not as the result of their thane's choices but because of the disintegration of community in the face of a natural/superhuman threat.

Chapter 1: The Old English Maxims and their Functions

In order to establish whether there is a Viking "maxim" at work in *The Battle of Maldon*, we must first clarify what constitutes a maxim and how they function in the broader Old English corpus of surviving works. Maxims are generally gnomic statements that reflect a widely-held belief or universal fact. In Old English poems, these maxims are employed to describe or predict behavior, either of the natural world or (more frequently) human beings. They operate as a sort of short-hand to inform the audience by invoking universally-acknowledged truths and applying them to the narrative action. Many of these gnomic statements are assembled in *Maxims I* and *II*, and that is where they are most heavily studied; but they can be found in diverse texts in Old English, including *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and of course *The Battle of Maldon*.

Although there has been much critical debate on the true nature of *Maxims I* and *II*, the modern consensus is that, for the most part, they recorded commonly-held beliefs about the workings of the natural—and, perhaps to some extent, the supernatural⁵—world. While Thomas Shippey first claimed in 1976 that "no-one can hope to have more than an opinion on whether [the maxims] were widely disseminated or invented on the spot," he later amended his view.⁶ In a 1996 article about wisdom poetry with "identical or near-identical sapiential lines in more than one poem," he said that "such cases make it 'look as if the poems are using lines from a common tradition.'⁷ Nicholas Howe does agree that "it is difficult to know whether the individual statements . . . were collected or composed by their poets," but indicates that "The use of similar short statements

⁵ See below for a discussion of the supernatural's role in Anglo-Saxon texts.

⁶ qtd. in Deskis, Susan E., "Proverbs and Structure in *Maxims I.A*," *Studies in Philology* 110.4 (Fall 2013), 668.

⁷ *Ibid.* 668.

throughout the poetry and prose of the period does argue strongly for their actual use in the culture."⁸ Susan Deskis proposes that "the way to determine proverbiality is to look for proverbs," and presents a significant amount of evidence to support this delightfully simple solution from Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic sources.⁹

Whether these maxims are merely inventions on the part of the poet or a recording of actual proverbs and common wisdom has been at the heart of every critic's argument concerning these manuscripts. Loren Gruber teeters between the two in his analysis, "The Agnostic Anglo-Saxon Gnomes," in which he argues that the *Maxims* "began as initiatory utterances of an absolute religious nature and were weakened to their present form as mere *assertions* about the disposition of the universe"¹⁰ [emphasis original]. In other words, these are leftover statements from a previous religion passed down and stripped of their higher significance. Referring to them as "platitudes," Gruber claims that "a tacit assumption informed the gnomes, namely that an understanding of the worlds of men and gods begins with things knowable."¹¹ In this light, he claims their purpose was to instruct "people of all degrees of insight: the wise, by providing them with mythical patterns; and the common, by providing them with palpable examples of natural and cosmological relationships . . . as above, so below."¹² However, after describing what he views as their prime function (which seems to fall in line with recording widely-held wisdom), Gruber claims that in recording outdated "initiatory utterances"¹³ the "author of *Maxims I* through an incipient separation of the physical from the

⁸ qtd. in Deskis "Proverbs and Structure," 668.

⁹ *Ibid.* 668.

¹⁰ Gruber, Loren C., "The Agnostic Anglo-Saxon Gnomes: *Maxims I* and *II*, *Germania*, and the Boundaries of Northern Wisdom," *Poetica* 6 (1976), 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 29.

¹² *Ibid.* 30.

¹³ *Ibid.* 26.

metaphysical realms, seems to have recorded the beginning of an agnosticism,"¹⁴ and in this light *Maxims II* become "agnostic appropriations of the ancient gnostic lore and style."¹⁵ Gruber ultimately determines that "the *Maxims* and *Germania* are, to varying degrees, artistic appropriations of ancient lore and that they cannot be labeled conclusively as wisdom literature."¹⁶ However, while Gruber discounts them as genuine common wisdom, there is a great deal of evidence from contemporary North Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literature to suggest that many of the statements from *Maxims I* and *II* do indeed contain cultural wisdom and reflect, at least in part, the Anglo-Saxon world-view.

Much of the most thorough work on contextualizing the proverbs of the *Maxims* in recent years belongs to Susan Deskis. Deskis defines most of the wisdom statements from *Maxims I* and *II* as "gnomes," and offers this definition: "an independent (or potentially independent) present-tense declarative sentence of general applicability."¹⁷ She investigates the maxims found in *Maxims I* in "Proverbs and Structure in *Maxims I.A.*," providing examples of the same sentiments or proverbs from other texts. For instance, line 8a states "geong ealdian," or "the young must grow old."¹⁸ Deskis quotes a Latin-English text that states "'Senescunt omnia, que æterna non sunt. Æghwæt forealdeð, þæs þe ece ne byð' (Everything that is not eternal grows old)."¹⁹ She then quotes a line from *Hávamál* I.19:

Ósniallr maðr hyggz muno ey lifa,

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 47.

¹⁷ Deskis, Susan E., "Proverbs and Structure in *Maxims I.A.*," *Studies in Philology* 110.4 (Fall 2013), 667.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 669.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 669.

ef hann við vīg varaz;
enn elli gefr hánom engi frið,
þótt hánom geirar gefi.²⁰

Deskis translates this as "The foolish man thinks he will live forever./ if he keeps away from fighting;/ but old age won't grant him a truce/ even if the spears do."²¹ By offering similar sentiments from various texts, Deskis illustrates how each gnomic statement from *Maxims I* can be found in other texts, making a compelling case for the *Maxims* as statements of collective wisdom. I will return to more of Deskis' examples from this and others of her work to illustrate both how often maxims are used in Anglo-Saxon poetry and how they inform the narrative texts into which Anglo-Saxon poets worked them.

For the purposes of my argument, I will build on these interpretations of *Maxims I* and *II*, using Deskis' definition of gnomic statements to support my claims. If we regard the *Maxims* as expressions of societal beliefs and wisdom, we can reasonably assume that the statements they contain can not only give insight into how the Anglo-Saxons viewed the world, but also what ideologies and beliefs governed the actions of their literary characters. In this way, we can access hidden layers of meaning in the broader corpus of Anglo-Saxon works.

Instances of Maxims in Narrative Texts

There are multiple gnomic statements from *Maxims I* and *II* which appear in other Anglo-Saxon texts. In these cases, they are meant to appeal to these common beliefs and thereby add another layer of meaning for the Anglo-Saxon audience who would understand their implications. In her book, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*,

²⁰ *Ibid.* 670.

²¹ *Ibid.* 670.

Susan Deskis expands upon her work with gnomic statements by citing several instances of these gnomes being used in literary contexts, specifically in *Beowulf*. Deskis claims that the maxims found within *Beowulf* "must relate somehow to the narrative, either by prescribing or describing the attitude of a character, or by simply explaining the action as an extension of the divine will."²² The maxims function as justifications, or perhaps explanations, of character choices and actions. This claim is undoubtedly true in *Beowulf*, as Deskis's evidence shows, and it can certainly be attributed to *Maldon* as well, since many of the Maxims which Deskis identifies are also present in the latter poem in slightly different forms.

The most striking references which Deskis makes involve a fatalistic view of death in battle that we find in both *Maldon* and *Beowulf*. She entitles one maxim, or *sententia*, "The doomed must fall," citing lines 1753-55a of *Beowulf*:

Hit on endestæf eft gelimpeð,
þæt se lichoma læne gedreoseð,
fæge gefealleð.²³

Deskis translates this section as "In the end it finally happens that the perishable body declines, the doomed one falls."²⁴ She identifies this as the expression of a "proverbial" statement based on both North Germanic analogs as well as a line from *Maxims I*. Of the many examples she cites from Old Norse, one of the more interesting specimens is from *Reykðæla saga*, which runs "Þá mun hver deyja, er feigur er," or "Then must each die

²² Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 141.

²³ *Ibid.* 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 88.

who is doomed."²⁵ This one is interesting because, like the lines from *Beowulf*, time is an important aspect of the saying. Deskis then points to a line from *Maxims I*, "Fus sceal feran, fæge sweltan," or "The eager one must go, the doomed one die."²⁶

The idea of death coming to those who are fated to die is present in each of these three cases as well as several others which she references, but it is also present in *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Lines 104-105 of *Maldon* run, "Wæs seo tid cumen/ þæt þær fæge men feallan sceoldon."²⁷ This translates to, "The time was come that those fated to die should fall," which echoes the statement from *Maxims I*, but also contains the element of time that we see in both the *Beowulf* lines and the *Reykðæla saga*. Additionally, the *Brunanburh* poet tells us that "Sceotta leoda and scipflotan/ fæge feollan" (11-12a).²⁸ All of these statements evoke an understood fact about the battlefield: some are doomed to die, and when their time comes they must fall. The similarity of all of these statements indicates that these are all different articulations of the same commonly-held belief.

Deskis refers to another maxim which appears both in *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, which she terms "Death before dishonor."²⁹ She refers first to lines 2891b-92 of *Beowulf*, "Deað bið sella/ eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif."³⁰ She translates this as "Death is better for every man than a shameful life," and further clarifies that "The only significant difference between this passage and its analogues is that the latter contrast an *honorable*

²⁵ *Ibid.* 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 89.

²⁷ "The Battle of Maldon," *Introduction to Old English*, Peter Baker, ed. Malden: Blackwell Publishing (2007), 227.

²⁸ "The Scottish people and seafarers/ fell, fated."

²⁹ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 101.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 101.

death to a shamed life, whereas the *Beowulfian* lines omit the initial modifier"³¹
[emphasis original]. In all of her examples, the speakers value an honorable death over
the shame of fleeing a battleground.

In addition to the myriad parallels which Deskis provides,³² this *sententia* also
appears in *The Battle of Maldon* when Leofsunu declares his intention to remain by his
fallen lord's side:

"Ic þæt gehate þæt ic heonon nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
wreca on gewinne minne winedrihten.
Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hælæð
wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie,
wende fram wige, ac me sceal wæpen niman
ord and iren."³³

Likewise, Ælfwine thinks of his grandfather Ealhelm and says,

Ne sceolon me on þære þeode þegenas ætwitan
þæt ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
eard gesecan, nu min ealdor ligeð
forheawen æt hilde. Me is þæt hearma mæst."³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.* 101.

³² *Ibid.* 101-104.

³³ *Maldon* lines 246-253a: "I hereby vow that I will not flee from here even the length of a foot, but will go further, revenge in the battlefield my friend-lord. The steadfast warriors of Sturmer need not reproach me, now that my friend is dead, that I lordless journeyed home, returned from the battlefield; but I shall take up weapons deadly and iron."

³⁴ *Maldon* lines 220-223: "The thane's people shall not reproach me that I from this ford would run and go to ground, now that my lord lies disfigured on the battlefield. This causes the most harm to me."

Both of these men declare the love they held for their lord, but they also phrase it in terms of the glory—or shame—that they may receive for remaining on the battlefield. They seek to avoid reproach for cowardice and would rather die next to their fallen lord than be ridiculed at home by their fellow warriors and their elders. Byrhtwold also echoes this sentiment in perhaps the clearest manifestation of this maxim when he says "A mæg gnornian/ se ðe fram þisum wigplegan wendan þenceð."³⁵ These men are governed by the maxim expressed in *Beowulf* and in *Maxims I*: that it is better to die a hero than live a lifetime as a coward.

Not only can maxims dictate or clarify behavior within a narrative poem, they can also establish a larger theoretical framework for the pieces they adorn. Thomas Hill describes one such incident in his essay, "The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in *The Wanderer* and Its Contexts." Hill employs a strategy similar to Deskis by identifying what he believes to be a maxim within a text and attempting to find its analog in other Germanic texts of the time. He isolates a stanza from *The Wanderer* which appears to express "a suspicion of and contempt for the ideal of 'happiness' that was part of the literary culture of the Anglo-Saxons and presumably of their life as well."³⁶ The section on which Hill focuses is lengthy, but includes the lines: "Wita sceal geþyldig,/ ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde . . . ne to forht ne to fægen " (65b-66, 68).³⁷ While it seems peculiar that the poem should assert that a wise man ought not to be "too happy," Hill points to several examples from contemporary texts that portray people mourning not because "they are unhappy about what is taking place, but rather because gravity, even

³⁵ *Maldon* 315b-316: "Ever will he mourn who decides to turn away from the battle-play."

³⁶ Hill, Thomas D., "The Unchanging Hero: A Stoic Maxim in *The Wanderer* and Its Contexts," *Studies in Philology* 101.3 (Summer 2004), 236.

³⁷ "A wise man shall be patient—he shall not be too hot-hearted, nor too hasty of speech . . . nor too fearful, nor too happy, nor too greedy for money." *Ibid.* 233.

sadness, is an appropriate attitude for a young man or woman of æþele ('noble,' 'excellent') dignity."³⁸ He also directs attention to lines 11-14 of *The Wanderer*: "Ic to soþe wat/ þæt bið in eorle indryhten þeaw,/ þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,/ healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille."³⁹ Hill claims that these lines "affirm the ideal of stoic reticence—an ideal that the Wanderer finds difficult and that contests with the strongly emotional content of the poem as a whole."⁴⁰ The maxim within these lines not only informs the motives and actions of the Wanderer, but it also influences the poem in a pervasive way by highlighting the struggles of the protagonist.

In nearly all of these examples, the exact quotes often differ from each other in some way or another while still conveying the same general sentiment. In all of these cases, the sentiments are conveyed by what Susan Deskis refers to as *sententiae*, or sententious remarks. She borrows this phrase from B.J Whiting, who defined it "as 'a piece of wisdom which has not crystallized into a specific current form' and 'a truism which everyone feels perfectly free to rephrase to suit for himself.'"⁴¹ This definition separates a *sententia* from a "true proverb," which Whiting claims "expresses what is apparently a fundamental truth—that is, a truism—in homely language, often adorned, however, with alliteration and rhyme."⁴² As Deskis points out, this definition "can be useful for the study of medieval proverbs," since "the gnomonic passages of *Beowulf* can . . . be classified in some cases as true proverbs, and in others as sententious remarks."⁴³

This flexible viewing of gnomonic statements in Germanic literature is very useful, since

³⁸ *Ibid.* 238.

³⁹ "I truly know that it is a lordly quality in a noble that he should bind his mindbox, protect his treasure chest. Let him think what he wants!" *Ibid.* 240.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 241.

⁴¹ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 4.

⁴² *Ibid.* 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 4.

alliteration and context within the text often dictates word choices and rhythm, which may obliterate the cadence of an extant proverb.

Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*

The examples above show how prevalent maxims and sententious remarks are in other Anglo-Saxon works, such as *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer*, and how their inclusion often informs the general bent of the tales. The *Maldon* poet also appears to utilize several maxims or gnomic statements in his work. In this section, I will provide several examples of maxims within *Maldon* as well as a summary of the critical discussion on several of these passages.

I am not the first to connect *The Battle of Maldon* to *Maxims I* and *II*—many critics have analyzed the *sententiae* which the Maldon poet employs and how they function in the poem, and each reaches a different conclusion. Michael Matto stresses the importance of "containment" within the poem, taking John Niles' position from "*Maldon* and Mythopoesis" that several aspects of the poem are artistic deviations from the actual events which "attempt to conceptualize major social issues relating to Æthelred's reign."⁴⁴ Matto claims that the young warrior releasing his hawk before the battle evokes the line from *Maxims II*: "The hawk shall dwell on the glove, wild' (*Hafuc sceal on glofe/ wilde gewunian*, 17b-18a)."⁴⁵ This line is one from a list of descriptions of wild animals which ascribe rightful locations for them to exist, "suggesting a world made up of containers and their contents, a place for everything and everything in its place" according to

⁴⁴ qtd. in Matto, Michael, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 74 (2002), 61.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 63.

Matto.⁴⁶ The young man releasing his hawk, then, evokes this strict delineation between the world of men—a world of duty and war—and the world of the hawk, a flight to the woods. This reading imports a deeper meaning to Godric's flight, since they "fly for what they feel is a better stronghold—the very forest that was assigned to the hawk."⁴⁷ In this case, the invocation of a maxim informs the audience by assigning a proper place and course of action for a young man—on the battlefield defending his home—by providing the contrast of the half-wild hawk that belongs in the woods. The poet demarcates the battlefield from the woods, creating an even stronger feeling of approbation toward the kinsmen of Odda when they forsake the battlefield for the hawk and violate that boundary.

Paul Cavill also describes and analyzes the functions of several maxims present in *The Battle of Maldon*, claiming that they are above anything present in order to "reflect the poet's interest . . . in the motivation of the English warriors."⁴⁸ He refers to five separate excerpts from *Maldon* which he believes are maxims,⁴⁹ and relates them to the resolutions of the English soldiers. According to Cavill, "The maxims express the ideal and the proper order against the tendency of the prevailing situation," defining the actions of the English warriors as "a traditional obligation and an ideal."⁵⁰ In doing so, the poet "could transform the costly defeat of the English at Maldon into a victory of the heroic and Christian spirit which would encourage, if not morally compel, resistance against the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 63.

⁴⁸ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 632.

⁴⁹ lines 54b-55a: "Feallan sceolon/ hæpene æt hilde"; lines 94b-95: "God ana wat/ hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote"; lines 258-259: "Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð/ frean no folce, ne for feora murnan"; lines 315b-316: "A mæg gnornian/ se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð"; and lines 312-313: "Hige sceal þe heardra heorte þe cenre./ mod sceal þe mære, þe ure mægen lytlaþ."

⁵⁰ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 641.

marauding Scandinavian forces."⁵¹ In Cavill's view, the maxims function as an appeal to the *Maldon* poet's audience, explaining and justifying the deaths of the warriors who fell to the Vikings.

By looking at the maxims which Cavill addresses in context with the examples Deskis provides from *Beowulf*, we can both strengthen our understanding of how maxims function in Anglo-Saxon poetry and establish how pervasive gnomic statements are in *The Battle of Maldon* specifically. The first maxim Cavill identifies is lines 54b-55a: "Feallan sceolon/ hæþene æt hilde," which he renders "The heathen are destined to fall in battle."⁵² Cavill isolates this line because he feels that it is "rhetorically distinct," in that it deviates from the dialogue so far between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger, which Cavill characterizes as "heavily personalised, with frequent use of a variety of first and second person pronouns."⁵³ We can confirm this as a maxim to an extent by referring to Susan Deskis' chapter on "The Rule of God."⁵⁴ This quotation, as Cavill points out,⁵⁵ is similar to lines 104-105,⁵⁶ for which Deskis defines several parallels in *Beowulf* and in various other Germanic texts.⁵⁷

The use of "heathens" in lines 94-95 is interesting, because as Cavill indicates this statement seems to define the conflict along religious lines.⁵⁸ Deskis identifies a maxim which she characterizes as "No plan (action) avails against the will of God," quoting *Beowulf* lines 705b-707 ("þæt wæs yldum cup,/ þæt hie ne moste, þa Metod nolde,/ se

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 642.

⁵² *Ibid.* 632.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 634.

⁵⁴ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996).

⁵⁵ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 634.

⁵⁶ "Wæs seo tid cumen/ þæt þær fæge men feallan sceoldon."

⁵⁷ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 88-90.

⁵⁸ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 634.

scynscaða under sceadu bregdan") and 967-968a ("ic hine ne mihte, þa Metod nolde,/ ganges getwæman").⁵⁹ She summarizes this sentiment as "(Someone) could not (do something) if God did not so desire,' or more simply, that no human activity achieves its end without (or against) God."⁶⁰ By defining the Vikings as heathens, the *Maldon* poet could also be invoking this well-understood belief as well as "the simple and undeniable force of received wisdom which insists that the battle threatened by the vikings will be costly to them."⁶¹

In addition to these maxims which critics have described and analyzed, there are several others that are at work within *The Battle of Maldon*. In *Maxims II*, there is a maxim proscribing men's behavior which Godric and his brothers violate by fleeing the battle. Lines 20b-22a of the poem instruct, "Til sceal on eþle / domes wyrcean. Darop sceal on handa,/ gar golde fah" ("A good man must in the homeland/ Achieve fame. The dart must [be] in the hand,/ the spear adorned with gold"). Good men take spear in hand and seek fame—most particularly in their homeland. The young man releasing his hawk not only emphasizes the separation of the battlefield from the woods, but it also depicts the warrior fulfilling this maxim. In addition, this underlying maxim justifies the English conflict—if a man must achieve fame in his homeland, with weapons in hand, this carries an implicit duty to guard his home from danger. The English warriors, by engaging the Vikings, fulfill this cultural requirement.

This maxim could also be the reason for scholarly observations of the *comitatus* ideal, both here and perhaps in other works. Earl Anderson claims that *comitatus*, the

⁵⁹ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 26.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 26.

⁶¹ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 634.

supposed duty of men to die alongside their lord should he fall, "is *not* part of a continuous Germanic tradition . . . Tacitus derived this supposedly 'Germanic' ideal not from information about Germanic tribes, but rather from Julius Caesar's description of the band of 'soldurii' in Aquitonia."⁶² The *comitatus* ideal, then, is "a bit of academic folklore," and "any examples of Germanic tribes fighting to the last man were simply desperate attempts to 'defend homeland and family.'"⁶³ According to this interpretation, the deaths of the Englishmen are not merely the suicidal desire to die alongside their lord—although that is a part of their rhetoric. In the context of *Maxims II* lines 20b-22a, their deaths reflect the imperative to protect their homeland. The importance of homeland and community in Anglo-Saxon texts is not unheard of, and in fact Michael Kightley claims that *Maldon* "is an extended exploration of the relationship between the individual and the community at large, and that it presents the fateful battle as evidence for the thorough dependence of the entire community . . . on each of its component members."⁶⁴ This also puts the Vikings in opposition to the heroic and dutiful English, since they are wielding their spears far from home and seeking glory away from their native lands.

When Byrhtnoth agrees to let the Vikings cross the causeway, he proclaims "God ana wat/ hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote."⁶⁵ Paul Cavill points to this line as a potential maxim,⁶⁶ and indeed *Maxims I* line 29b-30 states "Meotud ana wat/ hwær se

⁶² Anderson, Earl R., "The Battle of Maldon: A Reappraisal of Possible Sources, Date, and Theme," *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature* ed. Phyllis Rugg Brown, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1986), 251.

⁶³ qtd. in Matto, 72.

⁶⁴ Kightley, Michael R., "Communal Interdependence in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 82 (2010), 58.

⁶⁵ *Maldon* 94b-95. "Only God knows who will control the battlefield."

⁶⁶ Cavill, Paul, *Maxims in The Battle of Maldon*, "Neophilologus" 82 (1998), 635.

cwealm cymeþ."⁶⁷ Byrhtnoth invokes the certainty of death, and the uncertainty of battle, by justifying his choice to allow the Vikings to come across with these words. The battle was inevitable because of the English imperative to protect their home, and victory is not guaranteed to either side because the knowledge of an outcome is only God's to possess.

All of these maxims, used as literary devices by the poets who employed them, appear in various texts to create similar effects and appear to descend from cultural values or widely-held conceptions. It is clear from the examples above that the *Maldon* poet employs several *sententiae* that can be found in *Maxims I* and *II*, as well as a variety of other Anglo-Saxon texts, and that inform the text in interesting and important ways. These invocations of shared wisdom serve to add implied meaning to the actions of the English warriors and the Vikings as well. Given these examples, it is not unlikely that the poet is employing a widely-held notion about Vikings and their behavior according to natural laws—a maxim that may be hinted at in lines 96-97:

Wodon þa wælwulfas (for wætere ne murnon)
wicinga werod west ofer Pantan,
ofer scir wæter scyldas wegon,
lidmen to lande linde bæron.

In order to establish to what extent the English held beliefs about the Vikings and how ubiquitous these beliefs were, we must look at the historical context and England's history with Vikings leading up to the battle at Maldon.

⁶⁷ "Only God knows where death will come."

Chapter 2: England's History with Vikings and Contemporary Impressions

Vikings in the Time of *Maldon*—Culture and History

Modern audiences often think of Vikings in specific contexts—bloodshed, plunder, rape, pillaging, and senseless violence. If the modern world had a maxim for the ancient Vikings, it would reflect these notions—barbaric, sociopathic, lustful berserkers reveling in slaughter and misery, more willing to take from others than to produce for themselves. One critic quotes a modern definition of a Viking that runs: "one of those Scandinavian adventurers who practised piracy at sea, and committed depredations on land, in northern and western Europe from the eighth century to the eleventh."⁶⁸ This can be seen in modern interpretations of Scandinavian culture, including George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* popular fantasy series. Martin's House Greyjoy, a moody, brutal family from rocky islands scattered across an intemperate sea, dispatch their armies in coastal long-ships, insist that they purchase goods and riches with "the iron price" (that is, the sword—buying with gold is dishonorable and cowardly), and boast the family motto: "We Do Not Sow," again reinforcing their distaste for agriculture and production. This depiction is based on modern perceptions of Viking behavior, which is colored by hundreds of years of artistic license, revisionist histories, and romanticized notions. We must therefore look back to contemporary sources and focus in on how the English and other neighbors viewed their northern aggressors.

Many critics now point to the nineteenth century for most of these misconceptions, although there were some earlier accounts that began the trend. Janet

⁶⁸ Nelson, Janet L., "Presidential Address: England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: II, the Vikings and Others," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (2003), 3.

Nelson claims that "the English, ancient and modern, have oscillated between repulsion and association" with the Vikings, giving rise to different stances at different points of history.⁶⁹ This can be seen as early as the twelfth century, when "churchmen . . . blamed the flaws and gaps of pre-reformed monasticism on Viking destruction centuries before."⁷⁰ Likewise, the nineteenth century and the rise of Romanticism began the transformation of the quintessentially Germanic Vikings into hypermasculine objects of female sexual desire. The idea of Viking rape, Erika Sigurdson tells us, serves two purposes: "rape as historicizing detail and rape as evidence of Viking masculinity," whereas "the most well-known accounts of Viking raids say next to nothing on the subject of rape," and scholars now agree that "the Vikings were not known to their victims in Frankia as 'notorious rapists.'"⁷¹ Sigurdson claims that "the phrase 'rape and pillage' was used to describe war rape and the barbarity of enemy soldiers long before it was ever applied to Vikings," and this pairing was connected in later rhetoric to distant Viking attacks from previous centuries.⁷² While they are frequently decried for their violence and destruction in contemporary accounts, the centuries have compounded their crimes and added, among other things, literal interpretations of rhetorical statements.

We must strip away these modern notions, then, and examine the facts that would have informed the *Maldon* poet and his audience. When the Vikings arrived on Northey Island in 991, they were only the latest of a long line of Scandinavian invaders to threaten British soil. For nearly two hundred years, Viking raiders and armies had attempted to exploit the island for its riches, its residents, and its territory. News of these attacks was

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 6.

⁷¹ Sigurdson, Erika Ruth, "Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction," *Scandinavian Studies* 86.3 (2014), 251.

⁷² *Ibid.* 253.

widespread, and their memory lasted long with the people. The Vikings made an impression on the English as fierce warriors, unearthly strong and skilled in battle. By 991 CE, the warlike nature of the Vikings was a by-word among the English, a well-known and understood fact which the *Maldon* poet knew and exploited in his documentation of this battle.

Early Viking Invasions in the British Isles

At this point in history, the Vikings had repeatedly invaded England to pillage and raid.

The most agreed-upon date for the beginning of these Viking attacks is 793, an attack "made by Norwegian Vikings on the monastic community on the island of Lindisfarne in the far northeast of the country."⁷³ The Vikings were brutal—"Monks were slaughtered as they fled, others were captured and sold into slavery, and sacred relics and anything of obvious value . . . were carted off. Much else was destroyed for the sheer wanton pleasure of it."⁷⁴ After the initial attack, there was an attempt to repopulate the monastery, but it was not the last raid on that island and "Lindisfarne was all but abandoned and would not be recolonized fully for three hundred years."⁷⁵

This attack resonated across Christian Europe and was seen as an attack on the faith. In Aachen, Alcuin wrote, "We and our forefathers have now lived in this fair land for nearly three hundred and fifty years, and never before has such an atrocity been seen in Britain as we have now suffered at the hands of a pagan people."⁷⁶ The brutality of the

⁷³ Arnold, Martin, *The Vikings: Wolves of War*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield (2007), 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 53.

raid and the nature of it—a group of pagans attacking a Christian landmark—shocked the English.

The Vikings, on the other hand, were impressed by how unguarded the riches of the cathedral had been. The raid on Lindisfarne was followed by raids on several other Christian communities among the British Isles, not only among the English but around Ireland and Scotland as well. The Vikings attacked the monastery of St. Columba on the Island of Iona in "795, 802, and 806, when, in the last instant, sixty monks were put to death;"⁷⁷ which prompted all but a few to leave the island altogether. Those few were brutally killed in a later raid in 825.⁷⁸ By 840, Dublin had become a Viking port from which Scandinavian attacks were launched against other parts of Britain.⁷⁹ The raids were so constant and so centered on rich Christian monuments that one monk penned the oft-quoted lines:

Bitter is the wind tonight
It tosses the white-waved sea,
I do not fear the coursing of the great sea
By the fierce warriors from Norway.⁸⁰

The Continued Viking Presence

These attacks grew from small raids on isolated monasteries to serious incursions into the heart of English territory, including repeated raids on Kent from a semi-

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 54.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 54.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 55.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 55.

permanent naval base on "the Isle of Sheppey on the Thames estuary"⁸¹ and a massive⁸² foray up the River Thames in 849.⁸³ In this last, "The Viking army stormed Canterbury, the principal city of Kent and England's oldest religious center, and at London, they forced the Mercian king and his army into flight."⁸⁴ Viking violence permeated even to the most prized cultural centers of England for nearly two centuries before Byrhtnoth faced the invading Viking army at Maldon.

After this decades-long string of sporadic attacks, the *Chronicle* "records that in 851 'for the first time, heathen men stayed through the winter on Thanet [Kent]', thus extending the length of the raiding campaigns."⁸⁵ The prolonged presence of the Vikings may mean they were "securing a firm foothold from which they could plan a coordinated campaign against English powers to the South," as Martin Arnold claims of their attacks on York in 866.⁸⁶ Indeed, with York as a staging-point for their attacks, the "Great Army" of Ivar the Boneless began a "seven-year campaign . . . with the kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia all under direct Viking control by 873."⁸⁷ Almost eighty years after the first attack on Lindisfarne, the Viking presence in England had become permanent, strong, and widespread. In addition, the English had by this time built a long and detailed history of opposing the Vikings.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 55.

⁸² According to Arnold, the *Chronicle* records "350 longships had entered the River Thames," which he admits "the writers probably exaggerated . . . but there can be little doubt that this assault was on a scale previously unknown" (55-56).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 55.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 56.

⁸⁵ Hadley, D.M., *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture*, New York: Manchester University Press, (2006), 10.

⁸⁶ Arnold, Martin, *The Vikings: Wolves of War*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield (2007), 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 57.

Indeed, it was against these invading Danes that Alfred earned his reputation as a great English leader.⁸⁸ As Halfdan Ragnarsson approached Reading at the head of his Great Army in 871, Alfred and his older brother Æthelred marched against them. According to records from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a "series of battles was fought," and "at the battle of Ashdown, many thousands of Vikings died."⁸⁹ Alfred ascended after his brother's death, and after some adversity—including his somewhat apocryphal sojourn by old women's cook-fires⁹⁰—he defeated Guthrum and converted him to Christianity, setting him up as the King of East Anglia under the name Æthelstan.⁹¹ Wessex flourished under Alfred, and when Hastein led the Second Great Army against him, Alfred and his son Edward "harassed and disrupted Hastein's army," and brought about the end of this latest Viking incursion.⁹² During Alfred's twenty-eight year reign, his kingdom would have seen a significant amount of conflict with the Vikings, which would give them a reputation on the battlefield. In a constant state of war with a foe perceived as monolithic, the English people would associate the Vikings with turmoil, particularly on the battlefield. These encounters would only increase over the next century.

These encounters also bear the record of the tributes which Alfred and, more infamously, Æthelred, paid in the hopes of persuading the Vikings to leave, which is a central element in *The Battle of Maldon*. In Alfred's protracted conflict with the Vikings, he paid a ransom to the Viking king of East Anglia, Guthrum, to save hostages from the town of Wareham in 875; but "no sooner had the truce been agreed than Guthrum

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 57-62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 57.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 59.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 59.

⁹² *Ibid.* 61.

executed the hostages" and left Mercia for a time, only to return and drive Alfred into hiding.⁹³ In spite of this failure and Alfred's later military successes, he and the rulers to come would fall into this trap time and again, so that by the time Byrhtnoth addresses the messenger of his Viking foes, the foreigner invites him to trade "feoh wið frēode and niman frið æt ūs,/ wē willaþ mid þam sceattum ūs tō scype gangan"⁹⁴ (39-40). The Viking messenger, aware of the English pattern of monetary appeasement, appeals to Byrhtnoth, the richest of them there, to ransom his men's lives according to the actions of earlier English leaders. After Maldon, Æthelred Unraed would pay 120,000 pounds of silver over his reign in a series of failed attempts to sate the Viking invaders.⁹⁵

England struggled for two hundred years against wave after wave of Viking invasion before Byrhtnoth and his men stood against them on the banks of the Blackwater. How, then did the ordinary Englishman regard his aggressor? I will now turn to contemporary accounts of the Viking activity, as well as criticism on the two most studied accounts of tenth-century battles: *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*. Through the lens of the people whom the Vikings attacked, we can understand what common conceptions European, and specifically English, audiences would have held about them.

The Vikings' Contemporary Image

There is a significant body of historical evidence regarding the Viking attacks and the facts surrounding regime changes and battles; but in order to understand how the English regarded their enemies, we must look to contemporary commentary on these

⁹³ *Ibid.* 58.

⁹⁴ Baker, Peter S., "The Battle of Maldon," *Introduction to Old English* 2ed., Malden: Blackwell (2007), 224.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 71-72.

conflicts. The common thread that unites these accounts is an understated fatalism—a belief that these events occurred because of some inescapable fate. Whether the victory belonged to the English or the Danes, the poet attributes it to fate, or to the will of God.

Many sources from the time clearly illustrate that the Vikings were often seen as supernatural force, a punishment from God for the decline of English culture and Christianity. D. M. Hadley claims that "Contemporary western European sources commonly assign the Scandinavian raids to divine punishment."⁹⁶ Alcuin responds to the Lindisfarne raids by asking his audience to "examine diligently, lest perchance this unaccustomed and unheard-of evil was merited by some unheard-of evil practice."⁹⁷ He then claims that "from the days of King Ælfwold fornications, adulteries and incest have poured over the land, so that these sins have been committed without any shame and even against the handmaids dedicated to God," again drawing a causal link between the evil deeds of the people and their punishment at the hands of the Vikings.⁹⁸

Hadley also draws our attention to King Alfred, who blamed the Viking attacks on his nation, which he says has lost its way. Alfred "wrote of the viking invasions as punishments 'when we neither loved wisdom ourselves nor allowed it to other men; we possessed only the name of Christians, and very few possessed the virtues."⁹⁹ This belief, Hadley posits, existed because "the Prophet Jeremiah (writing near Jerusalem in the late sixth century BC) had foretold that divine punishment for the chosen people would eventually come from the North."¹⁰⁰ These attitudes point to a shared contemplation of

⁹⁶ Hadley, D.M., *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture*, New York: Manchester University Press, (2006), 16.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 16.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 16.

the Viking problem, as well as a perspective that painted the Vikings as a superhuman scourge.

While so far these accounts lament the Viking attacks and the deaths that resulted from them, there is a certain fatalism inherent in each reference. Alcuin blames the attacks not on Viking evil, but on the evil deeds of the Christian community for which these atrocities were punishment. Likewise, Alfred attributes them to a punishment for a lapsed Christianity in the English community.

Besides *The Battle of Maldon*, critics look most to *The Battle of Brunanburh* as an example of Anglo-Saxon battle poetry. As Dolores Warwick Frese asserts, the *Brunanburh* poet "values military protagonists and antagonists as equal and almost interchangeable human presences."¹⁰¹ Frese argues that by bringing up Hengist and Horsa in lines 69-70, the poet is including "interchangeable versions of history that were, and were not, fated to be," thereby creating a "profound feeling of detachment from time, from the specifics of history, and from enmity itself."¹⁰² According to this reading, the Viking defeat is not a product of English national superiority or excessive martial prowess—it is merely a roll of the dice that worked out for Hengist and Horsa, but not in the case of the Viking army at Brunanburh. There is, then a feeling of brotherhood between the English warriors and the defeated Vikings, a "certain elegant sympathy."¹⁰³

Frese's claim that the *Brunanburh* poet does not bear the Norsemen any particular hatred is corroborated by the words used to refer to the Viking warriors. The poet refers to them as "scipflotan" (11b), "secg mænig" (17), "guma norþerna" (18b), "laþum

¹⁰¹ Frese, Dolores Warwick, "Poetic Prowess in *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*," *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature* ed. Phyllis Rugg Brown (1986), 84.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 87.

peodum" (22), "herefleman" (23a), "hæleþa" (25), "unrim heriges,/ flotan" (31b-32a), "Norþmanna" (33), and "Norþmen" (53). With the exception of "laþum þeodum" (which also appears in *Maldon* lines 89-90),¹⁰⁴ these terms generally describe the Vikings in neutral terms. They are indeed Northmen, seafarers, warriors, and sailors. While differentiating them from the English by place of origin, they are also treated with a general respect.

The interactions of the warriors on the field at Brunanburh become games, modes of exchange between equals. Frese dissects lines 51-52, saying that "The mortal combat of their gray-haired elders becomes an exchange of weapons, a game played on the battlefield with the sons of Edward."¹⁰⁵ Frese stresses an empathy which the audience gains toward the vanquished, saying, "we cannot remain untouched by a certain covert sense of relief and affirmative release when told that the old king did save his life. Indeed, I sense little scorn and a certain elegant sympathy attaching to this poetic account of his perilous survival."¹⁰⁶

These depictions, while allowing the Vikings a generous amount of physical prowess and martial ferocity, do not necessarily vilify the Vikings beyond a mere military opposition. That is, they are spared from the language of opposition present in a poem like *Judith*, where the audience may need to be told precisely how the wicked old general Holofernes might act, they having no knowledge of Babylonians firsthand. With Vikings, however, the audience knows that they are fierce in battle—in *Brunanburh*, the audience lauds the victory of the English due to the knowledge they have of their

¹⁰⁴ *Maldon* lines 89-90: "Ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode/ alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode" (Then the earl (Byrhtnoth) for his *ofermod* (see "Ofermod" discussion later) allowed too much land to the hateful people).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 87.

opponents. Likewise in *Maldon*, the audience knows that, because the English face Vikings, it will be a hard battle, a necessary battle, and one whose outcome only God can know.

Chapter 3: Vikings in *The Battle of Maldon*

It is important to determine how their portrayal in *The Battle of Maldon* interacts with this history between the English and their Scandinavian invaders. The storied antagonism between the two sides, including periods of extended occupation and usurpation, would seem to call for an impassioned disgust on the part of the poet—especially given the Vikings' brutal treatment of a valued thane's corpse. The poet, however, rarely descends to such diction, and confines himself to more impartial terms when describing the seafarers—this despite multiple instances of vitriolic language of opposition in other poems, such as *Judith*. This is puzzling, to say the least; but if the poet is employing a cultural maxim about Viking behavior, then he has more time within the poem to elaborate upon the heroics of the English in the face of this threat.

Many critics have attempted to explain the phenomenon of passive language in *The Battle of Maldon* as well. As in *Brunanburh*, the Vikings are more often referred to as "seamen," "warriors," "sailors," and "Vikings," and with a few exceptions are spared the poet's scorn. It is easy in both of these cases to attribute the poet's choices to poetics—the need to adhere to alliterative verse and its meter surely had a part in his choices, and perhaps the absence of pejoratives is a part of that necessity. However, as Leonard Neidorf points out, there is an abundance of Anglo-Saxon poets heaping scorn upon their antagonists. Most notably, *Judith* contains, in "fewer than fifteen lines of verse . . . a remarkable range of terms to express contempt for Holofernes and comment on his ill character."¹⁰⁷ This, along with "the *Judith* poet's evident bloodlust, put the *Maldon* poet's

¹⁰⁷ Neidorf, Leonard. "II *Æthelred* and the Politics of *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (October 2012), 458.

restraint in deep contrast."¹⁰⁸ Critics have mostly explained the *Maldon* poet's choices through nationalism—or perhaps a proto-nationalism—which led him to keep the focus away from the Viking aggressors in order to showcase the exemplary actions of the English soldiers. Whatever the explanation, that so many have marked this passive treatment indicates its significance; and I believe that if we interrogate these choices we can see that they allow the audience's perception of the Vikings rest upon a larger cultural perception of Scandinavian invaders, which in turn affords the poet more room to elaborate upon the actions of the English warriors.

As far back as 1976, Fred Robinson noted that "the poet is careful throughout *Maldon* to portray the Vikings not as heinous villains but as a vague inimical force."¹⁰⁹ The poet makes this choice, according to Robinson, so that he would avoid misleading his audience "into viewing the narrative as primarily a conflict between virtuous Englishmen and evil Vikings" and "divert[ing] attention from . . . the tensions within the English ranks."¹¹⁰ All of these claims, often complementary, tend to look at the larger trends in the poem and conclude that the English warriors are the focal-point of this rhetoric and the reason for the understated descriptions of the Vikings.

Many critics since Robinson have argued that this is a poem primarily about the bravery and fortitude of the English warriors, even in defeat—perhaps with the added message of resistance over payment, an exemplary instance of refusing the Viking's ransom. John Halbrooks states that "if Byrhtnoth had not allowed the crossing, then the Vikings would have simply sailed off and attacked elsewhere," which casts Byrhtnoth's

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 458.

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, Fred C. "Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 75.1-2 (Jan-Apr 1976), 27.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 38.

choice to engage in battle as a nationalistic duty.¹¹¹ Matto also takes this stance, claiming that "to allow the Vikings to advance any further can only result in more rampages, more chaos, as they impose themselves on civilized towns."¹¹² Engaging the enemy more closely was Byrhtnoth's only moral option, if only to spare another location's ravaging at Viking hands by destroying as many of them as he can. Byrhtnoth's engagement of the Vikings serves as a model for other communities and leaders, who were often too quick to pay the Vikings remuneration in exchange for momentary peace.

Paul Cavill most strongly casts this poem in a nationalist light, arguing that the deaths of the English serve a rhetorical purpose. The poet employs maxims "principally for the glorification of the defeated English, and possibly to promote a policy of stern resistance against the Vikings."¹¹³ According to this reading, the maxims that Byrhtnoth and other characters repeat serve to both justify their actions and advocate them to other English communities. By stressing the bravery of the defeated English at Maldon, the poet attempts to "transform the costly defeat . . . into a victory of the heroic and Christian spirit which would encourage, if not morally compel, resistance against the marauding Scandinavian forces."¹¹⁴ Put in a nationalistic context, the purpose is not to vilify the Vikings, who after all are already attacking and are therefore self-evident in their malice. Instead, the purpose is to raise up the English warriors who show bravery and loyalty, refusing to ransom their safety.

¹¹¹ Halbrooks, John, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003), 237.

¹¹² Matto, Michael, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 74 (2002), 64.

¹¹³ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82.4 (1998), 640.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 642.

Cavill and Halbrooks are not alone in applying the action of *Maldon* to the broader political climate of England. John Niles, in "*Maldon and Mythopoesis*," states that "the poem . . . turns a key incident drawn from the Viking troubles of the 990s into a showpiece of contemporary ethics and politics."¹¹⁵ According to Niles, "the action and motives of the men who figure in the action exemplify the two great issues of this period of English history: the need to negotiate peace with the Vikings versus the will to resist them by force."¹¹⁶ Edward Condren also asserts that "The poet has taken a known fact . . . and transformed it into the making of a momentous, even extreme ideal, one that radically changes the idea of loyalty in the lord-retainer relationship."¹¹⁷ Both of these critics claim that the poet uses the events of the battle to talk about the larger implications of the conflict, and both hint at the poem as a model for change and behavior.

Part of this behavior model is Byrhtnoth's refusal to pay tribute, and critics consistently attribute Byrhtnoth's refusal to a critique of Æthelred's appeasement policy. Fred Robinson suggests that the poem's references to Æthelred carry "a rich and powerful irony if we can assume that the poem was composed long enough after the battle for the audience to know that the king had proved unworthy of the sacrifices that were made in his name."¹¹⁸ John D. Niles makes a similar argument in "*Maldon and Mythopoesis*."¹¹⁹ However, Leonard Neidorf offers a new explanation with revised ideas of Æthelred's reign. Neidorf cites Susan Keynes' "groundbreaking reconsideration" of the era, along with its policy of "danegeld," which Theodore Anderson claims "was not foolish or futile

¹¹⁵ Niles, John D., "*Maldon and Mythopoesis*," *Mediaevalia* 17 (1994), 105

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 105.

¹¹⁷ Condren, Edward I., "From Politics to Poetry: Ambivalent Ethics in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Mediaevalia* 17 (1991), 82.

¹¹⁸ Robinson, Fred C., "Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 75.1-2 (Jan-April 1976), 28.

¹¹⁹ Niles, John D., "*Maldon and Mythopoesis*," *Mediaevalia* 17 (1994), 105.

but was intended as a 'divide and conquer' strategy that would purchase the assistance of certain Viking groups for protection against future Viking invaders."¹²⁰ This policy certainly had contemporary analogs, both in England and on the continent.¹²¹ Neidorf claims that, instead of a simple propaganda piece about the ineffectual nature of tribute payments, *Maldon* functions as "a mediation on loyalty and heroism"¹²² in an era when the Vikings who had come over in waves had begun to integrate themselves into English society. The poet, therefore, focuses on the heroics of the English and "rather than encourage aggression, he makes clear gestures toward accommodation."¹²³ Regardless of the underlying cause, all of these critics believe that the limited amount of strong language in the poem is significant.

It is easiest to investigate the "vague, inimical threat" of the Vikings to which Robinson refers by exploring the language which the poet uses to refer to them, just as we did with *Brunanburh*: *wicing* (26, 73, 97, 116, 139), *brimlīþendra* (27), *sæman* (29, 38, 278), *sælida* (45, 286), *drenga* (149), *lidmanna* (164). Thirteen references to their sea-faring nature and five more to their warrior status (*Beornas* (111), *hyssas* (112, 141), *fāege cempa* (119), *fāersceaþan* (142)) serve to remind the audience again and again that these are Vikings whom the English are fighting. Their names are unimportant, and insults must be used sparingly; for the purpose of this poem is not to vilify the Vikings—the audience's own memories serve well enough in that regard—but to illustrate the

¹²⁰ Neidorf, Leonard. "II *Æthelred* and the Politics of *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (October 2012), 454.

¹²¹ Alfred's baptism of Guthrum, with the intention of setting him up in Essex, comes to mind (Arnold 59-60). In 911 CE, Charles the Simple of Aquitaine also "took the view that . . . the this new wave of Vikings could be used to defend Francia against any further interlopers from the north," which Arnold reports he did quite successfully (94-95).

¹²² Neidorf, Leonard. "II *Æthelred* and the Politics of *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (October 2012), 453.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 453.

valiance of the English warriors. The Vikings are stage-dressing and backdrop for the actions of the brave English who would not pay a ransom or submit to the attacking horde, even when their leader had fallen.

Bradley Ryner attempts to dissect the dynamics of this battle through the philosophical musings of Michel Serres in his article, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*." According to Ryner, the battle is a series of exchanges—weapon for weapon, death for death—in an effort to retain subjectivity and render the enemy into an object, or a corpse. Battle, he asserts, "always adhere[s] to some type of economy codified in an explicit or implicit contract between the combatants."¹²⁴ This "contract" defines the battle as a joint venture among the English and the Vikings, an arena with certain rules and expectations. In this way, the two sides are put on equal footing, each a participant in the battle. Ryner states that "On the battlefield, the distinctions between subjects and objects are blurred: men become simultaneously participants in the exchange of battle and the objects of this exchange," experiencing what he refers to as an "agentive drift."¹²⁵ This drift is evident in the shift of a warrior from a fighter in the battle to a corpse on the ground.

In this struggle for "subjectivity" and "agency," the poet grants little to no agency to the Viking opponents. In the fight between Wulfmær and one of the many nameless Vikings, Ryner points out that the poet tells us "Wulfmær was wounded, he chose a bed of death," and claims that the warrior "asserts his agency to the last by actively choosing the location on the battlefield where he will become an object forever."¹²⁶ He then cites

¹²⁴ Ryner, Bradley, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*," *English Studies* 87.3 (2006), 268.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 271.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 272.

the Viking's death—"the doomed warrior fell at [Edward's] feet"—claiming that "the Viking warrior is unable to marshal any agency in his final moments of subjectivity."¹²⁷ Again, when Byrhtnoth is killed and his kinsman Wulfmær avenges him, the "exchange yields to the younger Wulfmær a valiance that it does not yield to the anonymous Viking he slays."¹²⁸ This struggle for subjectivity, framed as a struggle between equals for dominance, is congruent with Frese's reading of *Brunanburh*—there will be a winner and a loser.

This "lack of agency," instead of serving to denigrate the Vikings, draws more attention to the actions of the English, especially the negative ones. Michael Kightley, along with many other critics, asserts that the lack of Viking agency also places blame for the defeat squarely on Godric and his brothers. The shield-wall falls because of Godric's flight. Kightley points out that "the deserters do not all flee at the same time, nor even do the three brothers. Instead, the *Maldon*-poet "very specifically describes the flight of the cowards as a three-step function," saying that the flight spreads from "the individual . . . to a small group . . .and subsequently to the broader community."¹²⁹ As Kightley points out, this means that "the decision of a single retainer decides the fate of an entire army."¹³⁰ By inference, this also means that the day is lost not because of the actions or treachery of the Vikings, but because of the actions of one Englishman.

Ryner proposes an interesting view of the water's role in the conflict which might provide a model for understanding the role of the Vikings. Building upon Michel Serres' definition of war relationships, in particular the "ambient noise," which is "the disruptive

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 272.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 273.

¹²⁹ Kightley, Michael R., "Communal Interdependence in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 82 (2010), 61.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 62.

encroachment of the objective (natural) world on subjective (human) conflicts."¹³¹ Ryner applies this to the flood-tide which separates the English from the Vikings. Through this interpretation, "Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings safe passage demonstrates his desire to share battle with the Vikings rather than allow nature to emerge victorious, having stolen the battlefield from both competitors."¹³² Once again, this point of view unites the English and the Vikings together, two sides complicit in a contract of war, and who must attempt to eliminate the "noise" which obscures the conflict.

I would take this a step further. Before his discussion of the flood, Ryner refers to several illustrations from other poems that nature was the objective "ambient noise" which was a part of the battlefield. He cites Roy Leslie's interpretation of a line from *The Wanderer* ("sumne se hara wulf/ deaþe gedælde"), for which Leslie suggests "the wolf got one as his share at the death" (qtd. in Ryner 269). The broader implications of this and several other examples is that "both the wolf and death are understood to be entitled to a share of the battle and its participants . . . [they are] active participants in a battle, participants who can take a portion of victory from either of the combatants."¹³³ I believe the Vikings are participants on two levels. The first level is subjectively (in the usual sense, as to a third party), in that they are one side of the battle and hold half of the implicit war contract. The second level is objectively in relation to the English. For the English soldiers, the Vikings are another natural force like the wolf in the woods who gets his share of death (the Vikings are called *wælwulfas*, after all). By entrusting the audience's perception of the Vikings to their knowledge of a "Viking maxim," the

¹³¹ Ryner, Bradley, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*," *English Studies* 87.3 (2006), 268-269.

¹³² *Ibid.* 270.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 29.

Maldon poet streamlines his message and allows the focus of the poem to remain on the actions of Byrhtnoth and his men.

The Vikings belong on the battlefield. Fred Robinson argues that "By referring to the Vikings as *Wælwulfas* immediately after Byrhtnoth has asserted God's foreknowledge of who will possess the *wælstowe* the poet seems to be presaging ominously that it is the Vikings to whom the battlefield naturally belongs."¹³⁴ I believe that he is not far off—that this could be near the heart of a maxim describing the Vikings:

*Wicing sceal on wælstowe, wæpne wealdan.*¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Robinson, Fred C., "Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 75.1-2 (Jan-April 1976), 33.

¹³⁵ This is my crude creation, reflecting the existing statements in *Maldon* about Vikings.

Chapter 4: The Viking Maxim

I am arguing for the presence of a Viking maxim—some sort of sentential statement that evokes a common conception of Viking behavior or nature in the audience of the poem. Proving the existence of a maxim can be difficult—as Deskis notes, "no reliable method exists for determining the essential orality or literality of a given sentence,"¹³⁶ and even the collections of *sententiae*, while offering "welcome evidence for the circulation of proverbs and sentences, they are of less value as encyclopedias of those proverbs."¹³⁷ However, I believe there is sufficient evidence in *Maldon* and other sources to at least point toward some commonly-held beliefs concerning the Vikings in this era. In this section I will attempt to ascertain both the potentiality for commonly-held beliefs in the time period and the existence of *sententiae* within *The Battle of Maldon* itself.

Other critics have taken a similar approach, identifying what they believe to be *sententiae* within the poem that are meant to inform the audience. Their precedents afford useful models to pursue a Viking maxim. When they make no headway against the three brave English warriors, the Vikings "ongunnon lytegian þā lāþe gystas" (86). As they persuade Byrhtnoth to allow them to cross with their treacherous guile, they become the "hateful strangers," and Byrhtnoth allows the "lāþere þēode" (loathsome people) too much land (90). Philip Pulsiano makes a case for this line being based on a popular conception of Danes in Anglo-Saxon culture. Pulsiano cites Donald Scragg, who says that with this line, the poet seems to feel as if he "tells us all that we are required to

¹³⁶ Deskis, Susan E., *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies (1996), 139.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 141.

know, which is that the Vikings acted treacherously."¹³⁸ Much as I am arguing, Pulsiano asserts that "the *Maldon* poet creates a greater richness in his characterization of the Danes by drawing upon popular conceptions of their guile and ability to manipulate through language."¹³⁹ Pulsiano is able to dredge up a few later examples of this conception, including the evocative "'danska manna ordh / är werre än mord' ('Danish men's words are worse than murder')" from a fifteenth-century source.¹⁴⁰ However, the closest he comes to a contemporary manifestation of this *sententia* is this 1086 entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: "Swa hit wæs in Denmearcan, þæt þa Dænescan þe wæs ærur geteald eallra folca getreowast, wurdon awened to þære meste untriwðe, to þam mæstan sicdome þe æfre mihte gewurðan."¹⁴¹ This is compelling, but without a literary source in Anglo-Saxon, Pulsiano's theory is difficult to prove.

In this case, *Brunanburh* might once again afford us an analog for how the Vikings were portrayed in Anglo-Saxon poetry. When describing the flight of Constantine, "har hilderic" (39a),¹⁴² the *Brunanburh* poet tells us, "Gelpan ne þorfte/ beorn blandenfleax bilgeslehtes,/ eald inwidda, ne Anlaf þy ma" (44b-46).¹⁴³ Michael Livingston translates "eald inwidda" as "old deceitful one,"¹⁴⁴ which contributes to the idea of "Danes" or Vikings being somehow deceitful, or skilled at deceit. This is not iron-clad, however, since Robert Creed translates the same phrase from the B manuscript

¹³⁸ Pulsiano, Philip, "'Danish Men's Words are Worse than Murder': Viking Guile and *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96.1 (Jan. 1997), 15.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 18.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* 23. "So it was in Denmark that the Danes, who were once reckoned as the most loyal ['true'] of all people, turned to the greatest disloyalty ['untruth'] and to the greatest treachery that ever might happen" (Pulsiano 23).

¹⁴² "Hoary-haired warrior" (Livingston 41)

¹⁴³ "He could make no boast,/ That gray-haired warrior of the sword-slaughter,/ the old deceitful one, no more than could Anlaf" (Livingston 43).

¹⁴⁴ *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston, Exeter: Exeter University Press (2011), 43.

as "evil old man."¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is an interesting indication of a common conception of Danish duplicity, for which there is indeed some evidence.

Martin Arnold provides several contemporary examples from historical accounts that may shed light on this issue. According to legend, when "the Ragnarssons, led by Ivar the Boneless, laid siege to York in 866 . . . Ælla cheekily offered them no more land than could be covered by a horsehide."¹⁴⁶ The Ragnarssons agreed, and "by slicing a hide into slender thongs, Ivar and his brothers encompassed sufficient land to establish a fortress."¹⁴⁷ While not necessarily deceit, this anecdote depicts Scandinavians as "manipulators of language"¹⁴⁸ who gain advantages on the battlefield by verbal trickery. In 858, Charles the Bald of France tried to hire the Viking leader Weland to drive off Bjorn Ironside, another Viking warlord who had been raiding the countryside. Instead of merely taking the payment given to him by Charles the Bald, Weland "laid siege to Oissell and then, against Charles's express instructions, offered to let Bjorn go free," receiving for his deception "six thousand pounds of silver."¹⁴⁹ Likewise Hastein, a Viking who supposedly attempted to sack Rome itself in 859, gained access to the city of Luna with a "Trojan-horse style" ruse.¹⁵⁰ Hastein "feign[ed] death and [had] Bjorn and his men pose as Christians seeking burial on sacred ground for their deceased leader."¹⁵¹ When they were admitted and "the bishop and the duke of Luna stepped forward to officiate over the funeral, Hastein leapt from his coffin and slew them both."¹⁵² In all of

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

¹⁴⁶ Arnold, Martin, *The Vikings: Wolves of War*, New York: Rowsman and Littlefield (2007), 4.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁴⁸ Pulsiano, Philip, "'Danish Men's Words are Worse than Murder': Viking Guile and *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96.1 (Jan. 1997), 16.

¹⁴⁹ Arnold, Martin, *The Vikings: Wolves of War*, New York: Rowsman and Littlefield (2007), 88-89.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 90.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* 90-91.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* 91.

these cases, the Vikings gain military or monetary advantage through deceit, which certainly reinforces Pulsiano's hypothesis.

Pulsiano's claim that Danes were seen as deceitful is indeed interesting, and it gives a compelling precedence for the presence of a Viking maxim. I would offer some additional conceptions that have evidence in some other Anglo-Saxon texts or that reflect *sententiae* from *Maxims I* and *II*. The unifying themes I see, at least from *Maldon* and *Brunanburh*, are their natural gravitation to the battlefield; their positions as "wælwulfas," or superhuman warriors; and, perhaps, their status as "gystas," strangers or visitors.

Vikings on the Battlefield

In Chapter 2, I provided historical examples of the numerous Viking attacks as well as several contemporary accounts of the violence they enacted. Several of these accounts attributed the Viking aggression to some sort of divine judgment or working of fate, which also seems to be the case for the *Brunanburh* poet. As he describes the Mercian onslaught against the Scandinavian forces, the poet says,

Myrce ne wyrndon

Heardes honplegan hæletha nanum

þære þe mid Anlafe ofer æra gebland

ond lides bosme land gesohtun

fæge to gefeohte.

(24b-28a).

Michael Livingston translates these lines thus: "The Mercians did not deny/ hard hand-play to any heroes/ who with Anlaf over the sea-surge/ in the belly of a ship had sought

land,/ fated to fight."¹⁵³ The notion that they were "fated to fight" is an interesting one: it could merely indicate that they came with the intention to fight, which would be true, certainly; but it could also be a broader reflection on Vikings in general, that they are fated to seek battle and fight.

If the Vikings were fated to fight, there was no shortage of battlefields for them to seek out, as is evinced by *Maxims II* lines 50-54:

God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylðo,
lif sceal wið deaþe leoht sceal wið þystrum
fyrd wið fyrde, feod wið oðrum,
lað wið laþe ymb land sacan

(Good must oppose evil, youth shall oppose old age,/ life must oppose death/ light must oppose darkness, army oppose army, one enemy against another,/ foe strive against foe across the land).

Grouped with eternal battles—good against evil, youth striving against age, life against death, light against darkness—are earthly battles, which implies that conflict is a natural part of life. There are always battlefields with armies striving against each other, and there must always be enemies to oppose one another.

Arguably, no foe was more apparent to the *Maldon* and *Brunanburh* audiences than the Viking. As I mentioned earlier, the *Maldon* poet also seems to hint that the Vikings belong on the battlefield "By referring to the Vikings as *Wælwulfas* immediately after Byrhtnoth has asserted God's foreknowledge of who will possess the *wælstowe*."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. Michael Livingston, Exeter: Exeter University Press (2011), 41.

¹⁵⁴ Robinson, Fred C., "Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 75.1-2 (Jan-April 1976), 33.

Fred Robinson, tellingly, interprets this to mean that "it is the Vikings to whom the battlefield naturally belongs."¹⁵⁵ Leonard Neidorf claims that this functions as an expression "not of disapproval but rather some degree of admiration for the military prowess of the Vikings."¹⁵⁶ If we perceive the Vikings as a natural force on the battlefield, it could certainly have a more reflective connotation than a negative one—merely an assertion of their natural place and prowess, a begrudging admiration of their ferocity.

The Natural Role of Vikings

The choice of "wælwulfas" also evokes the Anglo-Saxon "beasts of battle" motif, as many critics have already recognized. Bradley Ryner refers to *The Wanderer* and its evocation of the wolves' part in the battle. The poem's narrator, "recounting the death of his friends in battle, says: 'sumne se hara wul/ deaðe gedælde.'"¹⁵⁷ Wolves, who prey upon the bodies of the fallen soldiers after a battle, are a part of the "noise" which is a natural part of the battlefield. Paul Cavill also plays up the significance of this characterization, saying that it is "precisely the 'beast of carrion' image which the *Maldon* poet is intending to convey" and citing the prevalence of wolves as natural forces in Old English war stories.¹⁵⁸ Wolves are a part of the scavenging crew that comes at the end of each battle and devours the corpses of the fallen—the "beasts of battle." In *Maldon*, then, the Vikings' treatment of Byrhtnoth's corpse further serves to connect them to this natural part of the battlefield. As the English earl lies dead on the field, "Ða hine heowon

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 33.

¹⁵⁶ Neidorf, Leonard, "II *Æthelred* and the Politics of *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (October 2012), 459.

¹⁵⁷ Ryner, Bradley, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*," *English Studies* 87.3 (2006), 269.

¹⁵⁸ Cavill, Paul, "Maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 82 (1998), 636.

hæþene scealcas/ and begen þa beornas þe him big stodon"¹⁵⁹ (181-182). This image of the "slaughter-wolves" disfiguring a corpse as it lay further aligns them with the predatory wolves who feast upon the dead and dying, which were viewed as a natural part of battle.

We can further investigate how this alignment with nature affects the dynamics of the battle by returning to Bradley Ryner's application of Michel Serres' *The Natural Contract*. Serres outlines the "social contract" of war, its "organization and legal status,"¹⁶⁰ and separates "subjective wars" ("wars . . . that nations or states fight with the aim of temporary dominance"¹⁶¹) from "objective violence" ("that in which all the enemies, unconsciously joined together, are in opposition to the objective world"¹⁶²). Ryner uses these definitions first to oppose the Vikings and English in a subjective war, then to unite them in an objective war against the "flood" at Maldon.¹⁶³ If we define the Vikings as another "natural force" in this poem, however, then it is the English who must work collectively against it. This further serves to divert the focus away from the Vikings and onto the English warriors, with whose deeds the poet is primarily concerned.

This identification of the Vikings as the "natural" owners of the battlefield also aligns them with the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition of nature as an un-opposable force. There is a perceived lack of distinction between natural and supernatural forces in Old English poetry and literature, which Jennifer Neville claims is "not an accident caused by the loss of manuscripts" but rather an indication that there was actually no such

¹⁵⁹ "Then they hewed him, the heathen warriors, and both the men who stood by him."

¹⁶⁰ Serres, Michel, *The Natural Contract* trans. Macarthur, Elizabeth and William Paulson, University of Michigan Press (1995), 13.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* 10-11.

¹⁶³ Ryner, Bradley, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*," *English Studies* 87.3 (2006), 269.

distinction.¹⁶⁴ Neville claims that, in these depictions, "The natural world stands as a negative mirror for human capability, its power reflecting the unstated but apparent lack of human power."¹⁶⁵ In multiple pieces, the contrast between the ability of man and the impassive power of nature defines man as helpless in opposition to the natural world, which she argues is "truly 'typical of Old English poetry—that the representation of the natural world is not merely a descriptive element incidental to some poems but rather one of the Old English poets' traditional techniques for defining human issues."¹⁶⁶ Natural terms thereby serve to highlight not only the natural aspect of the Vikings but also the supernatural.

There are numerous examples of humans in Anglo-Saxon poetry gaining ascendancy over their foes by poetic alignment with the natural world. Neville illustrates this point through the superhuman strength granted to Beowulf by his feats against nature. He swims against the storm and he slays whales in their natural element, and his "ability to accomplish such feats, to challenge the power of the natural world, defines him as an ideal, a unique human being."¹⁶⁷ This literally super-natural status grants him the ability to oppose Grendel, a creature defined by and constructed through nature.¹⁶⁸ Thus, the *Maldon* poet describing the Vikings as "wælwulfas" defines them simultaneously as natural and supernatural elements, explaining their victory over the English by aligning them with the realm of nature, which nearly always triumphs over man.

¹⁶⁴ Neville, Jennifer, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press (1999), 2.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 132.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 70-81.

Neville argues that forces and enemies being aligned with nature automatically defines them as evil or negative, which could contribute to the *Maldon* poet's maxim-based construction of the Vikings. Neville states that "creatures like Grendel are not merely mirror images but negative forces, not merely different but destructive."¹⁶⁹ If we apply this idea to the Vikings as "wælwulfas," their natural identifier inherently characterizes them as negative. As in other cases of Anglo-Saxon *sententiae*, this serves to evoke a commonly-held understanding of the universe in order to create a reaction in the audience.

This definition of the Vikings as "natural" also evokes the theme of human collaboration in the face of natural disaster. Neville asserts that "It is only when acting collectively, within the structures of society, that the human race can hope to stand against the natural world."¹⁷⁰ Her primary example is *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, in which "Alexander always triumphs over the natural world," but he "needs an army to do it, and many individuals lose their lives in the process."¹⁷¹ So with *Maldon*, the "natural disaster" which washes up against the shores of England—the Viking armies—requires the concerted effort of the English communities, with a sure, brave leader at their helm.

That opposing nature requires a united human effort can perhaps shed light on how the poet treats Odda's kinsmen, who are reviled by both the narrator and several characters after their flight. The poet goes to great lengths to establish how ungrateful Godric, who is "ærest on flēame," is to flee from the battle (*Maldon* 186). We are told that Godric leaves the good man "þe him mænigne oft mearh geseald" (who had given

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 53.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 34.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* 34.

him horses, many and often) (188). Further indemnifying him is the fact that he "gehlēop þone eoh þe āhte his hlāford/ on þām gerædum þe hit riht ne wæs" (leapt upon the horse upon which his lord had ridden, which was not just) (189-190). As if to drive the point home fully, the poet then reminds his audience that those who flee are violating an understanding based on these gifts and Byrhtnoth's leadership. Many flee, "mā þonne hit ænig mæþ wære/ gyf hī þā gearnunga ealle gemundon/ þe hē him tō duguþe gedōn hæfde" (more than it was right, if they had but remembered all that Byrhtnoth had done for the army) (195-197). After being given horses by his lord, to whom he had sworn loyalty, he steals his leader's horse in order to escape death and abandon his duty.

The vows of Ælfwine and Offa serve as reproach enough for Godric's actions, but Offa names Godric outright as a coward and traitor. After he praises Ælfwine's words and adds his own oaths, he says "Us Godric hæfþ,/ earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene" (237-238). Here he confirms that many had fled believing that "wære hit ūre hlāford" who rode off, causing the "folc totwæmed,/ scyldburh tōbrocen" (men to be divided, the shield-wall to be broken) (240-242). Then Offa pronounces, "Åbrēoþe his angin,/ þæt hē hēr swā manigne man āflymde!" (May all his deeds come to ill, he who put so many to flight) (242-243). Godric violated the contract of battle, running when he ought to fight and abandoning his duty; the Vikings, however, maintain their natural part of the true battle—the toe-to-toe fight which is the setting for the English heroism which is the Poet's main focus.

The breaking of the shield-wall gives us an opportunity to once again compare *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*—one poem where the English emerge victorious through unity and one where they fail through its lack. In *Brunanburh*, Prince Edward and his men

"Bordweal clufan,/ heowan heaþolinda hamora lafan" (5b-6).¹⁷² The English break the enemy's shield-wall and carry an explicit agency in doing so. In *Maldon*, however, the shield-wall breaks not because of the fierceness of the Vikings, but as a direct result of Godric's cowardice. Michael Kightley discusses how, because of this, "the decision of a single retainer decides the fate of an entire army . . . [and] those of the future victims of the raiders."¹⁷³ His actions affect not only himself and his army, therefore, but also the broader community, since "each member of the community is entirely dependent upon each of the others for survival."¹⁷⁴ This takes an added significance if we consider the English warriors as men opposing the natural world—a battle in which it is imperative to adhere to societal structures.

Vikings as "Strangers"

The externality of the Vikings is, obviously, a huge part of their identity in both *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*. The *Brunanburh* poet calls them "scipflotan" (11), "flotan" (32), and of course "Norðmanna/Norþmen" (33, 53). These terms refer to their seafaring nature and their status as "Northmen"—visitors from another place. The *Maldon* poet, too, frequently refers to the Vikings as sailors and seafarers.¹⁷⁵ Both poets, also, use the term "laþere ðeode/laþum þeodum" (*Maldon* 90/*Brunanburh* 22). More specifically, the *Maldon* poet refers to them as "laðe gystas" (86). These could be translated as "hated people" and "hated strangers respectively; but as with *Maxims II* line 54 (lað wið laþe, "foe against foe"), "lað" could be translated as "hostile" or "enemy," "the people who we

¹⁷² "They split the shieldwall,/ hewed the battle-wood with hammer-beaten blades" (Livingston 41).

¹⁷³ Kightley, Michael R., "Communal Interdependence in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 82 (2010), 62.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 62.

¹⁷⁵ See my discussion of terms used to refer to the Vikings above.

fight," "the enemy from elsewhere." In line 9 of *Brunanburh*, it is certainly used this way.¹⁷⁶ I would argue that this, along with other choices such as "fynd" and "feondum" (*Maldon* 82, 103, 264), more than "loathsome folk" or "hated strangers," is meant to reinforce the Vikings' role as "enemy" to the English. Even "hæðen," according to Leonard Neidorf, merely "places the Vikings at Maldon into an amorphous continuum of real and imagined otherness."¹⁷⁷ In other words, the Vikings were merely the necessary counterpart to the English warriors—the "others" who occupy the oppositional part of the social "war contract."

Their status as "strangers" and "seafarers" also put them in opposition to the English warriors in terms of the *Maxims*. *Maxims II* line 20b-21 says, "Til sceal on eðle/ domes wyrcean": "a good man must in his homeland/ make his reputation." In *Brunanburh*, Edward's sons already have a reputation because they "oft/ wiþ laþra gehwæne land ealgodon,/ hord and hamas" (8-10). Likewise, the warriors in *Maldon* are desperately defending their homeland against the Viking threat. The Vikings, on the other hand, have sought not only battle but fame and riches in a foreign land far from their home. In the eyes of Anglo-Saxon society, they are already aberrant, perhaps even dishonorable, just as the kinsmen of Odda are, who flee from the battlefield.

The Viking maxim in *The Battle of Maldon*, then, defines them as fierce warriors, natural elements of the battlefield, and as sailors seeking a dishonorable fortune—according to the English—in a foreign land. This maxim, like the others within the poem, functions to inform the audience without diverting the audience's attention from

¹⁷⁶ "swa him geæþele wæs/ from cneomægum þæt hi æt campe oft. wiþ laþra gehwæne land ealgodon"; Michael Livingston renders this, "as it was [Edward's sons']/ birthright that they often in battle/ against every enemy defended the land" (40).

¹⁷⁷ Neidorf, Leonard, "II *Æthelred* and the Politics of *The Battle of Maldon*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 111.4 (Oct. 2012), 463.

the English soldiers. As fierce warriors who belong on the battlefield, the audience takes for granted their presence. As natural elements, just as uncontrollable as the tide, they prove a difficult adversary that can neither be avoided nor easily defeated. Finally, as roaming strangers, they represent the threat of aberrant behavior and the natural enemies of tenth-century England.

Conclusion: What Effect Does a Viking Maxim Have on *The Battle of Maldon*?

It is important to address what implications a Viking maxim could have on the narrative fabric of *The Battle of Maldon*. Just as Thomas Hill's application of the stoic maxim to *The Wanderer* creates a richer image of the conflict within the narrator, the presence of the Viking maxim affects the broader themes of *Maldon*. As I have already stated, a common conception of Vikings as a natural force stresses the importance of each Englishman's actions, and it streamlines the narrative by creating a short-hand referent for the poet to exploit. This allows the poet to focus on the actions of the English. We have already discussed some of the group dynamics, such as how Godric's flight violates social structures necessary to combat natural forces, and how the Vikings' marauding nature serves as a flattering contrast for the maxim-adherent English patriots who protect their homeland. One final function within the view of Vikings as another natural force is the justification of Byrhtnoth's actions, which brings us to the ubiquitous and unavoidable subject of *ofermod*.

The moment when Byrhtnoth allows the Vikings to cross the ford and join battle on the mainland is a source of great contention among scholars, and has been for a long time. After the Vikings "ongunnon lytegian,"¹⁷⁸ Byrhtnoth "for his ofermode/ alufan landes to fela lapere ðeode"¹⁷⁹ (89b-90). In 1953, J.R.R. Tolkien famously wrote, "This act of pride and misplaced chivalry proved fatal"¹⁸⁰ and translated the line as "then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not

¹⁷⁸ See my discussion of Phillip Pulsiano's article concerning "Viking Guile" above.

¹⁷⁹ "for his (pride?) allowed the hateful (or hostile) people too much land."

¹⁸⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R., "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," *The Tolkien Reader* (1966), 4.

have done."¹⁸¹ Since that publication, "this assessment of Byrhtnoth has become an orthodox reading of the poem."¹⁸² However, this view has been contested by critics in recent years.

John Halbrooks weighs in on the nationalistic duty of Byrhtnoth in terms of national safety in his investigation of *ofermod*, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*." Halbrooks states that "if Byrhtnoth had not allowed the crossing, then the Vikings would have simply sailed off and attacked elsewhere. If this is the case, then it is difficult to find fault with Byrhtnoth's decision."¹⁸³ Michael Matto also takes this stance, claiming that "to allow the Vikings to advance any further can only result in more rampages, more chaos, as they impose themselves on civilized towns."¹⁸⁴ Engaging the enemy more closely was Byrhtnoth's only moral option, if only to spare another location's ravaging at Viking hands by destroying as many of them as he can. Halbrooks also creates in Byrhtnoth's laughter a dual function of the old-Germanic berserker and pious Christian. After his fall, his "retainers emulate both his battle-rage and his piety as they call upon God to help them as they disregard their own safety and fight on in the fury."¹⁸⁵ In this case, Byrhtnoth creates a model for his followers to emulate, taking what appears to be an admirable course of action which should be duplicated. In the same way, Byrhtnoth's engagement of the Vikings serves as

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* 19.

¹⁸² Halbrooks, John, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003), 236.

¹⁸³ Halbrooks, John, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003), 237.

¹⁸⁴ Matto, Michael, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 74 (2002), 64.

¹⁸⁵ Halbrooks, John, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003), 244.

a model for other communities and leaders, who were often too quick to pay the Vikings remuneration in exchange for momentary peace.

Discussions of *ofermod* and the actions of the English all hinge around the battle being a voluntary event on the part of the English, claiming that the poet "disapprove[s] of Byrhtnoth's actions";¹⁸⁶ but as Halbrooks says, "The poem gives no hint of blaming Byrhtnoth for the defeat after lines 89-90 . . . on the contrary, his faithful retainers fight on to the death in memory of their beloved lord."¹⁸⁷ Perhaps this is because the retainers and the poet both understand that battle was always inevitable.

In the light of a Viking maxim, the dynamics of the battle change. It goes from a "subjective war" to "objective violence"¹⁸⁸—from a battle between two members of a social "war contract" to a group of men struggling desperately against the onslaught of a natural phenomenon. The battle becomes unavoidable, and therefore Byrhtnoth's choice to allow the Vikings to cross becomes less of a choice and more of an inevitability. Perhaps the poet labeling this as a choice is the same as the "choices" of his retainers to die by his side, which Ryner argues are "the culmination of the poet's imaginative conceptualization of a process of subject formation achieved in battle."¹⁸⁹ Regardless, with the presence of the Viking maxim, Byrhtnoth cannot be blamed for his defeat, no more than a man can be blamed for drowning when his ship is overtaken by a storm.

The Battle of Maldon, a narrative about the bravery and dedication of English warriors in the face of the Viking invasions, reflects the world-views of those

¹⁸⁶ Matto, Michael, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 74 (2002), 67.

¹⁸⁷ Halbrooks, John, "Byrhtnoth's Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Philological Quarterly* 82.3 (2003), 238.

¹⁸⁸ Serres, Michel, *The Natural Contract* trans. Macarthur, Elizabeth and William Paulson, University of Michigan Press (1995), 10.

¹⁸⁹ Ryner, Bradley, "Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in *The Battle of Maldon*," *English Studies* 87.3 (2006), 275.

Englishmen. The poet uses maxims to explain and justify the deeds of these warriors—and to indemnify the deeds of those who deviate from the path of honor—building his portrayal of events upon the wisdom and experiences of the generations before him and stating them in terms with which his audience would be familiar. The nature of the Vikings would have been self-evident to the audience of the poem as well as its author; therefore, the poem reflects yet another maxim, an implied statement of Viking behavior. The poet can then spend his time lauding the deeds of the English and cursing the flight of Godric and his brothers.

The Battle of Maldon is a poem governed by maxims: the hawk is a model for his kind, as is the young warrior who turns him loose in order to do battle. Byrhtnoth, worthy earl, stands his ground like a ferocious boar. Odda's kin flee the battlefield, forsaking their positions as men on the battlefield to join the world of beasts, forsaking their proverbial duties as defenders of the homeland. The Vikings, slaughter-wolves to whom the battlefield belongs, deal their share of death.

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