

Maldon, 991AD

The Society of Ancients Battle Day 2025 Battle Pack

Then, because of his pride, the earl set about allowing the hateful race too much land; over the chill water now then began to call the son of Byrthelm... "Now a path is opened for you: come quickly against us, men at war. God alone knows who will control the battlefield."

The Battle of Maldon, 89-95, trans. Scragg

Introduction

The purpose of this short 'battle pack' is not to present a comprehensive historical account of the Battle of Maldon, but rather to orientate organisers and players to the context of the games being played and pose some challenges which I imagine scenario writers and game organisers will need to wrestle with in preparing for the Battle Day itself.

Why Maldon?

In addition to being immortalised in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and presenting a significant moment in English history (the payment of Danegeld tribute to the Vikings commenced following the defeat), Maldon presents an interesting challenge to the traditional wargame in that the dynamics, choices and mechanisms which influence the decisions made on the day of the battle seem not be focussed on sweeping tactics or grand manoeuvres. Maldon invites us to consider how we model the impact of the moral, cultural and regional context on the battlefield. The key decisions made by personalities on that day back in 991 AD seem to have been guided by much more than what we might call the 'kinetics' of the battle – i.e. the tactics associated with winning the clash of arms – and decisions which might seem to be tactically naive or foolish must be considered in the context of the wider cultural and political landscape. Maldon was not just a brutish clash of shield walls, but a complex interplay of honour, political expediency and cultural pressures.

(Very) Select Bibliography.

The two most important contemporary sources include the eponymous poem 'The Battle of Maldon' as well as the various versions of The Anglo Saxon Chronicle. In addition, the battle features in a number of other accounts, including The Life of St Oswald and John of Worcester's Chronicle of Chronicles, though these tend to give scant details. Numerous original sources from the surrounding era give both general context (such as surviving charters and legal documents) and individual lives such as the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* and the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason.

Many modern works deal with both the context of Viking and Anglo-Saxon warfare, including specific works on the battle itself and on wargaming the period in general; I will mention only two of the many which piqued my interest: Donald Scragg's 'The Return of the Vikings: The Battle of Maldon 991' (2006, Tempus Publishing) covers the historical context, size and nature of the opposing forces, and a good set of logical deductions when recreating the battle; it also includes a full translation of the poem which I have quoted here. Martin Hackett's 'As Told In The Great Hall: The wargamer's guide to Dark Age Britain' (2013, Amerley Publishing) provides a good overview of the period from a wargaming perspective, including rules, and a specific scenario for Maldon.

Finally, it is worth mentioning some of the treatments of the battle within the Society of Ancients. Ian Greenwood's article in Slingshot 123 contains a useful summary of the historiography of the battle, as well as some comments on topography. Phil Sabin's article in Slingshot 181 includes his own translation of the poem, and some considerations on wargaming it; I was particularly struck by

his observation regarding the prevalence of missile troops in what might otherwise be assumed to be a rather face to face clash of shields. Phil has produced a video on his YouTube channel which includes a recitation of his own translation of the poem as well as a re-fight using his own rules (<https://www.youtube.com/@philipsabin1653>). Bruno Servili's recent articles on the battle (Slingshot's 355 and 356) explores ways how a card-assisted scenario can be used to wargame the key choices which the commanders made on the day.

Context.

Alfred The Great (r. 871-899 AD) is credited with both checking the expansion of Viking rule in England, which had seen the establishment of permanent settlements and a shift towards more territorial control since the first encounters with raiders in the late 8th Century, and with effectively uniting the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms into what we would now recognise as 'England' in the late 9th Century. The Viking threat nevertheless remained. Alfred's successors invested more effort in constructing defences to major towns, as well as expanding the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon England further north. Following Aethelstan's victory at the Battle of Brunanburh in 937 AD, Anglo-Saxon England was both largely secure from external threats and organised into a wealthy and well-administered kingdom. Following a period of relative peace following Brunanburh, the 970s and 980s saw a recommencement of raids around the coast by Vikings seeking to draw on England's new-found wealth in a *modus operandi* similar to the early days of Viking encounters, seeking to gain either by direct raiding or by political control and extortion. In common with those early days, the pattern of small raids on vulnerable communities grew to the point where sizeable armies of Norse raiders could seriously threaten even the most well defended of population centres.

Preamble to the Battle.

Differing sources, including variant manuscripts of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, suggest that it is likely but no means certain that it was Olaf Tryggvason who led a Viking fleet of 93 longships on a series of raids around the Thames estuary in August 991 which culminated in the Battle of Maldon. The other main contender for leadership of the Viking force is Swein, son of Harold, who features both in some accounts of the raid and is also mentioned in subsequent English legal documents which imply his involvement; it is also quite possible that both personalities were present. The numbers of Vikings present at the battle is open to wide variations in interpretation. Assuming the number of 93 ships is correct, then we may be able to bracket the size of the Viking force. The most common form of longship, the *snekkje*, typically carried a crew of 30-40, but larger ships could hold up to 60 or more. This gives us a bracket of between about 3000-5500 for the maximum size of the army.

Responding to this raid fell to Byrhtnoth, Ealdorman of Essex and a wealthy and powerful nobleman in his own right as well as being, in effect, King Aethelred's right-hand man. Whilst it is not known over what period of time the raid progressed from Folkestone to Sandwich, Ipswich and then Maldon, the distances involved could have been covered over a matter of days which could arguably place limits on the scale of the English mobilisation to confront it. Assuming Byrhtnoth had access both his own household and the better equipped semi-professional warriors in the followings of local lords, he might have led 500-600 good quality fighters. In addition, the Battle of Maldon poem suggests that he had mustered less well-equipped warriors as part of a universal military obligation, as it makes a point about Byrhtnoth's drilling of the army ahead of the battle. Again, numbers are unknown, but if the raid took little more than a few days to reach Maldon then it seems unlikely that the general muster would have been a significant force. Whilst most scholars seem to conclude that Byrhtnoth would have been outnumbered, by how much remains indeterminate.

Having moored their longships on Northey Island near the town of Maldon, the Vikings found themselves facing off against the English army across a narrow causeway linking the island to the mainland, close enough for arrows to inflict casualties across the water but prevented by the tide and the English position from crossing. The fact that Byrhtnoth chose not just to confront the Vikings at Maldon but also to ultimately let them cross the causeway to engage in open battle, combined with contemporary accounts which note the high numbers of casualties on both sides, suggests that the discrepancy between the size of the two armies cannot have been that great. Given an available frontage in the vicinity of the causeway measured in hundreds of metres, it seems unlikely that more than a couple of thousand participants would have been able to be effectively engaged on each side; this dimension of space might have been seen as limiting the number of Viking warriors who would have been able to actually cross the causeway in sufficient time and order to be effective in the battle, even if we credit their numbers as being at the higher end of the possible estimates. Given the time to assemble the English army and the size of the battlefield my personal preference is for lower numbers of participants; perhaps no more than 1500-2000 English and some 3000 Vikings, some of who may not have been able to actually make the fight during the decisive phase. But I must recognise that there is no compelling reason to accept this!

The Battle.

Byrhtnoth's army had dismounted to fight on foot and Byrhtnoth initially sent three great warriors: Wulfstan, Aelfhere and Maccus to block the causeway. Whether this was literally three warriors standing heroically alone or if they were accompanied by their personal retinues is unknown, but either way this seems to have been effective at frustrating the Viking attempts to cross to the mainland. In a curious incident redolent of both epic storytelling and arguably the interplay between cultural norms and military necessity, the Vikings asked for permission to cross the causeway; a request granted by Byrhtnoth. The Maldon poem criticises Byrhtnoth for giving up too much ground "because of his pride" (trans. Scragg), and the battle entered its decisive phase as both armies now faced off against each other on the shore. In the ensuing struggle, it would seem that the English shieldwall held its ground effectively until Byrhtnoth himself was struck down.

The death of Byrhtnoth caused a degree of panic in the English army; "Then those who did not want to be there turned from the battle" (trans. Scragg). Godric, Odda's son, flees on Byrhtnoth's own horse, accompanied by his brothers Godwine and Godwig, and by implication many more of the English warriors, seeking the relatively safety – and escape route – in woods to the rear of the English line of battle. The narrative of the poem at this point switches to an heroic last stand by Byrhtnoth's personal retainers, loyal to their fallen lord. Eventually, complete with heroic speeches, they fall and the Vikings rule the day.

Challenges for wargamers.

A number of challenges present themselves when designing to refight the battle on the wargames table. I will be interested to see how the following considerations are reflected at the 2025 Battle Day:

- How do you resolve the uncertainty about the absolute and relative sizes of the armies? How much of the Viking host would have been able to physically reach the mainland in a position to contribute?
- What role did missile troops play? They feature (bows and throwing spears) in the poem; how does this interact with relatively solid shield walls?

- Where to begin the game? If scenario design is largely about creating decisions for players to make, replicating the decisions the historical commanders would have had to make, a number of potential start points present themselves:
 - Do you give the Vikings the chance to land on the mainland?
 - A 'straightforward' recreation of the battle might start with the Vikings having crossed the causeway, or at least deploying from it. Do you include the holding of the causeway and require the Vikings to either force the crossing, or bargain for passage?
 - If you want to include the preamble across the causeway, how does this work in a single game. Does this part of the battle require its own pre-game scenario?
- How do you account for decisions such as ceding the causeway? Might a matrix wargame, or branch-and-sequel mini-campaign, present a suitable way to give commanders pre-game choices which set the conditions of the main battle?
- What counts as victory? If you feel that Byrhtnoth must defeat the Vikings (hence his allowing the decisive engagement on the mainland), what happens if they withdraw back to their moorings?
- What role should honour and cultural norms play in the conduct of the battle, and in the victory conditions?

Conclusion

I have tried to outline some of the key questions which make Maldon an interesting subject for this year's Battle Day; you will undoubtedly find more, or have a very different take on the battle itself altogether. That is the great thing about the Battle Day; every game is a particular interpretation of the events, and the variety itself exposes different ideas about how we understand ancient and medieval warfare. I look forward to seeing the different variations of that fateful day in Essex a thousand years ago!