ANGLO-SAXON NATIONALISM: A STUDY OF THE
BATTLE POEMS IN OLD ENGLISH

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Introduction

In the course of the tenth century two Anglo-Saxon poems were written on the occasion of battles fought between English and Viking armies. The Battle of Brunanburh celebrates the victory won by King Aethelstan in 937 against the combined forces of Olaf, king of Dublin, Constantine, king of Scots, and Owen, king of the Strathclyde Welsh. The Battle of Maldon tells us about the defeat of Earl Byrhtnoth, his retainers, and the Essex fyrd in a battle fought against the Vikings in 991. No previous poems of the extant Anglo-Saxon literature reveal such an explicit interest in contemporary historical events as these battle poems do. Their focus seems to have been shifted away from purely heroic or Christian concerns, and an attempt has been made to amalgamate in them the more traditional themes of Anglo-Saxon poetry with themes of patriotic dimensions. The protagonists do not fight against dragons and devils, they fight against the Danes.

Literary critics, however, have disagreed on the issues of nationalism or patriotism in the battle poems. Whereas Nora Kershaw argues that The Battle of Brunanburh is "inspired to a considerable extent by national patriotism - a feeling which is wanting in the earlier poetry, and which testifies to the growth of national consciousness in the England of the tenth century"\textsuperscript{1)}, Bruce Mitchell takes the opposite stand when he says that "it would be mistaken to detect a sense of patriotism here, for England is not yet united..."\textsuperscript{2)}. And while one critic writes on behalf of The Battle of Maldon that
"it is for Earl Byrhtnoth, rather than for their country, that the
knaves are ready to sacrifice their lives"\textsuperscript{3}, another considers
"a feeling of patriotism" to be at best a possible reinforce-
ment of the thanes' sense of duty to their lord\textsuperscript{4}. Such contra-
dictory views as these will more than likely confuse the student
and if he looks further for information in the literature about
the period he will soon find out that references to nationalism
and patriotism are random among literary historians and that the
question of national consciousness in Anglo-Saxon England is a
problem that has not been systematically dealt with. A thoroughgoing
pursuit of the matter may have been thwarted by the popular histori-
cal commonplace that English nationalism did not become apparent
till sometime during the Hundred Years War\textsuperscript{5} and that feudalism, as
the basis of the social structure in the Middle Ages was too strong
a concept to permit the development of national consciousness at
a date prior to the Anglo-French conflict. It seems, however, that
some critics have detected traces of a sense of national identity
and commonalty in England already during the twelfth century. They
have wondered how the sudden Arthurian efflorescence in the second
half of the twelfth century could be explained and why Geoffrey of
Monmouth, for instance, gave such an important place in his history
to popular national story. He intentionally removed "national
history from its traditional context, the history of salvation"\textsuperscript{6},
and it was for dynastic as well as national reasons that Geoffrey's
History of the Kings of Britain was so successful with the later
Anglo-Norman dynasty "that had become English in sentiment, if not
in manners and speech" and "could not very well encourage its supporters to chant a Song of Roland as a Norman duke could afford to do in 1066". Even these critics, however, do not concern themselves about patriotism in pre-Conquest England.

Nevertheless, looking back in time one would expect to find some specific English consciousness to have been generated with the movements towards the political unification of England from a considerable number of small kingdoms into a single monarchy, and with the relentless struggles against Viking invaders from the late eighth century on. Yet to judge the mood of two poems in particular and that of a past age in general by the mere intuitions of a modern reader is both unfair and misleading. In order to do them justice we have to go ad fontes. The major part of the extant Anglo-Saxon literature, especially poetry, will be of little use for our purpose: as I have indicated above it either centers around a distinctly Christian point of view (e.g. Christ, Christ and Satan, Andreas, etc.) or like Beowulf and the elegies draws from both Christian and Germanic sources, and has obviously no concern for national issues. Besides the merely religious and heroic preoccupation revealed in the poetry there is yet another reason which may account for the absence of national themes in Anglo-Saxon poetry. One must bear in mind that the scaffolding of this poetry consisted of oral formulae that were probably centuries old and would not easily lend themselves to the composition of only recently emerging national subjects. This argument goes hand in hand with the idea of F. Magoun who has suggested that
much of the Christian poetry centers around action rather than contemplation because the formulae were lending themselves more easily to the expression of saintly heroism than to Christian doctrines and exhortations. 8) There are, however, written sources which existed for other reasons than literary or homiletic ones, documents that were written for the more down-to-earth needs of daily life — such as charters, letters, laws, annals — where one can expect to find something closer to the point of view that people took to their living in England. I propose, therefore, to investigate historical facts and written sources of the period itself in order to see whether they reveal any representative sense of national awareness which in turn would have prompted expressions of patriotic feelings and I hope, thereby, to come a little closer to the problem of how determinative a concept it finally was to the men who fought the battles of Maldon and Brunanburh, and especially to the men who composed poems about them.
Footnotes to the Introduction


5. S. Harrison Thomson, *Europe in Renaissance and Reformation* (New York, 1963), p. 268 makes this point. In his standard text on European history the author refers to the vernacular literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as being "evidence of the growing national consciousness of the English people..." A more familiar source perhaps is Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan" (*Complete Plays with Prefaces* [New York, 1962], p. 357, p. 369) where we get Warwick's statement that "our fellows are beginning to call themselves Englishmen..." and where Cauchon speaks about the "most dangerous idea" that he can only express by "such phrases as France for the French, England for the English".


8. See Francis P. Magoun, "The Oral Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum*, XXVIII (1953), p. 458: "..... the singers did not make things unnecessarily hard for themselves by attempting to sing about matters for the expression of which the old diction would have been inadequate ... This marked uniformness or unity of style is largely to be accounted for by the continuity of the traditional formulaic language of the Anglo-Saxon singers, a continuity that seems to live until the Norman Conquest."
Chapter One

Political and Religious Developments in England

Before the Danish Invasion

Despite the fact that the Anglo-Saxon invaders of the fifth and early sixth century shared the memory of a past on the Continent and had to fight against the same enemies in Britain, their sense of unity was tribal, cultural, or racial and the things they had in common were of anthropological nature and obviously not strong enough to shape a political identity including all Germanic tribes living in Britain. This in part explains the great number of kingdoms that had been established in England by the end of the sixth century. Apart from the lack of any centralizing authority, physical geography as well as settlements resulting from random migrations of people over a long period of time were other determining factors in disuniting the Anglo-Saxons. The Humber, highlands and lowlands, woods and fens all constituted effective trade- and communication-barriers. North of the Humber there were the two separate kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira (united in the kingdom of Northumbria later on). England south of the Humber was divided into ten independent states. They were the kingdoms of Lindsey, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Mercia, as well as the kingdoms of the Middle Angles, the Hwicce, and the Magonsaete. Entries in the chronicle, such as the entry for the year 597(A) for example, seem to be typical for the state of affairs in Anglo-Saxon England at that time. "In this year Ceolwulf
began to reign in Wessex, and he continually fought and contended either against the English, or the Britons, or the Picts, or the Scots..."1). Ceolwulf, like many other kings, was fighting not only against the indigenous peoples but against people of his own race as well and as P.H. Blair suggests, "once the invasion was successfully begun", the question was not so much "whether British or English would ultimately triumph" but rather "which of the various English kingdoms would finally establish supremacy over the others"2).

Two hundred years later, in 796, King Offa of Mercia died. He was the first king among the Anglo-Saxons to claim dominion over the entire English race and judging from the evidence of his charters, Offa seems to have been aware of his role.

Obviously some very definite changes in the political structure of England had taken place within two centuries and although a consciously English monarchy was not established before the tenth century, its foundation was foreshadowed long time before by the supremacy that certain kings assumed over others. From Bede we get a list of the seven first overlords in England3). They were Aelle of Sussex, Ceawlin of Wessex, Ethelbert of Kent, Raedwald of East Anglia; according to Bede these four kings were overlords of the kingdoms south of the Humber only. They were followed by three Northumbrian kings during the seventh century: Edwin whose "overlordship marks an important stage in the movement of the English peoples toward unity, for it first brought the southern kingdoms into definite association with Northumbria"4), Oswald, and Oswiu, who ruled not
only over the Northumbrians and the southern English, but over Picts and Scots as well. The ninth century chronicler who noted that King Egbert of Wessex was the eighth among the overlords and giving him the name of Bretwalda presented the same list of overlords as Bede did. Strangely enough he omitted two kings who secured Mercian supremacy during the eighth century. Diplomatic evidence, however, dating back to the reigns of the Mercian kings Aethelbald and Offa prove their supremacy during the major part of the eighth century. A charter from 736 illustrating Mercian authority in the kingdom of the Hwicce calls for special attention because of the regnal style given to King Aethelbald. "The words of gift with which it opens, ... style the king domino donante rex non solum Marcersium sed et omnium provinciarum quae generali nomine Sutangli dicuntur." 

According to the charters, Aethelbald's successor Offa reigned not only over all the kingdoms south of the Humber but over all Northumbria as well. In two documents of the year 774 Offa was styled as rex Anglorum and rex totius Anglorum patriae. In a way the subtle shift from Aethelbald's use of provincia to Offa's patria is indicative of how far the political conditions had progressed in England. Thus Alcuin, a born Northumbrian, uses the significant word patria in his letters from abroad time and again; and gathering from its context we may assume that with him the word does not stand for Northumbria alone, but for all of Britain. The reality of Offa's overlordship becomes even more convincing when the Northumbrian
Alcuin, in a letter to Offa, identifies the Mercian kingdom with that of all the English:

Be like a father to the Church of Christ, like a brother to the priests of God, be kind and just to all the people, be modest and peaceful in all your conversations and words, and be always devout in the praise of God; that the divine clemency may keep you in long-lasting prosperity and may deign by the grace of his goodness to exalt, expand, and crown in eternity with the benefits of everlasting pity your kingdom, may more, that of all the English (regnum tuum, immo Anglorum omnium).

One incident in particular seems to point to the fact that the political unification of England under the hegemony of Offa was even acknowledged beyond the limits of Britain. The relations between Offa and Charlemagne had always been friendly and obviously the Frankish king considered the Mercian dynasty to be respectable enough to suggest the marriage of Offa's daughter to his own son; when Offa, however, as condicio sine qua non, asked for Charlemagne's daughter to become the wife of his son, Charlemagne was deeply offended and as an answer to Offa's insolence Frankish ports were closed to English merchants in 789. Charlemagne's decision was of course directed against Offa personally rather than against the English people, but Charlemagne was also fully aware of the extent of Offa's power; in order to hurt him, the rex totius Anglorum patriae, he knew he had to punish the entire country.

Even before Offa's time the kingdoms of the Middle Angles, the Hwicce, and the Magonsaete had been embodied in the Mercian kingdom. During his reign East Anglia, Lindsey, and Essex lost their independence and their former kings were "styled subreguli or even duces
in the documents of the time). Apart from Mercia only four of the twelve original kingdoms remained - Northumbria, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex - and all were under Mercian predominance. Stenton rates the supremacy of the Mercian dynasty in the eighth century as the "first advance ever made on a great scale towards the political unity of England" because it demonstrated that "the particularism of the smaller kingdoms was not an insuperable obstacle to the creation of a greater state".

It seems to me that apart from the institution of the overlordship there was another unifying principle at work in the seventh and eighth century: Roman Catholicism. In 664, at the synod of Whitby, the long disputes between the Celtic and the Roman Church were at last settled in favour of the latter and as a consequence all Anglo-Saxons shared in the same faith and in the same religious practices. Together with strengthening the sense of unity among the English, however, Roman Catholicism contributed to the prejudice against the Welsh where the Celtic Church prevailed till the later part of the eighth century. Perverse though it be, prejudice serves as a prop for one's own views and as a unifying force among those who hold them. A man like Bede, for instance, made no secret of his anger against the Welsh. Along with Gildas, he considered the Anglo-Saxon invasion and the subsequent defeat of the Britains to be God's rightful punishment for a nation steeped in sin. Time and again he snarled at their way of wearing the tonsure and at their method of calculating the date of
Easter. If he accused the Welsh of hating the English\(^{16}\) one wonders whether there is not as much antipathy coming from his side when he called them *inveterati et claudicantes\(^{17}\)*, "obdurate and crippled".

Besides, Bede could never forgive the Welsh that no attempt had been made by them to christianize the heathen Anglo-Saxons who, according to him, were to be saved anyway: *Sed non tamen divina pietas plebem suam, quam praescivit, deservit, quin multo digniores genti memoratae praecones veritatis, per quos crederet, destinavit.*\(^{18}\) From Bede's point of view, Gregory's wish *Angli sunt, angelii sunt*! had indeed become true: Bede considered the English to be God's chosen people and his attitude is so chauvinistic as to indicate a genuine national consciousness - if not on the political then at least on the theological level.

These steps towards political and religious unity, however, would not have been successful, if a strong sense of racial and geographical identity had not seconded them.

Just as the sense of national identity stamps the work of Bede, so also the missionary zeal of Englishmen prevailing throughout the eighth century is characterized by the same feeling of homogeneity.

Archbishop Theodore, a native of Tarsus in Cilicia, had already worked for the organisation of "a united English Church which was a 'national' church but did not lose its connexion with Rome"\(^{19}\). He died in 690 and the note in the *Chronicle* concerning his death seems to indicate that the spiritual unity of the English people had its national elements. "In this year Archbishop Theodore died, and Byrhtwold succeeded to the bishopric." This in itself would be sufficient
information, especially coming from a source where words and sentences are handled sparingly. Yet the chronicler of the Parker MS. added a sentence concerning the provenance of bishops and including a differentiation he thought worthwhile making: Aer waerun Romanisce
biscepas, sibban waerun Englische. With a single church for them all, and - on top of that - with native bishops and clergy in the England of the following century one can conceive of a deepened sense of unity having prompted the continental missionary activities. Levison called them a "national undertaking of the whole English people"^{20}.

The English recognized the common origin of the continental and insular Saxons as a ground for the evangelisation of Germany. Bede wrote about Ægbert, a holy man, who planned to preach the word of God to some of the nations who had not heard it; "he knew that there were several nations of them in Germany, from which the Angles and Saxons, who now live in Britain, knew to have traced their race and origin" (quarum in Germania plurimas noverat esse nationes, a quibus Angli vel Saxones, qui nunc Britanniam incolunt, gentis et origine duxisse noscuntur)^{21}. It seems important to notice that Bede, though acknowledging the kinship of insular and continental Saxons, drew a clear line between them and thought of a nation in geographical rather than racial terms: two parts of a larger racial block (or unity) had migrated to Britain and by this very act had become autonomous; the common fate of the invaders made them different from those they left behind and enabled them to form a new national unity, that of the Angles and Saxons. Likewise Boniface, calling upon all Anglo-Saxons
to pray for the conversion of the Saxons (c. 738), implored his
countrymen to take pity upon them "for they themselves are saying:
'We are of one blood and one bone with you.""22) And if Boniface,
complaining about the sexual immorality of the English, compared
the "English people" to the "races of Spain and Provence, and to the
Burgundian peoples"23), he, like Bede, had started to think of
peoples and races as living in geographically distinct areas. Boniface's
terminology concerning nationality and race, however, lacks the pre-
cision of Bede's in the passage quoted above.

Boniface who came from Wessex, called his home country
'transmarina Saxonia', but he also described himself as
of the race of the Angles and asked all Angles to pray
for the conversion of the continental Saxons, men of the
same blood and bone(...). A bishop of Leicester named
these Saxons 'our people' ('gens nostra'...), while Boni-
face called the Northumbrian (that is Anglian) Willibrord
'of Saxon race' ('generis Saxonum').

The distinction drawn between Angles and Saxons had obviously become
insignificant and we find that Boniface considered himself to belong
above all to the "English race"25). From 718 on, when he first left
for Rome, till 754, when he and his companions were massacred by a
band of pagans, Boniface kept in close touch with his native country.
He turned to the English, with whom he identified himself, for help
and advice; he comforted and admonished them whenever they needed it:
"The well-doing and the fair fame of our race is our joy and delight;
their sins and their evil repute fill us with grief and sorrow."26)
Steeped in the task of creating and organizing a Church in Germany
and reforming the Frankish Church later on, Boniface, nevertheless,
expressed his deep concern for England as England time and again.
A similar regard for England marks the correspondence of Alcuin. While being a pupil and master at York school which had been founded by Archbishop Egbert, a former pupil of Bede and teacher of Alcuin, he had witnessed the blossoming of English monasticism and scholarship in the eighth century. Thus, when he accepted Charlemagne's invitation to settle at the Frankish court in 782, it was with him, as Greenfield has suggested, that the cultural initiative of western Europe passed from England over to the Continent. Alcuin became head of the palace school, he was the king's adviser on doctrinal issues and worked as a mediator in his relations with England. Despite such a remarkable career at the Frankish court he felt committed to England during all his life. English students had followed him across the Channel to learn under him; in a letter addressed to Hygbald, bishop of Lindisfarne, where he recommended a student's return home, he added: "But if it pleases you to send him back to us, I will gladly give him all I can for the good of this same holy church. Because I am highly delighted to communicate whatever I have learned from scholars for the need of God's holy churches to the men of our race (gentis nostrae hominibus)." Nor did he ever forget his friends at home: "Just as I shall serve as faithfully as I can the friends that God has given me here, so shall I those whom I left in my fatherland (patria)." Although he had always yearned to resume his life in England, he finally changed his mind and died as abbot of Tours in 804. "I was truly ready to come back to you with the gifts and return to my fatherland," he wrote to King Offa, "but considering the state
of peace of my people (propter pacem gentis meae) it has seemed better
to me to stay in a foreign country (in peregrinatione)."³⁰) This means,
in other words, that the first arrival of the Danes and the sack of
Lindisfarne made him stay on the Continent. The news of the raid
distressed him deeply:

Behold, it is almost three hundred and fifty years that
we and our fathers have been inhabitants of this most
beautiful country (pulcherrime patriae), and never before
such terror appeared in Britain, as we have now suffered
from a pagan race, nor was it believed that there could
be such a ship. Behold, the Church of St. Cuthbert
spattered with the blood of God's priests, bereft of all
ornaments, a place more venerable than all in Britain,
is given for preying to pagan peoples. ³¹)

As a Christian man he saw in it a sign of the divine wrath and a just
punishment for whatever sins his people had committed. But he also re-
acted as an Englishman: for the first time the safety of his country
and the continuation of its culture had been threatened by foreigners.
"Who does not lament this as if his country were captured (quis hoc
quasi captam patriam non plangit)?" he asks. And in a letter to
Hygbald, bishop of Lindisfarne, and his monks, he wants them to
remember "Judas Maccabaeus, how he cleansed the temple of God, and set
free the people from foreign servitude (et populum a servitute li-
beravit extranea)."³³) Judas Maccabaeus, a Jewish patriot, had fought
in a revolt against the Macedonians and brought about a period of free-
dom for Judea. One may safely assume that a scholar of Alcuin's shape
knew the Bible well enough to quote another example, if he did not
specifically mean to imply that military action might be a necessity.
And indeed, war against the Danish invaders was to become a major con-
cern for the English during the next two centuries.
During the seventh and eighth centuries the most significant steps towards the formation of a single state had been made, and the English were spiritually united by one and the same faith. English merchants travelled abroad; English missionaries and scholars were held in high repute in western civilization. Offa, being aware of the powerful impact of his overlordship, had established diplomatic relations with the Continent; the sense of cultural identity had inspired and shaped the work of Bede, Boniface, and Alcuin. In all this we can see the glimmering of an English consciousness, a consciousness which was yet to be tested and challenged for survival in order to prove the justification of its existence.
Footnotes to Chapter One


6. Bretwalda is the form used in MS.A. The word appears in the other manuscripts of the Chronicle as Brytenwalda(B), Bretenanwealda(C), Brytenwealda(D,E), Brytenweald(F). The exact meaning of this title and the extent of the regnal power implied have puzzled the critics. Dorothy Whitelock translates the versions of MSS. A and C as "ruler of Britain" and suggests "mighty ruler" for MSS. D, E, and F (see Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, p.40). F.M. Stenton, however, "is against the view ... that Brytenwalda contains the Old English adjective bryten "wide", and means "wide" or "great ruler"" (see Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, p.34 ff.) and considers Bretwalda to be a contraction of the other forms, all meaning "Britain ruler". He suggests that the expression, in structure resembling such epithets as beah-gifa and daed-fruma, belongs to the sphere of panegyric poetry and he does not believe that the title was an invention founded on historical facts. "It arose among Germanic invaders whose position in Britain was insecure, and in its origin was clearly a defiance of British chiefs rather than the assertion of a claim to lordship over them."

7. Egbert is the only king specifically called Bretwalda by a contemporary. Bede does not use himself the title.

8. For the explanation of this mistake see F.M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, p.34.


12. Alcuin, Correspondence, p. 147.


17. Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica, V.22.


20. Levison, p.92.


28. Alcuin, Correspondence, p.65. See Eleanor Shipley Duckett's Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne (New York, Macmillan Co., 1951) which has valuable information about the correspondence of Alcuin but in which the translations are oftentimes inexact. For instance: eiusdem sanctae ecclesiae (Correspondence, p.65) is translated as "of your Church in Lindisfarne" (Duckett, p.151), gentis nostrae hominibus (p.65) as "to the people of our English race" (p.151).

29. Alcuin, Correspondence, p.125.
30. Alcuin, *Correspondence*, p.147.


Chapter Two

The Danes

With the arrival of the Danes a long period of exterior freedom had come to an end and all the more ferocious, therefore, did the Viking invasion strike Britain. It seems that the first motive behind the voyages of the first half of the ninth century, like those at the end of the eighth, was largely plunder. There were numerous but short incursions along the coastlines and estuaries. The English having neither a fleet nor an organized system of coastal defence were totally unprepared to meet these recurrent attacks from the sea. The country as a whole, however, was not threatened till 865, when a great army landed in East Anglia (\textit{cuom micel here on Angel cynnes lond}). A year later, the Danes turned north towards York and defeated Northumbria. In 870 they established a base at Reading and started their first attack on Wessex. The battle between the Danes and King Aethelred and his brother Alfred at Ashdown near Reading was described by Asser, Alfred's biographer in the following terms:

Round about this tree, then, the hostile armies clashed together in battle, with loud cries on all sides, the one side supporting an evil cause, the other fighting for life, and their loved ones, and their native land. And when both sides had for some while fought everywhere with zeal and very fiercely, by the judgment of God, the heathen were no more able to withstand the onslaught of the Christians.

In this contemporary account we can see that not only personal but also patriotic and religious motives were determining the English resistance against the Danish invasion. As opposed to the annal describing the battle at Ashdown in the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle} (a.871),
Asser's rendering of the event is far from being objective. In terms of the meanings of words he uses, it is loaded with emotions; and emotionalism towards one's country ("native land") and one's specific culture (summarized by "the Christians") is the prerequisite for patriotism.

The West-Saxon victory was soon followed by a serious defeat and when Alfred succeeded to the throne in 871 his forces were so exhausted that he decided to pay the price which would bring some relief to his weakened kingdom. The Danes left Reading and did not return to Wessex for the next five years. In the meantime, they took hold of eastern Mercia; their renewed attacks on Wessex, however, were unsuccessful because Alfred had had time enough to build ships and strengthen his troops. After Alfred's decisive victory at Edington in 878 the Danish army began to turn away from military conquest and it found permanent settlement within the limits of what had been the Mercian, Northumbrian, and East Anglian kingdoms. Of the four independent kingdoms that had existed at the middle of the century Wessex alone remained intact.

During the next years Alfred built fortifications all over southern England in order to secure his hold on England south of the Thames in anticipation of future attacks. In reaction to the collaboration of the East-Anglian Danes with over-seas Vikings he occupied London in 886. Fresh hope was born that the lands which were ruled by the Danes might one day again become English and as a consequence Alfred's sovereignty was recognized by those of the English who were not in subjection to the Danes. Him all Angel cyn to cirde baet buton
Deniscra monna haeftniede was. 4) Stenton, commenting on the events
of 886, says that "the occasion marked the achievement of a new stage in the advance of the English people towards political unity". The nature of Alfred's overlordship differed from that of his predecessors whose position had been based on the force at their disposal. Alfred, however, whose own kingdom was constantly threatened by the Danes had certainly neither the time nor the material power to impose himself on his English neighbours; but rather "the acceptance of Alfred's overlordship expressed a feeling that stood for interests common to the whole English race". In order to strengthen a common English cause Alfred worked towards a strong Mercian alliance. Trying to avoid any sort of offence, he entrusted London, formerly Mercian territory, to Aethelred, a Mercian nobleman, and a few years later Alfred gave him his daughter Aethelflaed in marriage. Aethelred, though content with an ealdorman's title, presided over the Mercian council and lead the Mercian armies with unchallenged authority. "In effect", Stenton writes, "his attitude made English Mercia a province of Wessex."

During the thirteen years of his reign that remained after the occupation of London, nothing changed in the general situation in England. But because of the political equilibrium he had successfully established, King Alfred now had time for other pursuits that in the long run became as important for the survival of English culture as his military successes. He began to study Latin in order to translate various works into Old English. In his preface to the Pastoral Care he commented on the lack of learning in England and justified his translations into the vernacular by pointing out that the clergy was
no longer fluent in Latin and would have easier access to books written in their own language. Alfred's program was not only intended for the clergy but for the entire younger generation in England:

\[
\text{Eal seo giegub þe nu is on Angel-cynne friora monna, ... sien to leornunga opfæste þa hwile þe hi to nanre opferre note ne maegen, ob bone first þe hie wel cunnan Englisc gewrit armaedan...} 8)
\]

From this and other similar passages, it becomes evident that Alfred's plans went beyond Wessex, and even beyond Mercia (though he directly addressed Waerferth, bishop of Worcester, in his preface); including England on both sides of the Humber (\textit{eal seo giegub þe nu is on Angel-cynne friora monna}), Alfred consciously pursued "pan-English" aims, which was all the more optimistic and daring at a time when half the country was still in Scandinavian hands. It is difficult to judge whether Alfred's educational reform had any direct connexion with the political situation he and his contemporaries were facing. Yet is was hardly an accident that the importance of the vernacular was suddenly stressed in a period when English culture was daily threatened with extinction. The native tongue distinguished the English from the Danes, and its development under Alfred may well had fostered the growing sense of national consciousness among the English.

Alfred died in October 899, and he was succeeded by his son, Edward the Elder. When Earl Aethelred died in 911, his widow, Aethelflaed (who was King Edward's sister) was declared "Lady of the Mercians" and with this title she ruled Mercia for eight years. Because of the close blood-relationship Mercia and Wessex were stronger tied together than ever before. While Aethelflaed was fortifying the Mercian frontiers and hold-
ing off the Danes west of Watling Street, King Edward could move northwards. The Danes no longer used to fighting lost one position after the other and by 918 Edward's authority reached from the Channel to the Humber. The climax of his military achievements came in 920 when the King of the Scots and the people of Scots, and Ragnald, and the sons of Eadwulf and all who live in Northumbria, both English and Danish, Norsemen and others, and also the king of the Strathclyde Welsh and the Strathclyde Welsh chose him as father and lord.

Aethelstan, his son, succeeded him in 925. He had been raised in the household of Aethelred and Aethelflaed and he could therefore count on the loyal support of the Mercian nobility in his future wars against the Scandinavians. In an attempt to secure control over York in a peaceful way he gave one of his sisters in marriage to Sihtric, the Norse ruler of York; after Sihtric's death, however, his son Olaf, supported by a force of Norsemen from Dublin, tried to claim his inheritance by violence. Aethelstan invaded Northumbria and expelled Olaf together with his helpers. "... and King Aethelstan succeeded to the kingdom of the Northumbrians and he brought under his rule all the kings who were in this island."^10^ The various kings who had been fighting for supremacy in the north made common cause when Aethelstan invaded Scotland in 934. Olaf, then ruler of the Norse kingdom of Dublin, sailed from Ireland in 937 with a large fleet and joined forces with the Scots and the Strathclyde Welsh. In the same year this alliance moved into English territory where they were met by Aethelstan and his brother Edmund at the head of the Mercian and West-Saxon levies at a place called Brunanburh.
In the battle which followed, the English won a decisive victory.

The battle of Brunanburh marked a climax in English history; with the arrival of the Danes in 865 the old political system began to collapse with the gradual disintegration of the several kingdoms and its place was finally taken by the single kingdom of England. Aethelstan became the first king of all England and there is plenty of evidence that he himself and his contemporaries in England as well as from abroad realized the impact of his position and power. Aelfric who was writing when Old English society was threatened again by foreign invaders seventy years after Brunanburh, lists Aethelstan among the three kings whose example might encourage and comfort a distressed people: ...Aebelstan, be wip Anlaf gefeasht Þ his firde ofsloh Þ aflimde hine sylfne, Þ he on sibbe wunude mid his leode.\textsuperscript{11}\) Flodoard, a canon of Reims and contemporary of Aethelstan, calls Aethelstan, in reference to an "English fleet", "their king\textsuperscript{12}\) and the writer of the Chronicle of Nantes calls him both "king of the English" and "king of England\textsuperscript{13}\).

Far more conspicuous, however, are the regnal styles used in the king's charters where he is called "Aethelstan, king of the English, elevated by the right hand of the Almighty, which is Christ, to the throne of the whole kingdom of Britain\textsuperscript{14}\) and Aethelstan, Angel-saxonum Denorumque gloriosissimus rex\textsuperscript{15}\).

\textsuperscript{11}\) Alfred had been "troubled and with reason by the constant attacks of foreign peoples\textsuperscript{16}\), but because of his and his descend-
ants' endeavour England was to enjoy a period of freedom for the first time since the beginnings of the Danish invasion. It was as if a Golden Age had come to England: *uno solidantur Britannidis arua, undique pax, omniumque foecundia rerum,...* ("The fields of Britain were consolidated into one, there was peace everywhere, and abundance of all things,...")\(^{17}\). And it is against this historical background, elated with victory, that we have to look at the Battle of Brunanburh.
Footnotes to Chapter Two


3. Asser, Life of King Alfred, translated with Introduction and Notes by L.C. Jane (London, Chatto & Windus, 1926), p.23. This tone is sufficiently dominant in Asser that it has prompted Miss Jane to the following interpretation: Starting from the assumption that the Life of King Alfred was written in order to effect a reformation of public moral among Welsh readers who were sympathizing with the Danes because of the traditional prejudice between Welsh and English, she comes to the conclusion that the whole work should be regarded "as a plea for common action against the Danes, and as an attempt to display Alfred as the hero of a threatened Christendom" (Introd. p.xxxiv).

4. Two of the Saxon Chronicles, Parallel, a.886(A). See also a.901(E).


10. Ibid., a.927.


16. Asser, Life of King Alfred, p.73.

Chapter Three

The Battle of Brunanburh

The poem on the battle fought at Brunanburh appears in four of the manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the entry for 937. The Laud MS. (E) refers to the event but briefly and in prose. As the first of six Chronicle poems, *The Battle of Brunanburh* is followed by *The Capture of the Five Boroughs* (942), *The Coronation of Edgar* (973), *The Death of Edgar* (975), *The Death of Alfred* (1036), and *The Death of Edward* (1065).

If we try to find a common denominator for these poems then it would be the following one: namely, that the kings these poems commemorate, were not chosen at random but for a very particular reason. Aethelstan had liberated the country from the enemy and was king of all England. Edmund reunited the country that had been threatened for a brief period by new attacks from Olaf, King of Dublin. Edgar's coronation must have been an event of primary importance to his contemporaries because of an "oath taken by the king towards his subjects, thus recognizing the principle that the king is under obligations towards his subjects". The recognition of Edgar's position as King of England is demonstrated by a story which relates how the other kings in Britain came to do him homage and rowed him in a boat on the Dee.

Florence of Worcester says:

and his eight sub-kings, ... met him as he commanded and swore that they would be faithful to him and be his allies by land and sea. And on a certain day he went on board a
boat with them, and, with them at the oars and himself seizing the helm, he steered (gubernavit) it skilfully on the course of the River Dee ... he is reported to have said to his nobles that any of his successors might indeed pride himself on being king of the English (regem Anglorum), when he might have the glory of such honour, with so many kings subservient to him. 2)

The act described above is, of course, highly symbolic; the boat is a physical metaphor, representing Edgar's kingdom which he steers or governs very aptly (Latin gubernare meant both "to steer" and "to govern"). The royal oarsmen are entirely under his command, and thus the story of Edgar dramatically emphasized the unity of the kingdom.

Edgar, *se æbela 7 se anraeda cining* 3), was also the last of the three ideal kings mentioned by Aelfric, because he had been a king whose enemies sought peace from him without a battle, and with his death new wars broke upon England. One wonders whether it was merely an accident that Aelfric, writing during the reign of Aethelraed Unraed described Edgar as *anraed*. There were for instance no poems written in honour of King Aethelred the Unready or the three Scandinavian kings, Swein, Cnut, and Harold. Yet Alfred, King Aethelred's son and a potential English king who was tortured by Godwine and died a miserable death, was commemorated in a poem; and so was Edward the Confessor, the first English king after a period of twenty-five years and also the last, dying at the eve of the Conquest. Thus we get the impression that the Chronicle poems were not so much written in adherence to a literary fashion but because the kings they praised were loved by their people and, in one sense of the other, strengthened their courage and reassured their hopes, even though the poems may not explicitly mention this.
Although the poems commemorate various historical events, I do not believe that all of them are primarily concerned with "national history" as S.B. Greenfield has suggested. With the exception of Brunanburh their interest seems singularly focused on the glory of one single king or nobleman; eulogistic epithets are piled upon one another, and the themes center around the individual rather than the national, presenting small actions and conflicts or none. The Battle of Brunanburh, however, is both an encomium on the achievements of King Aethelstan and his brother Edmund as well as a piece of "emotive historiography". And it seems that H.M. Chadwick did full justice to the poem when he wrote that it "is not concerned with the personal adventures of the king and his brother, but with the prowess of the English army as a whole".

As far as the location of the Chronicle poems is concerned, it is worth noticing that (1) four of the six poems were inserted into the Chronicle between 937 and 975, a period which was marked by England's recovering from the damages caused by military conflicts that had lasted - on and off - for more than hundred years and that (2) The Battle of Brunanburh, the first poem in this group, was also the first poem ever entered into the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

What reasons may possibly have prompted the chronicler to write an annal in verse when the event preceding and following the year 937 were related in simple prose? The battle at Brunanburh and the victory of the English was, as the poet himself suggested, the greatest success ever achieved since the Angles and the Saxons had first come
to Britain. The medium of prose was no longer adequate enough to express the author's enthusiasm and the glory gained by his people; thus he turned to the heightened language of poetry, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". And it seems that the artistic quality of the poem owes much to the author's intense involvement into the situation itself, for whereas the five remaining poems have been subjected to the most derogatory kind of criticism.

The Battle of Brunanburh has generally been praised for both its skilful handling of diction and structure and for its vigour and vitality. Whether the author intended it or not, there is a psychological moment involved in our reaction to and appreciation of the poem: The Battle of Brunanburh immediately calls for attention because it is stylistically so vastly different from its context and consequently the reader finds himself actually believing - as the poet does - that the battle of Brunanburh was indeed an event of major and unique importance.

The poem tells us how Aethelstan and his brother Edmund, commanding both the West-Saxon and the Mercian forces, fought a fierce battle at Brunanburh, against an army of Scots and Norsemen, who had come in ships from Ireland. The Norsemen were commanded by Olaf (Anlaf), King of Dublin, the Scots by Constantine. The first meeting of arms was soon followed by the flight of the enemy and the pursuit lasted all day long. Olaf and the remainder of his forces escaped by ship to seek Dublin. Constantine who had lost friends and relatives, including
his son, returned to Scotland. Five young kings and seven earls of the Norse force had died in the battle. The slaughter was great. Aethelstan and Edmund returned to Wessex in triumph.

The Battle of Brunanburh has been called "an expression of national triumph", the poet has been said to be "steeped in national song"; both these statements, I believe, are true; the really fascinating thing, however, is the way in which the author created this atmosphere of "national triumph".

About three fifths of the poem are, strangely enough, devoted to the enemy, and only two fifths to the English army. The poet worked by means of contrast and paradox, focusing his view now on the enemy, now on the friend. This structural device of juxtaposition was so effective in itself, that the poet had actually to use but little panegyric pastiche in order to permeate the poem with a sense of national glory.

What treatment did the English get in the four passages where the poet writes about them?

Aethelstan and his brother Edmund are referred to by name only once, i.e. in the very beginning (ll. 1a, 3a). Two conventional epithets suffice to describe Aethelstan (gorla drihten, lb; beorna beahgifa, 2a) and they are - metrically speaking - practically weightless because of the final eac preponderating over the other words in the verse and carrying us to the next line, to Edmund. The introduction (ll. 1-10a), however, ends with a remark that implies the real issue of the battle; because of their noble descent, the poet
says, it was the brothers' vocation to defend their country, their possessions, and their homes:

swa him geæpele wæs
fræm ðæromaegum, þæt hi æt campe oft
wæþ lāþras gehwan ealaegodon
hord and hamas.

(11. 7b-10a)

This mixture of personal as well as patriotic motives for their wars harks back to Asser's remark on the occasion of the battle at Ashdown \(^{12}\). These lines also reveal the poet's emotions: by explaining the English cause, he indirectly justifies their means, and has already characterized the enemy as an intruder into their country.

In the next passage (11. 20b-28a) a brief account is given of how the West-Saxons and the Mercians pursued and fought off their common enemies. This reference to the West-Saxons and the Mercians fighting side by side is of great importance. After Offa's death in 796 rivalries flared up between Mercia and Wessex until the overlordship passed finally over to Wessex with the military success of Ægbert. We have seen that both Alfred and Edward the Elder contributed much to smother the spirit of competition and to consolidate the two kingdoms once and for all. Thus Stenton writing about Brunanburh remarks that "it associated Mercians and West-Saxons in the common memory of a great achievement which blurred the traditions of their ancient wars"\(^{13}\). Here, then, we have proof that Bruce Mitchell was probably mistaken in his conclusion that nationalism was nonexistent because - as the poet refers to Mercia and Wessex separately - England was not yet united. \(^{14}\) Collaboration of the kind described
by the poet shows that petty separatism had been long out-dated.

The third passage concerning the English, 11.57-59, is interesting not so much because the brothers are said to be exulting over the war (wiges hremige), which would be natural enough considering what they had performed during the day, but because the poet called them simply "brothers", thus letting them sink into anonymity. As they lose their names, they also lose their identity, thus becoming types rather than individuals, "champions and representatives of the nation".

The final statement in the poem, 11. 65b-73, developing the idea that the battle of Brunanburh was the greatest battle ever since the Angles and Saxons had first come to England and defeated the Welsh, may well seem exaggerated and presumptuous at first sight. Yet historically speaking, it was a major defeat for the Scandinavians and it did lead to the political unification of England. Other sources, such as Aethelweard's Chronicle or Aelfric's Heptateuch reinforce the importance of Aethelstan's victory for England as a whole. Furthermore, by insisting on a common past, the continuity of common interests between Mercia and Wessex is strongly sustained and a sense of national tradition established. Neill D. Isaacs has suggested that the passage could also be "a slap at the Welsh" which might well be true considering the hostility between England and Wales. So far it seems that the poet though being pragmatic, was never really obtrusive in his enthusiasm; almost paradoxically he was more propagandistic in his silence than he was in his treatment of the English.
Not once did he mention that the English losses had been heavy, including the two sons of Aethelweard, Alfred's youngest son. Neither did it occur to him that the English were now in the same position as the Welsh had been four hundred years earlier, nor did he remember that many of his contemporaries saw the Danish invasion as a just punishment of God. And in failing to realize this or in avoiding to mention it, he betrayed an almost chauvinistic blindness.

When Campbell wrote that exultation and scorn were "the two feelings breathing through the poem", he forgot that there is a solid amount of hatred accompanying the poet's scorn for the enemy. Twice the enemy is depicted by the adjective _lab_, "loathsome" (1.69a, 22b). Twice we are told that some of the slain were young men (1.29b, 44a) which practically means that the potentially best warriors had been killed. With almost cruel insistence the old age of Constantine is brought up several times and so is his loneliness when we are informed that he lost his relatives, his friends, and his son, too. Despite the poet's disdain the distorted hierarchy of this list, with the dead son mentioned at the end, imposes the image of Constantine as a tragic figure, heirless and alone. Yet the poet indulged in this image only for the twinkling of an eye and this in order to make his blow of sarcasm all the more devastating; the line (44) that refers to the youth of Constantine's son, also contains the upward beat _sylpan ne borfte_, "he dared not boast" (i.e. Constantine) and to complete the irony, the alliteration falls on _geongne_ and _sylpan_.

The entire passage centering around Constantine ends with the epithet _eald invita_ (1.46a); the connotation of _invita_, a word suggesting utter evil, may perhaps best be understood when one remembers that the
dragon in Beowulf is referred to as inwitgaest (1.2670). Very effectively the poet evoked an atmosphere of lurking doom around the hostile forces; faego, "doomed" occurs twice in relation to the sailors (11. 12a, 28a); a sense of utmost urgency is conveyed by such a detail as the boat hastening, almost like the enemy, off shore (1.35a); the sea over which the survivors escape seems unfriendly, fealu ("fallow")¹⁸ and deep ("deep"); the survivors themselves are dreorig, which means both "bloody" and "sad"; the beasts of prey waiting for the carrion give the final grim touch to the scene. The battle beasts have become something like a common property in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Raven, eagle, and wolf: they form the classic trio¹⁹; yet in some passages only one or two of them are mentioned.²⁰ Significantly enough, the poet of The Battle of Brunanburh chose to present us with the complete list, and devoted five and a half lines to their description, which is a considerable amount of space regarding the total length of the poem. Not only the list of the animals but also the immediate context of the passage adds by means of contrast much to the savage quality of the poem; preceding 11.60-65a, we are told about the victorious return to Wessex, following it there comes the crescendo of the entire poem: England's past and present glory. Furthermore, the poet could have simply stated that the beasts of prey were feeding on the carrion; but by opening the passage with the half-line leton him behindan a direct connection with the return of the king and his brother has been established: they consciously neglected the burial of the dead or were forced to neglect it.
It is, however, the poet’s use of understatement and irony, his most powerful weapons, which best betray how much he is gloating over the enemies’ defeat. About a slain soldier we do not read that he was dead, but that he was "weary, sated with war" (20a); the young kings were "put to sleep by swords" (30a): the ironic implication of peace and the juxtaposition of sleep and sword make their deaths appear all the more violent. On a similar premise works the use of plegan, "to play" or "to fight", referring to the fight of the enemies against the English (1.52b); the battle was certainly no play for the former, it may well have been one for the latter. The delirious delight with which the poet relates that the enemies had no reason to exult, to boast or to laugh is rhythmically emphasized by the parallel structures occurring three times in the second half-lines of 11. 40, 45, and 47. With a shrewd sense for ironic effects the poet also used certain words both in reference to the Vikings as well as to the English, thus reinforcing by their relative context either catastrophe or triumph.

Both armies are seeking their homeland:

Gewiton him þa Norþmenn naegledcnearum,
dreorig darøpa laf, on Dynges mere
ofe ætop waeter Dyflin secan,
eft Iraland, æwiscmode. (11.53-56)

Swylce þa gebropor begen aetsomme,
cing ond æapelning, cyppæ sohton,
Westsexna land, wiges hremige. (11.57-59)

The verb, secan "to seek", is modified in each case by the hint that Norsemen were æwiscmode "ashamed", and the brothers wiges hremige
"exulting over the war". And whereas Constantinus dared not exult (1.39b), Aethelstan and Edmund did (59b).

This constant play with ambiguities reaches its apex in the description of the rising and setting sun, a description that is realistic as well as metaphorical. The passage (11.13b-17a) sums up the lapse of a day. The image of the rising sun that is said to be maere "glorious", beorht "bright", and aebele "noble" links up with the glory achieved by the king; the image of the setting sun, however, with its associations of coming darkness and night point to the tired and sleeping warriors, i.e. to death, to the battlefield darkened by blood, to the dusky sea, and to the beasts of prey that are "grey" (64b) and "black" (61b).

It is quite obvious that many of the poetic details - such as the colours used, the attributes given to the king and the sun, the list of battle animals - belong to the stock of formulae in Old English poetry. The places given to them within their context and the number of shades they assume thereby, however, are original and "a familiar phrase becomes fresh as it illuminates, and is itself illuminated by, novel associations". The poet knew how to use them effectively, and they have passed the stage of literary commonplace because he integrated them perfectly into the total body of the poem.

Time and again critics have mentioned that the poet was most probably not personally involved in the conflict because he gave so
little detail and information about the actual fighting. The problem, however, seems totally irrelevant. Whether the poet was at the battle or not, whether the poem is a recollection of personal experiences or based on the accounts given by someone else, one thing seems to be certain: the poet's intention was not that of an objective reporter; his was the point of view of the victors and carried away by his own patriotic feelings he wrote a poem that insulted the enemy and glorified his country. He was not interested in the descriptions of individual fights, he aimed at a general overview: armies persecuted, armies were persecuted: some died, some returned home. Motion in this poem is performed in grand movements until it becomes almost static and we are left with the impression of looking at a richly ornate tapestry, embroidered on the occasion of the victory at Brunanburh, representing a procession where the victors are passing beneath the triumphal arch of the poet's praise, the defeated beneath the yoke of his scorn and dislike.
Footnotes to Chapter Three


5. J.B. Bessinger, "Waldon and the Olafsdrapa: An Historical Caveat," Comparative Literature, XIV, p.34.


8. See, for instance, D. Whitelock, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, p.77, note 2: "The entry ... is in alliterative metre, of a quality to make one glad that the chroniclers mainly used prose."


10. H.M. Chadwick, The Heroic Age, p.34.


12. See above, p. 21.


15. H.M. Chadwick, The Heroic Age, p.34.


17. The Battle of Brunanburh, ed. A. Campbell, p.41.

18.fealu or fealo is used both in Beowulf (l. 150) and in The Wanderer (l.46) to describe the colour of water. The author of The Phoenix
wrote about the plain that ne feallæ bær on foldan fealwe blastman (1.74). The translations given by Bosworth-Toller are: "fallow", "pale", "yellow", "dusky", "pale yellow or red coloured as whithered garss". Fealu in The Battle of Brunanburh has first of all the meaning of "yellow" and "pale" as it does in other places to characterize the colour of water. With its implication "dusky", however, it seems to point forward to the grey colours of the battle beasts, the shade of red links up with the dreorig in 1.54, and the nuance of transitoriness suggested in The Phoenix fits in very well with the theme of death in The Battle of Brunanburh.


Chapter Four
The Second Scandinavian Invasion

King Edward, Edgar's son and successor, was murdered in 978, three years after his accession. He was followed by Aethelred the Unready whose reign ended thirty-eight years later in the subjection of England to a foreign king, Cnut of Denmark.

About 980 a new wave of Scandinavian raiders fell upon England. As in the early ninth century, they first came in small bands and later as organized armies. If the invaders of the preceding century were met with the resolution and persistence of King Alfred, they now faced a king always hesitant to offer battle and all too often willing to pay the tributes they asked for. The chroniclers of these years clearly recognized the causes of national failure, and for the first time in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle the annals are full of complaints about the feebleness of the leaders and the lack of a steady policy.

And ever as things should have been moving, they were the more delayed from one hour to the next, and ever they let their enemies' force increase, and ever the English retreated inland and the Danes continually followed; and then in the end it effected nothing - the naval expedition or the land expedition - except the oppression of the people and the waste of money and the encouragement of their enemies. 1)

After some years of continuing attacks an unusually large Danish force arrived off the coast of Kent in 1009. Oxford was burned early in 1010, and shortly afterwards the East-Anglian levies were
defeated. With ironic understatement the chronicler summarized the events of the year 1010: "...And ever when they were in the east, the English army was kept in the west, and when they were in the south, our army was in the north ..." 2) In the autumn of 1011 the Danes returned to Kent after making a series of raids into the heart of the country. They seized the archbishop of Canterbury and murdered him in the following year. Towards the end of the year 1012 the greater part of the army left England, but in 1013 King Swein of Denmark invaded England, established a base in Northumbria and was accepted as a king by the Northumbrians and the Danes of eastern England. He then advanced towards the south and after the surrender of English Mercia, Wessex, and London, Aethelred fled to Normandy where he stayed "until the happy event of Swein's death" (ob bone byre be Swegen dead wearp) 3), in 1014. The Danish army accepted Swein's younger son Canut as their leader. At the request of some of his subjects, Aethelred returned from Normandy and led an expedition against the Danes whereupon Canut withdrew his army and went back to Denmark. It seems highly significant that Aethelred was asked to return to England; although he had been thoroughly unsuccessful in his opposition to the Danes, his people preferred him, an English king, to a foreign ruler:

Then all the councillors who were in England, ecclesiastical and lay, determined to send for King Ethelred, and they said no lord was dearer to them than their natural lord (him nan leofre hlaorf naere bonne gecynde hlaorf)... and they pronounced every Danish king an outlaw from England for ever (aefre aelcne Denisce cyning utlagede of Engla lande gecwaedon). 5)
Cnut was back again in England in 1015. For some months he was mainly opposed by Edmund Ironside, Aethelred's son, and by the people of London. Aethelred died in April 1016 and in the autumn of the same year Edmund suffered a sharp defeat at Ashingdon. The Chronicle reports that although Edmund had collected "all the English nation"(ealle Engla beode) "all the nobility of England was there destroyed"(eal seo dugub of Angelcynnes beode). Although by far the greater part of England was under Danish rule by that time, the chronicler does not limit his statement to London, Wessex, and Essex where the battle was fought. This proves that the sense of national unity had grown enough to allow this insistence on an overall English defeat, even though only a small part of the country was immediately involved in the military conflicts of 1016. An agreement was made whereby Wessex was left to Edmund and the remainder of the country handed over to Cnut; but within a month after the battle of Ashingdon Edmund died, and Cnut became king of England.

A strong sense of disillusionment and despair must have prevailed in the minds of the Englishmen living during these renewed Scandinavian attacks. After a century of continuous military success, beginning with the reign of Alfred the Great and ending with the death of King Edgar, the overall national - and, as I have shown, they were conscious that it was national - catastrophe must have struck them unexpectedly and all the harder therefore. Resignation speaks out of the Chronicle; nostalgia for past peace out of Aelfric's Heptateuch; fear and anger out of the homilies. Thus Wulfstan re-
cognized the historical parallels that the author of *The Battle of Brunanburh* had either neglected or forgotten. In interpreting the Viking raids as a sign of the divine wrath, Wulfstan was taking the same stand as Alcuin had done after the sack of Lindisfarne. In his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* he actually incorporated a passage of Alcuin's letter to Archbishop Æthelheard, where he wrote about Gildas who explained the Anglo-Saxon invasion as divine retribution for the sins of the Britains. Wulfstan insisted on Gildas in order to exhort the English "to turn to the right and to give up some of their wrong-doings" (gebogan to rihte ond be suman daele unriht forlaetan) so that they earned "the glories and the joys that God had prepared for those who perform his will in the world" (geearnian us ba maerba and ba myrba be God haefp gegearwod bam be his willan on worulde ge-wyrcað). Even though Wulfstan interpreted the Viking attacks as the manifestation of God's will, one wonders how strongly he believed in it: "But all the insult which we often suffer we repay with honouring those who insult us; we pay them continually and they humiliate us daily; they ravage and they burn, plunder and rob and carry on board." Dorothy Whitelock has pointed out that *Sermo Lupi* was preached after Æthelred's exile, probably in 1014, as is shown by the passage which she quotes: "And a very great treachery it is also in the world that a man should betray his lord to death or drive him, living, from the land; and both have happened in this land; Edward was betrayed and then slain and afterwards burned, and Æthelred was driven out of his land." She concludes that "Wulfstan's disapproval of the acceptance
of Sewgn is clear." 9) Thus we see Archbishop Wulfstan reacting to the Danes not only as a "homilist" but also - as the title of Miss White-
lock's essay suggests - as a "statesman"; and we may add: as an English
statesman. This attitude of Wulfstan becomes even more distinct when we look at his Institutes of Polity where he reveals in fact a national
concern beyond his display of political realism. According to him each
throne should stand on three pillars, one of them being Bellatores:
Bellatores sind wigmen, be eard sculon werian mid waepnum... 10) And
his work ends with a paragraph exhorting the English to be loyal to one
king and to defend their life and their country together; it is a plea for
common action: And uton acne cynchlford holdlice healdan, and lif
and land samod ealle werian, swa wel swa we best magon. 11)

Yet the evidence of Wulfstan and the chroniclers with their
justified sense of dissatisfaction tells only part of the story; it
ignores the stand of Byrhtnoth and his companions in the battle of
Maldon in 991. Byrhtnoth did not become famous because of this battle.
He was well known as a defender of the monastic revival and as a defend-
er of his country. E.V. Gordon writes that "he was one of the great men
of his generation" and "that he made a deep impression on his age"(p.15).

Byrhtnoth was made ealdorman of Essex in 956 and must have been one of
the greatest landowners in England. It is known that Byrhtnoth had
possessions in Essex, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Suffolk, Cambridges-
shire, Huntingdonshire, Northamptonshire, and Worcestershire(p.17).
The fact that the Ealdorman could have landownings scattered all over
central England may have helped to speed up the breakdown of provincial
separatism in favour of the growing "Englishness" of England. Yet his
political power was not so much due to his wealth and the width of his
territory as to the favour of the king and the church, to his alliance with influential friends, and to his popularity as a leader and protector. Gordon quotes from the Ely historian who said that Byrhtnoth was "untiring in his campaigns against the foes of the kingdom" (p. 19). And a passage of the *Vita Oswaldi*, written between 997 and 1005, describing the battle of Maldon, says about Byrhtnoth: *tota virtute coepit pro patria pugnare* (p. 6). Very sparingly the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that "in this year Ipswich was ravaged, and very soon afterwards Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon" 13). The battle of Maldon was just an episode in a tedious sequence of disasters, and in the long run its outcome was of no great consequence either to the Scandinavians or to the English. Nevertheless, Maldon has been impressed upon our minds as an important battle because of the great poem written on the deaths of the English warriors whose epitaph could have been:

> Go, tell the Spartans, thou who passest by, 14)
> That here obedient to their laws we be.
Footnotes to Chapter Four

1. Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a.999.

2. Ibid., a.1010.

3. Ibid., a.1014

4. (ge)cynde, "natural", "native", "innate" is related with cynd (or: cynn), "kin", "race", "people", "species". The use of this adjective suggests that the Danes were felt to be different not only because of their religion and geographical provenance, but also because they belonged to an other race. Kingship, with the emphasis on racial homogeneity, as it is defined in this annal seems to contradict the statement of J.E.A. Jolliffe, The Constitutional History of Medieval England (London, 1954), p.51: "The feeling that the king was natural lord of all Englishmen was of slow growth in England, and before the Norman Conquest not deeply held."

5. Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a.1014.

6. Ibid., a.1016; italics mine.

7. Alcuin, Correspondence, ed. E. Dümmler, No.17.


11. Ibid., No.236, p.165.


14. Simonides, Selected Epigrams, iii.4.
Chapter Five

The Battle of Maldon

In dealing with The Battle of Maldon we are faced with two major problems: (1) The beginning and the end of the poem are lost and we do not know how long the poem originally was. Critics, however, believe that the lost part of Maldon cannot be very substantial, and interpretations, therefore, have convincingly been based on the poem as it has been preserved. (2) The Battle of Maldon has generally been said to be a perfect example of the old Germanic comitatus ethos, described by Tacitus long ago, and related in spirit both to Beowulf and the heroic literature of the Continent. 1)

It is not my intention to contradict this traditional approach to the poem, nor do I want to prove that The Battle of Maldon is a pure expression of national consciousness in late tenth century England; I would simply like to show that both these elements, - the heroic and the national -, are combined in the poem without one necessarily excluding the other.

The Battle of Maldon is precise both topographically and historically and a summary of the poem will also be a summary of the actual events; the preliminaries of the battle were that a Viking force had entered the Blackwater estuary and taken hold of Northey island to the east of Maldon. For access to the mainland they depended on a causeway that was flooded at high tide. The poem begins with Byrhtnoth having taken possession of the landward end and drawing up
his forces along the bank while the tide was high and before the
Vikings could leave their camp on the island (11. 1-24). Refusing
an arrogant demand for tribute, Byrhtnoth waited for the ebb (11. 25-
61). As soon as the water fell the Vikings began to stream out along
the causeway. But a few of Byrhtnoth's retainers held it against them
and finally they asked to be allowed to cross unhindered in order to
fight on equal terms on the mainland. Byrhtnoth - with what the poet
called overmod - agreed to this and battle was joined (11. 96-184).
Many among his own men took to flight and the English ranks were
broken (11. 185-201). A group of Byrhtnoth's retainers, however, know-
ing that all hope was lost, went on fighting in order to avenge their
lord until they, too, fell (11. 202-325).

Critics have noticed a change of tone from the time on when Byrhtnoth's
retainers, faithful to their oaths, go on fighting with the courage of
despair. Generations of readers have been moved - and rightly so - by
their heroic deaths. The poem, however, as it has come down to us con-
centrates only in the third part (185ff.) on the theme of comitatus
loyalty; the poet's "real subject was not the battle but the deeds and
deaths of the English heroes", E. V. Gordon wrote. But we cannot know
for sure what the real subject was as long as the poem lacks its be-
ginning and end, and the fact remains that the poet concentrated for
a long time on the events before the battle (1-98) and on the turmoil
of the battle itself (99-184).

In order to work out the national theme of The Battle of Maldon
I propose to look at the poet's treatment of the Scandinavians.
The messenger of the Vikings had asked for tribute "as if he and his men were the proprietors of the land":

\[\text{and eow betere is paet ge pisne garraes mid gafole forgylidan bonne we swa hearde hilde daelon;}\]

(11. 31-33)

And Byrhtnoth answered:

\[\text{Ge hyrst þu, sælida, hwaet þis folc segeþ? Hi willep eow to gafole garas syllan, ættryrne ord ond ealde swurd, þa heregæatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.}\]

(11. 45-48)

Byrhtnoth, repeating the gafol mentioned by the messenger continues to specify its meaning ironically; it is heregæatu, a payment in wæpons to a lord on the death of his tenant and thus certainly not a tribute that will profit the Vikings. Byrhtnoth's idea is stylistically illustrated in 1.46 and in the last line of his speech (1.61), where gafol alliterates with garas and with grim sogenæsa.

Furthermore, Byrhtnoth answered in the name of his folc, which refers first of all to the people immediately around him, i.e. to his retainers and the East-Saxon levies. Folc, however, has also the meaning of "people" or "nation" and it seems quite possible that he spoke by extension in the name of the English people for whom he felt responsible. Paying tributes to the Danes had become a national habit during the reign of Aethelred the Unready; one has only to remember the continuous complaints of the chroniclers in order to understand that the poet's intention may have been amongst others
the presentation of Byrhtnoth as one man who refused to pay the
Danes. The extended meaning of *folc* becomes even more plausible
when one considers the continuation of Byrhtnoth's speech:

sege þinum leodum micce lapre spell,
þæt her stynt unforcup eorl mid his werode
be wile gealgean eþel þisne,
Æbelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc ond foldan;

(11. 50-55)

Here again, as in Asser, in *Brunanburh*, and in Wulfstan, we come
across the notion that the English had to defend their "people"(*folc*),
their "native land"(*eþel*), their "country" (*eard*), and their "soil"
(*folde*). Byrhtnoth stresses this concept once again (1.58) when he
has the possessive pronoun precede "country": *on urne eard.*

To heanlic me þinceþ
þæt ge mid umrum sceattum to scype gangu
unbefohtene, nu ge þus feor hider
on urne eard in becomon;
ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangan;
us sceal ord ond ecg aer geseman,
grim gupplega, aer we gafol syallon.

(11. 55-61)

The inherent threat and grim irony of the entire sentence reveal that
the real subject of the poem - if we can talk about a real subject
at all - is not only the deeds and deaths of the heroes surviving
Byrhtnoth and dying after him, but the theme of the battle itself:
*feallan sceolon haebene aet hilde* (11. 54-55). The stand taken by
Byrhtnoth proves that not everybody in England was willing to be
humiliated daily, as Wulfstan put it in his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos.*
Once the battle has started the poet's treatment of the Danes shifts from scorn to hatred. Again he stresses the fact that the Vikings are not just enemies, but foreign enemies who have no claim on the country: laðe gystas (1.86) he calls them, and "loathed people" (labere beode [genitive], 1.90). Acting crookedly as they do (lytegin, 1.86), it links them up with the name grom (1.100) meaning "enemy" but also having the religious connotation of the Enemy (Old Saxon: devil). Another epithet used in connection with the Vikings is waelwulf (1.96) as the description of a warrior who is as fierce to slay as is a wolf.

The Scandinavians would probably have liked the name, as they called themselves "the givers of plenty to the raven, who long were hateful to the English." Waelwulf, however, was also used as an epithet of a cannibal, who preys on the dead like a wolf, a definition which is somehow closer to the spirit of Maldon. With this meaning the word seems to point forward to the circling raven and greedy eagle (ll. 106-107) thus creating a "personal union" between the Vikings and the birds of prey. One remembers similar names attributed to them by other authors; thus Asser compared them to "foxes", "wolves", and "women"; Aethelweard called them lues inmunda ("foul plague"); and Simeon of Durham said they were "fearful wolves" and "stinking hornets." G.C. Britton remarked very pertinently in a recently published article that the poet of The Battle of Maldon meant the Vikings to be an unknown threat; "the more terrifying, because the less human,"
the less defined ... The Vikings are consciously animalized, they are not human, but 'wolves of slaughter'."11)

As far as the remaining part of the poem is concerned, i.e. Byrhtnoth's death, the treachery of some and the loyalty of others, it is justified to interpret it in terms of the comitatus bond. Whereas the beginning of the poem and the first stages of the battle were focused both on the Vikings and the English, the second part concentrates around the latter and the enemies move into the background from where they act as anonymous agents. The interest of the poet is no longer based on the blow-counterblow verbal and military attacks of the opposing armies, but on the way the English behave. It is worth noticing that the Vikings do not speak any more once they have been indentified with the battle beasts, whereas each of the English heroes is individualized by the speech he gives before his death.

Byrhtnoth died defending his country and his people as he had proposed to do in his message to the enemies. If some of his retainers fled, they betrayed the very cause they were originally fighting for, i.e. the freedom of their country and the downfall of the pagans. Likewise one may say that the loyal retainers died at the side of their lord, faithful to him, faithful to their country, and faithful to themselves. Their deeds and their deaths though standing in the long tradition of the Germanic heroic code, prove that these traditions had not become meaningless in a society whose conditions
were far removed from Tacitus' Germania. What happens in the later part of the poem becomes a far deeper sense if we see it as the logical consequence of Byrhtnoth's oath at the beginning of the poem, where he and his force of men promised to defend epel þisne,
Aepelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc ond foldan;
(11. 52-54)

I have commented on the meaning of this passage above (see p. 52). It seems more than an accident when the last part of the poem starts by taking up the very themes of Byrhtnoth's answer to the Vikings:
þa wearp afeallan þaes folces ealdor
Aepelredes eorl;
(11. 202-203)

It is as though the retainers were realizing at this moment who Byrhtnoth was and what he stood for: the awareness that their lord was also the lord of the people (Folces ealdor) and the earl of King Aethelred (Aepelredes eorl) makes them continue the battle - in the spirit of Byrhtnoth - defending the country of their king and his people.

J.B. Bessinger wrote on behalf of The Battle of Maldon as opposed to The Battle of Brunanburh that it was "patriotic without being propagandistic". Yet I believe that both Maldon and Brunanburh are patriotic and propagandistic, despite the fact that Maldon shows none of the triumphant and gloating qualities we find in Brunanburh. It seems that the poet of Maldon expressed his detestation for the Vikings freely, indeed, his use of irony and scorn in the beginning
resembles the tone of *Brunanburh* very much. And having the English heroes die one after the other like martyrs is about as propagandistic as one can get.

The heroic sentiment with which each poem deals individually is thought of as a contemporary issue of national dimensions and what difference there is between the two poems can be naturally explained by the fact that one poem celebrates a great victory whereas the other mourns over a sad yet noble defeat.
Footnotes to Chapter Five


2. The Battle of Maldon, ed. E.V. Gordon, p.28.


5. When the Viking messenger spoke about Byrhtnoth's ransoming his people, he said it with the following words: Gyf bu baet geraedest, .... / baet bu bine leoda lysan wille (11. 36-37); it is significant that the Vikings felt about the leode as Byrhtnoth did about the folc: They realized that not only the destiny of the men surrounding him but of the leode, i.e. "people", "nation" lay in the hands of Byrhtnoth.


7. Ibid.


Conclusion

In the course of this study I have tried to answer the questions of how important and strong English national consciousness had become at the time when the battle of Brunanburh and the battle of Maldon were fought; to what extent it had been the feeling of patriotism that had prompted the poets to write about the battles; and, finally, in how far nationalism is reflected in both the form and the content of the poetry itself.

With the exception of a few random remarks on the expression of patriotism in the poems, literary critics have either considered the problem to be irrelevant or have carefully avoided it. Historians, non-literary documents of the Anglo-Saxon period, and the events of history itself, however, have supported - what was first an intuition - that a specific English consciousness had gradually become a factor of pre-Conquest England which was urgent enough to be fused into the poetry that seems so thoroughly conventional at first sight and which has often been condemned as an example of the decadence of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse.

We have seen how by the tenth century an English monarchy had emerged out of the twelve separate kingdoms that existed shortly after the Anglo-Saxon invasion. Originally, the limits of a single kingdom were set by tribal bonds and kinship loyalties, its structure was defined by the sense of common blood. Rule over an alien kin could
only be maintained by force; thus the supremacy of the Bretwalda depended largely on the strength of the ruler holding the title and it was a rather brittle institution as long as the dynasties could break away from it whenever it suited them to do so. Offa, who had incorporated several kingdoms into Mercia, was the first king to clearly drive towards the lasting kingdom of the English; yet he, too, ruled England by force and Mercia's supremacy was challenged by Wessex soon after Offa's death. It was not until King Arthur that the English peoples pledged their allegiance to one king, realizing their affinities and recognizing the West-Saxon king as representing them all together. The creation of an English nation, of a crown and subjects, and of a general peace was the work of Alfred's successors, such as Aethelstan who on sibbe wunude mid his leode or Edgar who was rowed by his sub-kings on the river Dee while he was steering the boat. Thus the various tribal organizations had gradually been replaced by an overall English racial and territorial organization.

It is significant that during a century that maintained its political stability because of the Mercian hegemony English scholarship and missionary enterprises reached a climax hitherto unknown. This testifies to Christianity acting as another unifying element which tied the English spiritually together, and helped accelerate the growth of national unity and its ensuing national consciousness. Bede is filled with national pride and with the sense of belonging to a people chosen by God. Boniface and Alcuin, both spending many
years on the Continent and dying there, remained strongly attached to their native country, expressing their concern for its welfare over and over again.

The political and cultural developments of the interior were seconded by still another element: the continuous effort of the English to throw off "the virus of the Viking attacks"\(^1\), in order to save their own cultural heritage. It seems that the racial, religious, and linguistic qualities that the English saw embodied in their enemies made them become all the more conscious of their own identity, and if they fought against the invaders it was not simply in order to survive as individuals but in order to survive as a free people with its own traditions and characteristics, as the English nation. Thus King Alfred fought against the Vikings, built ships and constructed fortresses. But he also wanted the young people of his nation to know how to write and read their native language; and his translations were an effort to preserve an Anglo-Christian culture that was challenged and threatened by Scandinavian invaders.

Likewise, The Battle of Brunanburh and The Battle of Maldon bear testimony to the existence of an English national consciousness, on the one hand by telling us how the English and the Vikings fought and died, and on the other hand by showing us that the writing of Old English poetry was still more than an antiquarian hobby and could yet be inspired by contemporary issues such as the sentiment of nationality which V.B. Galbraith has defined as
love, or at least awareness, of one's country, and pride in its past achievements, real or fictitious; and it springs from attachment to the known and familiar, stimulated by the perception of difference - difference of habits and customs, often too of speech, from those of neighbouring peoples.

If the poems still remind us of the heroic tradition because of the conventionality of their language, then we might recall that the author of Beowulf wrote or rather sang about Christian belief in a diction close to the heathen devotional vocabulary, probably because the culture he was living in and the poetic language he knew had not yet had time enough to absorb and assimilate the new themes of the Christian religion. In dealing with the problem of national patriotism in the battle poems we must take into account that the traditional habits of narration may have confined the poets to a limited presentation of their emotions. Being put into the new context of national themes, however, the formulaic patterns lend themselves to new interpretations, and once we have accepted this, the poems become a positive expression of the poets' sentiment of nationality.
Footnotes to the Conclusion


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