



English Nationalism in 'The Battle of Maldon' and 'The Battle of Brunanburh'

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To assess the prevalence of English nationalism in Anglo-Saxon literature, it is first necessary to define what we mean by 'English'. Recent archaeological and genetic research has suggested that—contrary to belief in a singular mass migration of Germanic people—immigration to Britain 'consisted of only small groups of warriors and few, if any, families'.¹ It is possible, therefore, that the entire Anglo-Saxon society did not arrive fully formed and in vast enough numbers to span the country. Ward-Perkins has suggested that the spread of Anglo-Saxon culture is instead due to many native Britons being quickly 'anglo-saxonised',² willing to adopt a new Anglo-Saxon culture by breeding, fighting and worshipping alongside the invaders. By the time of a Christianised monarchy in the tenth century, the ethnic makeup of those who identified as 'English' could contain genes from Britain, Germania, Scandinavia and more, with substantial regional variations.³ Because of this, and accounting for further migrations between the fifth and tenth centuries, the English nationalism that we might find in Anglo-Saxon literature is not merely the patriotism of one racial group from the Germanic continent. It is instead the nationalism of a variety of peoples for whom Englishness could be learnt, shared and adopted.

To identify nationalism, one can look at the ways in which the literature promotes the ideas of English culture. In doing this, the poets not only celebrate Englishness, but also present ideals that promote nationalism in the poems' audience. It is impossible to narrow down the essence of an entire culture into a list of specific features, however the significant focus on both history and faith in written sources such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* make it productive to treat these as cultural markers that present a united England. I focus particularly on *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon* as their purpose is to present accounts of true battles. Although still manipulated by the intentions of their author, as I will discuss, it is important to consider the presentation of Englishness as it applies to the common 'fyrd' soldier rather than, for example, a Saint or Christ.

Perhaps the evocation of nationalism that would be most recognisable to a modern audience can be found in *The Battle of Maldon*. The text is recorded in an eighteenth century transcription of a lost, fragmentary original, the date of which is uncertain but likely to be around the year of the battle itself, which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* places in the year 991:⁴

...his werode
þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc and foldan.⁵

(...his troop
who will defend this homeland,
my lord Æthelred's country,
people and ground.)

(*BM*, 51-4)

Byrhtnoth's speech is undeniably patriotic, and this rallying cry tying the land, the people and the king into one allegiance is a familiar motif to us through more recent texts such as Shakespeare's 'for Harry! England and Saint George!' in *King Henry V*.⁶ The possessives also demonstrate the unity of the English, and the pride they have in their Englishness. Byrhtnoth refers to the army as 'his' troop, a group of people with whom the leader is proud to share a common kinship. Similarly, the genitive 'Æþelredes' shows not only the rule the King holds over England, but also demonstrates England as more than a vague cultural concept, but as a nation with their own specific territory.

The Battle of Brunanburh is a retrospective, historical poem that specifically celebrates the victory of Æthelstan and Eadmund in defending this territory against the Scots and Vikings led by Constantine II and Olaf Guthfrithsson. Its inclusion in four versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is no

¹ Heinrich Härke, 'Anglo-Saxon Immigration and Ethnogenesis', *Medieval Archaeology* 55 (2011), 1-28 (pp. 2-4).

² Bryan Ward-Perkins, 'Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Not Become More British?', *The English Historical Review*, 115:462 (2000) 513-533 (p. 521).

³ Cristian Capelli et al, 'A Y Chromosome Census of the British Isles', *Current Biology*, 13 (2003), 979-984.

⁴ Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old English Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 251-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-269: all future quotes from *The Battle of Maldon (BM)* taken from this edition with line numbers in parentheses, followed by my translations using Marsden's glosses and glossary.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *King Henry V* Act III, Scene 1, Line 34 (1599) ed. T. W. Craik (London: Routledge, 1995).

coincidence; Hill suggests that, along with the rest of the *Chronicle*, it is ‘a kind of royalist, West Saxon propaganda’,⁷ promoting the Germanic ideal for political purposes. Indeed, the poem itself is nothing short of publicity issued by the church and the monarchy to cement in the English people a sense of nationhood and a loyalty to Christ and the King.⁸ The distinctions made between the English and their enemies are significant in forging this union, in particular the epithets and references to the armies themselves. Note the first references to the Scots and the Vikings, ‘Sceotta Leoda ond Scipflotan’ (*Men of the Scots and Seamen*, BB 11).⁹ The poet does not simply refer to the armies by collective nouns of ‘Scots’ and ‘Vikings’, but instead highlights that they are people *of* the Scots and seamen. The same can be found later in ‘gumena norþerna’ (BB 18), men *of* the North. Here there is nothing connecting these people other than where they are from. Each man has a separate identity—perhaps a separate Lord or separate, pagan Gods—and are only linked by where they are from. Compare this to the times the poet refers directly to the English; ‘Wesseaxe’, the West Saxons, ‘Myrce’, The Mercians (BB 20, 24). Even later in the poem are the ‘Engle ond Seaxe’, the Angles and Saxons. In these, the poet uses collective nouns to imply a sense of unity and similarity; the warriors are not simply men *from* Mercia, they are Mercians, linked not only by location but also by their culture, their livelihoods and their societal bonds.

Uniting the English against a common enemy is a recurring theme in Anglo-Saxon literature, and such a union is presented by the poet of *Maldon*. The implication of a combined and united English army against a pagan ‘other’ manifests itself in two ways; the poet’s word choice in referring to the armies, and the names of the English men. The enemies of the English are referred to repetitively using terms that—from an English perspective—would be considered derogatory. The poet describes ‘wælwulfas’ (*slaughter-wolves*, BM 96) advancing, and declares Byrhtnoð is slain by ‘hæðene scealcas’ (*heathen warriors*, BM 181). These demonstrate the brutal and ‘un-heroic’ nature of the enemy, not only showing them as animalistic through the comparison to wolves, but also as religiously corrupt non-Christians. The poet’s insult ‘hæðene’ is particularly significant, as it is not only drawing the English together by uniting them against the Vikings, but simultaneously strengthening their notion of a shared Christian faith. There is an irrefutable sense that the English are superior, a nationalism that we would surely expect from heroic poetry.

The names of these English men in the battle are perhaps not the names we might expect from a poem that otherwise seems to promote the notion of Englishness. Many of the names appear to be of Scandinavian origin, Locherbie-Cameron tracing the Scandinavian heritage of names such as ‘Thurstan’ and ‘Wistan’ and also highlighting the use of ‘by-names’ such as ‘Wulfmær se geonga’ (Wulfmær the younger, BM 155) as ‘indirect’ Scandinavian influence.¹⁰ This in part adds to the probability of the poem being historically accurate, but is also effective in creating a take on Englishness that encompasses more than just the ancestors of fifth-century Angles and Saxons. The implication is that people of all ethnicities and races can be drawn together under one ‘English’ banner, and in doing so become superior and more glorious than what they previously were. This was no doubt an appealing thought to the descendants of those Britons who survived the Anglo-Saxon invasion ‘to become subjects of the new Anglo-Saxon rulers’,¹¹ or to more recent migrants such as the ‘loyal Anglo-Danes’ from the east.¹² The English nationalism here is subtle, but capable of binding the men by more than genetics.

This notion of bringing different people together and grouping them into one cultural identity is supported by Byrhtnoð’s speech to the Viking messenger; ‘Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?’ (*Do you hear, seaman, what these people say?*, BM 45). ‘Folc’ here demonstrates Byrhtnoð, a Lord, speaking on behalf of his retainers and imposing upon them a shared voice. By now, the *Maldon* poet presents the English as a collective with a common attitude and thoughts rather than as individuals. In the same part of the poem, Byrhtnoð uses the collective noun ‘urum’ (*our*, BM 56), establishing a stark contrast with the poet’s use of ‘laðe gystas’ (*hateful strangers*, BM 86) in the previous line. The poet aligns himself with the English warriors, suggesting that a stranger to them is a stranger to himself and, by extension, to those reading or hearing the poem. The distinction between a brave and valiant ‘us’

⁷ John Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature* (Gainesville, Florida UP, 2000), p. 2.

⁸ Note that Brunanburh is not overtly religious, however its reference to the genealogy of Kings as discussed below demonstrates how, according to the *Chronicle*, the church is inseparably linked to the monarchy.

⁹ Marsden, *Cambridge Old English Reader*, pp. 86-91: all future quotes from *The Battle of Brunanburh* (BB) taken from this edition with line numbers in parentheses, followed by my translations using Marsden’s glosses and glossary.

¹⁰ Margaret A.L. Locherbie-Cameron, ‘The Men Named in the Poem’, in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 239.

¹¹ Ward-Perkins, ‘Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Not Become More British?’, p. 522.

¹² Locherbie-Cameron, ‘The Men Named in the Poem’, p. 239.

and a pagan and savage 'them' shows perhaps the most nationalistic feature of *Maldon*; regardless of background or race, the English are English because they are not Vikings.

The Battle of Brunanburh creates a similar effect in its final few lines through its glorified destruction of the Welsh, looking back in retrospect and celebrating the success of the Angles and Saxons who 'Wealas ofercoman' (*overcame Welshmen*, BB 72) during the fifth century immigration to Britain. The nationalism here is evident in the poet's praise of the Anglo-Saxon success, but is also apparent in the way the two events, the claiming of England and the defending of it, are placed side by side. Graham Caie suggests that this comparison implies that 'the English are now claiming their rightful inheritance' and that the poet's use of stock phrases, clichés and archaic language 'evokes the heroic period of the great Germanic victories'.¹³ It is clear then that the glory of the separate Angles and Saxons who 'eard begeatan' (*acquired a homeland*, BB 73) is later reinforced by the glory of the English, a collective united under a single monarch who 'land ealgodon' (*defended land*, BB 9). The *Brunanburh* poet creates a celebrated legacy for the English, setting down a shared historical background as the framework for Anglo-Saxon culture and rooting the indefinable and abstract notion of contemporary Englishness in the concrete and factual events of the past.

Reference to the monarchy, 'Her æþelstan cyning' (*Here King Æthelstan*, BB 1), is a further factor that draws the nation together and demonstrates a sense of patriotism. Not only does the poet show England united under one ruler, but also subtly wraps idealistic fiction in indisputable fact. The poem declares that Æthelstan and Eadmund fought bravely 'swa him geæþele wæs / from cneomægum' (*as was inborn in them from their ancestors*, BB 7-8). Reference to the brothers' ancestors does not just refer to renowned leaders such as Eadweard and Alfred, but looks back further to the royal genealogies set out in previous entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Although the *Brunanburh* poem itself does not make this link, it can be deduced from the assertion that books are 'ealde uðwitan' (*old authorities*, BB 69) which emphasises the *Chronicle's* own legitimacy as a truthful source. The entry for the year 856 traces the heritage of Alfred back through several kings that are known to us by other historical documentation such as 'Ine' and 'Cenred', then further through to 'Woden', 'Noe' (Noah) and 'Cristus' (Christ).¹⁴ The *Chronicle* brings together Germanic paganism and Christianity into one continuous and unbroken bloodline, culminating in the rulers of modern England. *Brunanburh* attempts the same on a larger scale, bringing Christians, pagans and people from different regions into one common culture. Not only does this create a shared history, but also by extension a shared faith.

Alfred, Æthelstan and the composers of the *Chronicle* were no doubt aware of this when writing, keeping the idea in mind that 'one Church, one people and one faith could prefigure a political unity'.¹⁵ Although extant documents can provide clear evidence of some sort of legal framework in tenth century England from the reign of Æthelbert,¹⁶ specific written laws are not mentioned in *Brunanburh* or *Maldon* and are therefore not relevant here. The idea of political and legal unity, however, encompasses more than just charters, and the 'heroic code' expressed in the poems suggests an underlying social understanding of cultural responsibilities. Brynnoth's troops are aware that they are obliged to remain faithful to their leader; as Harris points out, it is not something as abstract as loyalty that drives the warriors of *The Battle of Maldon*, but is instead the fulfilling of an oath, the breaking of which could carry severe legal punishment.¹⁷ The poet says of Eadric, 'beot he gelæste / þa he ætforan his frean feohtan sceolde' (*he fulfilled the vow that he must fight in front of his Lord*, BM 15-16). 'Beot' here is an important term, Einarsson tracing it through other Old English texts and suggesting that it 'stresses the fact that it is a promise, or a vow' (976),¹⁸ a contract to their lord but also a boast that will be met with either death or glory. After Brynnoth's death, those loyal to him reaffirm their vows, Ælfwine reminding the warriors of their 'beot' made in mead halls (BM, 212-213) and Offa achieving praise and glory from the poet for fulfilling his oath, achieving 'ðegenlice' (*thane-like*, BM 289-294) status because of it.¹⁹ Of course, there are those who do break their oaths, but in doing so they are morally condemned;²⁰ the poet severely

¹³ Graham D. Caie, 'The Shorter Heroic Verse', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. (Amsterdam: VU UP, 1994), p. 88.

¹⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition* (Volume 5 MS.C), ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), pp. 56-57: all future references to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* taken from this edition, followed by my translation.

¹⁵ Sarah Foot, 'The Making of Angelcynn: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), 25-49 (p. 41).

¹⁶ Andrew Prescott, 'The Textus Roffensis' in *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, ed. by Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991), pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ Steven Harris, 'Oaths in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Academia.edu* <https://www.academia.edu/1213825/Maldon_and_Oaths_Pre-Pub> [accessed 20 April 2016].

¹⁸ Stefan Einarsson, 'Old English Beot and Old Icelandic Heitstrenging', *PMLA*, 49:4 (1934), 975-993 (p. 976).

¹⁹ See also Leofsunu offering his 'gehate' (promise) that he will not flee from battle (BM, 246-248) and the way the fulfilment of Eadweard's vows allows him to 'wurdlice wrec' (worthily avenge) his lord (BM, 273-279).

²⁰ Donald Scragg (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1981) p. 37.

criticises Godric's desertion, 'hit riht ne wæs' (*it was not right*, *BM* 190), Crossley-Holland translating this phrase as 'most unlawfully',²¹ which stresses the potential legal consequences of his actions. Those who flee are instantly ostracised, distinguished from the loyal soldiers and 'othered' like the Vikings. The poet stresses that the English are bound by a set of values and moral laws, the breaking of which is incompatible with the established societal norms. *The Battle of Maldon* is a nationalistic celebration of English values, but is also a way of defining them.

Contemporary audiences of *The Battle of Maldon* were likely to have been aware that the heroic ideals presented in the poem were glorified.²² Yet those values it sets out still signalled to them as well as us that the English people were united by shared values, beliefs and expectations. Both *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* reinforce Foot's notion of 'cultural, legal and linguistic unity' (49),²³ creating a strong sense of nationalism that runs through these poems and other Anglo-Saxon literature. However, being predominantly written by the monarchy and the church, those to whom a united England would be appealing, it is worth pointing out that these poems cannot be taken as proof that the English as a collective were particularly nationalistic. The unreliability of these sources is highlighted in *The Capture of the Five Boroughs*, a poem similar in its plain and descriptive style to *Brunanburh* and also found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, under the year 942. Here, Edmund is praised for his role in releasing Danes from the 'hæþenra hæfteclommum' (*heathens' prison-fetters*),²⁴ yet no mention is made of the armies that he commanded. This demonstrates the tendency of written documents, products of literate earls and monks, to have a significant bias towards the crown and the church. Despite this, the factual evidence of Scandinavians fighting alongside Anglo-Saxons²⁵ and the proof of a united culture demonstrates that the commoners were willing to accept the Englishness that their lords and literature imposed on them. Ultimately, of course, it worked, and by 1066 there was no doubt that the English were their own nation state, united again against common enemies. The nationalism of poems such as *Brunanburh* and *Maldon* showed the beginnings of a country where race and ethnic origins were of little importance when compared to the common culture, laws, faith and monarchy of a cohesive England.

²¹ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) p. 16.

²² Caie, 'The Shorter Heroic Verse', p. 93.

²³ Foot, 'The Making of Angelcynn', p. 49.

²⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, pp.79.

²⁵ Locherbie-Cameron, 'The Men Named in the Poem', p. 240.

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