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The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's ofermod Once Again

by Helmut Gneuss

For Norman E. Eliason

ALMOST fifteen years ago, Professor Elliott said of *The Battle of Maldon* "Such a poem invites and rewards frequent and detailed critical discussion, and of this there has not been nearly enough."¹ Today, it seems doubtful if Anglo-Saxonists would still subscribe to this statement. I have counted forty-two editions of *The Battle of Maldon* (not including revised editions), thirty-three translations, and about one hundred forty books and articles dealing with the poem as a whole or with its various problems and aspects, and yet I am sure I have missed some published work. Most of the more comprehensive treatments of *The Battle of Maldon* have paid attention to one of its crucial passages, lines 84-90—

¹ Ralph W. V. Elliott, "Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A Study in Heroic Technique," *Comparative Literature*, XIV (1962), 56.

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þa hi þæt ongeaton and georne gesawon
 þæt hi þær bricgweardas bitere fundon,
 ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas,
 bædon þæt hi upgang agan moston,
 ofer þone ford faran, feþan lædan.
 Ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode
 alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode.²

—and many of them have discussed in more or less detail the meaning of *for his ofermode* in line 89.

In view of all this it would not be surprising if students of *The Battle of Maldon* should think that enough has been written about the poem, and enough about Byrhtnoð's *ofermod*. That I am nevertheless returning to this word and the passage in which it occurs is due to three reasons: first, because most scholars—though not all³—seem to be agreed that here we have a key word in a key passage, essential for our understanding of the poem and the poet's attitude to his hero; second, because there is anything but agreement on what *ofermod* might mean; and third, because at least a certain amount of what has been written about this word in *Maldon* must be considered as superficial and even careless.

But what does OE *ofermod* mean in our poem? Let us first look at the solutions suggested by a large number of editors, translators, and literary historians. It has seemed to me uneconomical and unnecessary to provide a full list of definitions or translations, names and publications; instead I will try to provide a basis for my discussion by grouping the various senses that have been proposed for *ofermod* into five categories and quote representative examples from the literature on the subject. I am well aware, of course, of the problems of semantic analysis, and in particular of semantic analysis applied to poetry written in a “dead” language;

² Quoted from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR VI (New York, 1942), p. 9.

³ George Clark, “*The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem*,” *Speculum*, XLIII (1968), 61 f., considers lines 181–208 as the turning point of the action. Cf. O. D. Macrae-Gibson, “How Historical is *The Battle of Maldon*,” *Medium Aevum*, XXXIX (1970), 103–5, and David G. Hale, “Structure and Theme in ‘The Battle of Maldon’,” *N & Q*, CCXIII (1968), 242 f.

and I am also well aware that I am oversimplifying the results of previous work by arranging the various translations in five apparently clear-cut sense-groups. But I hope that the remarks following the list will help to avoid misunderstandings. The five groups of proposed meanings are:

1. pride, great pride, excessive pride, foolish pride, foolhardy pride; arrogance, haughtiness, disdain; overweening courage
2. overconfidence, superb self-confidence
- 3a. recklessness, rashness, rash courage, foolhardiness, Ger. *Übermut* (= high spirits, wantonness, exuberance?)
- 3b. over-courage, overboldness
4. great, high courage
5. magnanimity, greatness of heart, over-generosity

It will be obvious at once that neither the five categories nor the concepts listed in each can be neatly separated from each other. While "foolish pride" and "magnanimity" do not seem to have anything in common, one would hesitate to draw a line between "recklessness" and "overboldness." What makes judging the whole issue yet more difficult is the fact that editors, translators, and critics understandably do not always use one-word definitions, and that their translations are often ambiguous. In some papers and commentaries it is not clear if the author wants to offer us a translation of *ofermod*, or a general appraisal of Byrhtnoð's character and action, or both. Thus E. V. Gordon says "Byrhtnoð, magnanimous and over-confident, allowed them passage," but translates *ofermod* by "great pride, overconfidence" in his glossary;⁴ W. P. Ker speaks of Byrhtnoð's "pride and self-reliance" and of his "unnecessary magnanimity" on one and the same page.⁵ Some authors may refrain deliberately from an exact translation; thus Professor Bessinger refers to *ofermod* as "a traditional heroic fault."⁶ Others, again, consider

⁴ *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon (London, 1937), p. 76.

⁵ W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance. Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, 1896; repr. New York, 1957), p. 54.

⁶ J. B. Bessinger, Jr., "Maldon and the *Óláfsdrápa*: An Historical Caveat," *Comparative Literature*, XIV (1962), 31. See also Heinrich Beck, "Zur literatur-

the OE word as ambiguous, either because "we readers may be uncertain about the exact meaning of a word in a given context,"⁷ or because the ambiguity is intended by the poet. Professor Cross thinks that when translating *ofermod* there is a choice between "pride" and "over-courage," and that "magnanimity" may also be possible; but he does not believe that we are dealing with a case of deliberate polysemy, created by the poet,⁸ whereas Professor Bloomfield would not exclude this possibility: "The poet's attitude towards his hero may be condemnatory although there is an ambiguity of mood, perhaps reflected in the word *ofermod*," he says, and: "It is possible that the word retains the ambiguity of its elements and of its German cognate *Übermut*—'high spirits' or 'pride'."⁹ A special case is that of O. D. Macrae-Gibson, who claims that "Byrhtnoð did not show rashness on the occasion on which the poet ascribes *ofermod* to him, but he did on another occasion, so that the accusation is quite understandable and the usual view of the sense of *ofermod* can be maintained"; for line 89, however, he would prefer to think that *ofermod* also has a favorable connotation. The "other occasion" occurs in line 132, when Byrhtnoð advances to meet the Viking;¹⁰ can we seriously believe that the poet should have anticipated his judgment of Byrhtnoð's advancing ahead of his warriors in the context of lines 89–90?

There are further problems when we look at the definitions and translations of *ofermod* that have been offered. "Pride" is the

geschichtlichen Stellung des althochdeutschen Ludwigsliedes und einiger verwandter Zeitgedichte," *ZfdA*, CIII (1974), 41: "Byrhtnoð . . . antwortet mit einem zunächst rätselhaften *ofermod*."

⁷ J. E. Cross, "Mainly on Philology and the Interpretative Criticism of *Maldon*," in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. E. B. Irving and R. B. Burlin (Toronto, 1974), p. 251, n. 39.

⁸ Cross, p. 247; cf. the same author's "Oswald and Byrhtnoth, a Christian Saint and a Hero who is Christian," *English Studies*, XLVI (1965), 103.

⁹ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgment of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum*, XLIV (1969), 558 and 547. See also T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), p. 28: "a hero can even be verbally ambiguous."

¹⁰ Macrae-Gibson, pp. 104 f.

sense suggested most often,¹¹ and it is frequently pointed out that in this sense the OE term is a word of condemnation, but not in every case does it become clear that “pride” is to be taken as “exaggerated self-esteem, arrogance, proud behaviour,” and not in the “good” sense of “self-respect, knowledge of one’s own dignity and worth.” There are at least two or three instances in which the possibility of assigning a positive or neutral sense to *ofermod* “pride” has been suggested.¹² “Overconfidence” appears quite often in conjunction with “pride,” in combinations like “proud overconfidence,”¹³ or separated by a comma in glossaries (“pride, overconfidence”)¹⁴ which may suggest an alternative, or two constituents of the meaning of *ofermod*. The fact that these two are found side by side fairly frequently may appear somewhat surprising, since the concept of “pride” would seem to include an element of “confidence/self-confidence/ overconfidence.” Is it likely that quite a number of scholars should have considered this element so prominent in our passage that they thought it ought to appear in glossaries and commentaries? Perhaps it is more likely that they took over the combination from the Bosworth-Toller Dictionary, where the sense given for the noun *ofermod* in *Maldon* 89 and *Genesis B* 272 is “pride, arrogance, over-confidence.”

Words from sense-group 3a have only occasionally been suggested as interpretations of *ofermod*. Terms like “recklessness, rash courage, foolhardiness”¹⁵ may have seemed inappropriate

¹¹ As, e.g., in the *NED*, s.v. *overmod*.

¹² Frederick Whitehead, “*Ofermod* et *desmesure*,” *Cahiers de Civilization médiévale*, III (1960), 116; Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1965), p. 100; R. E. Woolf, “The Devil in Old English Poetry,” *RES*, N.S., IV (1953), 7 f.

¹³ M. W. Grose and Deirdre McKenna, *Old English Literature* (London, 1973), p. 134.

¹⁴ E.g., Gordon, *Battle of Maldon*, p. 76; John C. Pope (ed.), *Seven Old English Poems* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 186.

¹⁵ E.g., Gavin Bone, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry. An Essay with Specimen Translations in Verse* (Oxford, 1943), p. 29: “recklessness”; Macrae-Gibson, pp. 103–5: “rash courage, rashness”; Margaret Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 78: “Part of the meaning is better

for a man of Byrhtnoð's age and experience, and in any case it looks as if we could, or even should merge them with those in group 3b. But a number of German-speaking philologists have used the translation *Übermut*,¹⁶ which is rather troublesome, because it can be used with two significations: (1) "wantonness, high spirits," perhaps also "recklessness"; (2) "pride, arrogance." The second sense has become very rare now in spoken and written German. But what about scholars like Brandl, Schücking and Wülcker, writing sixty or even eighty years ago? There is some reason to believe that "pride" rather than "high spirits" was what they meant, and if this is so, we might have to drop our category 3a altogether. Schücking, in his *Kleines Angelsächsisches Dichterbuch*¹⁷ glosses *for his ofermode* by "aus Übermut, aus übergroßem Selbstvertrauen," which, incidentally, reminds us of Bosworth-Toller once again. In the Grein-Köhler-Holthausen *Sprachschatz*¹⁸ *ofermod* in *Maldon* and *Genesis B* 272 has been translated by "Übermut." Since it is quite clear from the context that Lucifer, "se engel ofermodes" in *Genesis B*, is not in high spirits, but simply *superbus*, one may assume that the *Sprachschatz* attributes the corresponding sense to *Maldon* 89, although it seems remarkable that, in the same book, OE *oferhygd*, *ofermede*, *ofermedla* are all rendered by *superbia*, and *ofermodig*, *oferhygdig* by *superbus*. If, on the other hand, we are willing to believe that some German-speaking scholars were using *Übermut* for *ofermod* meaning "high spirits," or anything in a semantic range from "cheerfulness" to "recklessness," we must bear in mind that they may have been misguided by the morphological

rendered by 'foolhardiness,' but this fails to do justice to the heroic quality of the action."

¹⁶ E.g., Richard Paul Wülcker, *Kleinere angelsächsische Dichtungen* (Halle, 1882), p. 138; Alois Brandl, *Geschichte der altenglischen Literatur* (Strassburg, 1908), p. 1076; cf. Klaus von See, *Germanische Heldensage* (Frankfurt, 1971), p. 81, "aus vermesenem, übermütigem Stolz"; cf. also Elliott, p. 57; and see notes 17 and 18 below.

¹⁷ Levin L. Schücking, *Kleines angelsächsisches Dichterbuch* (Cöthen, 1919), p. 153.

¹⁸ C. W. M. Grein, F. Holthausen, J. J. Köhler, *Sprachschatz der angelsächsischen Dichter* (Heidelberg, 1912), p. 519.

correspondence between their native word and OE *ofermod*, and the same may be said of the suggestion, made twenty years ago by a Flemish speaker,¹⁹ that his native word *overmoed* “recklessness, overboldness” could help us to interpret the word in *Maldon*. However, at least one English-speaking scholar has suggested that OE *ofermod* may have a meaning nearer to *Übermut* “high spirits” than to *Übermut* “pride.”²⁰

So far we have dealt with possible meanings of *ofermod* (groups 1–3a) which clearly imply the poet’s criticism of Byrhtnoð’s action. No such criticism would be involved in words of sense-groups 4 and 5, and even “over-courage” (= “excessive courage,” group 3b) would be more in line with the poem’s description of Byrhtnoð as a great leader and fighter. “Over-courage,” “overboldness” have had a small number of supporters for quite a long time, among them such authorities as W. P. Ker²¹ and Sir Frank Stenton,²² but so far only one scholar, Dr. G. C. Britton,²³ seems to have suggested “great, high courage.” Professor Cross has, however, twice protested emphatically that the meaning “great, high courage” is impossible.²⁴ This is not the place to deal with the controversy in detail, but let us look at two of his arguments. He claims that *ofer* as a simplex never means “great.” This, however, cannot possibly be a valid criterion for the semantic analysis of a compound. After all, *ofer* as a simplex, i.e., as an adverb or preposition, does not mean “too” or “excessive,” either. Furthermore, Cross points out that in the examples chosen by Dr. Britton to support his argument—OE *oferhygd*, *ofernid*, *oferþrymm*—*ofer* cannot be translated by “great,” and this would imply that compounds of the type *ofer*-x can never mean “great x.” Both Dr. Britton and

¹⁹ Luc Indestegen, “Heroic Poetry,” *TLS*, 27 March 1953, p. 205.

²⁰ Bloomfield, p. 547.

²¹ See his translation, made in 1887, of the *Battle of Maldon* in R. W. Chambers, *England before the Norman Conquest* (London, 1926), p. 262: “overboldness.”

²² Sir Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), p. 377: “over-courage.”

²³ G. C. Britton, “Heroic Poetry,” *TLS*, 27 February 1953, p. 137.

²⁴ Cross, “Oswald and Byrhtnoth,” p. 103; “Mainly on philology,” pp. 244–7.

Professor Cross have not been very fortunate in the choice of their arguments and examples. Instead of referring to only a few other *ofer*-compounds (of which *oferbygd* is unsuitable anyhow) and to the entry *ofer*, preposition and adverb, in Bosworth-Toller, it would have been better to examine all the OE *ofer*-compounds very closely, as well as the relevant literature, in particular Röhling's dissertation (which is in need of revision, but still very useful) and Hans Marchand's book on English word-formation.²⁵ Even a cursory examination of these sources makes it evident that OE noun and adjective combinations with *ofer* in the sense of "great x" are semantically and morphologically perfectly legitimate and do occur; cf. OE *ofermaðm* (*Beowulf* 2993), *ofer-seocness* (*Canons of Edgar*, ed. Fowler, 30; 36), *oferyldu* (*Homilien*, ed. Assmann, 140. 60 MS. N; [Pseudo-] Wulfstan, ed. Napier, 147.27) *ofercostung* (*Lindisfarne Gospels*, John 16:33). Even if one were to translate these words by "extreme x," "extremely great treasure," "very serious illness," "very old age," etc., there is no "too" or "excessive" possible here, just as in the adjective *ofereald* (*Benediktinerregel*, ed. Schröer, 61.12 = *Regula* 37.1 "senum").²⁶

Translations and interpretations of *ofermod* as "magnanimity" or "greatness of heart" are not found very often;²⁷ except in one instance,²⁸ no linguistic evidence is offered in their support, and it seems obvious that in these cases the commentators tried to

²⁵ Martin Röhling, *Das Präfix ofer- in der altenglischen Verbal- und Nominalkomposition mit Berücksichtigung der übrigen germanischen Dialekte*, Diss. Kiel 1914 (Heidelberg, 1914), especially pp. 79–88, 94–9; Hans Marchand, *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word Formation*, 2nd ed. (München, 1969), pp. 117 f.

²⁶ See also *oferswicol* in the OE Benedictine Rule (ed. Schröer, 30.7 MSS.OT), which Professor A. Campbell translated as "very deceitful": *Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda* to the Supplement of Bosworth-Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1972), p. 49.

²⁷ E.g., Walter F. Schirmer, *Geschichte der englischen und amerikanischen Literatur*, 5th ed. (Tübingen, 1968), p. 25, "Byrhtnoths stolze Grossmut." Cf. also Gordon, p. 1; Ashdown, p. 78; Cross, "Mainly on philology," p. 274; Karl Heinz Göller, *Geschichte der altenglischen Literatur* (Berlin, 1971), p. 184. Here as elsewhere I do not aim at completeness of references to translations or discussions of *The Battle of Maldon*.

²⁸ Cross, "Mainly on philology," pp. 246 f.

supply a meaning for the OE word that would correspond to their interpretation of the poem as a whole and that would suit a seemingly faultless hero—or, in the article of N. F. Blake²⁹—a Christian martyr who acts “out of the greatness of his spirit,” with “greatness of heart.”

It has to be admitted that anybody who wants to interpret *ofermod* in the *Battle of Maldon* is faced with the fact that the word as a noun occurs only four times, three times in OE poetry and once in a glossary. Under these circumstances it might have seemed a matter of course that a word for which so many different meanings have been suggested, and which is so important for our understanding of the poem, should have been studied very closely, together with related words and synonyms, possibly even in the other Germanic dialects. It seems therefore unbelievable that, in more than 200 books and articles dealing with *The Battle of Maldon*, this has never been done, with the exception of Professor Cross's recent discussion of some pertinent points.³⁰ If an author touches the philological aspect of our problem, all we usually get is a vague remark or a guess. One article utilizes Dr. Britton's note,³¹ four lines from Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, and three cases of *ofermod* in *Genesis B*, as well as such arguments as “Modern English ‘pride’ has differing values in religious and heroic contexts. One might consider the ‘pride of the Yankees’.”³² Most commentators seem to rely on the context and their impression of the poet's intentions. One author speaks of “the wide variety of instances of this word [= the noun?] recorded by Bosworth-Toller”;³³ another scholar calls it “a calque on *superbia*”³⁴ (a notoriously inexact term, since “calque” may denote a semantic loan as well as a loan formation), offers furthermore no evidence for his claim, and refers us to the

²⁹ N. F. Blake, “The Battle of Maldon,” *Neophilologus*, XLIX (1965), 339, 342.

³⁰ Cross, “Mainly on philology,” especially pp. 243–8.

³¹ See note 21 above.

³² Clark, pp. 68–70.

³³ Michael J. Swanton, “*The Battle of Maldon: A Literary Caveat*,” *JEGP*, LXVII (1968), 445.

³⁴ W. F. Bolton, “Byrhtnoð in the Wilderness,” *MLR*, LXIV (1969), 483.

references in another paper with the subtitle "Toward a Definitive *Ofermod*." But the only reference to occurrences of *ofermod* that we find in this "definitive" paper is a quotation from a footnote in an earlier article by Professor Tolkien: "In verse the noun occurs only twice, once applied to Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer." In addition, the author of "Toward a Definitive *Ofermod*" speaks of "an etymological argument" and "discounting etymology," although what really matters here, and what he means, is not etymology, but semantics.³⁵ As I said, it seems unbelievable that this should be our philological basis for the study of *ofermod*; it seems even more unbelievable, however, that for more than ten years a book has been available which lists every occurrence of all Old English translation words for *superbia* in Old English texts as far as they have been printed, and yet not a single writer about *Maldon* has taken any notice of it. This book is the first volume of Hans Schabram's *Superbia*;³⁶ a second volume, containing a semantic study of the words and passages listed, has been promised by the author. It is to be expected that this will also include the final word on *ofermod* in *Maldon*. Until it has appeared, whatever is being written about our problem will necessarily remain incomplete and provisional; this should not be forgotten in what follows here.

Ofermod as a noun occurs four times in OE texts, in *The Battle of Maldon*, the *Later Genesis* (line 272), in the *Instructions for Christians* (ed. Rosier, *Anglia*, LXXXII [1964], l. 130), and in an eleventh-century glossary. Except in *Maldon*, the meaning in each case is "pride," "*superbia*"; the OE word is used in connection with Lucifer "se engel ofermodes" in *Genesis B*,³⁷ and

³⁵ F. J. Battaglia, "Notes on 'Maldon': Toward a Definitive *Ofermod*," *ELN*, II (1965), 247-9.

³⁶ Hans Schabram, *Superbia. Studien zum altenglischen Wortschatz. Teil I: Die dialektale und zeitliche Verbreitung des Wortguts* (München, 1965). The author has published addenda in "Das altenglische *superbia*-Wortgut. Eine Nachlese," in *Festschrift Prof. Dr. Herbert Koziol zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. G. Bauer et al., *Wiener Beiträge zur englischen Philologie*, LXXV (Wien, 1973), pp. 272-9.

³⁷ For various interpretations of the syntax of this passage, see Bright's *Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. by Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler (New York, 1971), p. 301.

denotes the quality of a proud man in the *Instructions* (129 f.; cf. Luke 16:15):

Ac se ðe sylfne to swiðe ahefð
for his ofermode, he bið earm for Gode.

In the glossary,³⁸ the OE word stands for Latin *coturnus* and was translated “a high style (?)” in Bosworth-Toller, but medieval glossaries and dictionaries of medieval Latin leave no doubt that *cot(b)urnus* could be employed in the sense of “*superbia*,” and this would also explain the use of *ofermod* in our OE glossary. The Bosworth-Toller Supplement and Professor Cross have another instance of *ofermod* as a noun, from the *Liber Scintillarum* (ed. Rhodes, 82.9), where *altum sapere* is glossed *ofermod witan*; it seems uncertain whether the OE word here is an adjective or a substantive,³⁹ but the meaning of *altum sapere* is “to be proud.” All instances of *ofermod* as a noun are from southern OE texts.

Among the words that stand in a close semantic or etymological relationship to *ofermod*, its equivalents in the West Germanic dialects (there are no such equivalents in Gothic or Old Norse) and the OE adjective *ofermod* may also throw light on the possible meanings of the OE noun. In Old Saxon, *obarmôd* is found as an adjective; it occurs three times (*Heliland* 3992, 4169, 5296), always in the sense “proud, *superbus*” (of the Jews); the two instances of *obarmôdig* (referring to the two Herods, *Heliland* 775 and 2705) have the same meaning. Behaghel and Sehrt⁴⁰

³⁸ Thomas Wright and Richard Paul Wülcker, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2nd ed. (London, 1884), I.111.37; Lowell Kindschi, *The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS.32 and British Museum MS Additional 32,246*, Diss. Stanford 1955, p. 56 and note 13. In the *Supplement* to Bosworth-Toller's *Dictionary*, this example of *ofermod* is considered an adjective, no doubt erroneously.

³⁹ There is a similar instance in a homily edited by Rudolf Brotanek, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur altenglischen Literatur und Kirchengeschichte* (Halle, 1913), p. 18, l. 10: “*nan þing ofermodes*”; it seems likely that this is also an adjective.

⁴⁰ *Heliland und Genesis*, ed. Otto Behaghel, 8th ed., rev. by Walther Mitzka (Tübingen, 1965), p. 277; Edward H. Sehrt, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zum Heliland und zur altsächsischen Genesis* (Göttingen, 1925), p. 420. Schabram (*Superbia*, p. 128) rightly points out that the noun used in the *Heliland* is *obaruhgð* (l. 4254), but there is also a noun *obarmôdi*, which occurs once, in the sense of “pride, *superbia*,” in an early 10th century *Confessio* from Essen; see *Kleinere altsächsische Sprachdenkmäler*, ed. Elis Wadstein (Norden, 1899), p. 16, ll. 12 f.

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translate “übermütig” except for *obarmôdig*, where Sehrt has “übermütig, stolz”; there is obviously a parallel here to the rendering of *ofermod* in *Maldon* by German “Übermut.” Old High German *ubermuot*, *ubarmuati* and their derivatives are all used in the sense of “pride; proud.”⁴¹ But Professor Betz believes that the noun is a native West Germanic word, which has acquired the meaning *superbia* through semantic borrowing. Its old meaning, he says, “wird etwa dem ‘hohen Mut’ entsprochen haben” and re-emerges in written Middle High German.⁴²

The OE adjective *ofermod*, according to Schabram's book, occurs 123 times, including six instances in poetry, fifty-eight in interlinear glosses to psalms and canticles, and at least twenty in the works of King Alfred. Very often the word can be shown to render Latin *superbus*, while its meaning is everywhere “proud, haughty.”

Before we try to draw some conclusions from the necessarily limited evidence presented so far, we must have a look at the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* which gives an account—generally thought to be unreliable as an historical source⁴³—of two battles fought by Byrhtnoð against the Danes at Maldon. When the Danes return for the second battle, the Ely chronicle reports that Byrhtnoð “cum paucis bellatoribus, spe victorie et *nimia* ductus *animositate*, iter ad bellum suscepit . . .”⁴⁴ It has been suggested that one of the compilers of the *Liber Eliensis* may have known the OE poem, and that *nimia animositate* may correspond to *for his*

⁴¹ Cf. Rudolf Schützeichel, *Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch* (Tübingen, 1969), p. 205; E. G. Graff, *Althochdeutscher Sprachschatz* (Berlin, 1834–42), II. col. 688–90. Schützeichel has “Hochmut” (= pride) for OHG *ubermuot* and all related words except an adverb *ubermuotlihho* “übermütig” in Notker. Apparently this is the translation of Latin *superbus* in Boethius, *De Cons. Philos.* III metr. 4.1 (*Die Schriften Notkers und seiner Schule*, ed. P. Piper [Freiburg, 1882–83], I. 153.5), which clearly has the sense “proud.”

⁴² Werner Betz, *Deutsch und Lateinisch. Die Lehnbildungen der althochdeutschen Benediktinerregel* (Bonn, 1949), p. 127.

⁴³ But see Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), pp. 222–4.

⁴⁴ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, Camden Third Series, vol. XCII (London, 1962), bk. II, chap. 62, p. 135.

ofermode in line 89.⁴⁵ But *Liber Eliensis* II.62 seems to represent a garbled version of an earlier historical account (our poem?), and *nimia animositate* refers not to a leader who opens up to the enemy a ford or bridge, but to one who hurriedly marches to the battle-field. Even if the two passages in *Maldon* and the *Liber Eliensis* were to tally, this would not help, since *animositas* in medieval Latin could have a very wide range of meanings, including “courage,” “boldness,” “confidence,” “hostility,” “excitement,” “pride,” “arrogance,” “magnanimity,” and these are just the various terms from which we will have to choose the appropriate one for *ofermod* in *The Battle of Maldon*. It is interesting to compare two translations of the passage in the *Liber Eliensis*; one renders *nimia animositas* by “an over confidence” (Conybeare), the other by “his own adventurous spirit” (Sedgefield).⁴⁶

What, then, are our results so far? For a responsible philologist, it seems impossible to assign one definite sense—or a range of closely allied senses—to our OE word with absolute certainty. But all the evidence we have points to “pride”; in particular:

1. *ofermod* (noun) can only mean “pride” in *Genesis B, Instructions for Christians*, and a glossary, i.e., wherever it occurs;⁴⁷
2. the phrase *for his ofermode* is found in *Maldon* and *Instructions*;
3. the OE adjective *ofermod* denotes “proud” in more than 120 instances; nowhere can it be shown to have a sense like “bold, courageous, magnanimous,” etc.;
4. the Old Saxon and Old High German equivalents of OE

⁴⁵ See F. Liebermann, “Zur Geschichte Byrhtnoths, des Helden von Maldon,” *Archiv f.d.Studium d.n. Spr. u. Lit.*, CI (1898), 27 f. and note 74; and E. O. Blake’s note 4 to *Liber Eliensis*, pp. 134 f. But cf. Gordon, *Battle of Maldon*, pp. 8 f., the same author’s “The Date of Aethelred’s Treaty with the Vikings: Olaf Tryggvason and the Battle of Maldon,” *MLR*, XXXII (1937), 31 f., and Ashdown, pp. 3 f.

⁴⁶ J. J. and W. D. Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1826), p. lxxxix; *The Battle of Maldon and Short Poems from the Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Walter John Sedgefield (Boston, 1904), p. xix.

⁴⁷ For some examples of the word (noun and adjective) in Early Middle English texts, with the same meaning, see *NED*, s.v. *overmod*.

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ofermod (noun and adjective) are always used with the sense "pride; proud" in extant written records;

5. there is no evidence whatsoever to prove that *ofermod* (noun) could have a signification like "recklessness," "over-courage," "great courage," "magnanimity";
6. the context in which *ofermod* appears in *The Battle of Maldon* makes it likely that the word is a term of criticism, if not of reproach; *lytegian* (l. 86) and *alyfan landes to fela* (l. 90) clearly point to an error of judgment committed by Byrhtnoð.⁴⁸

On the other hand, one has to admit that there are a few facts we ought to consider carefully before we make our final decision in favor of "pride": almost all our numerous instances of *ofermod* (noun and adjective) occur in religious contexts,⁴⁹ whereas *The Battle of Maldon* is a Christian, but not a religious, poem; we cannot be certain if *ofermod* is an old native word which has borrowed one of its meanings from *superbia/superbus*, or if it is perhaps a loan-formation in the West Germanic dialects; we should not ignore the polysemy to be found in some closely related OE words: *modig* and its derivatives ("brave": "proud"), *mod* ("mind, courage": "pride"), and at least one or two cases in which OE *oferhygd* is used in a "good" sense.⁵⁰ But on the whole, "pride" with its various shades of meaning seems the best solution to a philological puzzle that had its origin almost a thousand years ago.

⁴⁸ Cf. Thomas D. Hill, "History and Heroic Ethic in *Maldon*," *Neophilologus*, LIV (1970), 291, and see note 58 below.

⁴⁹ Cf. Cross, "Mainly on philology," p. 244, who, however, points out that there is a case of *ofermod* (adjective) in prognostications from the moon's age; there is another example of the adjective in the same text; both translate Latin *superbus* in an OE interlinear gloss and so do not supply exactly the kind of evidence that their earlier edition—without the Latin text—by Cockayne would suggest (*Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, Rolls Series, XXXV [London, 1864–66], III.190.14 and III.192.22). See Max Förster, "Vom Fortleben antiker Sammelunare im Englischen und in anderen Volkssprachen," *Anglia*, LXVII/LXVIII (1944), 110.6 and 116.1, and Schabram, *Superbia*, pp. 107 f.

⁵⁰ The suggested meanings are "superior thought, wisdom, high-mindedness, magnanimity"; "hoher Mut, edler Stolz." Cf. Cross, "Mainly on philology," pp. 246 f., and Schabram, pp. 39 f., who points out that *oferhygd* is so used "ausnahmsweise."

If, then, we can agree on “pride” as the meaning of *ofermod* in *Maldon*, we can also draw two further conclusions: in lines 84–90 the poet is obviously censuring the hero of the poem, and if this is so, we have a weighty piece of evidence relating to the vexed question of the historicity of *The Battle of Maldon*. This is not the place to go into all the pros and cons of this point, and I certainly do not imagine the poet as “a kind of battlefield correspondent.”⁵¹ But why should a poet invent a serious and even fatal mistake made by a man who—throughout the first half of the poem, apart from lines 84–90—is presented to us as a model of courage, patriotism, and leadership? The only explanation for this seems to be that the poet had this detail—and presumably a great deal of what he recited or wrote down—from eyewitness accounts of the fight, or from local tradition ultimately going back to the reports of people who knew what they were talking about. Once we think, however, that we can regard *Maldon* as essentially historical, we might as well ask what exactly Byrhtnoð’s mistake was (or what our poet considered it to be), and why the battle was lost. Once again, I can only briefly refer to the various suggestions and hypotheses that have been put forward.

Some scholars have considered *Maldon* as a political poem, or even as political propaganda, meant to denounce the contemporary policy of “appeasement” and to stir up resistance against the Viking invaders in some of the darkest years of Anglo-Saxon England.⁵² However that may be, there is certainly no indication that the poet should have considered it advisable for Byrhtnoð and his men to avoid fighting against the Vikings at all. Nor does it seem likely that he considered Byrhtnoð inexperienced in military matters.⁵³ It seems very doubtful to me that *lytegian* in

⁵¹ Cf. Bessinger, p. 27.

⁵² See, e.g., Daniel Abegg, *Zur Entwicklung der historischen Dichtung bei den Angelsachsen* (Strassburg, 1894), p. 8; Brandl, pp. 1076 f.; Elliott, p. 69; von See, pp. 80–2; Göller, pp. 128, 186; Cross, “Mainly on philology,” pp. 247 f. But cf. Swanton, p. 443 and Bessinger, p. 34.

⁵³ Cf. A. D. Mills, “Byrhtnoð’s Mistake in Generalship,” *NM*, LXVII (1966), 24. Warren A. Samouce (“General Byrhtnoth,” *JEGP*, LXII [1963], p. 130) refers to the opinions of earlier authorities on *Maldon*. Would it not be more useful to examine

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line 86 is intended to suggest that Byrhtnoð was gullible.⁵⁴ Most commentators are silent on this point. Perhaps the *Liber Eliensis* may give us a hint as to what happened; it reports that the Vikings after having returned to Maldon for the second battle (they had been defeated in the first)

statim mandant se ad ulciscendos eos [i.e., their comrades who had been killed in the first battle] adventasse ipsumque inter ignavos habendum, si non audeat cum eis conferre manum ["that they should rank him among cowards if he declined an engagement"] (Conybeare).⁵⁵

Is Byrhtnoð being criticized in the poem because, as Professor Tolkien says, he treated a desperate battle as a sporting match, throwing away the lives of his men?⁵⁶ Did Byrhtnoð do this because "he allows his sense of honour to override his real duty"?⁵⁷ We do not know. It has been assumed for quite some time that he committed "a traditional heroic fault,"⁵⁸ whereas he ought to have kept the Vikings on the island, where he could even have starved them out.⁵⁹ But it seems doubtful if they would have waited for this to happen. I think we should very seriously consider the—probably more realistic—assessment of the situation by Professor Whitelock and Captain Samouce:⁶⁰ Byrhtnoð could easily have blocked the ford, but it seems safe to assume that in this case the Vikings would have sailed away in

the rôle and function of tenth-century *ealdormen* in military operations, even if one does not believe in the historicity of our poem?

⁵⁴ As is claimed by Mills, p. 23. As regards the controversy about *lytegian*, however, I believe with Professor Cross ("Mainly on philology," pp. 236–40) that Dr. Clark has failed to produce convincing evidence for "a good sense" of the word; cf. his arguments in *Speculum*, XLIII (1968), 68.

⁵⁵ *Liber Eliensis*, p. 135; J. J. and W. D. Conybeare, p. lxxxix. Cf. Elliott, p. 59: "Perhaps there was as in the *Hildebrandslied* some taunt of cowardice."

⁵⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," *ES*, N.S., VI (1953), 15.

⁵⁷ C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), p. 123.

⁵⁸ Bessinger, p. 31; Samouce, p. 134; Kemp Malone, "The Old English Period," in *A Literary History of England*, ed. A. C. Baugh (New York, 1948), I, 58.

⁵⁹ Thus Irving, p. 462, and cf. Bessinger, p. 31.

⁶⁰ Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, rev. by Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford, 1967), pp. 266 f.; Samouce, p. 131; cf. also Macrae-Gibson, p. 100 f.

order to ravage a part of Byrhtnoð's earldom, or of the country, that might have been without military protection. This may well be the reason why Byrhtnoð decided to draw the Vikings into pitched battle. But he was defeated—and posthumously criticized by our poet. A possible explanation for this—actually the only one I can think of⁶¹—seems to be the fact that Byrhtnoð was employing the right tactics but did not, or not yet, have a fighting force sufficiently strong to carry through his plan.⁶² A treatment of this issue should certainly be left to a professional historian, but a few relevant facts might perhaps be mentioned here.

The number of Vikings present at the battle of Maldon has been estimated by Professor Vinogradoff; they “represented the crews of 390 ships, that is, not less than 15,600 men, on the average of 40 men per ship.”⁶³ Eric John objected to this because “We now know enough about the site of the battle to be certain that nothing like this number could have occupied the space available.”⁶⁴ But we need not worry about the space available; Vinogradoff apparently misunderstood the entry for 991 in the Parker Chronicle,⁶⁵ which has “*mid þrim 7 hundnigentigon scipum*,” i.e., with ninety-three ships, and these, according to E. V. Gordon, would have held a fighting force of 2000 to 2500 men.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Professor Hollister ascribes Byrhtnoð's defeat to “the ambiguous loyalties of Anglo-Danish leaders”: C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1962), p. 146 and n. 2, but without sufficient evidence. One should not ignore, of course, what we are told about the effect of Godric's flight (ll. 195, 239–43), yet one would not expect the poet to criticize Byrhtnoð in l. 89 f. for not having foreseen what might happen after his death.

⁶² Two attempts have been made to reconstruct Byrhtnoð's plan and tactics, in the articles by Captain Samouce and O. D. Macrae-Gibson. One would wish to see their hypotheses examined by an expert in medieval military history.

⁶³ Sir Paul Vinogradoff, *English Society in the Eleventh Century* (Oxford, 1908), p. 28.

⁶⁴ Eric John, *Land Tenure in Early England* (Leicester, 1960), pp. 138 f., n. 3.

⁶⁵ Such a misunderstanding seems to have occurred before; cf. Liebermann, “Zur Geschichte Byrhtnoths,” p. 22, n. 48.

⁶⁶ Gordon, *The Battle of Maldon*, p. 11, n. 1. For the types, sizes, and crews of Viking ships, see Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (London, 1968), pp. 183–94, especially p. 194, and the literature quoted on p. 183, n. 2. For the size of Danish armies in ninth-century England, see P. H. Sawyer, “The Density of the Danish

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Unfortunately, there is some reason to believe that the Parker Chronicle has confused two separate Viking campaigns, and that the 93 ships may belong in the second of these.⁶⁷ Also, it has never been established with certainty that Olaf Tryggvason was present at Maldon, as is stated by the Parker Chronicle.⁶⁸ But Sir Frank Stenton thought of the Viking force operating in Eastern England in 991 that "it was larger than any of the forces which had lately harried in England, and to some extent it had the character of an organized army."⁶⁹ May one assume that such an army was not considerably smaller than the one computed by Professor Gordon on the basis of ninety-three ships?

There can be even less certainty about Byrhtnoð's Anglo-Saxon force. The problem of numerical inferiority or superiority at Maldon has rarely been mentioned even by those authors who would not question the historicity of our poem. "*Der Übermacht erliegt die kleine Sachsenschar*," said Zernial ninety years ago; E. V. Gordon speaks of "the smaller body of English troops"; Mossé mentions Byrhtnoð's "*maigres forces*"; George Clark suggests that the Vikings outnumbered and outclassed the English; while Captain Samouce assumes that they were "approximately equal in strength of numbers."⁷⁰ How do we know? Here we are confronted with the controversial problem of Anglo-Saxon military

Settlement in England," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, VI (1957-58), 1-17.

⁶⁷ See Liebermann, "Zur Geschichte Byrhtnoths," p. 22; Charles Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford, 1892-99, repr. with a bibliographical note by Dorothy Whitelock, 1952), II. 173, and—for the dating of the entry in the Parker Chronicle—Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042* (London, 1955), p. 213, n. 1.

⁶⁸ See Gordon, "The Date of Aethelred's Treaty," but cf. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 293.

⁶⁹ Stenton, p. 376.

⁷⁰ U. Zernial, *Das Lied von Byrhtnoths Fall. 991. Ein Beitrag zur altgermanischen Volks poesie*, Wissenschaftliche Beilage zum Programm des Humboldts-Gymnasium, Ostern 1882 (Berlin, 1882), p. 10; Gordon, *The Battle of Maldon*, p. 28; Fernand Mossé, *Manuel de l'Anglais du Moyen Age des Origines au XIV^e Siècle. I: Vieil Anglais* (Paris, 1945), I.ii.422; Clark, p. 56 f. and n. 27; Samouce, p. 132 f.; see also Mills, p. 20 f.; but Samouce finds indications of a possible slight superiority of the

organization—again a subject for the expert historian, and not for the philologist. The most detailed recent study of military matters in late Anglo-Saxon England, by Professor Hollister,⁷¹ distinguishes between three different types of Anglo-Saxon fighting forces: 1. Mercenaries, or retainers, serving the king and other prominent men as professional soldiers; Byrhtnoð's *beorðwerod* must have consisted of such men; 2. The select *fyrð*, a levy of trained warriors, for which each five-hide unit had to supply one man; this force is organized on the basis of shires and led by their respective *ealdormen*; 3. The great *fyrð*, a general levy of all free men, with an essentially local and defensive mission.

What kind of force was at Byrhtnoð's disposal? Apparently, the literary critics (and a military specialist) cannot help us on this point. Captain Samouce thinks that Byrhtnoð's troops were untrained, and Professor Irving speaks of "the crowd of untrained peasants who make up the *fyrð*."⁷² On the other hand, N. F. Blake believes that the majority of the fighters belong to the *beorðwerod* and are Byrhtnoð's retainers, while Eric John—a historian—has repeatedly denied any distinction at all between *fyrð* and *beorðwerod*.⁷³ Considering what we knew about Anglo-Saxon military institutions even before the appearance of Professor Hollister's book, none of these views seems tenable to me. Byrhtnoð's *beorðwerod* can only have been a small bodyguard,⁷⁴ and it appears unlikely that these men, together with "untrained peasants," should have attempted to oppose what must have

Vikings. Cf. also C. E. Wright: "a story of the defence of a narrow place against great odds" (*The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* [Edinburgh, 1939], p. 23), and the *Liber Eliensis*, p. 135: "cum paucis bellatoribus."

⁷¹ C. Warren Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions on the Eve of the Norman Conquest*; cf. H. R. Loyn, *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1965), pp. 77 f.

⁷² Samouce, p. 132 (criticized by Mills, pp. 17 f.); Irving, p. 458; see also Macrae-Gibson, p. 101; and Hill, p. 293.

⁷³ Blake, p. 338; Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae and other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), pp. 292 f., and *Land Tenure in Early England*, pp. 138 f., n. 3. I fail to see how one can possibly claim that in "ll. 255–63 the 'simple ceorl' addresses the rest as *hiredmen*," as is done by John in his note.

⁷⁴ Cf. Dorothy Whitelock, "The Anglo-Saxon Achievement," in *The Norman Conquest* (London, 1966), p. 39.

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been a formidable Viking force. There was probably enough time to assemble the select *fyrð* of Essex, since the Norsemen had previously attacked Ipswich (and, perhaps, Sandwich and Folkestone).⁷⁵ Professor Hollister, at any rate, thinks that the English army at Maldon was composed of the select *fyrð* and Byrhtnoð's retainers, while he considers it uncertain whether there were also elements of the great *fyrð* present.⁷⁶ If we assume, then, that the number of Byrhtnoð's retainers was comparatively small, that the select *fyrð* of the shire of Essex was present at Maldon more or less in full strength, and that members of the great *fyrð*—if any were there—may not have been prepared well enough, if at all, for their task: if we assume all this, we might be able to estimate very roughly the number of trained warriors on the Anglo-Saxon side in the Battle of Maldon. In the Domesday Book, Essex is assessed at approximately 2,767 hides,⁷⁷ which means that the shire *fyrð*, if complete, would consist of about 550 warriors.⁷⁸ If this, or perhaps a rather smaller figure, is representative of the strength of the Anglo-Saxon fighting force at

⁷⁵ See the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MSS. ACDEF for the year 991. I assume that Byrhtnoð was *ealdorman* of Essex, and that only the forces of this shire would have been involved. But it is difficult to be certain about the territory under Byrhtnoð's administration, and there are indications that he may have exercised jurisdiction or authority of some kind elsewhere; cf. Gordon, *Battle of Maldon*, p. 16 f.; E. O. Blake, *Liber Eliensis*, pp. xiii and 99, no. 2. Eric John even believes that Byrhtnoth may have been *ealdorman* of Northumbria, and that the battle of Maldon was more than a local engagement fought by the Essex *fyrð* (*Orbis Britanniae*, pp. 222–5). But how do we then interpret our poem's *Eastseaxena ord* (l. 69)?

⁷⁶ Hollister, pp. 127 f. and note 3. But see Clark, pp. 63 f. and n. 46. One important piece of evidence is the *unorne ceorl*, l. 256. I shall deal with this as well as with the *comitatus* at Maldon in a forthcoming paper.

⁷⁷ Cf. H. C. Darby, *The Domesday Geography of Eastern England*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1971), p. 221. The figure given by F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and beyond* (Cambridge, 1897, repr. London, 1960), p. 464, is 2,650 hides.

⁷⁸ Professor Vinogradoff's figure is 530, but he thought that, in addition, members of the great *fyrð* must have been present at Maldon, because otherwise "the disparity would have been too overwhelming" (pp. 27 f.). One has to realize, however, that in the late tenth century the *fyrð* may have been recruited on a basis different from that suggested by Professor Hollister. See, e.g., King Athelstan's Laws, II. 16, ed. Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (Halle, 1903–16), I. 158.

Maldon, then it seems quite possible that Byrhtnoð's men were in a very difficult, if not desperate, position as soon as the Vikings had been allowed to cross the *brycg*, and our poet's *ofermod* becomes understandable, even though the *ealdorman* may have seriously hoped to be able to defeat the Vikings and thus to prevent them from further attacks.

I am only too well aware that a great deal of what I have been saying in this article has had to remain tentative, and often qualified by conditional clauses. One has to remember that our sources for Anglo-Saxon local history are scanty, and that our knowledge of Old English is and will remain limited. Nevertheless, we should patiently try to analyze the meaning of Old English words with the help of all available philological tools and all textual evidence, and we should try to avoid producing what Professor Robinson has very aptly called "a bit of literary criticism posing as lexicographical fact."⁷⁹

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⁷⁹ Fred C. Robinson, "Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A Caveat," *Philological Essays. Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague, 1970), pp. 99–110; see also the recent discussions of the methodical approach to OE semantics by Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London, 1972), esp. chap. 2; Cross, "Mainly on philology," p. 235; Hans Schabram, "Ae. *wlanc* und Ableitungen," *Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Sprache und Literatur. Festschrift für Helmut Papajewski*, ed. Paul G. Buchloh *et al.* (Neumünster, 1974), pp. 70 f.