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Scyld sceal cempa

The Shield and the Warrior in Old English Poetry

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Introduction

Two Exeter Book poems illustrate the importance of the shield in the life of the Anglo-Saxon warrior.² *Maxims I* contains the assertion ‘scyld sceal cempa’ (‘the shield must go with the warrior’, l. 129)³ suggesting that possession of a shield was fundamental to the concept of what a warrior was.⁴ In Exeter Riddle 5, usually solved as ‘shield’, the close connection between the object and its bearer forms the basis of the poem’s controlling metaphor. An old shield is personified as an ageing warrior, worn out from years of fighting:

Ic eom anhaga	iserne wund,
bille gebennad,	beadoweorca sæd,
ecgum werig.	Oft ic wig seo,
frecne feohtan.	Frofre ne wene,
þæt me geoc cyme	guðgewinnes,
ær ic mid ældum	eal forwurðe,
ac mec hnossiað	homera lafe,
heardecg heoroscearp,	hondweorc smiþa,
bitað in burgum;	ic abidan sceal
laþran gemotes.	Næfre læcecynn
on folcstede	findan meahte,

¹ I am grateful to Alice Jorgensen, Helen Conrad O’Brian, Gerald Morgan and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.

² The only book-length study of the shield is by Ian P. Stephenson, *The Anglo-Saxon Shield* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002). The authoritative guide to the archaeology of shields from the early Anglo-Saxon period is by Tania Dickinson and Heinrich Härke, *Early Anglo-Saxon Shields* (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1992). General studies of Anglo-Saxon weapons that feature a section on the shield include Richard Underwood, *Anglo-Saxon Weapons and Warfare* (Stroud: Tempus, 1999), pp. 77–91; Stephen Pollington, *The English Warrior from Earliest Times Till 1066*, rev. edn (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Press, 2002), pp. 150–61.

³ All line numbers for Old English poems refer to *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition*, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–53), apart from *Beowulf*, which refers to *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All translations are my own.

⁴ Several synonyms for ‘warrior’ in *Beowulf* are compounds that literally mean ‘the one having a shield’: *lindhæbbend(e)*, ll. 245, 1402; *rondhæbbend(e)*, l. 861; *bordhæbbend(e)*, l. 2895.

Scyld sceal ceman

þara þe mid wyrtum wunde gehælde,
ac me ecga dolg eacen weorðað
þurh deaðslege dagum ond nihtum.

I am solitary, wounded by iron, injured by swords, sated with battle, weary of (sword-) edges. Often I see battle, fierce conflict. I do not expect comfort, that I might get help in battle, before I perish completely among men, but the remnant of hammers strikes me, the hard-edge, battle-sharp, handiwork of smiths bites in the strongholds; I must await a more hateful encounter. I never found in the people's dwellings one of the race of physicians who could heal my wounds with herbs, but for me the wounds of swords increase day and night through death-stroke.

The numerous correspondences that allow the life of the shield to be presented here as the life of the warrior eloquently reinforces the point contained in the maxim: the shield does indeed 'go with' the warrior. However, while the object and the person inhabit the same harsh environment, other literary and cultural evidence from the Anglo-Saxon period suggests that in poetry the shield only goes with a certain kind of warrior. This riddle begins with the claim that the warrior and shield are solitary. Yet, even when used conspicuously by heroic figures such as Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* or Beowulf, the shield is not usually associated with the warrior as an individual, as a solitary figure; instead it typically denotes the warrior who exists in a social relationship with others, the warrior who is part of the group. This association arises not only because of the shield's unique physical properties, which denied it certain associations available to other weapons and armour, but also because of the way it was used in combat. To be a 'shield-bearer' in Anglo-Saxon society entailed more than simply carrying a means of personal protection; it was also a social position, one in which an individual bore responsibility for the welfare of the community.

Her byð scyld læne: the history of Anglo-Saxon weapons and armour

In the Exeter riddle, the metaphor of the tired warrior recalling the effects of earlier battles introduces a property normally absent from poetic depictions of the Anglo-Saxon shield: history. Unlike other types of weapons and armour such as swords, mail-coats, and helmets, poets do not generally call attention to a shield's past. Swords, for example, are regularly described and celebrated for having a history of some sort. The honorific 'old sword' is used in several poems ('ealdsweord', *Beowulf*, l. 1663; 'ealde swurd', *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 46; 'alde mece', *Exodus*, l. 495; 'gomel sweord', *Beowulf*, ll. 2620, 2681–2). Past owners and past generations are alluded to through references to a sword being an 'old heirloom' ('ealde lafe', *Beowulf*, ll. 795, 1488, 1688, *Exodus*, l. 408; 'gomele lafe', *Beowulf*, l. 2563); these owners are sometimes specified ('Hreðles lafe', *Beowulf*, l. 2191; 'Eanmundes laf', *Beowulf*, l. 2611). Mention is sometimes made of a sword's makers, whether that is a mythical race of giants ('ealdsweord e(o)tonisc', *Beowulf* ll. 1558, 2616, 2979; 'enta ærgeweorc', *Beowulf* l. 1679) or a legendary smith ('Welandes worc', *Waldere I*, l. 2). Mail-coats are also discussed in *Beowulf* in terms of their past, on one occasion as an 'heirloom of ancestors' ('gomelra lafe', l. 2036) or again as the work of Weland ('Welandes geweorc', l.455); likewise, in *Waldere* a mail-coat is referred to as 'Ælfhere's legacy' ('Ælfheres laf', *Waldere II*, l. 18). Finally, in *Beowulf* a helmet is also mentioned by reference to its makers ('entscne helm', l. 2979). Outside of the imaginative conventions of the riddle-genre, it is difficult to find any shield depicted in terms of its history. The only shield whose origins are of poetic interest poet seems to be the 'eall

irenne [...] wigbord wrætlic' ('all-iron [...] wondrous war-board', ll. 2338–9) Beowulf orders made to face the dragon. In a poem where weapons and armour so often lead the audience from the narrative present into the distant past this shield is notable for having no history at all.

No explanation is given why some objects are celebrated for having a history while others are not, but two possible reasons why shields are not considered in this way concern the materials from which they were made and their role in combat. Another irony about the shield Beowulf uses against the dragon is that it is constructed from the type of material that seems necessary for a weapon or piece of armour to be considered in terms of its history. The Anglo-Saxon sword, mail-coat, and helmet were all primarily metal objects and are depicted that way in poetry.⁵ Even when uncared for, objects constructed from this material could potentially last a very long time. In *Beowulf*, for example, the dragon's hoard contains swords so old they are 'thoroughly eaten through with rust as though they had remained a thousand years [...] in the earth's embrace' ('omige þurhetone, wið eorðan fæðm | þusend wintra [...] eardodon', ll. 3049–50). Although these swords have corroded, the analogy used here recognises the longevity of metal as a construction material. The maintenance of metal weapons and armour was carried out by *feormynd* (*Beowulf*, l. 2256, *-leas* l. 2761) — these were 'polishers' or 'cleaners' whose task it was to keep metal weapons and armour in a state of good repair.

The Anglo-Saxon shield, by contrast, was constructed from far more perishable materials. The use of *-wudu* in 'bordwudu' ('board-wood', *Beowulf*, l.1243) and 'campwudu' ('battle-wood', *Elene*, l.51) confirms archaeological evidence recovered from early weapon burials⁶ and suggests that, unlike Beowulf's iron shield, the main part of the Anglo-Saxon shield — the shield board — was made from wood.⁷ Like the swords in the dragon's hoard, a shield's metal fittings (the boss, grip, rim, and decorative appliques where they were used) are often recovered from archaeological sites in a heavily corroded state;⁸ however, apart from traces of wood around these fittings the board itself does not survive.⁹ In the real world, then, the materials from which shields were made meant that as intact objects they were far less likely to survive over the long term. That the spear, another predominantly wooden weapon, is similarly

⁵ On the construction of Anglo-Saxons swords see Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: Its Archaeology and Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), pp. 15–103; Underwood, pp. 47–67. On mail-coats and helmets, see Underwood, pp. 91–106.

⁶ 'The vast majority of Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries of the fifth to seventh/eighth centuries have burials with shields' (Dickinson and Härke, p. 63); the main period of deposition was the fifth and sixth centuries (p. 1)

⁷ Evidence for shield boards is discussed by Dickinson and Härke, pp. 43–55; see also Stephenson, pp. 26–45. The widespread use of *lind* as a poetic term for shield (*Genesis*, l. 244; *Exodus*, ll. 228, 239, 251, 301; *Andreas*, l. 46; *Beowulf*, ll. 2341, 2365, 2610; *Judith*, ll. 191, 214, 303; *The Battle of Finnsburh*, l. 11; *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 99, 244; *The Metrical Charms 4: For a Sudden Stīch*, l. 7) might further suggest that shields were made specifically from 'linden-wood' or the wood of the lime tree. However, where it has been possible to identify the type of wood used, the majority of shields recovered appear to have been constructed from other species such as alder, poplar, and willow: Dickinson and Härke, p. 48; Stephenson, pp. 39–40. The discrepancy between poetic convention and archaeological data has been explained as owing to the prevalence of lime trees in the pre-migration heartlands of central and north-western Europe: Pfannkuche, cited in Dickinson and Härke, p. 48.

⁸ On the different kinds of shield fittings see Dickinson and Härke, pp. 31–42, 61–62; Stephenson, pp. 17–26, 46–54. Shields were sometimes decorated with metal lozenges or discs; this might provide an archaeological explanation for a reference in *Beowulf* to shields bearing metal 'plates' ('fætte scyldas', *Beowulf*, l. 333) although this could also be the result of poetic embellishment.

⁹ Stephenson, p. 34; Dickinson and Härke, p. 56.

not depicted in terms of its history seems to suggest that the kind of material from which an object is made has a bearing on its representation in poetry.¹⁰

Another, related explanation why the shield is not considered in historical terms is its role in combat. In the violent world depicted in heroic poetry, all objects, irrespective of the materials from which they were made, had the potential to be destroyed. Helmets could be shorn (*Beowulf*, ll. 1526, 2973, 2979–80; *The Battle of Finnsburh*, l. 45), mail-coats could be cut (*The Battle of Maldon*, l. 144; *The Battle of Finnsburh*, l. 44) and in the hands of someone like Beowulf swords could be broken (l. 2680). Nevertheless, as the shield's narrative in the Exeter riddle suggests, there seems to have been an acceptance that the shield in particular would eventually be destroyed in day-to-day use, and its destruction would be unremarkable. The language of battle in Old English poetry, both in the Exeter Riddle and elsewhere, is the language of shields being broken (*gebrec/-bræc*, *Elene*, l. 114; *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 295; *Beowulf*, l. 2259) and hewn (*(ge)heawan*, *Judith*, l. 303; *Beowulf*, l. 682; *The Battle of Brunanburh*, l. 6).¹¹ This imagery gives battle scenes much of their dynamism and energy, but it also means that there could be little expectation that objects used this way would survive for very long. Outside poetry there is some evidence of shields being passed from one generation to the next, although it is not clear if such objects had been used in battle or if they had undergone repair.¹²

In poetry, the capacity of an object to have a long history is significant because it provides the basis of other poetic associations. A weapon or piece of armour with such a history also has the potential to acquire an 'identity'¹³ based on that history. The references in *Beowulf* to the dragon's hoard recognise that metal weapons and armour¹⁴ have the capacity to retain their general form over time, to keep their basic physical identity, and to be recognizable as a sword or helmet even after hundreds of years. This constancy of form permits a level of individuation by which, in some cases, the identity of an inanimate object can almost approach that of an animate being. Weapons and armour referred to as heirlooms, or the work of a famous smith, derive their identity as unique objects both from their great age and their connection to celebrated figures from the past. Named objects such as swords (e.g. Hrunting, *Beowulf*,

¹⁰ The spear is also identified in Old English poetry using terms that highlight the use of wood in its construction (e.g. *æsc*, *Beowulf*, l. 1772, *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 43, 310, Riddle 22, l. 11; *æscholt*, *Beowulf*, l. 330, *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 230; *garwudu*, *Exodus*, l. 325; *þrecwudu*, *Beowulf*, l. 1246; *mægenwudu*, *Beowulf*, l. 326; *guðwudu*, *The Battle of Finnsburh*, l. 6); on Anglo-Saxon spears see Underwood, pp. 39–46.

¹¹ In poetry, the destruction of metal weapons and armour are perhaps to be taken as signalling that a particular encounter was exceptionally violent. George Clark, 'Beowulf's Armor', *ELH*, 32 (1965), 409–41 (p. 412) argues, for instance, that 'in *Beowulf* the "sword versus helmet" theme epitomizes the ferocious savagery of heroic warfare'.

¹² Ætheling Æthelstan, son of King Æthelred and his first wife Ælfgifu, leaves two shields (*mines targan* and *mines bohscylde*) in his early eleventh-century will to a retainer and another individual. Shields often appear in Anglo-Saxon wills, usually as part of weapon heriots, which are discussed in more detail below. Æthelstan's bequest is different because the shields in question are clearly his own. Dorothy Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p. 60.

¹³ Identity is understood here as 'the sameness of a [...] thing at all times or in all circumstances', *OED*, s.v. 'identity', 2.a. Anglo-Saxon weapons and armour, including shields, were often highly decorated. While this is another way of approaching the issue of identity my concern here is with the general characteristics of weapon and armour types. On the decoration and symbolism of shields see Dickinson and Härke, pp. 50–4, 61–2; Stephenson, pp. 50–2, 103–24; Underwood, pp. 86–89; Pollington, p. 160. The possible social significance of different kinds of shield-decoration is discussed in Tania Dickinson, 'Symbols of Protection: The Significance of Animal-ornamented Shields in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeology*, 49 (2005), 109–64.

¹⁴ The hoard also contains many 'old and rusted' ('eald ond omig', l. 2763) helmets.

ll. 1457, 1490, 1659, 1807, Nægling, l. 2680; Mimming, *Waldere I*, l. 3) also derive their identity partly from their history, although they do so in a different way. As Isaacs notes, the personification of a sword can be so complete it ‘is not only given human attributes but it is also given a distinct personality all its own.’¹⁵ In the case of Hrunting, for example, this is achieved by referring to it in human terms (e.g. ‘guðwine’, ‘battle-friend’, l. 1810), by implying that it can act independently (‘næs þæt forma sið l þæt hit ellenweorc æfnan scolde’, ‘that wasn’t the first time it had to perform a courageous deed’, ll. 1463–64), and by alluding to the many earlier conflicts in which it was involved (ll. 1460–64).¹⁶ Like the shield in the Exeter riddle, Hrunting is thus presented as a warrior with his own unique history; significantly however, unlike the shield it is Hrunting’s longevity as an object that provides the basis for its personification, rather than the use of personification providing the impression that it has had a long history.

As a potentially short-lived object the shield did not support this kind of individuation. Due to the way it was used in combat the wooden shield board was ‘likely to have been damaged in most serious encounters’.¹⁷ Indirect evidence for repair indicates that when the slats that made up the board became damaged they were removed and replaced.¹⁸ If the entire board was destroyed there was also the option of remounting the fittings onto a new board, in much the same way that modern archaeologists have remounted the fittings recovered from sites like Sutton Hoo.¹⁹ Stephenson suggests thinking of the shield as an object that could have various ‘incarnation[s]’,²⁰ with boards being refitted regularly, not necessarily with the same type of wood, and with the possibility of warriors using entirely new boards each time they went into battle.²¹ In this sense, the shield differed from metal weapons and armour insofar as the main part of it could be changed repeatedly and was in effect ‘disposable’.²² The shield thus lacked that stable physical core that forms the basis for the strong sense of identity we find among objects made from more durable materials.

Weapons and armour with long histories of their own were also important for what they offered societies depicted in heroic poetry. These objects provided individuals and groups with a sense of history they could literally grasp with their hands, a tangible connection to ancestors and legendary figures, a means by which a people could attire itself in a glorious and mythical past. This was not simply a convention within literature. The early eleventh-century will of Ætheling Æthelstan, for example, includes a bequest of several swords. The name of one sword’s former owner indicates that Æthelstan was bequeathing one sword he believed to be over two hundred years old: ‘ic geann Eadmunde minon bræder þæs swurdes þe Offa cyng ahte’ (‘I grant to Edmund my brother the sword which belonged to King Offa’).²³ Presumably this sword belonged to a number of people since it belonged to the Mercian king, but Æthelstan still regards it as Offa’s weapon either because he is the most famous of the sword’s previous

¹⁵ Neil D. Isaacs, ‘The Convention of Personification in *Beowulf*’, in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. by Robert P. Creed (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1967), pp. 215–48 (p. 220).

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the personification of Hrunting see Isaacs, pp. 220–2.

¹⁷ Dickinson and Härke, p. 56.

¹⁸ On the evidence for shield repair see Dickinson and Härke, pp. 55–60.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the Sutton Hoo shield see Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial*, 3 vols (London: British Museum, 1975–83), II (1978), 1–137.

²⁰ Stephenson, p. 40.

²¹ pp. 54, 126.

²² p. 40.

²³ Whitelock, p. 58.

owners or he is the one who had it made. Either way, it is evidence that the desire for physical connection with the past found in poetry is an expression of a broader cultural phenomenon.

War-gear, Commonality, and Community: Byrhtnoth at Maldon

Celebrating an object for its age is a celebration of its material value. A relatively consistent value-hierarchy existed throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, and it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that metal weapons and armour requiring great skill and labour to produce were considered more valuable than predominately wooden objects like the shield and spear. In the weapon burials of the early Anglo-Saxon period, the shield was the second most common piece of war-gear deposited in Anglo-Saxon graves. Evidence of shields is present in four out of ten weapon burials, less than the most common of all Anglo-Saxon weapons, the spear, which occurs in nine out of ten, but more than the sword, which appears in one out of ten.²⁴ Much less common was the deposition of helmets and mail-coats, which appear in only a 'handful of very rich burials'.²⁵ At the other end of the Anglo-Saxon period, in the half-century prior to the Norman Conquest, Cnut II produced a law-code stipulating the number and type of weapons and armour to be rendered as heriot. For the different ranks of English society the code effectively calls for a payment of two shields and two spears for every sword.²⁶ Depending on the rank, the code further calls for the number of helmets and mail-coats to be given at a rate either equivalent to or half that of swords. This ratio is reflected in a number of late Anglo-Saxon wills where there are generally fewer swords bequeathed in comparison to shields and spears, and where, in many cases, the number of shields and spears is exactly double that of swords.²⁷

Shields and spears are more common in weapon heriots because, as Brooks notes, this combination was the basic battlefield equipment of all warriors.²⁸ The free man was armed with just a shield and spear; warriors of higher rank would additionally have had swords, helmets, and mail-coats.²⁹ The possession of metal weapons and armour was thus a symbol of wealth. Indeed, among the weapon sets found in early weapon burials, the combination of sword, shield, and spear is relatively rare, and found in only one in twenty-five burials, whereas the combination of shield and spear is found in one in four.³⁰ In poetry, emphasising specific kinds of weapons and armour creates a particular impression about the world of the poem and its characters. In *Beowulf*, celebrating the history of swords, helmets, and mail-coats evokes a rarefied world of affluence and privilege. In a poem like *The Battle of Maldon*, calling attention to different weapons at different times can have a narrower function, and can say something about a character's relationship to those around him:

²⁴ Heinrich Härke, '“Warrior Graves?” The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), 22–43 (p. 34); Dickinson and Härke, p. 67.

²⁵ Härke, pp. 25–26.

²⁶ Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze Der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1903–16), 1 (1903), 356–60; Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), pp. 115–6; see also Rosemary J. Cramp, 'Beowulf and Archaeology', *Medieval Archaeology*, 1 (1957), 57–77 (p. 60).

²⁷ See, for example, Whitelock, pp. 2, 26, 30, 42, 54, 80.

²⁸ Nicholas Brooks, 'Arms, Status, and Warfare in Late-Saxon England', in *Communities and Warfare 700-1400*, ed. by Nicholas Brooks (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon, 2000), pp. 138–61 (p. 141).

²⁹ The heriot of a wealthy man would include the basic equipment for fully-armed warriors and their attendants; the latter would carry just a shield and spear (Brooks, pp. 144–47).

³⁰ Härke, p. 34.

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Byrhtnoð mæpelode, bord hafenode,
wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde,
yrre and anræd ageaf him andsware:
'Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
ættrynne ord and ealde swurd,
þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.'
(ll. 42–8)

Byrhtnoth spoke, raised his shield, waved his slender ash spear, declared with words, angry and resolute, answered him: 'Do you hear, seafarer, what this people says? They will give you spears as tribute, the deadly point, and old swords, that war-gear which will be of no use to you at battle.'

Eode þa gesyrwed secg to þam eorle;
he wolde þæs beornes beagas gefecgan,
reaf and hringas and gerenod swurd.
þa Byrhtnoð bræd bill of sceðe,
brad and bruneccg, and on þa byrnan sloh.
To raþe hine gelette lidmanna sum,
þa he þæs eorles earm amyrd.
Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd;
ne mihte he gehealdan heardne mece,
wæpnas wealdan.
(ll. 159–68)

Then an armed warrior went to that nobleman; he wanted to carry off the man's rings, treasures, armour, and decorated sword. Byrhtnoth then drew his sword, broad and bright-edged and struck at the mail-coat. Too soon a Viking hindered him when he wounded the nobleman's arm. The gold-hilted sword then fell to the earth; he could not hold the hard blade, wield the weapon.

In general, *The Battle of Maldon* reflects the hierarchy of weapons discussed above. In a literary analogue to the early archaeological evidence, references to spears in this poem occur most often, followed by references to shields, then swords.³¹ The above passages in particular, taken together, identify Byrhtnoth as belonging to the elite of English society by depicting him as someone who could afford to carry a sword, shield, and spear. In the two speeches given by Byrhtnoth in this poem, the first to the Viking messenger (ll. 45–61) and the second to God (ll. 173–80), the choice of weapon takes on a further thematic significance in reinforcing the way Byrhtnoth chooses to identify himself on both occasions. In the first passage, Byrhtnoth's brandishing of the most common pairing of Anglo-Saxon weapons and armour underlines his complete identification with the rest of the Essex *fyrð*, who are likely to have been carrying a similar combination, and to whom he refers on a number of occasions in terms that make no distinction between ranks (l. 45, 'þis folc'; l. 56, 'urum sceattum'; l. 57, 'urne eard'; l. 61, 'we'). Similarly, while Byrhtnoth's later use of a sword is to be expected of a wealthy Anglo-Saxon warrior, it takes place after the narrative focus has shifted onto him and immediately prior to his short final speech in which he offers what is uniquely his (i.e.

³¹ Spear: 28 references (*asc, æscholt, daroð, franca, gar, ord* (as spear), *spere, wælspere*); shield: 17 references (*bord, lind, rand, scyld*); sword: 12 references (*bill, ecg, iren, mece, swurd*). Other weapons and armour mentioned are mail-coat: 4 references (*byrne, hringloca*); arrow: 2 references (*flan*).

his soul) to God. Here he is alone, giving an account of his behaviour as a Christian leader. He refers to himself (*ic/min(um)*) six times in the space of eight lines,³² something he does only three times in his seventeen-line speech to the Viking messenger.³³ This second passage is concerned with Byrhtnoth alone, apart from the group, and associates material exclusivity with spiritual exclusivity; it represents a change from the inclusiveness of his first speech where the use of shield and spear emphasise Byrhtnoth's connection to those around him.

The shield and social relationships

In Old English poetry metal weapons and armour were very much associated with the unique, the individual, the exclusive in Anglo-Saxon culture. As potentially long-lived objects with their own unique histories these items could both acquire names of their own and provide a link to famous names from earlier times. The example of Byrhtnoth demonstrates that the shield not only lacked these associations, but it was also much more likely to be associated with the opposite of this — that which is common, undifferentiated, unnamed. While the perishability of the shield meant that it was not used to discuss the relationship between present and past, in depictions of shield-use the shield did offer poets a means of discussing existing social relationships, both their importance and how they can be compromised. Indeed, even in the one instance from Old English poetry where the shield in question is not the common wooden shield, the importance of social relationships is a key theme.

Beowulf's iron shield is in one sense all about Beowulf. He orders it made because against the dragon

wisse he gearwe
 þæt him holtwudu helpan ne meahte,
 lind wið lige
 (ll. 2339–41)

he knew well that wood couldn't help him, linden-wood against flame.

Beowulf's decision to arm himself with equipment suited to the task is a product of a wisdom born out of a long history fighting monsters that is as peculiar to Beowulf as the object itself. He demonstrates a foresight here which will, with his death, be lost to the Geats, and which can be contrasted with the impetuosity of the young retainer Wiglaf, who, moved by the thought of Beowulf suffering, is unable to restrain himself ('ne mihte ða forhabban', l. 2609); he snatches up his own wooden shield and rushes into the dragon's barrow only to meet the fate that Beowulf has been careful to avoid:

Lig yðum for;
 born bord wið rond. Byrne ne meahte
 geongum garwigan geoce gefremman,
 ac se maga geonga under his mæges scyld
 elne geode, þa his agen was
 gledum forgrunden
 (ll. 2672–77)

Fire advanced in waves; the shield was burned up to the boss. The mail-coat could not help the young warrior, provide aid, but the young kinsman went with courage under his kinsman's shield when his own was consumed by flames.

³² ll. 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 179.

³³ ll. 51, 53, 55.

Although Beowulf uses a shield against the dragon specifically to meet the threat it poses, it is worth noting that of all Beowulf's fights, this is the only one in which he both uses a shield and fights with a companion.³⁴ While the shield itself is materially unique, the enduring images of the final part of the dragon fight do not emphasise what is distinctive about Beowulf or his shield, but rather what he shares with that companion. After his sword Nægling breaks (l. 2680) and he becomes pinned by the dragon, Wiglaf, ignoring the threat to himself, strikes the dragon so that the flames abate, allowing Beowulf time to cut into the underside of the creature and kill it. The passage concludes with an explanation of what it was that killed the creature:

Feond gefyldan — ferh ellen wræc —
ond hi hyne þa begen abroten hæfdon,
sibæðelingas.
(ll. 2706–8)

They killed the enemy — courage drove out life — and they both had killed it, the related nobles.

Wiglaf may not possess Beowulf's practical knowledge in dealing with monsters but he does possess his courage and sense of duty. The recognition here that it was a shared virtue that killed the dragon leads Irving to argue that the credit for the dragon's death should not go to either or even to both men, but rather to the relationship that exists between them:

What kills the dragon? Neither one of the two heroes as individuals, but the relationship between these two *sibæðelingas* almost as a hypostatized entity in itself, the reality of heroic comradeship, affectionate loyalty, and self-sacrificing courage.³⁵

If the dragon's death is achieved through the relationship that exists between the lord and his retainer, then Beowulf's shield protects that relationship, and provides the safe physical space from which both men strike out at the creature.

The use of the shield as a form of shared protection, while it arises due to Wiglaf's lack of experience and occurs in a fantastic context, resonates with more general imagery of shields in Old English poetry, in particular the depictions of shield-use on the Anglo-Saxon battlefield. In accounts of large scale encounters the shield is perhaps the only weapon or piece of armour that is described being used cooperatively. Poets often note the use of the 'shield-wall', a close-order battle formation employed by the English and their enemies during the period. As the name suggests, the shield-wall was a continuous barrier created by the front rank of warriors arranging their shields into a line.³⁶ The metaphors for the shield-wall

³⁴ It might perhaps be expected that Beowulf would not use a shield in the fights that begin or take place entirely in water (Grendel's mother; the sea-monsters during the swimming contest against Breca), although in both he does use sword and mail-coat. In the two fights that take place on dry land (Grendel, Dæghrefn) he dispatches his enemies using no weapons at all; he scorns the use of sword and shield before combat with Grendel (ll. 677–87) and boasts about using only his hands to kill Dæghrefn (ll. 2497–509).

³⁵ Edward B. Irving Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 163.

³⁶ As Pollington notes (p. 215), there is no consensus on the precise structure of the shield-wall, whether it was a relatively loose arrangement with warriors simply raising their shields to a similar position, or whether it was a much tighter formation, with shields held edge to edge or even overlapped. There appears to be no evidence in Old English poetry to support either view. Bosworth and Toller note references to shields being held edge to edge (lit. 'shield against shield', 'skjöldr við skjöldr') in an account of the Battle of Stamford Bridge in the Old Norse *Haralds saga harðráða*: Joseph Bosworth, and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1898) s.v. *scildburh* (hereafter BT). Another suggestion is that the shield-wall began as a tight structure but loosened as the sides came together to allow room for weapons to be used more freely: Underwood, p. 90; Pollington, pp. 215–16).

in Old English poetry find various ways of describing the structure; it is not only a wall of shields (*bordweall*, *Beowulf*, l. 2980; *The Battle of Brunanburh*, l. 5; *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 277; *scildweall*, *Beowulf*, l. 3118), but also an enclosing hedge³⁷ (*wihaga*, *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 102; *bordhaga*, *Elene*, l. 652), and a fortress (*scildburh*, *Judith*, l. 304; *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 242). In Old Norse kennings, the ground-words suggested by Snorri Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál* for the shield-wall offer more developed images of a three-dimensional protective space: ‘skjaldborgin er kolluð höll ok ræfr, veggr ok golf’ (‘the shield-wall is called hall and roof, wall and floor’).³⁸ Taken literally, these Old Norse terms more appropriately describe the kind of protection afforded by the Roman *testudo*, the protective ‘box’ created by the wall of legionaries shields held to the front, sides, and the ‘roof of overlapping shields’³⁹ held above the head. While Old English poetry contains nothing comparable to the language of *Skáldskaparmál*, the sense of enclosure implied in both *-haga* and *-burh* suggests that the Anglo-Saxons did consider the shield-wall as something more than a simple barrier. Indeed, in a metaphorical sense, the shield-wall was a kind of hall; on the battlefield it served a number of the same functions as the hall and was often presented in similar terms.

Heall on wælstowe: the shield-wall in The Battle of Maldon

As a protected social space, the hall in Old English poetry represents the positive element in a binary opposition between two very different environments. Hume, for example, describes the hall as a ‘circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger’.⁴⁰ Using similar language, Neville calls it an ‘enclosure within which light, order, value and safety prevail’, to be distinguished from the natural world where ‘darkness, chaos and danger rage’.⁴¹ The hall was the centre of communal life ‘where the vital and affectionate interchanges of social solidarity, the giving and taking of rewards and service, responsibility and gratitude’ were carried on.⁴² To the extent that the physical structure could be identified with the society that built and inhabited it, the hall was, as Magennis notes, an image of the community itself.⁴³

In a poem like *Beowulf*, the narrative is driven by external threats to the poem’s two great halls, to Heorot and Beowulf’s hall in Geatland. However, in both cases the more insidious threat to what the hall represents does not come from outside, but from within. In Denmark, for example, Grendel’s attacks against Heorot have over time led not only to the diminishment of Hrothgar’s warrior-band (‘wigheap gewanod’, l. 477), but also to a gradual collapse of Danish morale, as eventually warriors start to abandon the hall and choose their own personal safety over the safety of the symbolic centre of their society:

³⁷ Although *-haga* in the compounds *bordhaga* and *wihaga* can be translated simply as ‘hedge’ (BT, s.v. *bordhaga*; Scragg, p. 75) the noun *haga* carries a sense of ‘enclosure’. BT translate it as ‘a place fenced in, an enclosure, a haw, a dwelling in a town.’ ‘Haw’ is a now-obsolete term meaning ‘a hedge or encompassing fence’ and, by extension, ‘a piece of ground enclosed or fenced in’ (*OED*).

³⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols (London: Viking Society For Northern Research, 1998), I 49.

³⁹ Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), p. 194.

⁴⁰ Kathryn Hume, ‘The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), pp. 63–74 (p. 64).

⁴¹ Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 57.

⁴² Edward B. Irving Jr., *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 137.

⁴³ Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 18 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 35–40.

Stephen Graham

þa wæs eaðfynde þe him elles hwær
gerumlicor ræste sohte,
bed æfter burum
(ll. 138–40)

then it was easy to find the one who sought a resting-place, a bed elsewhere, further away
among the dwellings

This process continues until finally Heorot ‘idel stod’ (‘stood idle’, l. 138). This abandonment of the communal centre of Danish life is also the abandonment of the idea of community itself. A similar fate befalls the Geats following the dragon’s attack on Beowulf’s hall. When Beowulf goes to avenge the attack, it is made clear that he does not have a ‘group of close companions’ (‘heape handgesteallan’, l. 2596) to protect him; these have ‘fled to the forest to protect their lives’ (‘hy on holt bugon, l ealdre burgan’, ll. 2598–99), leaving only Wiglaf to help him. In both cases the external threats to the hall have led to what are arguably greater threats to the communities concerned as members of the group cease to behave according to the shared system of values that hold their society together. By placing these communities under psychological pressure the attacks have revealed points of weakness within them and discovered their potential for disintegration.

The symbolism of the shield-wall in Old English poetry is not as rich as that of the hall but the structure is depicted in a similar way. It too is a barrier that protects those inside from external danger, and in that sense it is also part of a binary opposition between two very different environments. In his examination of how the structure partitions physical space on the battlefield, Pollington notes an analogous, if less dramatic, contrast between both sides of the shield-wall:⁴⁴

us	:	them
behind the shieldwall	:	beyond the shieldwall
defensive behaviour	:	threatening behaviour
solidarity	:	hostility

To be effective the shield-wall relied on warriors being conscious that they were fighting as part of a group, and that their welfare relied on the welfare of those around them. Abels, for instance, notes that the strength of a shield-wall lay in ‘unit cohesion, and this in turn depended upon the morale of the troops. Once morale was broken the battle was lost’.⁴⁵ In Old English poetry the maintenance of the shield-wall represents the collective will to fight; its destruction often signifies the decision point of a battle. In *Elene*, the breach of the Huns’ ‘shield barrier’ (‘bræcon bordhreðan’, l. 122) also marks the end of their resistance to the Romans; in *Judith* the sheering of the shield-wall (‘scildburh scæron’, l. 304) leads to the rout of the Assyrians at the hands of the Hebrew army; in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, the celebration of King Æthelstan’s victory begins with the claim that he and Eadmund Ætheling clove the shield-wall (‘bordweal clufan’, l. 5).

In some poems the shield-wall represents the same image of community that the hall represents in *Beowulf*. In *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, the shield-wall is central to the poem’s thematic concerns, and its destruction is presented in terms of individuals abandoning

⁴⁴ Pollington, p. 202 n. 8.

⁴⁵ Richard Abels, ‘English Tactics, Strategy and Military Organization in the Late Tenth Century’, in *The Battle of*

Scyld sceal ceman

both the community and the sense of community that the structure symbolises. Immediately after he decides to cede the river crossing, Byrhtnoth

mid bordum het
wyrcaþ þone wihagan and þæt werod healdan
fæste wið feondum
(ll. 101–3)

ordered the construction of a shield-wall with shields and that the company hold fast against the enemy

Once the shield-wall is established, the risk to the welfare of the group comes less from the external threat posed by the Vikings than the handful of warriors who put their own interests over those of the community. The turning point of the battle in this poem is the flight of Godric and his brothers, who are mistaken for Byrhtnoth leaving the field on horseback. When Offa complains about their cowardice, he makes a direct connection between the unity of the group and the integrity of the shield-wall:

Us Godric hæfð,
earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene.
Wende þæs formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
on wlancaþ þam wicge, þæt wære hit ure hlaford;
forþan wearð her on felda folc totwæmed,
scyldburih tobrocen.
(ll. 237–42)

Godric, wretched Odda's son, has betrayed us all. Many men believed when he rode off on the horse proud from war, that it was our lord. Therefore the people became divided here in the field, the shield-wall broken.

The destruction of the shield-wall is presented here as a fracturing of social bonds, with the collective unity of the *fyrð* being destroyed by the selfishness of Godric and his brothers. It is a violation of two statements that stand adjacent in *Maxims II* and which this incident suggests are related: 'fyrð sceal ætsonne, I tirfæstra getrum. Treow sceal on eorle' ('the army must be together, the troop of men set on glory. There must be loyalty in the man', ll. 31–32).

In *The Battle of Maldon* the collapse of the shield-wall does not signal the end of English resistance. Those who are left find themselves in the same position as Wiglaf, conscious that they are no longer acting as part of a group, but as individuals struggling with an external enemy out of a sense of duty to their lord. In these circumstances, the hall becomes a point of reference for the ideal of social unity. Ælfwine, for example, in a speech intended to rally those around him, explicitly recalls the hall and what was said there:

Gemunan þa mæla þe we oft æt meodo spræcon,
þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn;
nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy.
(ll. 212–15)

Let us remember the times that we often spoke at mead, when we on the bench raised boasts, heroes in the hall, about hard struggle; now we might know who is brave.

Here the image of the hall appears to take the place of the shield-wall that has been broken. However, these remarks actually seem to question whether the hall is really an authentic and

truthful image of community, and whether what is said there has any validity in the real world. Ælfwine's remarks should perhaps be read in conjunction with the scepticism of Offa who warns that earlier 'on þam meþelstede' ('in the meeting place', l. 199), 'manega spræcon l þe eft æt þearfe þolian noldon' ('many spoke boldly who afterward would not endure at a time of need', ll. 198–201). This concern about the relevance of words uttered in the hall is reflective of a deeper cultural concern evident in several other poems. In *Beowulf*, Wiglaf tries unsuccessfully to encourage his companions to help Beowulf by reminding them of promises made in the 'biorsele' ('beer-hall', l. 2635), while *Vainglory* condemns outright the making of proud boast-speeches in the hall, saying that there are too many ('sindan to monige', l. 25) who engage in it. In a sense, therefore, because the shield-wall is established on the battlefield, it arguably represents a truer test of a warrior's commitment to the welfare of the group. The danger that threatens it is more immediate than that which faces the hall and the warriors who stand in the front rank literally have the security of the community in their hands.

Red Sea shield-walls: the Old English *Exodus*

One other poem from the corpus that depicts the shield-wall as a hall-like structure is the Old English *Exodus*. This poem appears to contain two references to metaphorical shield-walls. The first occurs when Moses addresses the Israelites gathered upon the shore of the Red Sea. He describes his own actions as he strikes the waters and they part; he then urges the Israelites to hurry across and take the opportunity God has given them to escape the pursuing Egyptians:

Ofest is selost
 þæt ge of feonda fæðme weorðen,
 nu se agend up arærde
 reade streamas in randgebeorh.
 Syndon þa foreweallas fægre gesteppe,
 wrætlicu wægfaru, oð wolcna hrof.
 (ll. 293–98)

Haste is best so that you escape the grasp of enemies, now the Creator has raised up the Red Sea into a rampart/shield-wall. The walls are fairly erected up to the roof of the heavens, a wondrous track through the waves.

Later in the poem, with the Israelites safely on the far shore, the poet describes the coming together of the seas and the drowning of the Egyptians:

Randbyrig wæron rofene, rodor swipode
 meredeaða mæst, modige swulton,
 cýningas on corðre, cyre swiðrode
 sæs æt ende. Wigbord scinon
 heah ofer hæleðum, holmweall astah,
 merestream modig.
 (ll. 464–67)

The ramparts/shield-walls of water were broken, the greatest of sea-deaths lashed the sky, the proud ones died, kings in a troop, their choice diminished, at the seas end. The war-shields shone, high over the warriors, the wall of sea-water rose up, the raging sea waters.

The translations of ‘randgebeorh’ and ‘randbyrig’ (sing. *randburh*; cf. *scildburh*) given here are those suggested by Lucas and Irving respectively.⁴⁶ As is evident, there is no consistent interpretation of either term, with editors and critics split on whether the poet is referring specifically to the Red Sea being raised up into a metaphorical shield-wall, or whether the terms refers more generally to the form of the structural boundary of water. Tolkien, like Lucas, does not read *randgebeorh* as a reference to shields, preferring ‘marginal protection’; he translates ‘randbyrig wæron rofene’ in a similar way: ‘the ramparts on either margin were broken’.⁴⁷ Clark Hall, by contrast, offers ‘shield-wall of waves’ for *randbyrig* and ‘protecting shield of waves’ for *randgebeorh*.⁴⁸ Roberta Frank suggests ‘shield-walls’ for *randbyrig* and ‘shield-enclosure’ for *randgebeorh*.⁴⁹ Finally, Bosworth and Toller offer ‘a protection such as that afforded by a shield’ for *randgebeorh* but are uncertain of *randbyrig*, asking: ‘are the walls formed by the water compared to the arrangement of the line of battle when the shields overlapped?’⁵⁰

The above discussion suggests that the answer to Bosworth and Toller’s question is ‘yes’ and that Irving is correct in reading both *randgebeorh* and *randbyrig* as references to a metaphorical shield-wall of water erected by God to aid the fleeing Israelites. Frank rightly notes the semantic distinction between *-gebeorh* (‘a defence, protection, safety, refuge’) and *-burh* (‘a fortified place, fortress, castle, walled town, dwelling surrounded by a wall or rampart of earth’),⁵¹ but the broader associations that the shield-wall had in Old English poetry provide a good basis for believing that a connection is being made here between the structure God uses to protect the faithful and the structure Anglo-Saxons used to defend themselves on the battlefield. Like the hall and the literal shield-wall, two hugely different environments are kept apart by this metaphorical shield-wall — the community of Israelites is protected and safe on one side, danger and destruction await on the other. Such a reading seems to be complemented by the references to war-shields shining above the heads of the warriors as the ramparts of water collapse, which, developing the shield-wall metaphor could be a reference to the reflections from the wave-tips as they crest and come down. These passages are perhaps an example of what Tolkien himself describes as the ‘adaptation of English/Germanic atmosphere to biblical narrative’,⁵² in which an indigenous idiom is used to convey an exotic image; in this case a shield-wall holds back the waters of the Red Sea to create a defensive space for the Israelites to pass through, in the same way that the shield-wall in *The Battle of Maldon* resists the Viking tide.

The imagery of *Exodus*, perhaps more forcefully than *The Battle of Maldon*, highlights the temporariness of the shield-wall. In *Exodus*, its existence depends upon the will of God and when that changes the structure collapses; in *The Battle of Maldon* the integrity of

⁴⁶ *Exodus*, ed. by Peter J. Lucas (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994); *The Old English Exodus*, ed. by Edward B. Irving Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

⁴⁷ *The Old English Exodus: Text, Translation, and Commentary* by J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. by Joan Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 61, 71.

⁴⁸ J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), s.v. *randburg*, *randgebeorh*.

⁴⁹ Roberta Frank, ‘What Kind of Poetry Is *Exodus*?’ in *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures*, ed. by Daniel G. Calder and T. Craig Christy (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1988), pp. 191–205 (p. 199).

⁵⁰ BT, s.v. *randgebeorh*, *randburg*.

⁵¹ BT, s.v. *gebeorh*, *burh*.

⁵² Turville-Petre, p. 39.

the shield-wall relies upon the will of individuals which, as the actions of Godric and his brothers demonstrate, is also subject to change. For warriors this change was a product of human weakness, a moral fragility that mirrored the material fragility of the shield itself. The sense in the Exeter riddle that a shield will eventually collapse under the blows of swords is echoed in the imagery of the shield-wall by the fear that the shield-bearer might undergo an equally disastrous moral collapse, a failure that would have dire consequences for the entire community.

Conclusion: *bitað in burgum*

In a literary culture that valued weapons and armour for their longevity, the Anglo-Saxon shield was not an object celebrated by poets. It was constructed largely from cheap, perishable materials and used with an expectation that it would be damaged or destroyed. Unlike metal weapons and armour, the shield lacked the constancy of form that provided the basis for some objects to develop an identity of their own. Not only was it rarely of interest itself, in societies where physical objects provided a means for the past to live on in the present, the shield offered little by way of connection to what had gone before.

Yet precisely because of its commonness and fragility the shield did offer a means for poets to talk about other kinds of connections. The shield was the piece of Anglo-Saxon war-gear that best captured the importance of the reciprocal relationship between the community and the individual warrior. Depictions of the shield provide a counterweight to the focus on heroic individualism that marks so much Old English poetry and which is embodied by objects like swords, helmets, and mail-coats that are celebrated for their uniqueness. While the community needed the courage of individuals to protect and sustain it, there were also occasions when it was necessary for the community to act together to protect the individual. Whether in struggles against legendary creatures or in mass engagements on the battlefield, using an object that could be used cooperatively entailed a moral choice about the value of cooperation, and whether the survival of the group was more important than the survival of the individual. *Beowulf* and *Wiglaf* offer one answer, Godric and his brothers offer another.

In *Beowulf*, the name of the Danish patriarch Scyld Scefing alludes to his role as protector of his people.⁵³ In a sense, though, every Anglo-Saxon who carried a shield into combat bore a responsibility for the welfare of others. The shield in the Exeter riddle says that in battle the weapons of his enemies 'bite in the strongholds' (*'bitað in burgum'*); the use of *burh* here suggests that this particular shield was actually one that was used in the shield-wall (*scyld-/rand-burh*). In battle it protected the individual warrior as the warrior worked with those around him to maintain the structure of the shield-wall, the symbol of the community on the battlefield. The Exeter shield thus not only embodied the warrior's fragility, it also embodied the fragility of the social group to which the warrior belonged.

⁵³ Fulk, Bjork and Niles, p. 111.