

Introduction

Then the wolvish Vikings, avid for slaughter, waded to the west across the River Panta. The seafarers hoisted their shields on high and carried them over the gleaming water. Byrhtnoth and his warriors awaited them, ready for battle; he ordered his men to form a phalanx with their shields, and to stand firm against the onslaught of the enemy. Then was the battle, with its chance of glory, about to begin. The time had come for all the doomed men to fall in the fight.

The clamour began; the ravens wheeled and the eagle circled overhead, craving for carrion; there was shouting on earth. They hurled their spears, hard as files, and sent sharp darts flying from their hands. Bow strings were busy, shield parried point. Bitter was the battle. Brave men fell on both sides, youths choking in the dust . . . The brave men stood resolute, rock firm. Each of them hunting for a way to be first in with his spear, winning with his weapons the life of a doomed warrior; the dead sank down to the earth. But the rest stood unshaken and Byrhtnoth spurred them on, inciting each man to fight ferociously who wished to gain glory against the Danes . . . Another seafarer advanced on the earl, meaning to make short work of him and snatch away his treasures – his armour and his rings and his ornamented sword.

Byrhtnoth drew out his sword from its sheath, broad-faced and gleaming, and made to slash at the seafarer's corselet. But his enemy stopped him all too soon, savagely striking Byrhtnoth's arm. The golden-hilted sword dropped from his hand. He could hold it no longer nor wield a weapon of any kind. Then the old warrior raised his men's morale with bold words, calling on his companions to do battle again . . . Then the heathens hewed him down and the two men who stood there supporting him; Aelfnoth and Wulfmaer fell to the dust, both gave their lives in defence of their lord . . . So Aethelred's earl, the prince of those people fell; all his hearth-companions could see for themselves that their lord lay low. Then the proud thanes, with the utmost