The Battle of Maldon

An Analysis of the Icelandic Translation
by Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson.
Abstract

Despite existing more than 1000 years apart, Old English and Modern Icelandic are closely related languages. Old English texts can be faithfully translated to Icelandic with relative ease and the subject matter of many Old English texts is closely related to Icelandic and Scandinavian history. The Battle of Maldon is one such example, as it tells of Danish Vikings who raided the eastern shoreline of Britain in the ninth and tenth century. In addition to this historic connection, the metre and form of Old English poetry closely resembles old Icelandic traditions, furthering this ease of access to an Icelandic translator or reader. Despite all these qualities, Old English stories and poetry have been neglected by Icelandic scholars except for a select number of professors and language enthusiasts. One such enthusiast is Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson. He made the only existing Icelandic translation of The Battle of Maldon and published in 2014 after venturing to the poem’s historic grounds in south-eastern England. This thesis explores Sigurjón’s translation with regard to his attempts to convert the Old English poetic style to the Icelandic fornyrðislag, specifically focusing on his choices towards alliteration, metre and form. The thesis includes word-for-word comparisons of selected passages from the poem and, despite not being meant as a critique of Sigurjón’s work, includes arguments for or against specific translation choices. As well as focusing on the poetic aspects of the translation, special mention is made of the etymological connections of the two languages and extended points are made about the etymological choices that Sigurjón makes. As well as being an analysis, the thesis offers information about the history and preservation of the text and refers to scholars of Old English and their varied opinions on certain elements within the poem.
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1. Introduction

In this thesis I examine the Old English (OE) poem The Battle of Maldon and the Icelandic translation by Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson (Ísaksson 2014). The Battle of Maldon is a historical poem about a battle that took place on the eastern shore of England in the year 991, in which Danish Vikings invaded Britain. In 1991, 1000 years after the battle took place, scholars revisited the poem and published books and articles exploring various viewpoints and thoughts on the poem and battle (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 7). In the summer of 2008, Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson travelled to England and learned about this battle (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 7). He thought it a shame to have no Icelandic translation of such an important text and that Icelandic scholars had to rely on an English publication to learn about the battle. Therefore, he decided to translate the poem to Icelandic and finally published his translation in 2014. I agree with Sigurjón that it is a shame for Icelandic scholars to have to rely on English, and considering Iceland’s historic connection with Vikings as well as the Icelandic language’s close relation to Old English I found this a particularly interesting subject matter. Furthermore, what makes this subject especially noteworthy is that Sigurjón is not a professional in the field as Icelandic scholars of Old English are few and far between. Old English is generally not a common subject matter for Icelandic scholars, with only three major exceptions: professors Þórhallur Eyþórsson, Pétur Knútsson and the late Magnús Fjalldal. Seeing that Sigurjón is credited as the sole creator of this translation, I decided to take a close look at the text and explore his efforts to take on such a difficult task. In the prologue to the translation, Sigurjón states that while he tries to translate in an archaic style, and as accurately as possible, he sometimes diverges from a direct translation in favour of alliteration and form, or to have a more diverse vocabulary, making the translation more enjoyable to read (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 7). The poem is written in a metre that is closely related to the old Icelandic fornyrðislag, where alliteration and metre are the main characteristics (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 7). In order to move the form closer to Icelandic tradition, Sigurjón opts to split the lines of the poem in two halves, making the 325-line poem 650 lines. For sake of clarity, all referrals to the poem will use the translation’s line count of 650.
2. Maldon: Historical connections and the history and nature of the text.

The Battle of Maldon took place on 11 August 991, close to the town Maldon in Essex in England (Ísaksson, 2014). Viking raids were a common occurrence on the eastern shore of England at the time and they largely went unchallenged until a large Viking army approached Maldon. There, they were met with resistance, as Byrhtnoð, ealdorman of Essex, led an Anglo-Saxon army to Maldon in hopes of defeating the Vikings. The Vikings had set up camp in Northey Island and thought to attack the city from the east. The island is linked to the mainland by a causeway which is covered during high tide, limiting the Viking’s possible approach to the low tide. Because of this causeway, the Anglo-Saxon army chose to meet the Vikings on the banks of the Blackwater, giving them a significant advantage. Despite this advantage, the battle ended with the death of Byrhtnoð and Viking victory. At the time of the battle, Byrhtnoð was the second most powerful man in the country, after Æthelred, later called the Unready or Redeless, who ruled England at the time (Hodgkin, 1906).

Only a fragment of the poem has survived to present day, as the unique manuscript was lost in the Cotton Library fire of 1731 (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 33). Fortunately, a transcript had been made and published a few years prior to the fire and thus a part of the poem still survives to this day. As the beginning lines of the poem are lost the story begins with the Anglo-Saxon army dismounting along the shores of the Blackwater. Mitchell and Robinson (1999) speculate that the lost beginning lines of the poem must have told of Byrhtnoð rallying his troops and heading to the River Blackwater (Mitchell & Robinson, 1999). The poem names about 30 individual men, but focuses mainly on Byrhtnoð and his actions until his death in the middle of the poem. Immediately after his death a few men flee from the battle and the poet devotes a few lines to naming them and calling them traitors and horse thieves. The second half of the poem shows the remaining soldiers encouraging each other to fight on and being killed off one by one until the text abruptly ends, as the ending is lost.

The date of composition of the poem is unknown and is a topic of debate amongst scholars in the field. According to Edward B. Irving, jr. (1961), the realistic and vivid descriptions in the poem imply an early composition date, before there was an opportunity to introduce any legendary or fictional elements into the story (Irving, jr., 1961, p. 457). John D. Niles (2002), similarly argues for an early date of composition. His main argument for this claim is Æthelred’s nature. It was not until later in his life, long after the Battle of Maldon, that Æthelred received the nickname the Unready. Niles argues that had the poet known of his nature at the time, he would have surely mentioned it at some point in the
poem, especially considering Byrhtnoð’s death and how it ultimately did not matter as the English ended up paying the Vikings for peace anyway (Niles, 1991). Other scholars, such as George Clark, offer a different idea about the poem’s date of composition. According to Clark (1968), the realistic and detailed descriptions of which Irving speaks cannot be counted as hard evidence and may actually work against the idea of an early composition date. Clark argues that if the poet knows the events so well, he must either have been at the battle and fled, making him a coward, or that he must have been someone who talked to one or more of the cowards who fled the battle (Clark, 1968, p. 54).

One scholar who was particularly influenced by the Battle of Maldon was J.R.R. Tolkien. As a scholar of Old English, Tolkien took a great interest in The Battle of Maldon. In 1953 he published *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, a work of historical fiction, inspired by The Battle of Maldon. This work is an alliterative poem and takes place shortly after the events of The Battle of Maldon. The poem mostly consists of a dialogue between two characters, Tidwal and Torhthelm, as they retrieve the body of Byrhtnoth from the battlefield. By setting this poem up as a dialogue Tolkien creates an effective way to criticize The Battle of Maldon, as Torhthelm makes a proposition about Byrhtnoth’s bravery and Tidwal offers a rebuttal (Tolkien, 1953). In this work, Tolkien seems to side against Byrhtnoð’s mindset and character type, and George Clark argues that this influence is manifested in the *Lord of the Rings* through the character Sam Gamgee, who serves as the true hero of the story and is many ways the opposite of Byrhtnoth (Clark, 2000, p. 50).
3. Methodology

This thesis is not meant as an evaluation of Sigurjón’s translation but rather an observation of his methods in regard to the close relation of Icelandic and Old English. In order to fulfil this task, I will pay close attention to the use of poetic diction within the translation but my primary focus will be on the translation’s form in regard to metre and most importantly, alliteration.

My main method of observing the close relation of the two languages comes from a word-for-word analysis of selected passages with the Old English version used by the translator and the translated Modern Icelandic (MI) version side by side. With this method, I am able to make a close comparison of many different elements of the selected passages, namely alliteration, etymological connections and rhythm, without the references I make to the Old English texts becoming confusing to the reader. This method resonates with Pétur Knútsson’s method in his 1984 article about Halldóra B. Björnsson’s *Beowulf* (Knútsson, 1984). Knútsson compares Björnsson’s translation to the original Old English text in a detailed word-for-word manner and offers extensive explanations for some of the translator’s choices as well as his opinion on whether these choices are good or not. I will try to follow this example to a great extent and aim to be completely neutral in my approach.

Although this thesis is not meant as an evaluation or a critique of Sigurjón’s work, I will sometimes offer an alternative translation to certain words or passages that I believe may be a better fit. I will base these propositions on evidence gathered by carefully analysing the etymology of the translated words, with special mention of other passages where similar words are translated in a different manner.
4. The translation: An analytic comparison of selected passages

4.1 Main characteristics of the translation

In this section, I will go over the main characteristics of the translation. Old English and Modern Icelandic are closely related languages but there are some differences that make translating from one to the other a difficult task. Although many words have direct cognates in each language not all words do. Old English words like *boldlice*, ME ‘boldly’ and *ongan*, ME ‘began’ do not have a direct cognate in Icelandic and so do not allow for an etymologically perfect translation. Even words that do have direct cognates like *rinc*, MI ‘rekkur’ and *hild*, MI ‘hildur’, that if directly translated, are unknown and can be difficult to understand for the average reader. Also, the prefix *ge-* is rather common in Old English and can be found on multiple occasions throughout the poem in words like *gehyrde*, ME ‘heard’, *gesawon*, ME ‘saw’ and many more. This prefix does not exist in Modern Icelandic. Furthermore, even though the form in which the poem is written closely resembles the Icelandic *fornyrðislag* they are not the same, and moving a poem from one form to another is a task of its own. This adds another layer to the translator’s mission. Keeping in mind Sigurjón’s goal to translate the text as closely as possible to the original, keeping the alliteration to a great extent, and making the text an enjoyable read for an average reader, in the following chapter I will explore and discuss his efforts and their varying levels of success.

4.2 Drawing in the reader

As well as being a translation, Sigurjón also includes a significant number of footnotes with every few lines of text. Here, he steps out of his role as translator and takes on the role of historian. Some footnotes only serve as a bit of historical or linguistic detail to go with the events of the poem. As an example, in the second line of the poem, where Byrhtnoð orders his men to release their horses, Sigurjón notes that the reason for this is so that the horses cannot be used to flee from the battle and he further notes that the Anglo-Saxon army did not fight on horses at the time so there would be no practical use for them there (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 7). The footnotes are usually similar to this one. Short explanations about word exchanges or character actions. However, the footnote for lines 12-19 is more extensive than the others.
In this segment an unknown character releases his hawk and walks to the army. From that action it could be perceived that he would not avoid fighting if it came to that. By releasing the hawk, this character shows his commitment. As scholars have pointed out, it is unclear who this segment refers to because the beginning of the poem is missing (Scragg, 2006, p. 128). The lines before this segment talk about Offa’s kinsman so Scragg conjectures that it must be he who releases the Hawk. Sigurjón points out that hawks were usually status symbols for only the highest-ranking officers and noblemen and as Byrhtnoð was at the time the second most powerful man in the country it would be strange for someone else than him to have a hawk and thus it is more likely that the character who releases the hawk is Byrhtnoð himself. Furthermore, he observes that it would make sense for Byrhtnoð to release his hawk as a gesture for his army to see that he intended to fight to the last man with them. They key to interpreting these lines lies in the word cniht, which can either mean ‘warrior’ or ‘young man’. As Byrhtnoð was most likely around 60-65 years old at the time of the battle (Ísaksson, 2014, p. 19), he cannot be called a young man, and therefore these lines must either refer to someone other than Byrhtnoð, or cniht in this case does not mean ‘young man’. Sigurjón’s opinion seems to go against other translators’ interpretation of these lines; for example, Jonathan A. Glenn’s 1982 edition translates this instance of cniht as ‘the lad’ (Glenn, 1982), which could by no means refer to Byrhtnoð, and Richard Hamer’s 1970 edition translates it as ‘young man’ (Hamer, 1970).

With these thoughts, which appear on the first page of the translation, Sigurjón draws the reader in and makes them interested in the subject matter. The reader immediately feels that they are reading an individual work, and not just an imitation.
As Sigurjón mentions in the prologue, he is willing to make changes in order to alliterate. However, the specific nature of these changes is not mentioned and the reader must find out for themselves whether these changes make a significant difference for the meaning of the text. The first example of changes in favour of alliteration is at the very beginning of the poem. The original text alliterates with ‘h’ and Sigurjón does so as well.

As far as structure goes, the translation is near-identical to the original. The word count for the four lines is the same, although split differently between the lines, and the alliteration matches the original text in every way possible. However, if one takes a closer look at each individual word there are some inconsistencies that change the meaning of the segment. In the original text, someone is ordering a group of young men to release their horses, drive them far away, and walk forth. In order to keep with the alliteration of ‘h’, Sigurjón chooses the word *hvatti* whose meaning is much closer to that of ‘encourage’ than ‘order’. While this may seem like a minor and insignificant change it introduces the Icelandic reader to a different setting than the Old English reader. If the reader is unable to read the original text he does not necessarily realise that the poet is introducing the leader, a figure of great authority. That sense of authority is lost in the translation and instead the great leader just encourages his troops to let go of their horses. On the surface the translation looks almost identical. Many words are carefully selected to resemble the Old English words, either in an etymological manner, or just on the surface, but ultimately the slightly different meaning does not deliver quite the same effect. Although this is somewhat apparent in the first four lines, it becomes obvious in lines 25-31 where Sigurjón takes the translation in a very different direction than the poem.

(25-31)

He hæfde god geþanc  
þa hwile þe he mid handum  
  Góð var sú kennd  
  að hafa í höndum
In these lines Sigurjón still keeps the alliteration almost perfectly and many of the words he uses are direct equivalents of the Old English words. However, his choice of words in the first line changes the meaning of this whole stanza drastically. In the original text Eadric, one of Byrhtnoð’s soldiers, has a good thought, or mindset. These lines are all about how loyal Eadric is and that as long as he can hold on to his sword and shield he will fight to his last breath for his Lord. He has taken a vow to serve and he will keep it. Sigurjón’s translation “Góð var sú kennd”, while essentially meaning ‘it was a good thought’, it does not refer to his leader but to his sword. This is a significant change because in the Icelandic version Eadric is hungry for battle. The first lines of the translation are much more akin to ‘It felt good to have a sword and shield in his hands, soon he would get to fight in the vanguard for his lord’. This changes Eadric from a noble and loyal servant to a bloodthirsty warrior. It is a significant change in character and sets a very different type of mood for the rest of the poem where loyalty, valour and a willingness to fight is exchanged for excitement and eagerness to fight.

This difference in mood is prevalent through the entire first half of the translation. As the two armies wait for the tide to ebb Byrhtnoð has time to prepare his men. He rides around, advising and encouraging his men before stopping and dismounting in lines 42-47. The translation is relatively similar to the original text except for two minor differences that may serve to change the reader’s feelings towards Byrhtnoð and his men.
The first four lines of the segment are accurate and essentially a direct translation. As Byrhtnoð has arranged his troops in a fair order, he alights from his horse with the people he holds most dear. However, in the fifth line of the stanza there is a difference. The word heordwerod refers to Byrhtnoð’s troop of household retainers, which is not the same thing as hirdmenn in the Icelandic translation. Hirdmenn has a much less personal connection between lord and servant than heordwerod and would normally be used to refer to any single person in a king’s court in contrast to a select number of soldiers that Byrhtnoð knows personally. Furthermore, the last line of the segment deviates even further from the original text. Holdost wiste loosely translates to ‘most loyally knew’ or ‘knew to be most loyal’, referring to Byrhtnoð’s household troop. There is a reason he dismounts and prepares himself for battle with these men. He knows them personally and he knows they are his most loyal soldiers, he trusts them for his life. In the translation, Byrhtnoð chooses to alight with these men for a very different reason. ‘Harðsnúna vissi’ simply means that he knows these men are tough and they are good fighters but it foregoes the loyalty and their love for their leader that is in the foreground of the original text.

Not all of Sigurjón’s choices result in such a big difference in meaning, there are many examples of less important deviations from the original poem in the translation. One such example can be seen in lines 32-36. The Icelandic translation catches the overall feel and meaning of the segment well and readers should not have any problems understanding what is happening despite archaic Icelandic words like brögnum fylkja, rekkum, and skjaldborg that appear in the segment.

As far as the meaning is concerned, these five lines are almost a direct translation. In the first two lines Byrhtnoð begins to arrange the men and the translation delivers the exact same meaning. However, the translation of the third and fourth lines could be closer to the original. If one focuses solely on the verbs in these lines rað, Modern English (ME) ‘rode’, is directly translated to the MI ‘reið’. Rædde, which has no etymological counterpart in Modern English but would be best translated to ‘discussed’, does not appear at all in the
Icelandic version. Instead it says: ‘Byrhtnoð rode forth’. The direct translation of the fourth line of the stanza would be ‘reið og ræddi’ and the translator’s choice of not using these direct etymological counterparts of the original words must be that he did not want to over-alliterate. This choice is questionable because if the original text is guilty of over-alliteration, there surely should not be a reason for him to be afraid to do the same in the translation. A direct translation of *rað and rædde, rincum tæhte* would probably be: ‘reið og ræddi, rekkum kenndi’. The choice of using ‘rekkur’ for *rincum* is interesting and will be discussed later. His choice of translating *tæhte* to ‘tjáði’ might be because they look similar and that they alliterate. *Tæhte*, ME ‘taught’ would be ‘kenndi’ but ‘tjáði’ is a direct translation of the Modern English ‘told’. In the end, these subtle differences do not have a significant effect on the text’s meaning but show some interesting choices made by the translator.

Like in the example above, there are multiple occasions throughout the translation where Sigurjón, despite the resemblance between Modern Icelandic and Old English, does not choose the most etymologically fitting word. In the example above, the purpose is clear; avoiding over-alliteration. However, sometimes there seems to be no practical reason for these inconsistencies. Lines 56-81 are a monologue by a messenger sent by the Vikings. He offers the Englishmen to pay tribute to avoid fighting. Looking at a few of the lines, one can observe some interesting choices made by Sigurjón where he seems to deliberately go against the original text without it making any particular difference for alliteration or rhythm.

(74-81)

\begin{align*}
\text{On hyra sylfra dom} & \quad \text{að sjálfdæmi þeirra} \\
\text{feoh wið freode} & \quad \text{fé mót frelsi} \\
\text{and niman frið æt us,} & \quad \text{og fagna sátt við oss,} \\
\text{we willaþ mid þam sceattum} & \quad \text{skulum vér skatt þann} \\
\text{us to scype gangan} & \quad \text{til skipa bera} \\
\text{on flot feran,} & \quad \text{á flot fara} \\
\text{and eow friþes healdan} & \quad \text{og yður frið veita.}
\end{align*}

Sigurjón chooses to translate the phrase *feoh wið freode* into ‘fé mót frelsi’. *Feoh* is simply ‘fé’ in Modern Icelandic and ‘fee’ in Modern English and must be the most obvious and logical choice here. However, *wið* and ‘mót’ are not related. Still, they are both words that
convey location so there is no significant change in meaning. The direct translation of wið in Modern Icelandic would be ‘við’ which has the exact same meaning. The same thing can be said about freode, which means ‘peace’, and ‘frelsi’, which is ‘freedom’. The meaning of the phrase is relatively similar, ‘Fee for peace’ and ‘fee for freedom’ but Sigurjón easily could have chosen the phrase ‘fé við friði’ and kept the same amount of words, rhythm, and alliteration as well as choosing the etymologically fitting word in every instance.

4.4 Speeches
This monologue by the Viking messenger starts what can be said to be the most important part of the story. As the high tide of the Blackwater prevents the two armies from fighting, both armies stand and wait. Continuing on with the Vikings’ attempts to convince Byrhtnoð to give up without a fight, the Icelandic translation clearly manages to convey both the meaning of the words of the messenger and also the manner in which they are spoken. As he is addressing a Lord, the messenger is very courteous in his speech and rather than simply threatening and intimidating Byrhtnoð he tries to persuade him to buy peace and therefore making it unnecessary for his beloved soldiers to die that day. Despite this being one of the longest stanzas in the poem, the Icelandic translation manages to keep the whole text very close to the original with only a few minor and effectively insignificant changes.

and eow betere is
þæt ge þisne garræs
mid gafole forgylдон
þonne we swa hearde
hilde dælon.

Betra er yður,
að undan geirhríð
með gjaldi leysið,
anars munum vêr harða
hildi þreyta.

These five lines are an almost exact translation, with only some minor differences. ‘Geirhríð’, despite an archaic and even then, a rare word serves as a very clear translation of garræs. The same can be said about ‘hildi’, meaning battle. Sigurjón chooses to use two very old Icelandic words that a modern reader cannot necessarily be expected to know, which also conveys the atmosphere of the original text to the modern reader. The only real difference in meaning that can be found in the five lines is using ‘annars’ in the fourth line. This choice of words makes the whole segment sound more threatening as a Modern English translation of ‘annars’ in this context would be ‘...or else’. The original text is not as threatening, as the messenger appears rather to be giving Byrhtnoð friendly advise not to
spill his good men in an unnecessary and cruel battle. Furthermore, in the next few lines the messenger further iterates Byrhtnoð’s wealth and just how easily he can save his men from battle if he just shares his wealth and prosperity. By his generosity, his men can be spared. The Icelandic translation captures the subtle threats in the messenger’s friendly warnings.

(70-73)
Gyf þu þat gerædest
þe her ricost earth
þæt þu þione leoda
lysan wille

Ef þetta ráð tekur
sem hér ríkastur ert,
að þú lýð þinn
leysa viljir

(76-81)
feoh wið freode
and niman frið æt us,
we willaþ mid þam sceattum
us to scype gangan,
on flot feran,
and eow friþes healdan.
fé mót frelsi
og fagna sótt við oss
skulum vér skatt þann
til skipa bera
á flot fara
og yður frið veita.

These short segments from the messenger’s speech serve to display the Vikings’ tactics to threaten violence but make it seem like an invitation to friendship. There are two minor differences in the Icelandic translation, neither of which has a significant change of meaning but rather a slightly different mood. In line 77: and niman frið æt us, simply means to ‘accept peace with us’, the Icelandic version uses ‘fagna’, which means ‘to celebrate’. In line 81 the original text uses friþes healdan, meaning to keep peace but Sigurjón chooses ‘frið veita’ whose meaning is closer to that of ‘giving peace’, which does not keep in line with the messenger’s peaceful speech about mutual friendship.

What makes the conversation between Byrhtnoð and the Viking messenger even more interesting is the historical context of the poem. Shortly after the battle, Æthelred paid the first Danegeld, or 10.000 pounds, as tribute to the Vikings (Hodgkin, 1906, p. 382). While in lines 56-81 the messenger offers Byrhtnoð to change his mind and pay the Vikings, lines 82-121 show Byrhtnoð turning down the offer. This marks the beginning of the end for Byrhtnoð and his men as he tells the messenger that rather than paying in gold they will pay them in various other ways.
Byrhtnoð is too proud to give up without a fight and threatens the messenger, saying that the Anglo-Saxon army would rather give them sharp spears, lethal sword-tips and old swords. Byrhtnoð’s motivations for turning down the Viking’s offer despite facing overwhelming odds has been a point of much discussion between various scholars of the poem. Lines 100-104 show a glimpse of Byrhtnoð’s view of himself as a leader.

Byrhtnoð calls himself unforcuð eorl whose meaning would be that closest to ‘reputable warrior’ or ‘nobleman’. The Icelandic translation uses the words ‘döglings jarl’, or ‘king’s chieftain’. The problem with using the icelandic ‘jarl’, although clearly etymologically related to eorl, is a rather significant difference in meaning. The OE eorl can refer to any warrior, nobleman, or ruler, but the meaning of the Icelandic ‘jarl’ is much more specific (malid.is, 2018). Only one Icelandic person was ever granted to title ‘jarl’, Gissur Þorvaldsson, and he was granted the title by the Norwegian King Haakon IV (Karlsson, 2014). Iceland had many chieftains and noblemen within various families but the word ‘jarl’ was not used so sparingly. Thus, using the word ‘jarl’ as a direct translation of the Old English eorl is correct etymology-wise but incorrect meaning-wise. The last three lines of the short segment are similarly not really a translation but rather something added by the translator in an effort to avoid being repetitive. Pe wile gealgean eþel þysne, Æþelredes eard loosely translates to: ‘who wishes this homeland to defend, Æthelred’s land’. Sigurjón,
as he states in the prologue, takes the liberty to change lines to avoid repetition and he does that here, choosing to change these lines to: ‘undefeated, with good reputation, guard Æthelred’s land’.

4.5 Ofermod

Judging by the aforementioned lines, Byrhtnoð clearly considers himself to be a great leader and it would be shameful for him to yield to the Vikings without a fight. However, deciding to fight the Vikings is not Byrhtnoð’s greatest folly. Lines 176-179 show a grave tactical error by Byrhtnoð.

(176-179)

Da se eorl ongan        Ækvað þá jarl
for his ofermode        í ofdirfsku sinni
alifan landes to fela    að leyfa landgöngu
lapere ðeode.            liði fénda.

These few lines show Byrhtnoð granting the Viking army passage over the causeway so that they may fight on even ground. Whether Byrhtnoð made a fair and courageous decision to let the Vikings pass or an arrogant blunder in his overconfidence has been the point of much debate by various scholars. The main point of argument lies in the original text in the word ofermode. Various translations show this word translated in various ways. E.T. Donaldson (1973), in his prose translation of the poem chooses to translate this word to ‘overconfidence’ which undeniably places blame on Byrhtnoð as the battle possibly could have been won had he not let the Viking army pass (Donaldson, 1973). Richard Hamer, in his 1970 translation of the poem, also chooses to translate ofermode to ‘overconfidence’ (Hamer, 1970). Jonathan A. Glenn (1982), translates for his ofermode to ‘for his arrogance’ which, although not identical to Donaldson and Hamer’s translation, effectively means the same thing and more importantly instils in the reader the same feeling of blame in Byrhtnoð’s decision (Glenn, 1982). Sigurjón chooses ofdirfska’ in the Icelandic translation but offers ‘ofdramb’ in the corresponding footnote (p. 14, footnote 20), effectively combining these two translations with ofdirfska meaning ‘overconfidence’ and ofdramb meaning ‘arrogance’. What makes Sigurjón’s handling of this word particularly interesting is how little information he offers with it as ofermode is one of the most discussed elements within the poem. Seeing that Sigurjón often offers extensive information or discussion with
many parts of the text it is surprising that his only contribution to the debate is a synonym. While many blame Byrhtnoð for the decision, J. B. Trapp (1973), comes to his defence, stating that *ofermod* is “generally translated to *rashness*, but it more likely means *magnanimity*, noble warrior’s pride, scorning expediency, relying on fate and force of arms to settle the matter” (Trapp, 1973, p. 106). Donaldson, similarly in Byrhtnoð’s defence, likens him to Beowulf when he insists to fight Grendel with his bare hands (Donaldson, 1973, p. 2). There is of course one major difference between the two, Beowulf won and Byrhtnoð lost and thus Byrhtnoð’s act of courage is deemed rash while Beowulf is celebrated a hero. J.R.R Tolkien offers some insight on the debate on *ofermode* and declares that the precise nature of Byrhtnoð’s flaw does not matter. Whether his motivations are good or bad, he made a bad decision which ultimately led to his death and defeat of the English army, making him a tragic hero (Clark, 1968, p. 57).

4.6 The importance of sounding correct

Sometimes, the Icelandic translation deserves praise for its use of etymologically fitting words. The old Icelandic word ‘rekkur’ is used frequently in the translation, mostly in place for its direct Old English cognate, *rinc*. *Rinc* appears five times throughout the original text, three times of which as the first half of a compound word. These words are *særinc, guðrinc*, and *fyrdrinc*. ‘Rekkur’ was never a particularly commonly used word in Icelandic but one other source that includes repeated instances of the word is Halldóra B. Björnsson’s Icelandic translation of Beowulf. Sigurjón seems to be familiar with her translation as he also uses words such as ‘hildarrekkur’ and ‘gunnrekkur’ which can nowhere else be found than in her translation. However, Sigurjón’s usage of the word is irregular and he mostly uses it when he needs a word that alliterates with ‘r’.

(16-17)

Be þam man mihte oncnawan  Ráða mátti af því  
þæt se cniht nolde  að rekkur sá myndi

(34-35)

Rad and rædde,  Reið hann fram  
rincum tæhte  og rekkum tjáði
In line 35, ‘rekkum’ is used for the Old English *rincum*. This translation is etymologically fitting as well as sounding and looking correct as both words start with ‘r’, and have two syllables with a clear stress on the first syllable. However, in line 17, ‘rekkur’ is used as a translation of the OE *cniht*, Modern English ‘knight’, which correctly translates to the Icelandic ‘riddari’. The only practical reason to choose ‘rekkur’ instead of ‘riddari’ in this instance seems to be to reduce the number of syllables in the line. However, syllable count does not generally seem to bother the Icelandic translation too much, as this line already has one too many syllables and the line before has two less syllables than the original text. Furthermore, reading the text out loud, replacing ‘rekkur’ with ‘riddari’ does not affect the flow of the text despite the added syllable. What makes this unnecessary usage of ‘rekkur’ even stranger is that at other times, he avoids using the word even when it would be appropriate.

(278)
Frod wæs se fyrdrinc Sá fróði fylkir

*Fyrdrinc* combines *fyrd*, meaning ‘army’, and *rinc*: ‘warrior’. Instead of translating this word in the same way he did *særinc* and *guðrinc*, to ‘sørekkur’ and ‘gunnrekkur’ respectively, he replaces this word entirely with the unrelated Icelandic word ‘fylkir’. One can assume that the reason for this decision is that he simply could not come up with a word involving ‘rekkur’ that also alliterates with the ‘f’ in ‘fróði’. The added benefit of this mistranslation is that *fyrdrinc* and ‘fylkir’ sound very similar, once more confirming that for Sigurjón, the surface of the translation, or the manner in which it is read, is more important than always choosing what is technically the best fitting word. In a sense, this gives the translation some poetic value of its own. It is not meant as a direct copy of the original text put in another language, but rather becomes its own work of art.

This idea about the translation not only being an imitation but rather its own unique piece of work resonates even further with Halldóra B. Björnsson’s translation of Beowulf (Björnsson, 1983). Whether Sigurjón’s ideas are derived directly from Halldóra’s translation style it is safe to say his translation definitely seems influenced by her. Similar to the above example of *fyrdrinc* and ‘fylkir’ sounding alike, Halldóra’s translation of Beowulf become known for exactly that: deliberately translating some words wrong in order for the text, as if read out loud, to sound more like the original text. Pétur Knútsen Ridgewell praises Halldóra for these deliberate mistranslations, using her translation of Gefeng þá be

...
eaxle to ‘greip þá í bægsli’ as an example. Pétur notes that the correct translation of eaxle is the Icelandic ‘öxl’ but Halldóra combines be eaxle to ‘bægsli’ which, while incorrect, makes the short segment sound more like the original (Knúttson, 1984, p. 231-232). Sigurjón sometimes translates in a similar way. In an effort to alliterate as well as trying to make the translation sound more like the original he either makes up his own words by joining two existing words or he uses words that were never common in Icelandic such as by using ‘rekkur’. Line 190 of the translation shows an even clearer example of this.

(190) Wodon þa wælwulfas Vóðu þá valúlfar

The translation sounds almost exactly the same as the original but when closely inspected it is not exactly correct. Wodon is the plural past participle of wadan; ‘to go; advance; travel’ (etymonline.com, 2018). Although the infinitive in Modern Icelandic is ‘vaða’ and is clearly a direct etymological counterpart of the Old English verb, the plural past participle is different. At some point in the transition from Old Icelandic to Modern Icelandic the ‘v’ at the beginning of the word has been discarded, making ‘vóðu’ an incorrect translation of wodon, it should be ‘óðu’ (bin.arnastofnun.is, 2018). It is safe to assume that this is not an accidental blunder, the ‘v’ is added for the purpose of alliteration and the meaning of the word should be easily understood by any Icelandic reader. The next word in the sentence, þa, is exactly the same in modern Icelandic and needs no further explanation, but the third word makes for a challenge for the translator. Wælwulfas roughly translates to ‘wolves of slaughter’ and has no direct counterpart in Icelandic. Instead, Sigurjón simply takes both parts of the word, wæl and wulfas, finds their Icelandic counterparts ‘valur’ and ‘úlfar’ and adds them together for a brand-new word: ‘valúlfar’. Thus, in this short line Sigurjón shows a bit of poetic creativity in two different manners. He allows himself to trade grammatical correctness for the value of sounding correct as well as creating a word, making the sentence sound almost exactly like the original as well has having an archaic, poetic feel to it.

4.7 Names
One topic that requires a significant talent from a translator is how to handle proper names. Looking at notable translations of poems and novels from English to Icelandic there does not seem to be any concrete pattern or set of rules governing how to translate names. Looking back at Halldóra B. Björnsson’s translation of Beowulf all character names are
carefully translated to Icelandic. Beowulf becomes Bjólfur, Hrothgar Hróðgeir, Wealhþeow Valþjófur, and Æschere Askherji, to name a few. Halldóra makes sure to never include letters that do not belong to the Icelandic alphabet, such as ‘c’ and ‘w’ and digraphs like ‘th’. This level of consistency and attentiveness in proper name translation does not seem to be the standard in Icelandic translations. Helga Haraldsdóttir translated the Harry Potter series from English to Icelandic. In a newspaper article from 2004 she discusses her methods for translating names. She only translates names that can be seen to have direct counterparts in Icelandic. Therefore, she lets names like Ron and Hermione appear unchanged but translates Mad-eye Moody to Skröggur Illauga (Haraldsdóttir, 2004). Whether translating some names and letting some names be unchanged is the best solution can be debated and Helga does not always seem to be able to uphold this rule for herself. For instance, Harry’s parents, Lily and James are left untouched although the name Lily exists in Icelandic as Lilja. Perhaps she refrained from changing only one parent’s name because they often appear together so it may have been unnatural for only one of them to have an Icelandic name. Furthermore, unlike Halldóra, she does not seem to be concerned with limiting her translation to the Icelandic alphabet. Names like Quidditch and Godric, which use letters such as ‘q’ and ‘c’ are left unchanged. More consistency can be found in Þorsteinn Thorarensen’s translations. His translation of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings includes many carefully translated names. He seems to follow the same rule as Helga, translating names that have a clear Icelandic counterpart, such as Treebeard to Trjáskeggur and Shire to Hérað. Unlike Helga, he generally keeps to the Icelandic alphabet, changing words like Rohan to Róhan and Theodan to Þjóðann. However, some inconsistencies can be found such as leaving Sauron unchanged. As the vowel digraph ‘au’ has a significantly different sound in Icelandic, this name could well have been changed to Sáron in order to keep the name as close in sound as possible.

Seeing that some of Iceland’s most notable and well-versed translators are somewhat inconsistent in their handling of names within their translations, it is interesting to see how Sigurjón handles them in The Battle of Maldon. As the poem names about 30 individuals he is faced with a rather difficult task.

4.7.1 Byrhtnoth
The name Byrhtnoth appears repeatedly throughout the poem. Depending on the version one chooses to observe this name tends to be written in two different ways. In Peter S.
Baker’s rendition of the poem the name is spelled with a ‘th’ ending: Byrhtnoth (Baker, 2011) but other versions often spell the name with a ‘ð’ ending; Byrhtnoð. A third variant exists: Beorhtnoth, but is only ever used by J.R.R. Tolkien in his works on the poem (Tolkien, 1953). Sigurjón never specifies which edition he relies on for his translation but for his translation the original text always displays the name as Byrhtnoð. The spelling of Byrhtnoð is left unchanged in the Icelandic translation. Although ‘ht’ is a rather unnatural sight for an Icelandic reader, as these two letters never appear next to one another in an Icelandic word, it should not pose any meaningful difficulties for an Icelandic person to pronounce the name. What makes this choice interesting is Sigurjón’s translation of two other names in the poem: Byrhtelm in line 182 and Byrhtwold in line 616. Byrhtelm is translated to ‘Bjarthjálmur’, which means that Sigurjón interprets the two parts of the compound name, byrht and (h)elm- to respectively correspond to MI ‘Bjart(ur)’, ME ‘Bright’ and MI ‘hjálmur’, ME ‘helm’. However, neither Byrhtnoð nor Byrhtwold are changed at all. If Sigurjón were consistent in his understanding and decision to translate Byrht to ‘Bjart’, these names should be Bjartnoð instead of Byrhtnoð and Bjartvaldur instead of Byrhtwold. My reasoning for choosing ‘valdur’ as a translation for wold comes from Sigurjón’s translations of Eadwold to Auðvaldur and Oswold to Ásvaldur, both in line 606. What makes these inconsistencies particularly interesting is that unlike many other irregularities discussed in this paper, these instances cannot be attributed to alliteration or rhythm.

4.7.2 Wulfstan and Wulfmær

The same cannot be said about Sigurjón’s handling of the names Wulfstan and Wulfmær.

(308-309)

Wulfstanes bearn, Úlfmær sá ungi,
Wulfmær se geonga Úlfsteins sonur

In order to fit better for alliteration, these lines are switched, but otherwise correctly translated. A minor comment can be made about the translator’s decision to replace bearn with ‘sonur’, instead of the more etymologically fitting ‘barn’ or ‘bur’, which is used in a similar setting in line 182 where Byrhtelmes bearn becomes: ‘Bjarthjálmur bur’. Despite that, this makes no meaningful difference other than adding a syllable. In a similar manner to
the translation of *wælwulvas* to ‘valúlfar’, translating *wulf* to ‘úlf’ is correct and the alliteration is fitting with ‘ú’ and ‘u’ in one line, and ‘ú’ in the other. What makes these lines stand out is that the name Wulfstan has already appeared earlier in the poem.

(149)

Se wæs haten Wulfstan Wulfsteinn hét sá.

The footnote that goes with this line mentions that this name can be translated either as ‘Wulfsteinn’ or ‘Úlfsteinn’. However, a translator should decide on one way over the other and stand by that decision for the rest of the text. One explanation could be that these were two different men but Sigurjón mentions in the footnotes that this is probably the same individual. In a short poem that names about 30 different men, calling a character two separate names in order to make alliteration easier for the translator makes for a confusing read. Similarly, later in the poem, Úlfmær appears as Wulfmær.

(224)


4.7.3 *Norð-hymbra*

A third example of a questionable choice in name translation is shown in the following lines.

(530-531)

He wæs on Norðhymbron Hann var af norð-hymbra

heardes cynnes hörðu kyni

These lines speak of one of the warriors in Byrhtnoð’s army. Different from the examples given in 4.7.1 and 4.7.2 the word in question here is not a given name but the proper name of the region Northumbria. Although there is rarely need to translate this name into Icelandic, the correct Icelandic form of the word is ‘Norðymbraland’, which means that someone from Northumbria would be ‘Norðymbri’ and not ‘Norð-hymbri’. The reason Sigurjón chooses to translate this word as such is simply to alliterate with ‘h’.
All these examples of incorrect or inconsistent name translations show interesting choices made by the translator and makes one wonder how far a translator is allowed to go for the sake of alliteration.
5. Excursus on God

Whereas religion does not seem to play a very big part in the poem, it is clearly present. God is only mentioned a few times, first appearing in line 187 where the speaker declares that God ana wat, hwa þære wealstowe wealdan mote – “God alone knows, who will control the battlefield.” The Icelandic translation of this short segment conveys the exact same meaning. ’Guð einn veit hver vígvelli þessum á vald sitt nær’. The footnotes offer an explanation with this idiom and declare that ‘to win is to gain control of the battlefield’ (p. 15, footnote 22). This idea of the winner controlling the battlefield still exists in modern Icelandic in ‘að halda velli’ and despite not being used much in daily speech it has gained a much broader meaning as simply holding one’s ground. There are many examples of this expression being used in a casual manner in Modern Icelandic, for instance in a news headline from 2017 where a man was unsuccessful in suing the University of Iceland for operating slot machines in the country. The headline read: “Spilakassarnir halda velli” or “The slot machines hold their ground” (“Spilakassarnir halda velli,” 2017).

God is not mentioned again in the poem until in line 293. There, a British soldier slays one of the Vikings with an arrow. As he sees the Viking fall he laughs and thanks God for giving him the pleasure of a good deed. This event makes it clear that the Christian God in the poem is very different from the modern reader’s view of God as a figure of peace and forgiveness. This is a God of war and he reminds the reader more of God as he appears in the Old Testament than the New. Still, the British soldiers do not seem fight for God as much as they fight for the ruler of the country, Æthelred, for Byrhtnoð, their leader, and for their homeland. One could expect Byrhtnoð’s army to view themselves as righteous Christians who must repel the heathen Vikings but the poet does not refer to the Viking army as heathens until in line 361, after Byrhtnoð is slain. Byrhtnoð’s death is the only part of the poem where God plays a significant role. As Byrhtnoð falls on his knees, wounded by a Viking’s sword he looks up to the sky and addresses God directly.

“Geþance þe, ·
ðeoda Waldend,
ealre þarea wynna
þe ic on worulde gebad.
Nu ic ah, milde Metod,
mæste þearfe
þæt þu minum gaste

“Ég þakka þér nú
þjóða jöfur
velsæld alla
er í veröld hlaut.
Nú þarf ég mest
mildi Drottinn
að þú anda mínun
In his dying moments Byrhtnoð thanks God for all the pleasures he enjoyed in life and asks God to show mercy to his spirit and that he may fly uninterrupted by the fiends of hell to God’s embrace in heaven. The style of this passage resembles other Old English texts in which God is addressed directly or which extensively speak of God. Cædmon’s Hymn was composed in the seventh century, making it the oldest preserved Old English poem (Greenblatt, 2012). Despite being written more than 300 years before The Battle of Maldon the two texts are very similar in the manner in which they address God. Here is Cædmon’s hymn in the original Old English text, transcribed by Peter Ramey, as well as his 2011 Modern English translation (Ramey, 2011). For practical reasons, the lines will be split in two, so the poem here appears as 18 lines instead of the original 9.

Nu sculon herigean
heofonrices weard
meotodes meahte
and his modgeþanc,
weorc wuldorfæder,
swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten,
or onstealde.
He ærest sceop
earðan bearnum.
heofon to hrofe,
halig scyppend;
þa middengeard

Now we must praise
the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom
the Measurer’s power
and his mind-thought,
the work of the Father of glory,
how he each of wonders,
eternal Lord,
first established.
He first created
for the children of the earth.
heaven as a roof,
the holy Creator,
then the middle-earth,
The key characteristic of both texts are the multiple mentions of God throughout the relatively short passages. In Byrhtnoð’s speech, which is only eight lines, God is mentioned three times. In the first line of the passage he is called *deoda Waldend* – ‘Ruler of nations’. In the third line God appears as *Milde Metod* – ‘Gentle Creator’, and in the sixth line he is *Peoden engla* – ‘King of angels’. In Cædmon’s Hymn, which only counts nine lines, God is mentioned eight times. There he is called *Heofonrices weard* – ‘The Guardian of the heavenly kingdom’, *halig Scyppend* – ‘holy Creator’, and twice *ece Drihten* – ‘eternal Lord’, to name a few. Both texts use the word *Metod*, although with a slight variation with the form *Meotod* in Cædmon’s hymn.

This tradition does not seem to have died with Old English. Heyr Himna Smiður, an Icelandic psalm, bears a great resemble to Byrhtnoð’s plea to God. The psalm is 24 lines, split into three eight-line verses. It was written by Kolbeinn Tumason, and is believed to have been written in 1208, before he fought and fell in the battle of Víðines (Kristjánsson, 2005). The hymn resembles the fall of Byrhtnoð both in poetic style but also in historical context:

Heyr, himna smiður,       Listen, smith of the heavens
hvers skáldið biður,      what the poet asks,
komi mjúk til mín         may softly come unto me
miskunnin þín.            Your mercy.
því heit ég á þig,        So I call on thee,
þú hefur skaptan mig,      for you have created me,
ég er þrællinn þinn,      I am thy slave
þú ert Drottinn minn.      you are my Lord.

Guð, heit ég á þig,       God, I call on thee,
að græðir mig,             to heal me,
minnst, mildingur, mín,    remember me, mild one
In a similar fashion to Byrhtnoð’s dying speech in The Battle of Maldon, the poet here addresses God directly and asks for his mercy. Comparing the following lines from The Battle of Maldon on the left and lines 11-12 from Heyr Himna Smiður on the right shows these similarities clearly.

(348-349)  (11-12)

Nu ic ah, milde Metod,           minnst, mildingur, mín,
mæste þearfe                  mest þurfum þín

In these lines, in both texts, the exact same thing is happening. Under near identical circumstances an old warrior addresses God and says that now he needs him the most.

The biggest difference between the two is that Byrhtnoð already knows that he is about to die and is not asking God to spare his life but rather to guide his soul to heaven while Kolbeinn does not yet know he is going to die and thus simply asks God to watch over him in the battle ahead. That being said, neither passage should be considered a simple plea to God. Both speakers thank God profusely for his goodwill and for allowing them to live good lives and acknowledging the good that God has already done for these men seems to be in the foreground of both texts. Furthermore, the style in which Heyr Himna Smiður is written resembles the style of both The Battle of Maldon and Cædmon’s Hymn in many
ways despite the three texts being written over a period of 500 years, in two different countries and in two different languages. Kolbeinn mentions God a few times throughout the poem through various kennings. He calls him ‘mildingur’ – ‘Mild one’, ‘Himna smiður’ – ‘Creator of the heavens’ and goes further than Cædmon and Byrhtnoð in that he declares him to be God’s slave, emphasizing God’s power over his life.
6. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson’s Icelandic translation of the Old English poem The Battle of Maldon. I have closely analysed and compared passages in the translation and original text with special regard to the alliteration, rhythm and etymology of the original text. The translator makes his objectives clear in the prologue to the translation. These objectives are to translate the poem as closely to the original as possible, only deviating in favour of alliteration or in favour of a more diverse vocabulary, making for a more enjoyable read. I have argued that the translator is in many ways successful and that the translation makes for a remarkably easy and enjoyable read for a relatively inexperienced reader. The close resemblance of the translation to the original makes it so that the reader sees clearly which words are direct counterparts and sparks an interest in the Old English language. However, the translation is not without fault. In many cases the translator strafes too far from the meaning of the original text, namely for the sake of alliteration. There are also some glaring inconsistencies within the translation, and the translator shows repeatedly that alliteration is the most important aspect of the work, as he is willing to make sacrifices in other aspects of the texts in its favour. In many of these cases I express my opinion on how he could have done better and sometimes offer an alternative translation that I believe may have reached certain goals, namely etymological consistency. Despite the translation’s faults, if one looks at the big picture and the purpose of the translation it is undeniably a success. Before this translation, the Battle of Maldon, both as a historic subject matter and the poem itself, was a rather difficult topic to learn about. Icelandic scholars had generally given relatively little thought to the text, and Sigurjón’s translation therefore fills a certain void in the accessibility of the poem to Icelandic scholars as well as the public. In this regard the translation is a total success and a stable source for Icelandic-speaking enthusiasts of Old English to use.
References


(Original work published 1954)

