

Lady Æthelflæd and the Danelaw in the West Saxon *Judith*

Richard North

The extant *Judith* starts mid-sentence on the eve of the Assyrians' entry into Bethulia in Judaea, with Holofernes, their king, throwing a pre-victory party in which he and his thanes drink themselves into a stupor.¹ Meanwhile the beautiful Judith of Bethulia is kept waiting until the moment comes for her to be led to Holofernes' bed in his high pavilion. When the Assyrian general is carried in senseless by bodyguards who leave him unattended, Judith prays for strength from the Trinity and in two strokes beheads him with his sword. Her maid stows the head in their bag and the two ladies walk back unchallenged to Bethulia, where Judith, having displayed the head and named the Lord as Bethulia's saviour, orders her militia to storm the enemy camp at sunrise. The Bethulians fall on the Assyrians, wipe them out and bring Holofernes' panoply back to Judith, whose victory the poet rounds off with a paean to God the Creator.

Although it tells a vivid story, this poem, presently at the back of London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A. xv, of the early eleventh century, continues to present some challenges, of which the first is its fragmentary state at the start. How much is missing? A modern manuscript-based consensus says that the poet began around 98 lines before the extant opening, starting with a fitt numbered 'IX' after one or more other works with which his or her (but henceforth: "his") poem was numbered in series.² It has long been observed that he streamlines the Book of Judith into a duel between Judith and Holofernes to the exclusion of all context and other personal names.³ It has also been conjectured that *Judith* was composed to hail or commemorate Lady Æthelflæd of Mercia (869/870-918), sister of King Edward the Elder (r. 899-924), in her campaigns across the Danelaw.⁴ Though hard to prove, the conjecture has proved popular, because the language of the poem never fails to liken the Assyrians to Scandinavian occupiers. Let us see if this likeness is a coincidence.

¹ *Judith*, ed. Griffith.

² Lucas, "The Place of *Judith*," pp. 477-78 and n. 40. *Judith*, ed. Griffith, pp. 3-4. Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 21.

³ Woolf, "The Lost Opening to the *Judith*." Huppé, *The Web of Words*, p. 137. Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 18-20.

⁴ Foster, Gregory T., *Judith: Studies*, p. 90. Cross, "The Ethic of War," pp. 174-75. Huppé, *The Web of Words*, pp. 145-47.

Herefolc: Assyrians as Danes

As Judith Kaup has shown, the Assyrians of *Judith* bear a passing resemblance to Midland Danish occupiers in the *Chronicle*, which consistently calls them and their forebears in the 890s *se here* or *se micla here* “the (great) raiding army.”⁵ So, where Judith and her maid pass *ūt of ðām herige* “out of the raiders’ army” (line 135), the Assyrians might be seen as armed Scandinavians. It is true that the poet calls this place a *fyrđwīc* “militia camp” or “group of encampments” on line 220, as if they were not Danes but West Saxons, whose armies the *Chronicle* consistently calls *fyrđ* “militia”. Nonetheless, the Assyrians merit this term in that they appear to operate from bases, one for each of *ealle ðā yldestan ðegnas* “all those most senior thanes” whom Holofernes invites to his party on lines 9-10. This is how Danish armies still worked in the Midlands two generations after their forebears disembarked in England as *here* “war-bands.”⁶

Elsewhere in *Judith*, the word *here* describes Holofernes and his troops. Using a *here*-compound unattested elsewhere, the poet says that when the Bethulians fall on the Assyrians, after Judith’s return, *nānne ne sparedon | þæs herefolces hēanne ne rīcne* “they spared not one man of the raiding-people, low-born nor powerful” (lines 233-34). A little later it is *ðæs herefolces hēafodweardas* “the raiding-people’s head watchmen” (line 239) who (with some irony, in the circumstances) first see the Bethulians coming, whereupon *se mǣsta dǣl | þæs heriges læg hilde gesǣged* “the greatest part of the raiding army lay dead, brought low in war” (lines 292-93). Above all, their king is twice associated with the *here* in another compound unattested elsewhere: once, during the escape, when Judith’s maid carries *þæs herewǣðan hēafod* “the raiding-hunter’s head” (line 126) out of camp; and again, after the victory, when Judith, sharp of mind and gold-adorned like a queen,⁷ bids her maid *þæs herewǣðan hēafod onwrīðan* “unwrap the raiding-hunter’s head” (line 173) and show it *þām burhlēodum* “to the townsfolk” (line 175) as proof of her victory.

The metaphor in the compound *herewǣða*, which corresponds with nothing in any analogue or potential source, claims to show the Bethulians as game, or captives, for the Assyrians. The Vikings dealt in slaves, sending them back to Scandinavia.⁸ Although the Bethulians are also called a *here*, term of choice for Vikings in the *Chronicle*, this is when

⁵ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 12 n.13, 169, 279. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (A)*, ed. Bately, pp. 46-61 (s.a. 865-896).

⁶ Williams, “Towns and Identities in Viking England,” pp. 17-18.

⁷ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 157.

⁸ Brink, “Slavery in the Viking Age,” p. 53.

they prepare to raid the Assyrian camp out of Bethulia (line 161), when they *herpað worhton* “made a path for the raid” (line 302) in pursuing their enemies and when they bring *heolfrig hererēaf* “gory war-spoils” (line 316) back to Bethulia after concluding the rout. Otherwise their city defines them as a militia, for their status as *burhlēode*, i.e. ‘garrison,’ takes the Danelaw parallel further by typifying Bethulia as all the forts which played a role in King Edward’s war against the Danes in the first two decades of the tenth century.

Added to this division of terms is the length of time in which *Judith*’s Assyrians have occupied the country around Bethulia, for here they differ from the newly arrived Babylonian invaders of the Bible. Judith, while telling the Bethulians that victory is assured for them in her first speech after returning (lines 152-58), stirs up a history of regional grievance by saying that *tīr* “honour” is also *gifeðe* “ordained” for them *þāra lāðða þe gē lange drugon* “for the abuses which you have long endured” (lines 158-59). Having inspired her *burhlēode* with the sight of Holofernes’ head, Judith delivers a longer speech (lines 177-98) in which she tells them in God’s name to rout the Assyrians at dawn. When the Bethulians advance, *þā ðe hwīle ær | elðēodigra edwit þoledon, | hǣðendra hosp* “those who for a long time already had suffered the insults of foreign men, heathen men’s contempt” (lines 214-16), their strength of feeling goes beyond requirements. They are enraged with *lāðum cynne* “a hated race” (line 226) and pursue without mercy *ealdgenīðlan* “old enemies” (line 228), leaving not one of them alive. In the summary with which the new fitt XII begins, the Assyrians are an *elðēoda* “alien nation” (line 237), from whom *rūm wæs tō nimanne* “there was space to take” (line 313) as well as gory spoils by Bethulian patriots, from their most hated and now lifeless *ealdfēondum* “ancient enemies” (line 315).⁹ By summing up the Bethulians as *ēðelweardas* “guardians of their homeland” (line 320), the poet may allude to the bible, in which their citadel is the Jews’ last redoubt before Jerusalem, but his term *ealdhettende* “old persecutors” for Assyrians on the same line shows how long the latter have been in the country. It is not only dead Assyrians, but also Danish occupiers, who might be regarded as *þā ðe him tō life lāðost wæron | cwicera cynna* “those who in life to them had been the most hated race that ever lived” (lines 322-23). With all this accumulation of feeling in epithets for Assyrians, it might be the natives of tenth-century Mercia, no less than good Christians on earth, to whom the poet alludes with *hērbūendra*, “those who live here” (line 96), when he asserts, after Judith’s speech to the Trinity (lines 83-94), that the Lord helps all who pray to Him.

⁹ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 243.

Burga ealdor: Holofernes as a Norse earl

Holofernes' chief Viking tendency appears to lie in his intention *ðā beorhtan idese | mid wīdle ond mid womme besmītan* "to defile the bright lady with filth and pollution" (lines 58-59), and yet here the poet merely exposes the brutality of the biblical model. The poet's Book of Judith lay between the Old Latin version and Jerome's revision of this in the Vulgate.¹⁰ In the more extensive former, Holofernes tells his servant Bagoas to invite Judith to a party, saying: *Foedum est enim in conspectu nostro, ut mulierem talem omittamus non fabulantes ei: quoniam si non illam adduxerimus ad nos, deridebit nos* "In our eyes it is a disgrace to let her go without talking to her: if we do not draw her to us, she will laugh at us" (12:11).¹¹ Jerome has him promise more vengefully that *Foedum est enim apud Assyrios, si femina inrideat virum, agendo ut immunis transeat ab eo* "A disgrace it is for any Assyrian, if a woman provoke a man, that he should act so that she may pass from him unharmed" (12:11).¹² On the other hand, the English poet's account of Holofernes' banquet is utterly different. Whereas in both biblical texts it is for slaves instructed to leave Judith alone with him, in the OE *Judith* Holofernes throws the party without her, reserving the woman for later as an early spoil of victory. As Kaup has shown, the party is the king's main objective, with his plan for Judith coming second, a rehearsal for the rape of Bethulia.¹³ Moreover, the poet calls her *idese* "lady" (line 58) at the moment he reveals Holofernes' intentions. That is, even from his perspective as a rapist, Judith is too highborn to be admitted to a *Schweinerei* in which the guests are not slaves but Assyrian captains wasted by a drinking that never stops.

In literary terms the party has been recognised as a travesty of heroic feasting,¹⁴ but there is also a tenth-century Scandinavian historical parallel. This is to be found in Ibn Fadlān's *Rīsala*, in his doubtless eye-witness description of the Rūs', Slavicised Swedish traders, in a camp by the Volga ("Itil") in 922:

When they arrive from their land, they anchor their boat on the Itil, which is a great river, and they build large wooden houses on the banks. Ten or twenty people, more or less, live together in one of these houses. Each man has a raised platform on which he sits. With them, there are beautiful slave girls, for sale to the merchants. Each of the men has sex with his slave, while his companions look on. Sometimes a whole

¹⁰ *Judith*, ed. Griffith, pp. 47-50.

¹¹ *Latinae Versiones Antiquae*, ed. Sabatier, vol. III, 1751, 776-78 (11:18-12:16), esp. 778. All Old Latin quotations from this edition.

¹² *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam*, ed. Colunga and Turrado, pp. 404-14, esp. 411. All Vulgate quotations from this edition.

¹³ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 135, 178, 253-59.

¹⁴ Magennis, "The Feast Scene."

group of them gather together in this way, in full view of one another. If a merchant enters at this moment to buy a young slave girl from one of the men and finds him having sex with her, the man does not get up off her until he has satisfied himself.¹⁵

Although there is no more mention of sex than there is of food in Holofernes' party, it is worth noting that he is *medugāl* "wanton with mead" while there (line 26). Perhaps the cups passing down the benches (lines 17-19) are borne by women, given that no *byrelas* "cup-boys" are said to bear them, such as we find in Hrothgar's feast in *Beowulf* (line 1161). And yet Holofernes keeps Judith away from his men. Her only servitude is when she is said to be *Nergendes / þēowen* "the Saviour's handmaid" just as the king, under the illusion that she is his handmaid, joins her in private (lines 73-74). Doctrinally, this isolation clears Judith of complicity in the lust by which Holofernes must lose his head, but in narrative motivation it appears to be both his privilege and her class that keep her out of the party.¹⁶

First, Holofernes drinks to excess; *ðā nīða geblonden* "then, steeped in malice" (line 34), he orders his men to have *þā ēadigan mægð* "the blessed woman" (line 35) brought *tō his bedreste* "to his bed-chamber" (line 36). Without seeing the risk Judith poses to their *byrnwigena brego* "prince of mailed men" (line 39), Holofernes' aides *bearhtme stōpon* "advanced in revelry" (line 39) to the lodge where they find his assassin waiting *ferhōglēawe* "with a clear mind" (line 41) and from where they escort her *tō træfe þām hēan* "to the high pavilion" (line 43). The Assyrians' camp thus sprawls over a hill on which Holofernes' structure is set up to face Bethulia on the far side of a valley. Like a dark inner sanctum, for the word *træf* describes heathen Danish shrines in *hærgtrafas* "idol houses" (MS *hrærg-*) in *Beowulf*, line 175, Holofernes' bed lies hidden behind a veil beyond which no visitor's eyes may venture; its designation as gold-threaded *fleohnet* "fly-nets" (line 47) appears to reveal the poet's knowledge of Rabanus' commentary, in which the screen is called *rete muscarum* with the same meaning.¹⁷ For the darkest moment, the poet lengthens his text with hypermetric lines:

Hīe ðā on reste gebrōhton
 (sn)ūde ðā snoteran idese; ēodon ðā stercedferhðe,
 hæleð heora hearran cýðan þæt wæs sēo hālige mēowle
 gebrōht on his būrgetelde. Þā wearð se brēma on mōde
 blīðe, burga ealdor, þōhte ðā beorhtan idese
 mid wīdle ond mid womme besmītan. (lines 54-59)

¹⁵ *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, trans. Lunde and Stone, pp. 46-47.

¹⁶ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 193, 232.

¹⁷ *PL* 109, pp. 539-92, esp. 573.

Into this chamber they then brought
the clever lady without delay. The men of hardened hearts went
to let their master know that the holy woman had been
brought to his tented bower. Then in his mood did the famous one,
lord of the boroughs, become ecstatic, the bright lady he intended
to defile with filth and pollution.

The Old English *Daniel* has Balthazar twice as *burga ealdor* (lines 676, 712), shortly before his own downfall.¹⁸ This, the only other instance, may tell us that the poet of *Judith* conceives of Holofernes as another tyrant of Babylon. However, we should also note that each of *ealle ðā yldestan þegnas* “all the most senior thanes” (line 10) summoned to his banquet, *folces ræswan* “leaders of the people” (line 12), will command a *burh* with Holofernes as overlord. This use of *burga ealdor* points to the holding of forts against King Edward by long-term Danish occupiers, as well as to the name *burga fýfe* “Five Boroughs” by which the Danelaw is known in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (s.a. 942).¹⁹

Mundbyrd from Holofernes

Judith’s absence from Holofernes’ party is due not only to her class, but also to an agreement they have reached in the now-lost opening of the poem, which the king now breaks:

Wiggend stōpon
ūt of ðām inne ofstum miclum,
weras wīnsade, þe ðone wærlogan,
lāðne lēodhatan, læddon tō bedde
nēhstan sīðe. (lines 69-73)

His warriors marched
out of the chamber, making great haste,
men wine-sated, who had led to his bed
that treaty-breaker, hated tyrant,
for the last time.

The compound *wærloga* means more here than ‘monster,’ denotation of its Middle English reflex *warlowe*.²⁰ It describes breakers of rules: devils, whose rebellion breaks a covenant with the Creator, in *Juliana*, line 455, *Guthlac* (A) line 298, (B) 623 and 911, and *The Whale*, line 37; pre-Noachic sinners in *Genesis* (A), line 1266, as well as Mermedonian cannibals in *Andreas*, lines 613 and 1297; and King Eormanric of the Goths, with the imputation that he

¹⁸ *Daniel and Azarias*. ed. Farrell, pp. 85, 87.

¹⁹ Hart, *The Danelaw*, pp. 17-20.

²⁰ *Guthlac*, ed. Roberts, p. 298.

will shortly execute his new wife Ealhild, in *Widsith*, line 9. In *Judith* this compound has been glossed as “treacherous person, traitor,” with the understanding that Holofernes breaks the bond between host and guest.²¹ That much is clear, but the meaning goes further, in that Holofernes’ hospitality depends on what Judith has promised him about Bethulia. By telling him that the city will fall, Judith surrenders; in exchange, Holofernes offers her his protection. This is what the clear-eyed Judith has been waiting for.

The first extant nine lines of this poem may be read as the poet’s aftermath to a now-lost scene in which Holofernes and Judith base their *wær-* on these mutual promises. As we shall see, it is the Old Latin Book of Judith that tells us that the first word was probably preceded by *ne* or another negative form:²²

<ne> twēode
 gifena in ðȳs ginnan grunde. Hēo ðær ðā gearwe funde
 mundbyrd æt ðām mæran þēodne, þā hēo āhte mæste þearfe,
 hylde þæs hēhstan dēman, þæt hē hīe wið þæs hēhstan brōgan
 gefriðode, frymða waldend. (lines 1-5)

<he>] did <not> doubt
 <her> gifts in this wide world. Readily there she then found
 protection from the famous king, when she had the greatest need
 of favour from the Highest Judge, that against the highest terror He,
 Ruler of Creation, would give her safety.

Here it emerges that Holofernes has given Judith his own pledge of peace. If we study these lines with an eye to the “treaty” which he later breaks, we may read them differently to the way in which they have been understood before.

To start with, the *gifena* “gifts” on line 2 have wrongly been seen to anticipate the *weorðmynde* “honours” and *mēde* “reward” (lines 342-43) which the Almighty is said to give Judith at the end of the poem. This has encouraged the view that Judith is the subject of the fragmentary opening clause, which is commonly read with a supplement *ne* “not,” on the basis of a comparison with the half-line *Hūru æt þām ende ne twēode* “indeed at the end she did not doubt” (line 345) God’s rewards, i.e. His promise of salvation. Kaup qualifies this reading by presenting the opening stub without the *ne*-supplement, so that Judith initially does have doubt in her heavenly reward.²³ However, it is not even clear that Judith is the subject of *twēode* on the opening line, for the *hēo*-pronoun at the head of the second sentence

²¹ *Judith*, ed. Griffith, pp. 119-20, 220.

²² *Judith*, ed. Griffith, p. 108 (n. 1b).

²³ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 253.

appears to make her a new subject in opposition to Holofernes. If he and not she is read along with *ne* into the opening stub, with the understanding that Holofernes does not doubt some other *gifena* “gifts,” it becomes clear that the immediately preceding passage in the poem now lost to us was adapted from Chapter 11 of the Book of Judith.

Here Judith, picked up with her maid by an Assyrian patrol, gives a spell-binding speech to the general in which she assures him that she, his servant, knows that Bethulia will fall in five days’ time. Her beauty and intelligence disarm the men completely. So they do at that moment in *Judith*, in which the poet calls her *ides ælfscīnu* “a lady preternaturally beautiful” (line 14). In Jerome’s Vulgate, each man says to the other: *Non est talis mulier super terram in aspectu, in pulchritudine, et in sensu verborum* “Not such a woman is there on earth in looks, in beauty and in the wisdom of her words” (11:19). Insofar as there is already a parallel between *super terram* and *in ðȳs ginnan grunde* “in this wide world” (line 2), we may treat the *gifena* “gifts” as Judith’s, as the poet’s summation of looks, beauty and wisdom which he has attributed to her before. In the Old Latin version this parallel is even stronger, for here it is Holofernes who says: *Non est talis mulier, à cacumine montium usque ad summum terræ, in vultu, & sapientia sermonum* “There is not such a woman from the summit of the mountains to the ends of the earth, either in her looks or in the wisdom of her words” (11:19). The scope of this recommends the Old Latin version as the source of *ginnan grunde* on line 2.

Both here and in the Vulgate, Holofernes responds to Judith’s words, beauty and wisdom by granting her protection. It is odd, but understandable (given the axiom that *Judith* started only just before and that this scene is mirrored in the poet’s closing peroration), that readers of *Judith* have all taken *mundbyrd æt ðām mæran þēodne* “protection from the famous king” (line 2) to refer to the Almighty. One possible cause of this is the phrase *mundbyrd is geriht* in *The Dream of the Rood* (lines 130-31) whereby the speaker’s “right of protection is transferred” to the cross in a new service to God.²⁴ Judith moreover addresses the Lord as *þēoden* in *þearlmōd ðēoden gumena* “firm-minded Lord of men,” in her prayer in *Judith*, line 91. However, the fact that this half-line is used also of Holofernes on line 61 opens line 2a up to him too, whose *mundbyrd*, in this case, represents the protection Holofernes confers on

²⁴ *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Swanton, pp. 130, 137 (“hope of protection”). Liebermann, II.1, p. 150 (“*mundbyrd*: Schutz;” “*mundbora*: Beschützer”); II.2, p. 641 (“Oberherrschaft”).

Judith, together with the peace she enjoys.²⁵ This word even renders the “hands” into which she surrenders Bethulia:

Et dixit ad eam Olofernis: “Benefecit Deus, qui misit te à filiis plebis tuæ, ut fiat in manibus nostris virtus” (Old Latin, Judith 11:20)

And Holofernes said to her: “God has done well, Who sent you from the children of your people, that power might be in our hands.”

Jerome, more emphasising the general’s notion of her as a slave, alters Holofernes’ clauses to *qui misit te ante populum, ut des illum tu in manibus nostris* “Who sent you ahead of the people, that you may give them into our hands” (Vulgate Judith, 11:20). In both cases, the word *manus* ‘hands’ seems to have helped the choice of *mundbyrd*, a compound coined on “guardian hand,” in *Judith*. For comparison, St Juliana in the eponymous poem is forced by her father to take an unwanted husband as her new *mundbora* “guardian” (line 156). However, when asked by the latter to “seek protection, favour” from the gods (line 170: *mundbyrd, hylde, sēcan*), she declares the Lord to be her *mundbora* instead (line 213).²⁶ Unlike Juliana, Judith, pretending to seek *mundbyrd* with Holofernes, keeps that part of it to herself. Although publicly Judith *funde* “found” (line 2) protection with Holofernes, privately she is with the Lord.

Indeed, the Old Latin Judith gives other indications that a legal protection, not merely hospitality, is what Judith expects from the general in Chapter 11. *Et nunc dic mihi* “And tell me now,” he offers, *qua causa recessisti ab eis, & venisti ad nos? Venisti enim ad salutem animæ tuæ* “from what cause did you withdraw from them and come to us? For you have come into security for your life” (11:3). Holofernes thus expects that Judith, having disowned the Bethulians, must apply to him for safety. She responds by giving herself to him: *Sume verba ancillæ tuæ, & loquatur ancilla tua ante faciem tuam* “accept the words of your handmaid, and may your handmaid speak in your presence” (11:4). Just as with *mundbyrd* in Juliana’s case, this offer portends concubinage.

Judith then tells the lie which will deceive Holofernes, that the Bethulians may expect divine vengeance for their use of holy vessels, and that she, consequently, is leaving them, *Unde ego ancilla tua, cum cognivissem hæc omnia, refugi à facie eorum* “wherefore I, your handmaid, when I knew all these things, fled from their face” (11:13). In particular, she says

²⁵ Laughlin, “The Anglo-Saxon Legal Procedure,” p. 279: “the protection conferred by anyone, and the peace he enjoys.”

²⁶ MacGaffey Abraham, “Cynewulf’s *Juliana*: A Case at Law,” pp. 174-77.

that God has sent her *facere tecum hanc rem, in qua mirabitur tota terra quæ audient ea* “to accomplish things through you which will amaze the whole world, as many as shall hear about them” (11:14): to make Holofernes famous, as in *ðām mæran* (line 3). Although Judith makes it clear that her heavenly Lord has not changed, in the world she submits to Holofernes: *Et nunc manebo penes te dominum meum* “And now I will remain in the power of you, who are my lord” (11:14). These protestations seem to underlie the *mundbyrd æt ðām mæran þēodne* “protection from the famous lord” (line 3) which Judith, according to the English poet, *gearwe funde* “readily found” (line 2) by overwhelming him with the *gifena* “gifts” (line 2) of her beauty, wit and words.

A constant danger of duplicity, however, lurks in Holofernes’ role as *þæs hēhstan brōgan* “the highest terror” (line 4) and in the poet’s resulting reassurance that the Lord *gefriðode* “gave safety” to Judith while she risks her body in this way. In the next five lines the poet shows not only why, but also how the Heavenly protects Judith from the earthly lord:

Hyre ðæs fæder on roderum
torhtmōd tīðe gefremede, þe hēo āhte trumne gelēafan
ā tō ðām ælmihtigan. Gefrægen ic ðā Hōlofernus
wīnhātan wyrcean georne ond eallum wundrum þrymlīc
girwan up swāsendo. (lines 5-9)

For her thus did heavenly Father,
bright of heart, carry out her request, because she had firm faith
ever in the Almighty. It was then, I heard, that Holofernes
eagerly organised a wine invitation and with all kinds of marvels prepared
a magnificent high feast.

The Lord helps her because she has prayed to Him for aid in Chapter 9, rebuking the town elders for testing Him with their plan to surrender in five days. On her roof-top and dressed in sack-cloth, Judith unleashes a hate for the invader which drives every seductive move she will make:

“Tu contere virtutem illorum, Deus æterne: comminue multitudinem illorum in virtute tua, confringe potestatem eorum in ira tua.” (Old Latin, Judith 9:11)

“Break their strength, O everlasting Lord: grind their multitude into pieces through Thy might, shatter their power in Thy wrath.”

This prayer for divine action is what the poet of *Judith* means by the *tīðe* “request” from Judith that the Lord thus *gefremede* “did carry out” (line 6). How He does so, follows on in a way that defines the poem’s extant opening passage as a summary intervention which

declares the chieftain's death inevitable. By the force of the poet's b-line, *Gefrægen ic ðā Hōlofernus* "It was then, I heard, that Holofernes" (line 7), Holofernes plans on the basis of what Judith has said. His immediate three-day preparation for a feast on the fourth day, on the eve of his entry into Bethulia, is the Lord's answer to Judith's request.

As we have seen, the phrase *mundbyrd sēcan* is given for a worshipper's bid for a place in heaven in *Juliana* (line 130). However, this idiom is also found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in which it describes an act of surrender. The climactic examples occur in late 917, towards the end of King Edward's Danish Wars in Essex and Middle Anglia. First, just after the harvest, the king brings a West Saxon army to Passenham at the head of the Blackwater; staying there while his men rebuild the fort at Towcester, he takes the submission of Earl Thurferth and all the Danes of Northampton, who *sōhton hine him tō hlāforde 7 tō mundboran* "sought him as their lord and protector."²⁷ Just after this, when Edward's militia is relieved by a new West Saxon force which rebuilds the fort at Huntingdon, the remaining Anglo-Danish community *bēag tō Ēadwearde cyninge 7 sōhton his friþ 7 his mundbyrde* "yielded to King Edward and sought his peace and protection."²⁸ In the first example, we see the investing of a town which has fallen to the king, with one of his armies: Judith convinces Holofernes that this is what he will be doing in five days' time. In the second, we see the submission of the district's non-military inhabitants, those who have not fled: that is what Holofernes also expects.

Later in 917, the *Winchester Chronicle* says that when King Edward rebuilds the fort at Colchester before Martinmas (11 November), the people of East Anglia and Essex, those whom the Danes have ruled for fifty years, turn themselves over to him. Subsequently two more Danish armies surrender to the king, swearing that they *eall þæt friþian woldon þæt se cyng friþian wolde* "would respect the peace of all territory that the king respected;" one of them, the Danish host from Cambridge, *hine gecēs synderlice him tō hlāforde 7 tō mundboran 7 þæt fæstnodon mid āþum swā swā hē hit þā ārēd* "chose him separately as their lord and protector and confirmed that with oaths just as he then determined."²⁹ These oaths appear to be expected as part of the king's *mundbyrd*. Like King Edward, Holofernes has moved through enemy country, taking town after town. Bethulia's surrender he takes through Judith, whose promise of its fall in five days, like an oath, seals the peace he makes with her. However, where the *Chronicle's* verb *friðian* "to respect the peace of" is concerned, in *Judith*

²⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (A), ed. Bately, p. 68 (ll. 6-8).

²⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (A), ed. Bately, p. 68 (ll. 9-14).

²⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (A), ed. Bately, p. 68 (ll. 19-25).

it is the Lord of Israel, not the Assyrian guardian, who *hīe wið þæs hēhstan brōgan / gefriðode* “would give her safety against that highest terror” (lines 4-5). Judith is playing a dangerous game: to pretend to seek *mundbyrd* (line 3) from Holofernes puts her life in danger. That is why the poet calls her *ellenrōf* “courageous” when she sets out on her mission (line 146).

General Judith as Lady Æthelflæd

After their victory, the Bethulian militia brings Holofernes’ panoply back to town and presents it to Judith, who is called *ellenrōf* “courageous” also when she beheads the enemy king on her second stroke (line 109). Insofar as this epithet is elsewhere used only of men, Judith is conceived of as a commander herself.³⁰ Later, having ordered her maid to display Holofernes’ head to *þām burhlēodum* “the townsfolk” (line 175), she tells them whose head it is, saying that this heathen criminal would have hurt them further, had God not refrained from lengthening his life:

‘ic him ealdor oðþrong
 purh godes fultum. Nū ic gumena gehwæne
 þyssa burglēoda biddan wylle,
 randwiggendra, þæt gē recene ēow
 fýsan tō gefeohte.” (lines 185-89)

‘I crushed out his life
 with God’s help. Now I will bid
 each man of these men of the town
 who can carry a shield that you men quickly
 fire yourselves up for a fight.”

God’s aid is portrayed as instrumental also to Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred and Ealhswith, who helped King Edward push the Danes back into the heart of the former kingdom of Mercia.³¹ According to the “Mercian Register” (*s.a.* 902-924), God helps Æthelflæd draw Danish forces away from her brother in the east:

Hēr Æþelflæd Myrcna hlæfdīge Gode fultumgendum foran tō Hlæfmæssan begēat þā burh mid eallum þām ðe þærtō hýrde þe ys hāten Dēorabý. Þær wæron ēac ofslegene hyre þegna fēower þe hire besorge wæron binnan þām gatum. (*s.a.* 917)³²

³⁰ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 149, 157-60.

³¹ Abrams, “Edward the Elder’s Danelaw,” pp. 138-40.

³² *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C), ed. O’Brien O’Keeffe, p. 76. Also in *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (B), ed. Taylor, p. 50.

Here Lady Æthelflæd of the Mercians, with God helping, before Lammastide [1 August] seized, with all that pertained to it, that fort which is called Derby, and there were also slain four thanes of hers, who were dear to her, within the gates.

The same bond between general and men is brought home to us in the poet's happier statement that *Æghwylcum wearð / men on ðære medobyrig mōd ārēted* "each man's mood in the mead-town was cheered" (lines 166-67) when they heard that Judith was *cumen / eft to ēðle* "come back to her homeland" (lines 168-69). In the Register's next entry:

Hēr hēo begeat on hire geweald mid Godes fultume on foreweardne gear
gesybsumlice þā burh æt Līgraceastre, 7 se mæsta dæl þæs herges þe ðærtō hīrde
wearð underþēoded; 7 hæfdon ēac Eforwīcingas hire gehāten, 7 sume on wedde
geseald, sume mid āþum gefæstnod, þæt hī on hyre rādenne bēon woldon. (*s.a.* 918)

Here she got into her power with God's help in the first part of the year by peaceful means the town in Leicester, and the greatest part of the raiding army that belonged to it was made to submit; and the men of York had also promised her, some by giving pledges, others by confirming with oaths, that they would be under her governance.

This divinely aided settlement may be likened to the poem's strategy of agreement (*wær-*, line 71) and protection (*mundbyrd*, line 3), which, *þurh godes fultum* (line 186), brings the *mægð* "woman"³³ Judith close enough to Holofernes to kill him.

Sister to King Edward, Æthelflæd led his western and central campaigns in *c.* 902 on the illness of her husband, Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia, whose death in 911 made her generalship official.³⁴ Æthelflæd was undermined in Wessex, her father's homeland, but in Mercia, her mother's, she became *Myrcna hlāfdīge* "Lady of the Mercians." She reconquered central Mercia largely through attrition and siege warfare, re-fortifying old towns and building new forts (*burhs*) along valleys to face Danish towns and encampments in defensive positions.³⁵ The Welsh and Irish called her a queen, worthier than either Alfred or Edward, whose deaths, unlike hers, go unnoticed in the Cambrian and Ulster annals.³⁶ Negotiating with Norwegian settlers from Ireland, Æthelflæd re-fortified Chester against their raids in 907.³⁷ Against the Danes she rebuilt *Bremesburh* possibly in the south-west in 909, *Scergeat* and Bridgnorth in 912, and Tamworth and Stafford in July and August of 913, Eddisbury and

³³ Not "virgin:" see Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 127-28, 280-88. *Judith*, ll. 35, 43, 78, 125, 135, 145, 165, 254, 260, 334.

³⁴ Bailey, "Ælfwynn," pp. 112-13.

³⁵ Wainwright, "Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians," pp. 47-49.

³⁶ *Annales Cambriæ*, ed. Williams ab Ithel, p. 17 (*s.a.* 917): "Aelfled regina obit." *Annala Uladh*, ed. and trans. Hennessy and Mac Carthy, Vol. I, pp. 436-37 (*s.a.* 917): "Eithilfleith famosissima regina Saxonum moritur."

³⁷ Wainwright, "Ingimund's Invasion," pp. 151-52.

Warwick in 914, and Chirbury and *Weardburh* in 915; in 916, to cover her south-western flank, she stormed Brycheiniog near Brecon in Wales. And as we have just seen, she took Derby from the Danes by force of arms on 1 August 917 and Leicester by threat in the spring of 918.³⁸ In the same year she was about to take the surrender of York's Norwegian occupiers when she died in Tamworth on 12 June. King Edward finished the war without her, dying on campaign in the north-west Midlands in 924. His sister's victories and other achievements are missing in all versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* but for the spare outline in the "Mercian Register," which was later inserted into the Abingdon *Chronicles* (B and C) and imperfectly assimilated in the Worcester *Chronicle* (D).³⁹ This tells us that Edward, probably through fear of a Mercian resurgence, removed Æthelflæd's victories from West Saxon record.⁴⁰

Judith, however, seems to proclaim these. Bethulia here is more fort than town, for there is no government other than Judith's military command. Neither Ozias nor the other elders in the Book of Judith are cited in the extant poem and the spoils of Holofernes all go to Judith, as if to Æthelflæd, at the end. The Book defines these as the canopy under which he had given audience. Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham goes along with this in his translation of 1002 x 1005, in which the homecoming Bethulians *pā herelāfa dældon betwux him on dēorwurðum sceattum, swā þæt hī wurdon swīðe gewelegode; 7 hī ealle betæhton Hōlofernes þing Iūdithe tō hæbbenne* "shared out between them the leavings of plunder in precious treasures, so that they were greatly enriched; while Holofernes' things they all entrusted to Judith's keeping."⁴¹ Later Ælfric seems no nearer *Judith* when he claims that Judith, on account of their pagan origin, *noalde āgan, swā swā ūs sægeð sēo racu, þæs wælhreowan hærerēaf, þe þæt folc hire forgeaf* "would not own, as the narrative tells us, the war-spoils that the people gave her from that murderously cruel man."⁴² In *Judith*, by contrast, the heroine welcomes Holofernes' treasures including his *sweord ond swätigne helm, swylce ēac sīde byrnan | gerēnode rēadum golde* "sword and blood-spattered helmet, also his wide coat of chained mail, adorned with burnished gold" (lines 337-38). The inclusion of Holofernes' panoply in these spoils is unique to the poem and defines Judith as Holofernes' opposite number. Here she thanks the Lord for these honours, which are said to be as much the Lord's gift as the heavenly salvation

³⁸ Ward, "The Re-Establishment of Chester," pp. 160-61. Griffiths, "The North-West Frontier," pp. 167-69.

³⁹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (C)*, ed. O'Brien O'Keefe, pp. 75-76. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (B)*, ed. Taylor, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁰ Wainwright, "Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians," p. 54.

⁴¹ *Ælfric's Judith*, ed. Lee, ll. 317-20.

⁴² Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 64. *Ælfric's Judith*, ed. Lee, ll. 356-57.

which she gets for her faith (lines 343-45). The Lord is said to have supported Bethulian warriors (lines 299-300), but that is only because He has empowered *sēo æðele* “the noble woman” (line 176) who leads them.

King Æthelstan’s call to arms

Where a date for *Judith* is concerned, it has been ventured that Edward’s suppression of Æthelflæd’s achievements would make his reign unsuitable for the composition of this poem.⁴³ Griffith’s finding moreover that its dialect is West Saxon in origin or through transmission⁴⁴ fits the poem to England as a more national entity at the earliest after Edward’s reign (899-924). *Judith* also includes two terms, *se inwidda* “the wicked” (line 28) for Holofernes and *hyrnednebb* “horn-beak” (line 212) for a raven anticipating battle, which elsewhere appear only in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, respectively for King Constantine of the Scots (line 47) and a postprandial raven (line 62).⁴⁵ Since the latter poem was copied into the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* not long after King Æthelstan’s victory against Norse invaders from Ireland in 937, probably around Bromborough on the Wirral,⁴⁶ these two words might place *Judith* in or after his reign (924-939). As a child, Æthelstan was brought up in exile by Lady Æthelflæd in her court in Mercia.⁴⁷ Ultimately the patronage of *Judith* might have been his, or even that of his half-brother warrior successors, Kings Edmund (939-946) and Eadred (946-955).

Later there were more Danish wars. Ælfric, in his letter on Old and New Testament translations to Ealdorman Sigeward after 1005, refers to a versified English Book of Judith, which resembles the Maccabees in being a call to arms against invaders.⁴⁸ On the Book of Judith, he says:

Iūdiþ sēo wudewe, þe oferwann Hōlofernem þone Sīriscan ealdormann, hæfð hire āgenne bōc betwux þisum bōcum be hire āgenum sige. Sēo ys ēac on Englisc on ūre wīsan gesett, ēow mannum tō bȳsne þæt gē ēowerne eard mid wāmnum bewerian wið onwinnendne here.⁴⁹

The widow Judith, who defeated Holofernes the Assyrian ealdorman, has her own book among these books, about her own victory. This is also put into English, in our

⁴³ Astell, “Holofernes’ Head,” p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Judith*, ed. Griffith, pp. 18-25, esp. 21. Pringle, “The Homily and the Poem,” p. 91.

⁴⁵ *Judith*, ed. Griffith, p. 28. Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, p. 271.

⁴⁶ Dodgson, *Place-Names of Cheshire*, pp. 237-40.

⁴⁷ Bailey, “Ælfrwynn,” p. 114.

⁴⁸ Kaup, *The Old English Judith*, pp. 64-66.*

⁴⁹ *Ælfric’s Libellus*, ed. Marsden, p. 217 (ll. 462-67).

style, as an example for you and your men to defend your homeland with weapons against an attacking army of raiders.

Thereafter he refers to English versions of the Maccabees. It has been suggested that in the above passage he cites his own Book of Judith, which he would have finished a year or two earlier. In support of this is an argument that Ælfric takes Judith's "chastity" to be the best weapon against the Vikings and knows that Sigeward will see it that way too.⁵⁰ His expressions for authorship point the other way, however. When he refers to Job earlier, he says *Be þām ic āwende on Englisc sumne cwide iū* "Concerning him I once translated a passage into English;" and with the Book of Esther, just before, he says *Ðā ic āwende on Englisc on ūre wīsan sceortlice* "This book I translated into English, into our style, in brief form."⁵¹ The passive construction, however, with which he says the Book of Judith *ys ēac on Englisc on ūre wīsan gesett*, claims only his or a common English style, not his authorship. As Huppé has observed, the *ēac* in this clause implies that Ælfric cites a versified English book besides his own, because this work, unlike his, was composed *tō bȳsne wið onwinnendne here*.⁵² Here it is worth asking whether *hærerēaf*, Ælfric's word for the spoils the Bethulians give Judith, is borrowed from the *hererēaf* (line 316) they take from the dead Assyrians in the poem. Ælfric's 'additional' English Book of Judith would have been a form of the poem we know, whose description of Holofernes and the Assyrians around Bethulia recalls King Edward's wars against Danes in the Danelaw in the first two decades of the tenth century. At the same time, the likeness between Judith and Æthelflæd, Edward's sister and leading general who won her war by strategy, negotiation and sending men into battle, seems no longer a matter of chance.

References

- Abrams, Lesley. 2001. "Edward the Elder's Danelaw." In: *Edward the Elder*, ed. By Higham and Hill, pp. 128-43.
- Astell, Ann W. 1989. "Holofernes' Head: *Tacen* and Teaching in the Old English *Judith*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 18: 117-33.
- Bailey, Maggie. 2001. "Ælfwynn, Second Lady of the Mercians." In: *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, pp. 113-127.
- Bately, Janet. (ed.) 1986. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, gen. eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes, *Volume 3: MS A*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

⁵⁰ Pringle, "The Homily and the Poem," pp. 86-88.

⁵¹ *Ælfric's Libellus*, ed. Marsden, pp. 216-17 (ll. 449 and 461-62).

⁵² Huppé, *The Web of Words*, p. 146.

- Brink, Stefan. 2012. "Slavery in the Viking Age." In: *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink with Neil Price. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 49-56.
- Colunga, Alberto, and Laurentio Turrado. (eds.) 1985. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam*, 7th ed. Madrid: La Editorial Católica.
- Cross, James E. 1971. "The Ethic of War in Old English." In: *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. by Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 269-82.
- Dodgson, John McN. 1972. *The Place-Names of Cheshire*. In: English Place-Name Society 4. Cambridge: University Press for the Society.
- Farrell, R.T. (ed.) 1974. *Daniel and Azarias*. London: Methuen & Co.
- Foster, Gregory T. 1892. *Judith: Studies in Meter, Language and Style, with a View to Determining the Date of the Old English Fragment and the Home of its Author*. Strassburg: Trübner.
- Griffith, Mark. (ed.) 1997. *Judith*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Griffiths, David. 2001. "The North-West Frontier." In: *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, pp. 167-87.
- Hart, Cyril. 1992. *The Danelaw*. London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press.
- Hennessy, William M., and B. Mac Carthy. (eds. and trans.) 1887-1901. *Annala Uladh: Annals of Ulster, otherwise Annala Senait, Annals of Senat: A Chronicle of Irish affairs from A.D. 431 to A.D. 1540*, 4 vols, 1st ed., Dublin: HM Stationery Office. *Vol. I: A.D. 431 to A.D. 1056*. Dublin: HM Stationery Office, 1887-1901.
- Higham, N.J., and D.H. Hill. (eds.) 2001. *Edward the Elder (899-924)*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Huppé, Bernard F. 1970. *The Web of Words: Structural Analyses of the Old English Poems Vainglory, The Wonder of Creation, The Dream of the Rood, and Judith, with Texts and Translations*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kaup, Judith. 2013. *The Old English Judith: A Study of Poetic Style, Theological Tradition, and Anglo-Saxon Christian Concepts*, with foreword by Hugh Magennis. Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Laughlin, J. Laurence. 1875. "The Anglo-Saxon Legal Procedure." In: *Essays on Anglo-Saxon Law*, ed. by Henry Adams, Henry Cabot Lodge and J. Laurence Laughlin, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, pp. 183-305.
- Lee, Stuart. (ed.) 1999. *Ælfric's Homilies on Judith, Esther, and the Maccabees*: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~stuart/kings/main.htm>.
- Liebermann, Felix. (ed.) 1903-1906. *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols., *II.1: Wörterbuch, II.2: Rechts- und Sachglossar*. Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer.
- Lucas, Peter J. 1990. "The Place of *Judith* in the *Beowulf*-Manuscript," *Review of English Studies*, New Series 41 (164): 463-478.
- Lunde, Paul, and Caroline Stone. (trans.) 2012. *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- MacGaffey Abraham, Lenore. 1978 [2001]. "Cynewulf's *Juliana*: A Case at Law." In: *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 171-92. [First published in: *Allegorica* 3, 1978, pp. 172-89.]

- Magennis, Hugh. 1983. "Adaptation of Biblical Detail in the Old English *Judith*: The Feast Scene," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 84: 331-37.
- Marsden, Richard, ed., *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric's Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo, Vol. I: Introduction and Text*. In: Early English Text Society, 330. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- O'Brien O'Keefe, Katherine. (ed.) 2001. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, gen. eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes, *Volume 5: MS C*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- PL: *Patrologia Latina*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, <http://pld.chadwyck.co.uk/>
- Pringle, Ian. 1975. "Judith: The Homily and the Poem," *Traditio: Studies in Medieval History, Thought and Religion* 31: 83-97.
- Roberts, Jane. (ed.) 1979. *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Sabatier, Pierre (ed.) 1743-51. *Bibliorum Sacrorum Latinae Versiones Antiquae*, 3 vols. Reims: Regnaud Florentain.
- Swanton, Michael J. (ed.) 1987. *The Dream of the Rood*, 2nd ed. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Taylor, Simon. (ed.) 1983. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, gen. eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes, *Volume 4: MS B*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Wainwright, F.T. 1948. "Ingimund's Invasion," *The English Historical Review* 63 (247): 145-169.
- Wainwright, F.T. 1990. "Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians." In: *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 44-55.
- Ward, Simon 2001. "Edward the Elder and the Re-Establishment of Chester." In: *Edward the Elder*, ed. by Higham and Hill, pp. 160-66.
- Williams, Gareth. 2013. "Towns and Identities in Viking England." In: *Everyday Life in Viking-Age Towns: Social Approaches to Towns in England and Ireland, c. 800-1100*, ed. by D.M. Hadley and Letty ten Harkel, Oxford and Oakville, TN: Oxbow Books, pp. 14-34.
- Williams ab Ithel, John (ed.) 1860. *Annales Cambriæ*. In: *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores: Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.
- Woolf, Rosemary. 1955. "The Lost Opening to the *Judith*," *Modern Language Review* 50: 168-72; reprinted in: *Art and Doctrine: Essays on Medieval Literature*, ed. by Heather O'Donoghue, London: The Hambledon Press, pp. 119-24.