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burden | burthen, n.

Text size: A AView as: Outline | [Full entry](#)Quotations: Show all | [Hide all](#)**Pronunciation:** /'bɜːd(ə)n/ /'bɜːð(ə)n/**Forms:** α. OE **berðen**, ME **byrðen**, **byrþan**, ME **byr-**, **birþin(e)**, **birthen(e)**, **birthun**, (**borþon** ... [\(Show More\)](#))**Etymology:** Old English *byrðen* strong feminine = Old Saxon *burthinnia* < West Germanic type ... [\(Show More\)](#)**This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1888).**[Publication history](#)[Entry profile](#)[Previous version](#)

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birthen, n. in Middle English Dictionary

byrþen in Dictionary of Old English

I. That which is borne.

1. A load.

Thesaurus »

α.

a1000 in T. Wright & R. P. Wülcker *Anglo-Saxon & Old Eng. Vocab.* (1884) I. 106 *Sarcina*, seam *uel* berðen.1154 *Anglo-Saxon Chron.* (Laud) anno 1135 Wua sua bare his byrþen gold & syluer.c1275 (?a1200) LA3AMON *Brut* (Calig.) (1978) l. 12961 He bar uppen his rugge burðene [c1300 *Otho* borþone] grete.a1300 *Havelok* 807 Gladlike I wile the paniers bere..They ther be inne a birthene gret.1382 *Bible* (Wycliffite, E.V.) Num. iv. 47 Berthens to be bore [a1425 To bere chargis].1398 J. TREVISA tr. Bartholomew de Glanville *De Proprietatibus Rerum* VIII. xxv, Bereris of heuy burþones.1566 T. STAPLETON *Returne Vntruthes Jewelles Replie* l. 4, I trust the burthen will sone be disburdened.a1701 H. MAUNDRELL *Journey Aleppo to Jerusalem* (1703) 44 All Ships, that take in their Burthen here.1827 J. KEBLE *Christian Year* I. ii. 7 Oh by thine own sad burthen, borne So meekly.

β.

c1160 *Hatton Gosp.* Matt. xxiii. 4 Hyo binned hefige byrdene þe man abere ne mæg.c1175 *Lamb. Hom.* 5 Ne ber hit nes nefre nane burdene.a1400 (a1325) *Cursor Mundi* (Gött.) l. 6830 If þu find of þin ill-willand vnder birdin his best ligand.c1440 *York Myst.* xxxii. 114 Bring on his bak a burdeyne of golde.c1470 HENRY *Wallace* XI. 29 A Churll yai had, yat felloune byrdyngs bar.a1616 SHAKESPEARE *King John* (1623) II. i. 92 With burden of our armor heere we sweat.1733 POPE *Ess. Man* III. 205 Did here the Trees with ruddier Burdens bend?1847 W. H. PRESCOTT *Hist. Conquest Peru* I. III. vi. 453 A light burden..was laid on his back.

(Hide quotations)

2. fig.

a. A load of labour, duty, responsibility, blame, sin,

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burd, n.	a1225
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burdash, n.	1707
Burdekin, n.	1889
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burdener, n.	1552
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burdensome burthen...	1578
burdensomely burth...	1611
burdensomeness bur...	1574

sorrow, etc. Cf. *white man's burden* *n.* at *WHITE MAN* *n.*

Compounds Now *hist.*

α.

c971 *Blickl. Hom.* 75 Swa sæt þonne seo unaræfnedlice byrþen synna on eallum þysum menniscan cynne.

c1000 *West Saxon Gospels: Matt.* (Corpus Cambr.) xi. 30 Soðlice min geoc is wynsum, and min byrðyn [v.r. byrðen, *Hatton* berðene] is leoht.

a1400 (a1325) *Cursor Mundi* (Vesp.) l. 17338 Late us and urs þe birthen ber.

1597 SHAKESPEARE *Richard III* iv. iv. 168 A greuous burthen was thy berth to me.

1744 G. BERKELEY *Siris* §119, in *Wks.* (1871) II. 408 A nervous colic, which rendered my life a burthen.

1748 T. SMOLLETT *Roderick Random* I. vii. 46 The folly of laying the burthen at my door.

1812 J. WILSON *Isle of Palms* iv. 221 Hath she no friend whose heart may share With her the burthen of despair?

β.

1303 R. MANNYNG *Handlyng Synne* 11959 For heuy byrdoun þat y of hem [sins] bere Y am confoundede.

c1374 CHAUCER tr. Boethius *De Consol. Philos.* 101 Þe burden of my sorwe.

1661 *Sir H. Vanes Politicks* 13 The burden of an injury.

1885 W. E. GLADSTONE in *Christian World* 15 Jan. 37/2 Sovereignty has been relieved by our modern institutions of some of its burdens.

(Hide quotations)

b.

Thesaurus »

burden of proof *n.* [*onus probandi* in Roman Law] the obligation to prove a controversial assertion, falling upon the person who makes it.

1593 R. HOOKER *Of Lawes Eccl. Politie* iv. iv. 177 The burthen of proving doth rest on them.

1780 E. BURKE *Speech Oeconomical Reformation* 64 The burthen of proof rests upon me, that so many pensions..are necessary for the public service.

1849 T. B. MACAULAY *Hist. Eng.* II. 152 The Roman Catholic divines took on themselves the burden of the proof.

(Hide quotations)

c. An obligatory expense, whether due on private account or as a contribution to national funds; often with the additional notion of pressing heavily upon industry and restraining freedom of action.

Thesaurus »
Categories »

1661 A. MARVELL *Let.* 6 Apr. in *Poems & Lett.* (1971) II. 22 In the matter of your two Companies, if they be of any charge or burthen to you, he is willing to indulge you.

1741 C. MIDDLETON *Hist. Life Cicero* I. ii. 62 Without any burthen on the Province.

1769 W. ROBERTSON *Hist. Charles VV.* iv. 392 The addition of such a load to their former burdens, drove them to despair.

1813 DUKE OF WELLINGTON *Let.* 11 Feb. in *Dispatches* (1838) X. 110 The burdens imposed shall be imposed with equality.

1863 H. FAWCETT *Man. Polit. Econ.* III. vi. 369 The burden of any fixed money payment.

1876 E. A. FREEMAN *Hist. Norman Conquest* V. xxiv. 373 The King lays certain feudal burthens on his tenants in chief.

(Hide quotations)

3. A 'load' (whether of man, animal, vehicle, etc.) considered as a measure of quantity. Now only applied to the carrying capacity of a ship, stated as a certain number of tons. Cf. 7.

Thesaurus »
Categories »

α.

- 1388 *Bible* (Wycliffite, L.V.) 2 Kings v. 17 Graunte thou to me..that Y take of the lond the birthun of twei burdones.
- c1449 R. PECOCK *Repressor* (1860) 155 A man which stale sumtyme a birthan of thornis was sett in to the moone.
- 1560 in *Etoniana* ii. 32 Fyve burthens of rushes to straw Mr. Durstons chamber.
- a1616 SHAKESPEARE *All's Well that ends Well* (1623) II. iii. 206 A vessell of too great a burthen.
- 1814 DUKE OF WELLINGTON *Let.* 7 Feb. in *Dispatches* (1838) XI. 505 Vessels of from fifteen to thirty tons burthen.

β.

- 1515 *Accts. St. John's Hosp., Canterbury* (Canterbury Cathedral Archives: CCA-U13/4) Paid for ij bordones off thornis for a hows.
- 1555 R. EDEN tr. Peter Martyr of Angleria *Decades of Newe Worlde* f. 349v, A shyppe of the burden of seuen score toonne.
- 1630 J. WADSWORTH *Eng. Spanish Pilgrime* (new ed.) iv. 33 This ship was of an 100 Tunne burden.
- 1871 J. Q. ADAMS in C. DAVIES *Metr. Syst.* III. 168 The burden of a ship, as a weight, is ascertained by the depth of the water she draws.

(Hide quotations)

†4.

a. That which is borne in the womb; a child.

Thesaurus »

- 1490 CAXTON tr. *Foure Sonnes of Aymon* (1885) iv. 131, I see my ryche burden go to exyle.
- 1594 T. BOWES tr. P. de la Primaudaye *French Acad.* II. 397 The veines whereby the burthen is nourished, may well be likened to small rootes, whereby plants are cherished.
- a1616 SHAKESPEARE *King John* (1623) III. i. 16 Let wiues with childe Pray that their burthens may not fall this day.
- 1629 J. GAULE *Practique Theories Christs Predict.* 112 Mary's burden and vnweildinesse, might well haue excused her absence.
- 1667 MILTON *Paradise Lost* II. 767 That my womb conceiv'd A growing burden.

(Hide quotations)

†b. **at one burden:** at one birth. *Obs.*

Thesaurus »
Categories »

- a1325 (c1250) *Gen. & Exod.* (1968) I. 1467 At on birdene ghe under-stod Two ðe weren hire sibbe blod.
- a1387 J. TREVISA tr. R. Higden *Polychron.* (St. John's Cambr.) (1871) III. 43 Sche bare tweie children at oon burþen.
- 1548 N. UDALL et al. tr. Erasmus *Paraphr. Newe Test.* I. Matt. i. 3 Further Judas had two children at a burden.
- 1572 J. BOSSEWELL *Wks. Armorie* II. f. 83v, Where many children are borne at one burdeyne.
- a1639 W. WHATELY *Prototypes* (1640) iv. 17 Some are of opinion that Evah at every burden bare twinnes.

(Hide quotations)

†5. What is borne by the soil; produce, crop.

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- 1523 J. FITZHERBERT *Bk. Husbandry* §12 Good grounde wylle haue the burthen of corne or of wede.
- 1669 J. WORLIDGE *Systema Agriculturæ* (1681) 11 It furnisheth the Owners thereof with a greater burthen of Corn, Pulse, or whatever is sown thereon.

[\(Hide quotations\)](#)**6. In Mining and Metallurgy. (See quot.)**[Thesaurus »](#)
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- 1825 'J. NICHOLSON' *Operative Mechanic* 329 In proportion to the quantity of lime and ore that is added to the standard quantity of the coke, the furnace is said to carry a greater or less burthen.
- 1881 *Trans. Amer. Inst. Mining Engineers May 1880-Feb. 1881* 9 113 *Burden* (Cornw.) 1. The tops or heads of stream-work, which lie over the stream of tin. 2. The proportion of ore and flux to fuel in the charge of a blast-furnace.
- 1944 *Jrnl. Iron & Steel Inst.* 150 419 We are operating at present on a burden of 60% brown Northampton ore and 30% carbonate ore.
- 1952 *Gloss. Welding & Cutting Metals* (B.S.I.) 43 *Burden*, the layer of melt and fused metal above the welding zone in submerged-arc welding.

[\(Hide quotations\)](#)**II.****7. The bearing of loads, as in *beast of burden, ship of burden* (= merchant-ship).**[Thesaurus »](#)
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- α.
- a1400 (a1325) *Cursor Mundi* (Vesp.) l. 5520 Halds þam..In birthþin, bath to bere and drau.
- 1697 DRYDEN tr. Virgil *Georgics* III, in tr. Virgil *Wks.* 112 Which before Tall Ships of burthen, on its Bosom bore.
- 1740 JOHNSON *Drake* in *Gentleman's Mag.* Dec. 603 Peruvian Sheep, which are the Beasts of Burthen in that Country.
- 1803 DUKE OF WELLINGTON *Dispatches* (1837) II. 199 Every animal..of the description of a beast of burthen.
- β.
- 1653 T. URQUHART tr. Rabelais *1st Bk. Wks.* 1. With nine thousand and thirty eight great ships of burden.
- 1789 H. L. PROZZI *Observ. Journey France* II. 385 Dogs drawing in carts as beasts of burden.
- 1863 'G. ELIOT' *Romola* II. x. 110 To do the work that was most like that of a beast of burden.

[\(Hide quotations\)](#)**III.**

8. Used in the English Bible (like *onus* in the Vulgate) to render Hebrew *massā*, which Gesenius would translate 'lifting up (of the voice), utterance, oracle'; the Septuagint has ῥῆμα, λῆμμα, ὄραμα. But it is generally taken in English to mean a 'burdensome or heavy lot or fate'.

- α.
- 1388 *Bible* (Wycliffite, L.V.) Zech. xii. 1 The birthun [1382 charge] of the word of the Lord on Israel.
- 1535 *Bible* (Coverdale) Zech. xii. The heuy burthen which the Lorde hath deuysed for Israel.

β.

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1611 *Bible* (King James) Isa. xiii. 1 The burthen of Babylon, which Isaiah the sonne of Amoz did see.

1865 A. C. SWINBURNE *Ballad of Burdens* 1 The burden of fair women.

(Hide quotations)

IV. Senses showing confusion with **BOURDON** *n.*²

[The earliest quotation for **BOURDON** *n.*² shows that word already confused with this. Apparently the notion was that the bass or undersong was 'heavier' than the air. The *bourdon* usually continued when the singer of the air paused at the end of a stanza, and (when vocal) was usually sung to words forming a refrain, being often taken up in chorus; hence sense 10. As the refrain often expresses the pervading sentiment or thought of a poem, this use became coloured by the notion of 'that which is carried' by the poem; its 'gist' or essential contents.]

†9. The bass, 'undersong', or accompaniment: = **BOURDON** [Thesaurus »](#) [Categories »](#)

*n.*¹ 1. *Obs.*

α.

1594 SHAKESPEARE *Lucrece* sig. H4. Burthen-wise ile hum on Tarqvin still, While thou on Terevs descants.

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *As you like It* (1623) III. ii. 242. I would sing my song without a burthen, thou bring'st me out of tune.

1833 I. TAYLOR *Fanaticism* ii. 46 The burthen of the dull echoes that shake the damp from the roof of his cavern.

β.

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1623) I. ii. 85 Heavy? belike it hath some burden then? *Lu.* I: and melodious were it, would you sing it.

c1840 H. W. LONGFELLOW *Terrestr. Paradise* vi, Foliage that made monotonous burden to their [birds'] rhymes.

(Hide quotations)

10. The refrain or chorus of a song; a set of words recurring at the end of each verse. [Thesaurus »](#) [Categories »](#)

α.

1598 BACON *Sacred Medit.* x. 123 As it were a burthen or verse of returne to all his other discourses.

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Tempest* (1623) I. ii. 383 Foote it featly heere and there, and sweete Sprights beare the burthen. *Burthen dispersedly*, Harke, harke, bowgh wawgh.

1659 H. HAMMOND *Paraphr. & Annot. Psalms* (cvii. Paraphr.) 543 Having a double burthen, or intercalary verse oft recurring.

1774 T. WARTON *Hist. Eng. Poetry* I. i. 26 It..has a burthen or chorus.

1838 E. GUEST *Hist. Eng. Rhythms* II. 290 Burthen..the return of the same words at the close of each stave.

β.

1772 W. JONES *Poems* Pref. p. vi, A lively burden at the end of each stanza.

1801 J. STRUTT *Glig-gamena Angel-ðeod* IV. iii. 304 At intervals, in place of a burden, they imitated the braying of an ass.

1868 A. HELPS *Realmah* I. vii. 207 Realmah had joined in the burden of the Ainah's song.

(Hide quotations)

11. *fig.* The chief theme; leading idea; prevailing sentiment. [Thesaurus »](#)

1649 W. BLITH *Eng. Improver* xxiv. 153 What is the Burden of my Song, and is the onely sure Cure.

1793 E. BURKE *Observ. Conduct Minority* in *Wks.* VII. 247 This was the burthen of all his song—"Every thing which we could reasonably hope from war,

would be obtained from treaty.'

- 1847 L. HUNT *Men, Women, & Bks.* I. xi. 199 The burden or leading idea of every couplet was the same.
- 1863 A. P. STANLEY *Lect. Jewish Church* I. xx. 449 Mercy and justice..is the burden of the whole Prophetic teaching.
- 1879 J. A. FROUDE *Cæsar* xi. 126 The burden of what he said was to defend enthusiastically the conservative aristocracy.

(Hide quotations)

V.

12. pl. The floor boards of a rowing boat; **side burdens**, the side seats in a rowing boat.

Thesaurus »
Categories »

- 1857 P. COLQUHOUN *Compan. Oarsman's Guide* 29 The flooring is termed *burthens*.
- 1857 P. COLQUHOUN *Compan. Oarsman's Guide* 31 *Side burthens* are extra thwarts laid in provisionally to carry sitters: *burthens* are the bottom boards.
- 1898 A. ANSTED *Dict. Sea Terms* 37 In boats the burdens are the footwalings.

(Hide quotations)

COMPOUNDS

General *attrib.*

C1.

burden-band *n.*

- 1855 F. K. ROBINSON *Gloss. Yorks. Words* 23 *Burdenband*, a hempen hayband.

(Hide quotations)

burden-bearer *n.*

Thesaurus »

- 1580 C. HOLLYBAND *Treasurie French Tong Crocheteur*..a burthen bearer.
- 1833 H. MARTINEAU *Charmed Sea* iv. 45 The burden-bearers must find their account in..a medium of exchange.

(Hide quotations)

burden-board *n.*

burden ship *n.*

Thesaurus »
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- 1658 tr. J. Ussher *Ann. World* vi. 424, 50 burden-ships of their friends shut in by the beaked ships of Eumenes.

(Hide quotations)

C2.

burden-bearing *adj.*

Thesaurus »

- 1793 T. HOLCROFT tr. J. C. Lavater *Ess. Physiognomy* (abridged ed.) xl. 209 Nothing but burden-bearing patience in the eyes [of the camel and dromedary].

(Hide quotations)

burden-carrying *adj.*

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1768 A. TUCKER *Light of Nature Pursued* I. 475 Ale-drinking, burthen-carrying, fish-selling rhetoricians.

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