

Cnut: Stability in England and evolving Norman connections



When we think about Cnut what immediately springs to mind is the seemingly fatuous episode when he tried to stop the tide coming in at Bosham (or wherever). Much like Æthelred II's modern nickname 'the Unready' (actually *Unræd* (ill-counselled), it is a '1066 and All That' like myth propagated for centuries. No doubt we shall return to this at the end of this paper.

Cnut was born c. 990, but Cnut's (*Knútr Sweynson's*) story is prefaced by that of his father Sweyn Forkbeard (*Sweyn Haraldsson*), king of Denmark, and his growing ambition to take England from Æthelred II.

Æthelred II had paid off the Vikings who had constantly plagued England for two centuries many times. When they raided he often gave them danegeld to go away, with the price escalating on each occasion. The underlying difficulty was that many Danes had been long settled in England, mainly in the area of the Danelaw, and having put down their roots they were not about to leave.

In 1001 Æthelred thought that he could pay the raiding Vikings to stop raiding permanently, giving them what at that time was the enormous sum of £24,000. Æthelred did not gain his nickname of *Unræd* for nothing, as neither he nor his advisors had learnt anything about the Danes, who would either keep coming back for more or were not actually in a position to leave, having put down roots, settled and married. In 1002 he was even more ill-advised as in reaction to being told, once it was only too clear that bribery was a foolish solution: '*..... that they would beshrew him of his life, and afterwards all his council, and then have his kingdom without any resistance,*' he issued a royal charter dated 13 November 1002, and '*ordered slain all the Danish men who were in England.*'

The order led to what is known as the St Brice's Day Massacre, which led to many people of Danish origin being killed south of the Danelaw line, but was less effective north of it. Worse as far as Æthelred was concerned that the sister of King Sweyn of Denmark whom William of Malmesbury names Gunhilda, plus her husband and their child are presumed to have died in this massacre. The story goes that they and other fleeing Danes had sought sanctuary in St Frideswide's minster in Oxford and the local populace burnt it down with the Danes inside (it is now the site of Christ Church Cathedral). The event has long been obscured by misinformation, but two burials recently unearthed at Oxford and near Weymouth (Loe) suggest mass executions of peoples of Viking origin, carbon dated 970–1025, which brackets 1002. Could they be the first archaeological evidence of the massacre?

Clearly Sweyn was more than a little enraged by these events, and proceeded to bring an army to England in 1003, landing at Sandwich then raiding into Wessex and East Anglia. In 1004 Æthelred issued a charter to St Frideswide making restitution, but part of the wording makes it clear that he had no remorse: *'it will be well known that a decree was sent out by me with the counsel of my leading men and magnates, to the effect that all the Danes who had sprung up in this island, sprouting like weeds amongst the wheat, were to be destroyed by a most just extermination.'* Sweyn was still in England at this time, no doubt still being very unpleasant and making much mayhem, but a severe famine in 1005 caused him to retreat to Denmark. It was not to be the end of Sweyn's interest in England. Another visit in 1006 was bought off in early 1007 by danegeld of £36,000, and for the next two years Sweyn 'forgot' his vendetta and England had no attacks.

In 1008, Æthelred, in an unusual and very expensive spate of organisation, placed a levy on every community in England (possibly excluding Northumbria) to provide: One warship for every 300 hides (56sq. miles, 146sq. km), plus one coat of mail and a helmet from every 8 hides (1.5sq. miles, 4sq. km). The warships created a new fleet, based on Sandwich.

This huge imposition on the people of England was wantonly squandered. Æthelred's leadership was so poor that, in 1009 after Beothric, the brother of earl Eadric of Mercia, had accused Wulfnoth, father of Earl Godwin, of some misdemeanour, Wulfnoth induced 20 of the ships to desert. Beothric then took another 80 ships to chase Wulfnoth, but he ran into a great storm and lost all the ships either at sea or cast ashore. The remains may have been either burnt or recovered by Wulfnoth. What remained of the fleet was sent back to London.

With no fleet of note left to stop them, the Danes were soon back in August 1009, led by Thurkill the Tall and his brother Hemming. In 1011–1012 they harried all of south-east England and East Anglia as far as Huntingdon and Northampton, and the specifically mentioned Hastings area (*... and Suð Seaxe and Hæstinga*). They were bought off, yet again, this time with £48,000. In 1012 the archbishop of Canterbury was killed by a mob of Vikings, an incident which is supposed to have made their leader Thurkill the Tall become a mercenary for Æthelred. The period was summed up by Stenton who wrote: *'The history of England in the next generation was really determined between 1009 and 1012 ... the ignominious collapse of the English defence caused a loss of morale which was irreparable.'* Æthelred the Unræd must have wished that he had been better advised in 1002.

He would wish that still more in 1013 as king Sweyn came in force with 300 ships. He first arrived at Sandwich, then sailed up the east coast to the Humber, and travelled up the River Trent to Gainsborough. Clearly England was in disarray after the previous years' predations by Sweyn, famines and floods. He rapidly gained in turn the submission of all of Northumbria, then Lincolnshire and the East Midlands, then all the Danelaw areas. Then he struck south to Oxford and Winchester before turning to London. Queen Emma and her

children were sent to her brother in Normandy, but Æthelred stayed with Thurkill by his side. Most places submitted to him, and only London held out. There took place in London the only significant battle, but it too submitted once Wessex submitted at Bath. Sweyn was then accepted as king and he returned to Gainsborough.

Sweyn's reign was a short and probably not very sweet five weeks. He died on Candlemas, 2 February 1014 at Gainsborough. The Vikings immediately chose his son, Cnut, as king. The Witan, or what remained of them, had other ideas, and advised that king Æthelred should be sent for – as long as he would govern more justly than he did before. It is not at all clear how, if Sweyn had held England strongly, this could occur. The record on this is surprisingly blank, but clearly a bunch of Saxons were able to say 'No' to a Viking army, which may have been in some disarray or really quite small (the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* says that '*the number of his followers was insufficient*'), and had taken themselves off to Gainsborough to celebrate, thinking the English so malleable that they could be safely left to run the country, which they did.

Æthelred did not reappear immediately himself, but sent his son Edward from Normandy to check things out. Full friendship was declared all round and the Witan bravely declared '*every Danish king outlawed from England forever.*' Æthelred returned in the spring, bringing with him some mercenary Vikings under the leadership of Olaf Haraldsson, and Queen Emma followed sometime later.

Cnut was still in Gainsborough, where an English army caught up with him probably just after Easter. Cnut escaped with his fleet, taking his hostages, but the poor people of Lindsey who had had to support him were cruelly pillaged. Cnut sailed to Sandwich where he cold-bloodedly mutilated his hostages, and then the fleet moved to Greenwich where Æthelred, still *Unræd*, paid them £21,000 to go away.

The people of England then had to cope in September 1014 with a huge sea flood, possibly a tsunami from the description. 1015 was not a year of full friendship. There was a great assembly of English and Danes at Oxford, where the odious Eadric Streona, son-in-law of Æthelred and Earl of Mercia since 1007, impeached the leading thegns of the northern Danelaw, Sigferth and Morcar, and had them murdered. The king was complicit and seized their property, and ordered the widow of Sigferth to be sent to Malmesbury. The situation became more complicated when the king's son, Edmund (Ironside), rescued the widow, married her, and then took over the property of both thegns.

In the summer of 1015 Cnut, having obtained the support of his brother, Harald II of Denmark, and having been reunited with Thurkill, returned with 160 ships and proceeded to march through England. *[Cnut] came into Sandwich, and straightway sailed around Kent to Wessex, until he came to the mouth of the Frome, and harried in Dorset and Wiltshire and*

Somerset. Eadric Streona and Edmund had briefly combined against him, but by the winter of 1015 the slippery Streona was with Cnut, and the weakened Wessex had submitted.

In very early 1016 Cnut marched into Mercia, plundering as he went and ravaged Warwickshire. Edmund Ironside, briefly with Ælthelred, attempted to muster an army to resist the invasion, but his efforts were not successful. Canute's forces continued unhindered into Northumbria and ravaged again. In response, Edmund and Earl Uhtred of Northumbria ravaged the lands of the turncoat Earl Eadric around Cheshire, Staffordshire and Shropshire. Earl Uhtred went back to Northumbria and submitted to Cnut, but was subsequently murdered and was replaced with Eric of Hlathir.

Then Ælthelred died on 23 April 1016. Cnut turned south again and threatened and eventually gained London, with part of his army going west to Somerset. There followed inconclusive battles with Edmund Ironside at Penselwood in Somerset and Sherstone in Wiltshire. Then Ironside began to make progress. He wheeled around the north of London and defeated Cnut at the Battle of Brentford. He then strategically retreated to reinforce, following which he chased the retreating Cnut across Surrey into Kent, and engaged him again at the Battle of Otford, forcing him to retreat to Sheppey. Eadric Streona defected back to Edmund at this time.

Cnut's ships were still available, and eventually they crossed the Thames estuary and landed in Essex, promptly harassing the county and the south-eastern counties of Mercia. Finally there was the evenly matched Battle of Assandun in Essex (at Ashingdon?) in October 1016 which Cnut just won, aided by Eadric Streona changing sides again at the last minute. Edmund retreated to Gloucestershire, somewhere near the Forest of Dean. It is not clear if there was a final battle here, but he and Cnut finally made an accord. A sort of brief co-ruling arrangement was made between Cnut and Edmund, with Edmund ruling Wessex and Cnut the rest of England. Edmund died suspiciously on 30 November 1016 (Malmesbury later implicated Eadric in his murder), and so Cnut became king of all England.

This was followed by a high-level culling and numbers of high-ranking Saxons were executed in 1017, including the duplicitous Eadric Streona. Eadwig Ætheling, the only surviving stepson of Emma (son of Ælgifu and Æthelstan), had been banished but was also executed after foolishly returning to the south-west. Edward and Edmund, the very young sons of Edmund Ironside, were said to have been sent to the 'king of the Swedes' to be killed, but he took pity and they ended up with the Hungarian royal family.

From 1016 Cnut ruled all England as king by conquest, this time permanently. He was about 26 years of age. Detailed comparisons with William in 1066 are difficult to make as the Norman record is far superior, although biased. Both took over a country that had a better administration than monarch, but Cnut did not have to deal with widespread native

rebellions, the potential leaders of which had either died or he had ruthlessly had executed. No one wanted further fighting. He was crowned in London by archbishop Lyfing in 1017.

The only potential challengers were Edward and Alfred who were still young and now in exile in Normandy, and soon Cnut strategically married their mother Emma, widow of Æthelred. Cnut also had a prior relationship with another woman, Ælfgifu of Northampton, daughter of earl Ælfhelm of Northumbria who had died in 1006 and been succeeded by Uhtred of Bamburgh who was killed in 1016. It is unclear when this liaison started, but he had two sons by her, Sweyn and Harold (Harefoot), before his marriage to Emma, and continued the liaison afterwards, which complicated things later.

In early 1017 he divided England into four parts, Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria. He ruled Wessex directly, but Mercia went to Eadric Streona, East Anglia to Thurkill, and Northumbria remained with Eric of Hlathir. Streona only lasted until Christmas day when he was either strangled or beheaded. A re-organisation in 1018 saw military rule diminished, and two earldoms created out of Wessex, with probably Æthelweard to the west and Godwin Wulfnothson (previously thegn of Sussex, and Harold Godwinson's father) to the east (Hampshire, Berkshire, Surrey and of course Sussex, but not Kent), and the split of Mercia into two earldoms – one centred on Herefordshire and the other on Worcestershire.

A huge *heregeld* (army payment) of £72,000 was raised from the poor people of England, plus £11,000 from London, to pay off most of the force Cnut had brought from Denmark, but he kept a 'navy' of 40 ships, which represented a force of perhaps 3200 men. It has been suggested that at this time Cnut had created a force of 'royal guards', comprised of both paid 'mercenaries' and landholders, which formed an hierarchical guild. These *solidarii* or *stipendiarii* would be the housecarls, with guild members of varying status from the king and earls down. It had jurisdiction over its members, with powers of banishment, outlawry (*niðing*) and death in extreme cases, and met as a gemot of housecarls. It was a mainly military organisation, but also had revenue collecting duties. In addition it was not based just around the royal court, but quartered throughout the kingdom with the earls and thegns. From time to time on special occasions they would eat with the king. They formed a powerful nationwide defensive core and would remain in existence through to the death of Harold in 1066. It must have been due to the presence of such a body that even the most powerful in the kingdom would have to obey its judgements. In Scandinavia similar corps would survive for another two or three centuries.

Later in 1018 there was a great meeting at Oxford. People of Danish and English heritage were declared equals, there would be one Christian god, and the observance of Edgar's laws – the ecclesiastical and secular parts of a single code established after the final suppression of the Danelaw. The folios of this code, held by the British Library, written in the early

eleventh century, have a clear connection with Worcester and bishop Wulfstan (1002–1016). In return for this maintenance of continuity Cnut expressly required obedience and loyalty, and pledged the defence of the kingdom.

Harald II of Denmark died childless in 1018 and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Cnut went to Denmark to claim the Danish throne, leaving Thurkill as regent in England. Cnut was accompanied by Godwin amongst others. Cnut finally returned to England in 1020 having had to undertake some military actions in Denmark, including against the Swedes, when Godwin made such an impression on Cnut that the king 'gave him' his brother-in-law Ulf's sister Gytha as a wife.

In 1020 another great meeting was held at Cirencester, following which Earl Æthelweard was outlawed, apparently for having caused some subversion whilst Cnut was away. Also this year Cnut went to Ashingdon where he had had a minster built to celebrate his victory there. This allows us another comparison with William, who had the much larger Battle Abbey built in the same circumstances.

Thurkill was banished in 1021, although he and Cnut became reconciled in 1023 when he was briefly appointed regent of Denmark and guardian of Cnut and Emma's young son Harthacnut, who was himself to become king of Denmark, then of England in his own right. Thurkill then disappears from the scene and Ulf, husband of Cnut's sister Estrith became regent of Denmark. Olaf Haraldsson had become king of Norway, and he and the king of Sweden induced Ulf to join them. In response to this, Cnut took a fleet to Denmark in 1026 but suffered a reverse. Cnut then took to subterfuge with the arrangement of the murder of Ulf, and outright bribery to unhappy Norwegian underlings, to undermine Olaf.

Cnut felt safe enough to undertake a visit to Rome in 1027 for the coronation of Emperor Conrad II, and returned first to Denmark then England by sea. In 1028 a combined Danish and English force took Norway. Olaf Haraldsson took refuge in Sweden, but then tried to return to Norway in 1030. He was not welcomed and was killed. Cnut was now *de facto* king of England, Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden, a title he had assumed in 1027.

Cnut first appointed Hákon Ericson, son of Eric of Hlathir, former earl of Northumbria, to be his regent in Norway, but soon afterwards Hákon either died at sea or was killed on Orkney, and was replaced by Cnut's oldest son, Sweyn Knutson, assisted by his mother Ælfgifu. This was not a success. Sweyn and his mother were driven into southern Norway by Magnus Olafson, son of Olaf Haraldsson, then by 1035 into Denmark, where Sweyn died in 1036.

Magnus then threatened Denmark, where Harthacnut, Cnut's son by Queen Emma, was by then old enough to be the full king of Denmark. Another threat to Cnut's English kingdom had always been Malcolm II king of Scotland. Malcolm was long-lived and had always

coveted Northumbria, making several incursions. In 1006 he had besieged Durham and ten years later in 1016 he tried again, but earl Eric of Hlathir pushed him back.

Soon after his return from Rome in 1027, Cnut himself was forced to march north into Scotland and overcame Malcolm, forcing him to become his vassal. Malcolm died in 1034, and his successor Duncan caused no trouble to England. Duncan's personal claim to eternal recognition was to have been killed by the Macbeth of Shakespearian fame in 1040.

Relations with Normandy started to deteriorate in about 1030. Duke Robert of Normandy may have married Cnut's sister Margaret/Esthrith, but had repudiated or divorced her. This is not recorded by Norman writers, who naturally tended to avoid writing about things that their dukes might not wish to see, but both Adam of Bremen, and Rodulfus Glaber (an 11th-century French historian) in his *Historiarum Libri Quinque*, both record (in a somewhat confused way) a marriage of a sister of Cnut to a duke of Normandy.

William of Jumièges says that Duke Robert of Normandy sent envoys to Cnut, complaining of the long exile of Edward and Alfred. Cnut would do nothing and it is possible that Robert prepared an expedition to England. We are told a fleet was assembled at Fécamp in Normandy, but was blown off course and ended up ravaging Brittany instead. The same writer also says that in his final illness Cnut sent envoys to Robert, offering to restore half of the kingdom to the sons of Æthelred, to establish peace for his lifetime. Clearly nothing came of this, if it really occurred.

Duke Robert left on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in early 1035, dying on the return journey. Cnut died on 12th November 1035 at Shaftesbury, at the age of about 45, and was buried at Winchester. From the wording of his charter (S975) to Sherborne Abbey of 1035 it appears that he knew he was dying.

Cnut spent nearly 20 years on the throne, during which England was relatively peaceful after 1020 and free of Viking raids, plus had a growing economy. He helped fuse the two populations of England, the English and Danes, into a coherent whole, but with the loss of some legal and economic freedoms, and more taxation for the poor. He had stabilised and protected the country, and left a legacy of a strong central military guild. He had also created a new, powerful meritocracy, breaking lines of tradition. This meritocracy included Earl Godwin, whose family would in time become too powerful for England's good.

Cnut had valued and rewarded loyalty, and dealt harshly and ruthlessly with dissent. He had supported and gifted the Church well, and had interfered with its functions and appointments very little. His marriage with Emma and his own background had kept the Vikings based in Normandy at bay. England remained at peace with Normandy, in spite of some possible end-of-life frictions with duke Robert.

He had kept Emma's sons by Æthelred, Edward and Alfred, at arm's length, but sadly he left no able direct heirs. His North Sea empire would not survive long, and nor would his dubious sons by Ælfgifu, who died in their early 20s. Their deaths at last opened the door to the crown to Edward the Confessor, and the power of the kingdom to the Godwin family.

Just to set the record straight, the first telling of the story of Cnut and the tide was by Henry of Huntingdon in the 12th century. There is no contemporary record: *'Cnut set his throne by the sea shore and commanded the incoming tide to halt and not wet his feet and robes. Yet continuing to raise as usual the tide dashed over his feet and legs without respect to his royal person. Then the king leapt backwards, saying: "Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws."*

If Cnut's heirs had been able and had survived England may have retained a Scandinavian northern European focus and the feudal Norman world focussed on Catholic western Europe may have passed us by.

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