

CANUTE AND HIS EMPIRE

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IT IS A CONSIDERABLE PRIVILEGE TO BE INVITED BY THE Provost of University College and the College Committee to deliver this lecture, the first in a series to honour the memory of the late Mrs Dorothea Coke, of whom the Chairman has told us. The terms of the benefaction require that the scope of the lecture shall be in the field of Northern research, but especially having regard to the relations between Scandinavia, Iceland, and the British Isles.

On first consideration I thought it would be appropriate to describe the five outstanding attacks on London by the vikings during this period, the theme which so fired the imagination of Mrs Dorothea Coke when she was shown the burial mounds of Norwegians and told that they were the graves of the destroyers of London Bridge. However, not only because the story has already been so graphically described by Mrs Coke herself in her travel sketches, but also because much of the evidence dealing with these attacks, confusing as it is, has already been set forth and ably discussed by others, I have chosen instead to speak of Canute, a Danish king whose two attempts to storm the city of London met with no success, but who yet succeeded by his prowess and strength of character in establishing a wide empire across the western seas. Henry of Huntingdon¹ praises him for his nobility and greatness of mind, and one of the earliest Danish historians, Sven Aggeson², proudly boasts of the multiplicity of his virtues which enabled him to extend the boundaries of his imperium from Ultima Thule almost to Greece, subduing, he claims, 'Hyberniam, Angliam, Galliam, Longobardiam, Teotoniam, Noruagium, Slatuiam, cum Samia³' in the process. However Canute's greatness is most evident,

¹ *Historia Anglorum*, ed. T. Arnold (1879), p. 188.

² *Brevis Historia Regum Dacie*, cap. ix, in M. Cl. Gertz, *Scriptores minores historiae Danicae medii ævi*, 1 (1917-18), 122-3.

³ Possibly in eastern Prussia, cf. E. A. Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, 1 (3rd ed., 1877), 766.

not in any inflated bead-roll of his conquests, but in his achievement in restoring confidence to an England harassed for more than two hundred years by viking attacks and for his success in persuading Englishmen and Scandinavians to accept his rule and to work together as fellow-subjects for the common weal. He achieved this acceptance of his overlordship, as Edmund Burke said of Henry of Navarre, 'by never seeking to be loved without putting himself first in a condition to be feared, and used soft language with determined conduct'. An early history of the Abbey of Croyland testifies¹ that he treated the English in particular in a most courteous and friendly fashion, and instantly showed his affection for Holy Church. He developed the writ as an effective instrument, as Dr Harmer² has shewn, and improved the economic life of the country by trade legislation which increased the responsibilities of the boroughs and secured uniformity in their legal procedure. As recent research has pointed out, he regulated the currency, so that, towards the end of his reign, he was 'able to keep an appreciably greater number of coins on a standard of weight'³. He was remembered for the grandeur and magnificence of his court, and his reputation as a humane and politic prince lasted in the land long after the Norman Conquest, so that Henry Knighton⁴ in the fourteenth century could claim that no predecessor on the English throne, save King Arthur, equalled him in greatness.

The first mention of Canute in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is in the entry for 1013, where it is recorded that his father Sweyn, after taking hostages from the conquered territories of Northumbria, Lindsey, and the Five Borough Towns, committed his ships and the hostages into the charge of Canute, his son, before setting forth to march south to bring about the submission of London and the expulsion of King Ethelred and his queen from the realm. The following year, in a laconic entry, the Chronicle records Sweyn's death at Candlemas and tells us that all the fleet chose Canute as

¹ Ingulph, *Historia Croylandensis*, ed. Sir H. Savile in *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptores post Bedam* (1596), p. 508.

² F. E. Harmer, *Anglo-Saxon Writs* (1952), p. 37.

³ V. J. Butler, 'The metrology of the late Anglo-Saxon penny', in *Anglo-Saxon Coins*, ed. R. H. M. Dolley (1961), p. 213.

⁴ *Chronicon*, ed. J. R. Lumby (1889-95), I, 13 ff.

king. In Snorri's separate *Óláfs saga helga*,¹ there is a reference to an English legend of the manner of Sweyn's death—'and it is told by Englishmen that Edmund the Holy killed him, in the same fashion as St Mercurius killed Julian the Apostate'. The legend, preserved by Symeon of Durham² and others, tells how in the midst of his court at Gainsborough—

Sweyn alone saw St Edmund armed coming against him, and was afraid, and began to shout great cries, saying 'Help me, my comrades, behold St Edmund has come to slay me'. And saying this, sharply pierced by the holy blade, he fell from the horse on which he was sitting and tormented with great agony until the fall of night ended his life on the 3rd of February by a wretched death, and was buried at York.

The saga makes Canute only ten years old at the time, and says it was decided that he should not claim his kingdom in England for three years; but it is hardly likely that Sweyn would have put his fleet under the command of a boy of nine the previous year, and it is more probable that Canute was in his teens when his father died. It is some evidence of the young man's ability and promise that he was chosen by free election to succeed to the command of a fleet of ruthless, battle-seasoned veterans, many of whom had been schooled in the rigorous discipline of a military garrison such as that reputed to have existed at Jomsborg in the Baltic³. Although the actual existence of Jomsborg has been questioned, it is no doubt true that the success of the Danish invasions was due largely to the presence in the viking fleets of large forces of such professional soldiers, maintained on a permanent war-footing, who formed the backbone of the hosts that had become the scourge of the western seas.

¹ *Den store Saga om Olav den hellige*, ed. O. A. Johnsen and Jón Helgason (1941), p. 42 (ch. 23); repeated in *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 12, in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla* (Íslenzk fornrit xxvi-xxviii, 1941-51), II, 14; and in *Knýtlinga saga*, ch. 6, in *Sögur Danakonunga*, ed. Carl af Petersens and Emil Olson (1919-25), p. 33.

² *Historia Regum*, cap. 125, in *Symeonis monachi opera omnia*, ed. T. Wright (1882-5), II, 146.

³ The great Danish camps of Trelleborg, Aggersborg, Fyrkat, and Nonnebakken are thought to belong to the age of Sweyn and Canute, see e.g. J. Brøndsted, *Danmarks Oldtid*, III (1960), 365-70. There may be more of the same kind, cf. *ibid.*, 442. Sensible arguments in favour of assigning the camps to the conquest of England phase are presented by O. Olsen, 'Trelleborg-problemer', *Scandia*, 28 (1962), 92-112. For a recent succinct account of the Jomsborg problem, see N. F. Blake, *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* (1962), pp. vii-xv.

Possessed as they were by fervent loyalty to their chief, these comrades-in-arms, known as 'housecarles', formed a formidable comitatus who would not have lightly tolerated the accession of a young leader if weak and lacking in promise. The young prince had presumably learnt well the lesson which is driven home in the first section¹ of the *Beowulf* poem 'to bring it about while he is in his father's care by good and ready gifts of treasure that willing comrades will stand by him in aftertimes, and support their chief when war comes'. 'Generosity', continues the poet, 'is the condition of success in every community.' Indeed, Canute's father had set him a good example in this respect, for Emma's biographer² tells how Sweyn 'had rendered his men submissive and faithful to him by manifold and generous munificence'. Perhaps historians have been too censorious in blaming Canute in his later life for resorting to an excessive use of graft as a hidden persuader to lure even his enemies to desert their lords and take service under his banner; whatever we think of his use of bribery, it is evident that his experience was similar to that of the *Hávamál*³ poet who 'never found a man so generous and hospitable that he would not receive a present, nor one so liberal with his money that he would dislike a reward if he could get one'.

In the Viking Age, young princes accepted responsibility early. If we can trust the testimony of the *Heimskringla*, Eric Bloodaxe⁴ took command of a fleet at the age of twelve, and St Olaf⁵ was given a viking ship about the same age. Earl Eric⁶ son of Hakon was apparently in charge of a ship at the age of ten or eleven, while St Olaf was often on viking expeditions whilst under the care of his foster-father. Canute's early martial training had been received from Thorkell the Tall, to whom Sweyn had sent him for fosterage, and he had undoubtedly accompanied his foster-father on raids. Thorkell⁷ was the brother of Earl Sigvaldi, the commander of the reputed Jomsborg fortress, and famous as the leader of a disastrous

¹ Lines 20-5.

² *Encomium Emmae*, ed. A. Campbell (1949), p. 8.

³ Stanza 39.

⁴ *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 32, *Heimskringla*, I, 134.

⁵ *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 4, *Heimskringla*, II, 4.

⁶ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 20, *Heimskringla*, I, 248.

⁷ The best discussion of Thorkell the Tall is by A. Campbell, in *Encomium Emmae*, pp. 73-82, cf. also pp. 87-93.

raid on Norway, when attempting to fulfil some extravagant boasts which he, Thorkell, and Sweyn had made over their cups at a funeral feast. Thorkell led an invasion force against England in 1009, possibly to avenge his brother's death, and although he has been blamed, particularly by William of Malmesbury, for the murder of Archbishop Ælfheah, it is very probable that the version of the incident recorded by Thietmar of Merseburg¹, being an almost contemporary record of the event, comes nearer the truth in exonerating Thorkell from any complicity in the deed. No doubt the drunken vikings, incensed by the archbishop's refusal to pay ransom, got completely out of hand, and Thorkell, says Thietmar,

seeing from a distance that the archbishop was surrounded by a troop with weapons to kill, ran up quickly, and cried 'Do not, I beg you, do this. I will give to all of you, with a willing heart, gold and silver, all that I have here or can get somehow, except only my ship, on condition that you do not sin against the lord's anointed.'

Yet he was powerless to soften the unbridled anger of his men, or prevent the barbarous slaughter of the archbishop. Revolted by the experience, he changed sides the following year, joined Ethelred, and gave up his heathen faith to become a Christian.

Under the tutelage of this experienced soldier in the tough school of Jomsborg it is not surprising to find the young Canute graduating at an early age to a position of authority capable of shouldering some of his father's responsibilities. A panegyric² by Óttar the Black, spoken in praise of Canute, emphasizes his youthful enterprise and ferocious temperament.

Destroyer of the chariot of the sea, you were of no great age when you pushed off your ships. Never, younger than you, did prince set out to take his part in war. Chief, you made ready your armoured ships, and were daring beyond measure. In your rage, Canute, you mustered the red shields at sea.

Young leader, you made the English fall close by the Tees. The deep dyke flowed over the bodies of Northumbrians. You broke the raven's sleep, waker of battle. Bold son of Sweyn, you led an attack at Sherstone, farther to the south.

¹ *Chronicon*, ed. R. Holtzmann (1935), VII, 42-3; cf. Freeman, *op. cit.*, I, 677-8, and a translation by D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents c. 500-1042* (1955), p. 321.

² *Knúts drápa*, vv. 1, 6, in the translation by M. Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents* (1930), p. 137 ff.

The *Encomium Emmae*¹ may have invented the story of Sweyn seeking his son's counsel before deciding to accept the exhortations of his soldiery to lead an attack against England, but however that may be, the biographer's intention was clearly to convey an impression of Canute's youthful sagacity. All historians from Freeman to Stenton² have praised Sweyn's generalship, and his remarkable career marks him as an opportunist, quick to take advantage of a situation, and unlikely to seek direction from others. The biographer, however, does not neglect to notice that while Canute says he approves of the undertaking, his decision is prompted by the fear of being accused of wily sloth if he opposes the proposal, thereby perhaps giving a hint not only of Canute's capacity for summing up a situation but also of his craftiness, and of that delight in cunning equivocations which in later life he used most effectively to ensnare traitors. Eadric, who was responsible for many of the English military disasters of Ethelred's time, fell into one of these verbal traps and convicted himself out of his own mouth when³ he came to claim his reward from Canute for the murder of King Edmund—

'Hail, complete king who yesterday wert only half a king; may you reward the author of your wholeness whose hand has removed and plucked from the earth your sole enemy.' Then the king, although very sorrowful, answered with unchanged expression: 'Good God, tell me who has been so conspicuous a friend to me, so that I may set him above all his comrades?' The slave answered: 'Myself.' Then the king ordered him to be swung up on high and hanged on the tallest oak, a fit and proper end for slaves.

We should perhaps be diffident in giving too much credence to the originality of this kind of verbal exchange, particularly when in Walter Map⁴ and in a *Life of Harold*⁵ we find Canute is credited with the use of a stratagem identical with that used by King Claudius when he attempted to send Hamlet to his death in England. The 'letter of death' motif is as early as the *Iliad*⁶ where

¹ A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

² Freeman, *op. cit.*, I, 364; F. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (2nd ed., 1947), p. 379.

³ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. M. R. James (1914), v, 4.

⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵ See C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (1939), pp. 226-8.

⁶ VI, 155 ff.

Bellerephon carries with him 'baleful tokens' which spell out orders for his destruction. Walter Map writes:

Canute began to fear the spirit of the young Englishman, Godwin, who was possessed both of physical strength and cunning. Although by necessity he had made use of him, nevertheless conceiving in his own mind something of the spirit of Saul, he thought out a device to destroy his most active deliverer and champion, whom it was not easy to suppress openly except by secret malice.

Fortunately for himself, Godwin, suspecting Canute's motives, breaks the seals of the letters on board his ship bound for Denmark, and by the skilful hand of a scribe re-writes them to the intent that he is to be received with the greatest ceremony by all and to be given the king's sister in marriage.

If we should treat these stories with caution, particularly since post-Conquest writers with Norman sympathies are apt to bestow upon all pre-Conquest kings, whether English or Dane, more than an average endowment of guile and craftiness, it is more difficult to justify Canute's actions after the death of Sweyn at Gainsborough. He hastily withdrew his forces from England to return to Denmark, throwing away all the advantages he had inherited from the campaign of his father, the support of the Northumbrians, many of them Scandinavian by birth, and the aid of the people of Lindsey who had promised him military supplies and horses. Perhaps the sudden access of responsibility was too much for him. The *Encomium Emmae*¹, however, is quick to justify his retreat on the grounds that 'faithful friends had found a plan to preserve his honour and ordered a fleet to be got ready for him, not because he was fleeing, afraid of the harsh outcome of war, but in order to consult his brother Harold about so weighty a matter'. It must also be remembered that the English had just received a fresh surge of confidence at Sweyn's death, and had sent to France for their king Ethelred, who returned to declare every Danish king outlawed from England; here was the opportunity of putting an end to the fear of the establishment of yet another Scandinavian kingdom in Northumbria which had long beset the minds of English kings². More-

¹ A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

² cf. D. Whitelock, 'The dealings of the kings of England with Northumbria', in *The Anglo-Saxons: Studies presented to Bruce Dickins* (1959), pp. 87-8.

over, if Olaf Haraldsson, later known as St Olaf, did accompany Ethelred from Normandy as is thought¹, Canute may have considered his chances of successful resistance against such an alliance to be exceedingly slim. The Chronicle states that he stayed in Gainsborough until Easter, but thereupon sailed from the Trent for Sandwich as Ethelred's punitive expedition to the north reached Lindsey. At Sandwich he put ashore the hostages which Sweyn had entrusted to him and 'setting all divine and human laws at defiance', as William of Malmesbury² deploras, 'he dispoiled his hostages, men of great nobility and elegance, of their ears and noses; some he even castrated, and so tyrannizing over the innocent, and boasting of the feat, he returned to his own country'.

Margaret Ashdown writes³:

Canute's brutal treatment of his hostages may well have seemed justifiable to himself, and Ethelred's unexpected appearance may well have caused confusion among the Danes. While the Chronicle takes the point of view that Canute had betrayed his supporters in Lindsey by retiring to his ships, it is possible that Canute himself considered that the people of Lindsey had dealt treacherously with him . . . No other barbarous action of the kind has been imputed to him, and one may suspect that the young king lost his head in an emergency.

While Canute's conduct cannot be excused under any circumstances, it may also be remembered that his contemporary Olaf was guilty of perpetrating the most hideous and premeditated atrocities⁴ in his missionary crusades throughout Norway, and that such inhuman conduct did not stand in the way of his subsequent canonization.

Whether Canute's withdrawal from England should be regarded as an ignominious retreat, or as evidence of his caution and good sense, his return to Denmark proved awkward and embarrassing for his brother Harald⁵ who was then ruling as King of Denmark.

¹ A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-9.

² *Gesta Regum*, ed. W. Stubbs (1887-9), I, 213.

³ *op. cit.*, pp. 103-4.

⁴ *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 73, and cf. his treatment of Erling Skjálgrsson, *ibid.*, ch. 176; *Heimskringla*, II, 101, 317.

⁵ On whether Harald was indeed the elder see A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. lvi.

The *Encomium Emmae* describes the conversation¹ of the brothers thus:

‘I have come’, said Canute, ‘partly out of my love for you, and partly to avoid the unforeseen audacity of barbarous fury . . . But there is one thing which you will first do for me, if you begrudge me not the glory which is mine, that is to divide with me the kingdom of the Danes, my heritage, which you hold alone, and afterwards we will add the kingdom of the English to our heritage, if we can do so by our joint efforts.’ . . . King Harald, having heard these unwelcome remarks, answered his brother in these words: ‘I rejoice, brother, at your arrival, and I thank you for visiting me, but what you say about the division of the kingdom is a serious thing to hear. It is my part to rule the heritage which our father gave me with your approval; as for you, if you have lost a greater one, I regret it, but though prepared to help you, I will not endure that my kingdom be divided.’ When Canute had heard this, and had silently weighed his brother’s reasonable words, he said: ‘Let us be silent concerning this for the moment, for God alone may perchance arrange the matter more equitably.’ Communing in such words and in other discussions of various kinds, and feasting at kingly banquets, they remained together for some time, and while mending the ships, they re-established the army.

In this Canute received the advice and help of his sister’s husband, Earl Eric of Hlaðir, who had played the chief part in the overthrow of Olaf Tryggvason, and who had ruled the western coasts of Norway as viceroy of King Sweyn, Canute’s father. Saxo Grammaticus² also preserves a tradition that Olaf Haraldsson, later St Olaf, helped Canute to conquer England, and whilst this is not improbable, it is far from likely that Harald Harðráði went on the expedition with Olaf, as Saxo makes out.

In 1015 the combined fleets of Norwegians and Danes sailed from Denmark and came to Sandwich, and there turned at once round Kent into Wessex until they made the mouth of the Frome, to harry in Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset. The *Encomiast*³ gives a vivid description of the ships, not however with the same wealth of technical detail he had previously employed to describe Sweyn’s

¹ A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-19.

² A. Campbell, ‘Saxo and Scandinavian Tradition’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XIII (1946-53), 14.

³ A. Campbell, *Encomium Emmae*, pp. 18-20.

vessels, but conveying perhaps more effectively the impression the magnificence of the fleet would be likely to make on the eye of a beholder.

So great, also, was the ornamentation of the ships, that the eyes of the beholders were dazzled, and to those looking from afar they seemed of flame rather than of wood. For if at any time the sun cast the splendour of its rays among them, the flashing of arms shone in one place, in another the flame of suspended shields. Gold shone on the prows, silver also flashed on the variously shaped ships. So great, in fact, was the magnificence of the fleet, that if its lord had desired to conquer any people, the ships alone would have terrified the enemy, before the warriors whom they carried joined battle at all. For who could look upon the lions of the foe, terrible with the brightness of gold, who upon the men of metal, menacing with golden face, who upon the dragons burning with pure gold, who upon the bulls on the ships threatening death, their horns shining with gold, without feeling any fear for the king of such a force?

King Ethelred retired sick to Cosham, near Portsmouth, while Prince Edmund gathered levies, but ealdorman Eadric left him in the lurch and deserted to Canute with forty ships. In the following year the Danes left their ships anchored in Poole Harbour and the crews went up country to harry in Wessex and as far north as Warwickshire. Although every Englishman fit for military service was called up to report for duty, 'it all came to nothing', the Chronicle says, 'as so often before'. Prince Edmund and Uhtred of Northumbria raised levies in the north, but they did not join battle with Canute who marched up to York unopposed. Uhtred surrendered, but was murdered soon afterwards, and Canute, now once more master of Northumbria, put his Earl Eric over the territory. Edmund hurried to London to prepare for a Danish attack, while Canute marched to Poole Harbour taking a south-western route to his ships, and then sailed immediately for London. Before he could reach it, however, Ethelred died. The Londoners chose Edmund for their king, and five or six times during that summer he rallied the English, succeeding beyond expectation in harassing Canute, who made two unsuccessful attempts to take the city. Edmund's forces, weakened by the treachery of Eadric and Ælfmær, were unexpectedly defeated at Ashingdon in Essex 'where Eadric and his men were first to set the example of flight, thus be-

traying his royal lord and the whole nation', as the Chronicle comments¹. Thereafter, in the same year, on the advice of Eadric and the counsellors, Edmund and Canute met at Alney near Deerhurst in Gloucestershire to make a compact of mutual friendship, both with pledge and oaths, and fixed the amount of money to be paid to the Danish host. Post-Conquest writers, however, in their accounts of the meeting, do not represent it solely as an occasion for parley, but preserve a tradition of single combat between the rival leaders of the hosts. The words of the Saxon Chronicle *hie togædre comon* are usually employed to describe the meeting of individuals or friends, although it is possible for them to be used of a hostile encounter. John Earle² therefore made the suggestion that 'the whole dramatic story of the single combat between Canute and Edmund arose simply from a misunderstanding of the phrase'. But the *Encomium Emmae*, which is almost contemporary, preserves a tradition that Edmund offered single combat to Canute, not on *this* occasion, however, but before the Battle of Ashingdon, and that it was refused. Henry of Huntingdon and Walter Map³, on the other hand, represent the meeting as a duel and give convincing detail. The former, however, in Freeman's words⁴, seems not to be clear whether he ought to describe a French tournament or a Scandinavian *hólmganga*: in *his* account there is no mention of horses, but we hear of spears and lances being broken, and it was not until then that swords were drawn.

Walter Map, writing his *De Nugis Curialium*⁵ late in the twelfth century, presents a still fuller account of the encounter, no doubt, as C. E. Wright⁶ supposes, based on some local legend of the Gloucestershire with which he was connected by ecclesiastical ties. He describes how Canute was persuaded by the Danes to propose a duel to Edmund, to which the prince agreed. The needful arrangements were made with due solemnity; truce was granted, keepers of the ground were armed, and the two combatants, borne in two

¹ *s.a.* 1016D.

² See Earle and Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (1892-9), II, 198-9.

³ See the discussion in C. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 191 ff.

⁴ *op. cit.*, I, 706.

⁵ v, 4, cf. note 3, p. 8 above.

⁶ *op. cit.*, p. 197.

boats from opposite banks, met on an island in the Severn, each equipped with excellent and precious arms. Walter continues:

Upon their several failures and successes after the fight was begun we cannot dwell since we have to pass on to other subjects, but it gave rise to one memorable phrase. When their horses were slain, they fought on foot, and Canute who was slender, thin and tall, pressed his attack on Edmund (who was heavily built and stocky) with such blows good and bad that, in a pause allowed for rest, while Edmund stood panting heavily drawing deep breaths, Canute in the hearing of the ring of men said, 'Edmund you are too short-winded!' He reddening for shame kept silent, but at the next assault came down on his adversary's helmet with such a mighty blow that Canute fell on his hands and knees. Edmund, springing back, did not crush his fallen foe nor obstruct him when he was down, but in revenge gave back retort for retort and said, 'Not too short-winded if I can bring so great a king to his knees'. The Danes, therefore, seeing that Edmund had spared their lord in a combat of such great purpose, with many tears and prayers urged them to become sworn brothers.

Besides the kiss of peace, an exchange of clothes and arms is made, despite the disparity in stature of the two men! In Gaimar's historical poem¹ where this incident is recounted, arrangements are made for the duel to take place on a ship moored by chains in the middle of the Severn; the spectators line the banks, but the two kings after long prayers 'looked at each other for a long time' until Canute proposed they should come to terms without fighting.

It is clear from these accounts that 'the tradition of the *hólmganga* is at work'². It was customary to fight such duels on an island so that they could be carried to a conclusion without interruption. Sometimes a field was marked out with poles of hazelwood; in Gaimar's narration, a ship makes an admirable substitute. 'In Anglo-Saxon law there is no hint of the later judicial trial by combat, but the custom of the Scandinavian *holmgang* must have been very familiar',³ and it may well be that post-Conquest writers have preserved a version of the story soundly based on local tradition.

The end of the truce came sooner than was expected, for the English king died on St Andrew's Day, 30 November 1016. The

¹ *Lestorie des Engles*, ed. T. D. Hardy and C. T. Martin (1885-9), line 4256 ff.

² C. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

³ *ibid.*, p. 191.

sole entry in the Parker Chronicle for 1017 records briefly 'In this year Canute was chosen king'. He forthwith made an arbitrary division of his realm to reward his chief lieutenants, giving Mercia to the English traitor Eadric, Northumbria to Earl Eric, East Anglia to Thorkell, keeping Wessex for himself.

The Chronicle is silent about the feelings of the English now completely subject to the viking invader, but thirty years of incompetence under Ethelred, followed by the tragic disappointment of those high hopes inspired by Edmund's military successes, had reconciled a demoralized people to accept the domination of a foreign prince. Mortified by the open treacheries of Eadric, and disgusted with the secret plottings of Æthelric of Bocking,¹ the men of Wessex were ready to accept the overlordship of any resolute ruler worthy of the name. Before Ethelred's death, Wulfstan Archbishop of York in his 'Sermon to the English'² had preached against the deterioration in the standards of public life since the time of Edgar; the times were out of joint when 'men were more ashamed of good deeds than of misdeeds, and there was little loyalty in the land'. We are supped too full of horrors nowadays for stories of viking atrocities and plundering to move us much, yet the pseudo-Ingulph *History of the Abbey of Croyland*, written from the viewpoint of a single monastic house, can still make its impact on our imagination. Quietly and without turgidity, it has the power to bring home to us the horror of the surprise attack, the miseries of the people, and the steady drain on the monastery's finances from successive levies for Danegeld. Monks and laymen fled to the security of the monastery in the flooded fens, so that the choir and cloisters were filled with monks, and the rest of the church with priests and clerks, and the whole abbey with laymen: even the cemetery was occupied night and day with women and children sleeping out under tents. It is therefore some indication of the attitude of Englishmen to Canute's advent to power when Ingulph could welcome the second year of Canute's reign as 'an occasion when the storms of battle had ceased, and the serenity of peace had begun to shed prosperity upon the times'³.

¹ See D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (1930), no. 16 (2).

² *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, ed. D. Whitelock (1952), p. 38.

³ *ed. cit.*, p. 507 (cf. note 1, p. 4 above).

Some indication of the peace enjoyed by the country under Canute's firm hand is the meagreness of the entries in the Chronicle following the first year of his accession. Apart from ecclesiastical affairs they are almost all concerned with his expeditions abroad. As Stenton¹ remarks, his reign was so successful that contemporaries found little to say about it. For the first year he ruled with rigour through the medium of his four lieutenants whom he had rewarded with earldoms, which in the period up to the Norman Conquest were to grow into regional centres of power, governed by powerful magnates like Godwine, whose influence and ambition not even the king himself could curb.

Before August of the same year Canute strengthened his grip on the throne by commanding, as the Chronicle² puts it, that the widow of the late king Ethelred, daughter of Richard of Normandy, should be brought to him so that she might become his wife, in order, as William of Malmesbury³ suggests, by giving him *new* nephews to look after, to reduce any enthusiasm which Duke Richard might have for the cause of Emma's sons by her first husband. Alistair Campbell⁴ makes this shrewd comment:

the object of Canute's marriage was a reconciliation with Normandy rather than with the English, and one may doubt whether the English regarded Emma with sufficient affection to feel any enthusiasm for the astonishing recovery of her former position as queen, much less to change their feelings towards their conqueror on her account.

Before he married Ethelred's widow, Emma, Canute had had 'an earlier connexion of a doubtful kind', as Freeman⁵ describes it, with Ælfgifu, the daughter of the Northumbrian earl Ælfhelm, usually described as Ælfgifu of Northampton, probably because her father had estates in that county. She was undoubtedly an attractive woman of great force of character for she maintained her position as Canute's mistress throughout the whole of his reign and bore him two sons, Harald and Sweyn. In 1030 Canute appointed her to act as his regent in Norway on Sweyn's behalf, but her harsh

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 393.

² *s.a.* 1017D.

³ *Gesta Regum*, ed. W. Stubbs (1887-9), I, 219.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p. xxi.

⁵ *op. cit.*, I, 411.

rule earned them both the hatred of their subjects. Some chroniclers give her the title of wife, possibly confusing her with Emma the queen who had taken the name *Ælfgifu* when she had become Ethelred's bride. Others speak plainly of her as Canute's concubine, while Saxo says she had already been St Olaf's mistress, and that the long comradeship of Olaf and Canute had been broken when Canute seduced her. One American historian¹, in particular, does not help us much to clarify her status by saying 'she was never Canute's wife, but then, in the eleventh century, vague ideas ruled concerning the marriage relation, even among Christians'! However that may be, Emma took the sensible precaution, before consenting to become Canute's queen, of insisting on the exclusion of her rival's children from the royal succession after Canute's death.

By 1018, so secure did Canute reckon himself to be that all but forty of his ships were sent home to Denmark, and not empty-handed, for he was strong enough to demand a levy of £72,000 in Anglo-Saxon values for their pay-off, not counting an extra £10,500 from the citizens of London. In the same year he gave evidence that the well-being of the nation was of primary concern to him by the enactment of a code of laws whose statutes derive mainly from the earlier codes of Edgar and Ethelred. It is probable that this code, a kind of first draft of later codes, was drawn up at Canute's request by the veteran Archbishop Wulfstan,² whom he appears not only to have admired for his sanctity and legal acumen, but also to have respected for his loyal support of Ethelred and for his forthright condemnation of the disorders of the late king's reign. The council met at Oxford, the archbishop no doubt being present, to ordain or enact laws which the Preface describes as 'devised according to many good precedents'. Moreover, as the drafting of the code must have taken some little time, we have evidence almost from the outset of his reign that the king had taken action to ensure that at least a framework of future codes was prepared for promulgation without delay.

In reading the various records which describe his reign and character, one rarely receives the impression that Canute at any time

¹ L. M. Larson, *Canute the Great* (1912), p. 128.

² D. Whitelock, 'Wulfstan and the Laws of Cnut', *English Historical Review*, LXIII (1948), 433-4.

during his career deliberately made up his mind to play the game of power politics in order to win for himself an extensive empire across the northern seas. As long as his brother Harald ruled in Denmark, it is unlikely that any such ambition influenced his mind or his policies, and his subsequent intervention in Norwegian affairs seems mostly prompted by the importunities of those Norwegians who had fled to his court from St Olaf's tyranny. It is true too, of course, that the Oslofjord area had long been counted a sphere of Danish interest. At home, too, he did not interfere in Scottish affairs until compelled to do so. Although provoked by the seizure of Lothian to lead an army into Scotland, he did not replace Malcolm by one of his earls, but was content with the Scottish king's recognition of his overlordship. Had he wished it, the most obvious path to a greater domination would have been into the Baltic, in active rivalry with the Swedes, if necessary. Such a move would have protected his trade routes and strengthened his position against the Holy Roman emperors who had long threatened the southern frontier of Denmark even as far as the Danewerk, north of the natural boundary, the River Eider. It was perhaps characteristic of the way the course of events usually ran in his favour that he was able to secure these benefits, not by warfare, but by cultivating the friendship of Conrad II whose coronation took place whilst he was on his pilgrimage there. Just as it is false, in M. Louis Halphen's opinion¹, to regard Charlemagne as a great politician who planned and perfected his grand designs before embarking on his enterprises, so too it is probably wrong to suppose that Canute's actions were dictated by any consistent policy of aggrandisement; they were rather those of an opportunist, one not particularly gifted with acumen and political sense to be able to anticipate the turn of events but decisive in action in pursuit of his interests when opportunity arose and the situation demanded it. The compiler of the *Knýtlinga Saga*² had a flash of insight in speaking of Canute's victories when he added 'He was a man of great luck in everything connected with power'.

The various versions³ of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle record four

¹ *Charlemagne et l'Empire Carolingien* (1947), p. 497.

² ch. 20, *Sögur Danakonunga*, p. 54.

³ s.a. 1019E, 1023C, 1025E, 1028E.

separate expeditions which Canute undertook to Scandinavia within ten years. The first was undertaken in 1019, and some indication of its purpose can be gathered from one part of a letter¹ which Canute despatched to Earl Thorkell who was acting as Canute's regent in his absence. He speaks of 'approaching dangers which I have taken measures to prevent, so that never henceforth shall hostility reach you from there as long as you support me rightly and my life shall last'. Harald, Canute's brother, who had been ruling as King of Denmark, had just died, and it is possible that the purpose of Canute's visit to Denmark was to take possession of his throne, before power could fall into the hands of those of Harald's housecarles who might in time have felt tempted to renew Danish attacks on England.

However, in 1021, Thorkell was outlawed, for what reason we are not told, and annal 1023C opens with the surprising statement that Canute returned to England, and Thorkell and he were reconciled. This is the second visit, and no explanation of Canute's presence in Denmark is offered. It has been conjectured that Thorkell had gone to Denmark after his exile with the purpose of provoking Danish adventurers into an attack on England, and that Canute's concentration of his fleet off the Isle of Wight before his departure for Denmark is to be explained² as a precaution to protect the southern coast against possible raids by Thorkell and his allies. At all events, Thorkell and Canute were reconciled *before* the latter's departure from Denmark, and the Abingdon Chronicle for 1023 records that Canute delivered Denmark and his son into Thorkell's keeping, and took Thorkell's son with him to England. As Harthacnut was still in England on 8 June that year it has been conjectured³ that it was Harald, Canute's second son, who was sent to Denmark, but it is more probable that Harthacnut was sent to Thorkell some time towards the end of 1023 or later. Nothing is known of Thorkell after this incident, and Denmark was put under the regency of Ulf Thorgilsson, Canute's brother-in-law, who conspired with Queen Emma to put Harthacnut on the

¹ See D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (1955), pp. 414-16.

² So Stenton, *op. cit.*, pp. 395-6, but see A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. xlvi and p. 75.

³ See A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 75 for a discussion of the difficulty.

Danish throne. In *Fagrskinna*¹ it says that Emma got hold of Canute's seal, and caused a letter to be sealed with it, ordering the Danes to make her son king of Denmark.

For the motivation of Canute's third expedition to Scandinavia, which led to the battle at the Holy River, one can turn to Snorri Sturluson's narrative and persuasive political analysis in the *Heimskringla*². Snorri, 'not only records history but also reflects on it'³; by imaginative use of beguiling anecdote or terse piece of dialogue he is able to animate the scene and provide that dramatic illumination of character and action which so far has been lacking in the bald accounts of those Latin and Anglo-Saxon chronicles on which we have had mostly to rely. After he has described the fall of Olaf Tryggvason in a gallant defence of his dragon-ship Long Serpent in the sea fight of Svöld, Snorri tells us how Norway was divided up between the three leaders who had defeated him—King Olaf of Sweden, King Sweyn of Denmark and Earl Eric, son of Earl Hakon of Hlaðir—and how Olaf Haraldsson, later known as St Olaf, had gradually brought the whole of Norway under his control by intrigue, and by bringing pressure to bear on the petty kings up country who still continued to maintain local authority. Some of them lived the lives of yeomen farmers and were content to acknowledge the Swedish or Danish kings as their overlords so long as payment of tribute left their independence undisturbed, as Snorri illustrates by a delightful story⁴ of one of them, Olaf's stepfather, Sigurð Sýr, who was out in the fields haymaking in his working clothes when Olaf arrived to solicit his support. Asta, Olaf's mother, ambitious for her son, hastily sends men off to the fields with royal robes with a peremptory message to her husband to put them on and try to look like his ancestor, the great Harald the Fairhaired, instead of behaving like a country farmer disgracing his family. Thus admonished, the king sits down and has his shoes pulled off, and dons cordovan hose and gilded spurs; he takes off his working clothes and is clad in fine raiment with a scarlet cope;

¹ *Fagrskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (1902-3), pp. 185-6.

² cf. the discussion in Ove Moberg, *Olav Haraldsson, Knut den store och Sverige* (1941), p. 148 ff., and in Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II, lxxv-lxxxii.

³ Peter Foote, *Heimskringla* (Everyman's Library, 1961), p. xxiv.

⁴ *Óláfs saga helga*, chs. 33-4, *Heimskringla*, II, 41-3.

he girds on a costly sword, sets a gilded helmet on his head, and mounting a horse with ornamented saddle, proceeds in state out of the fields to greet his ambitious stepson.

Little is known of Swedish affairs at this time, but Snorri dwells at length on the attempts made by leading Norwegians to reconcile the two Olafs, the king of Norway and the king of Sweden, by marrying Ingigerð, the daughter of the Swedish king, to the Norwegian Olaf. The lady herself was anxious for the marriage, and one day finding her obdurate father in good spirits gives him a forthright lecture¹ on the political situation:

What intentions have you about the hostility between you and Olaf? Many men are now lamenting this strife: some say that they have lost goods and some have lost kinsmen through the Norsemen, and none of your men can go into Norway under these conditions. It was very unlucky that you laid claim to the kingdom of Norway. That land is poor and bad to cross, and the folk not to be trusted; the men in that land would rather have anyone for their king but you. Now if I might counsel, you should leave off claiming Norway and rather extend your influence in the Baltic, for that realm which the earlier Swedish kings had and which Styrbjorn recently brought under his rule. But let Olaf have the land of his inheritance, and make peace with him.

But the Swedish king was obdurate, and on another occasion told his daughter that he could never be the friend of a man who had taken his kingdom as war booty and done him such great harm in robbery and manslaughter. He was soon to regret his words, for St Olaf secretly married Ingigerð's sister, and her father's chieftains confronted the Swedish king with an alternative, either that he should make peace with his namesake, or else they would go against him and slay him, reminding him that at the Morathing² five kings were pitched into a well for being as haughty as he was now to them. Finally, he was deposed in favour of his son Qnund. He died in 1022.

While the rulers of Norway and Sweden were at enmity, Canute had no fears that the balance of power in the Scandinavian world would be upset, or that his own dominant position as master of England and Denmark could be menaced. But now that the rulers

¹ *ibid.*, ch. 72, *Heimskringla*, II, 98-9.

² *ibid.*, ch. 80, *Heimskringla*, II, 116. (Adopting *Móráþing*, an assembly held near Uppsala, for the unknown *Múlaþing* of the original.)

of Norway and Sweden, Olaf and Qnund, were brothers-in-law, an alliance between them became a real possibility, and Ulf's disloyalty in conspiring to put Harthacnut on the Danish throne was an added cause for anxiety. Perhaps for these reasons, rather than as Snorri suggests¹ because Canute's ambition led him to remember that his grandfather Harald Gormsson had held Norway after the fall of Harald Greycloak and had taken tribute from it, Canute began to bribe many disaffected Norwegians to influence opinion in their country in his favour. Some of them had visited England to complain of Olaf's tyranny, and the richness of Canute's royal apartments thronged with courtiers was not altogether lost upon them; their magnificence surpassed anything to be seen in Norway. Canute sent a delegation to King Olaf to announce that he would graciously permit Olaf to rule Norway as his vassal if he would first come to England to pay him homage. St Olaf's scathing reply² is well-known:

Now he claims my inheritance. He ought to know some bounds to his ambition. Does he think to rule alone over all the north? Does he think alone to eat all the cabbage in England? Even this will he accomplish sooner than I shall bring him my head or show him any reverence whatsoever.

His overtures to Olaf having failed, Canute now sent gifts to the King of Sweden to persuade him to be neutral in any future clash with Norway, but his messengers got no satisfaction because the brothers-in-law had met and agreed to form an alliance to attack Danish territory in Skåne and Sjælland. Canute thereupon sailed from England with a great fleet and came to Limfjord where he dealt firmly with his 'foolish son', as he called him, 'who wanted to be king'. His enemies, the kings of Norway and Sweden, had concentrated their forces at the mouth of the Holy River in south Sweden, where he came up with them after sailing through the Kattegat. Accounts of the battle differ, and the date, probably summer 1026, is in dispute.³ Snorri tells⁴ how Canute's ships in the harbour were almost swamped by waves and battered by logs of trees when Olaf burst a dam which he had constructed across the

¹ *ibid.*, ch. 130, *Heimskringla*, II, 221-2.

² *ibid.*, ch. 131, *Heimskringla*, II, 223-4.

³ On the date and Ulf's part in the affair, see A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-4.

⁴ *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 150, *Heimskringla*, II, 279.

river for that purpose. Canute's great dragon-ship was driven out by the stream; it was not easy to turn it with oars, so that it was driven out to the enemy's fleet. But for Ulf, Canute's regent in Denmark, Canute's vessel would have been captured. Saxo¹, however, has quite a different story, and attributes Canute's failure to Ulf whom he describes as enticing Canute's men to destruction by encouraging them to cross a bridge which was unsafe. Ulf flees and is executed by Canute's orders. Neither version of the battle is very convincing, and while the Norse poet Óttar the Black ascribes the victory to Canute, the Saxon Chronicle under the annal for 1025 gives it to the Swedes, and makes Ulf an ally of the Swedes. What seems clear is that the fleets disengaged as soon as they could, Olaf and the Swedish king returning to their domains, while Canute went to stay with Ulf at Roskilde in Sjælland. Snorri describes how the earl was eager to entertain Canute and very happy, but the king was silent and not at all friendly but agreed to a game of chess. Although quarrels over a chessboard are a recurring motif in early story, this one is worth repetition because it may provide an insight into the less attractive, implacable side of Canute's character. Magnanimous as he was to those proud enemies of his who surrendered to him, he was not only on occasion quick to anger and impetuously cruel, but also at times cold-bloodedly vindictive and without mercy or scruple to traitors or turncoats.

And when King Canute and Earl Ulf were playing chess, the king made a bad move, and the earl then took a knight from him. The king put his piece back, and said he should play another move. The earl grew angry and threw down the chess-board, and got up and went away.

Then the king said, 'Are you running off, Ulf the coward?' The earl turned round near the door, and said, 'You would have run further at Holy River if you had been able. You didn't call me Ulf the Coward when I came to your rescue, when the Swedes were beating you like dogs.'

Thereupon the earl left and went to sleep. A little after the king himself went to bed.

Next morning when he was dressing he said to his page 'Go to earl Ulf and slay him!' The lad went and was away some time, and then came back. Then the king said, 'Did you slay the earl?' He answered, 'I did not slay him for he had gone to St Luke's Church.'

¹ *Gesta Danorum*, ed. J. Olrik and H. Raeder (1931), I, 288-9.

CANUTE AND HIS EMPIRE

There was a Norseman called Ivar the White who was in the king's body-guard and slept in the king's house. To him the king said, 'Go thou and slay the earl!' Ivar went to the church into the choir, and there struck a sword through the earl, whereby Earl Ulf met his death.

Ivar then went to the king with his bloody sword in his hand. The king asked 'Did you slay the earl?' Ivar answered 'I have just killed him.' 'You have done well then,' said the king.¹

In 1027 Canute made a pilgrimage to Rome and returned via Denmark. His last expedition which was to make him master of Norway was made in the next year. After St Olaf fled across the mountains to Sweden, forsaken by his earls and by his people, Canute was acknowledged as king at Nidaros in Throndheim. It was a bloodless and, in some respects, a discreditable victory, since for years past Canute had been undermining Olaf's authority by bribery. Few of the Norwegians appear to have possessed the moral fibre to resist his blandishments, and many like Bjørn the Marshal, enticed by greed, as Snorri emphasises, could not resist the lure of English silver poured into great heaps before their eyes². Florence of Worcester³ tells how the bribes were accepted with great avidity by the Norwegians, and there were few who heeded Sigvat the poet's verses⁴:

The king's enemies are walking about with open purses; men offer the heavy metal for the priceless head of the king. Everyone knows that he who takes gold for the head of his good lord has his place in the midst of black hell. It was a sad bargain in heaven, when those who betrayed their lord went to the deep-lying world of flaming fire.

'It was Canute's distinction as a ruler', as Stenton⁵ observes, 'that from the beginning of his reign he set himself to win the respect of the English Church.' His zeal for the Christian faith had none of the fanatical missionary ardour which possessed St Olaf of Norway. Wordsworth's sonnet on Canute attempts an assessment of what was remarkable in the transformation of a ruthless viking into a beneficent Christian king:

¹ *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 153, *Heimskringla*, II, 285.

² *ibid.*, ch. 185, *Heimskringla*, II, 336-7.

³ *Chronicon*, in *Monumenta Historica Britannica* (1848), s.a. 1027.

⁴ *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 161, *Heimskringla*, II, 294-5.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 390.

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Gospel-truth is potent to allay
Fierceness and rage; and soon the cruel Dane
Feels, through the influence of her gentle reign
His native superstitions melt away.

The sentiment has been translated into modern idiom by Professor Trevor-Roper who finds¹ it impossible to conceive of the recreation of Europe in the Dark Ages without the Church; without 'that doctrine whose unheroic content could yet subdue barbarian kings'.

Canute's pilgrimage to Rome in 1027 was made not only to reverence the tombs of the apostles and to visit many sanctuaries and holy places on the way, but also to secure political and commercial advantages for the nation by his presence at the coronation of Conrad II, the Holy Roman emperor, whose frontiers bordered those of Denmark and with whom it was clearly advantageous to establish friendship. His letter to his people from foreign parts shows an understanding not always evident in royal personages of the importance of public relations, and reveals his flair for making the right imaginative gesture at the appropriate moment. He tells them of his mission and explains what he is endeavouring to accomplish on their behalf and of the concessions he has been able to secure both for the clergy and for merchants making the journey to the Holy City. He states² that he has humbly vowed to Almighty God to amend his life from now on in all things, and as King of all England, Denmark, Norway, and part of Sweden promises to rule justly and faithfully these kingdoms and maintain equal justice in all things. He sends ahead his letter in order that all the people of his kingdom may be gladdened at his success, 'because', he writes, 'as you yourselves know, I have never spared—nor will I spare in the future—to devote myself and my toil for the need and benefit of all my people'.

Milton's cynical and captious comment³ on this part of the letter is characteristic of his attitude to kings, and a wilful misunderstanding of Canute's motives. He says:

¹ *Historical Essays* (1957), p. 16.

² See D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (1955), pp. 416-18, for a translation of the Latin.

³ *History of Britain*, in *The Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. R. W. Griswold (1847), p. 326.

It is a fond conceit in many great ones, and pernicious in the end, to cease from no violence till they have appeased the utmost of their ambitions and desires; then to think God appeased by their seeking to bribe him with a share, however large, of their ill-gotten spoils, and then lastly to grow zealous of doing right, when they have no longer need to do wrong.

Canute's acts of piety and his benefactions to the Church were many and great. He gave his permission for the translation of the remains of the murdered Archbishop Ælfheah from St Paul's to Christ Church, Canterbury, and the Saxon Chronicle records how with Emma the queen and her royal son, Harthacnut, and with great pomp and rejoicing and hymns of praise, they conveyed the holy archbishop into Canterbury, and with equal ceremony brought him on 11 June into Christ Church. He gave the port of Sandwich together with its harbour dues to Christ Church¹ as some atonement for Ælfheah's death; and on the occasion of his return from Denmark after his pilgrimage to Rome he presented twelve white bear skins to the Abbey of Croyland which the pseudo-Ingulph chronicle says² remained before the different altars even to his day.

Stenton, as I have said, has stressed the religious element in Canute's statesmanship, and how as a result of his obedience to the teaching of the Church his rule in England came to be regarded 'through a haze of kindly tradition which obscured the fact that he was an alien king with an alien force always at his command'³. He is chiefly remembered today by the story of his rebuking the waves and by the verse which he is said to have composed on hearing the singing of the monks of Ely as he approached the monastery over the fens by boat:

Merie sungen ðe Muneches binnan Ely,
ða Cnut ching reu ðer by;
Roweð cnites noer the land,
and here we þes Muneches sæng.—

'and other verses which follow', says the Book of Ely, 'which even

¹ Text and translation of the charter in A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1939), pp. 158-61.

² *ed. cit.*, p. 508 (cf. note 1, p. 4 above).

³ *op. cit.*, p. 405.

to the present time are still sung publicly in dances, and remembered in the saying of the wise¹.

The story of the waves, told first by Henry of Huntingdon², no doubt contains a folk-tale motif, for a similar story is told of the Welsh prince Maelgwn to explain his advent to power as the result of a competition, to quote Professor Lloyd³,

not of arms but of constructive skill; the contest with rival contestants came about on the sands of the estuary of the Dovey, and Maelgwn owed his victory to a cunning artificer who provided him with a floating chair composed of waxed wings, since he alone was able to hold his ground against the incoming tide, before which his rivals had to flee.

Although Gaimar sets the scene for Canute at Westminster, it is possible, as has been suggested, that the scene of the incident was at the head of Chichester harbour, at Bosham perhaps, where Canute had a royal residence, and where one of his daughters, according to local tradition⁴, was buried in the church.

As one might expect, Milton⁵ is not much impressed by the incident, considering that 'to show the small power of kings in respect of God needed no such laborious demonstration as Canute had contrived; unless maybe to shame court flatterers who would not else be convinced, he needed not to have gone wetshod home'.

The early English romance *Havelok the Dane* no doubt preserves vague recollections of a time when both England and Denmark were under the rule of a strong king who, as the poem describes, 'loved God and Holy Church, and in whose days good laws which he caused to be made were well kept'⁶.

Henry Knighton's chronicle of the fourteenth century also provides a link between Canute and the *Havelok* story⁷; it was based

¹ *Historia Eliensis*, ed. D. J. Stewart (1848), II, 85.

² *Historia Anglorum*, ed. T. Arnold (1879), p. 189.

³ *History of Wales* (1911), p. 129. The Welsh text is given by Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (1961), p. 439, note 1, and in translation by W. F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (1868), I, 64. For these references I have to thank Dr N. K. Chadwick. See also C. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-8.

⁴ M. A. Lower, *A Compendious History of Sussex* (1870), I, 64.

⁵ *History of Britain*, p. 327.

⁶ *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, ed. W. W. Skeat and K. Sisam (1915), line 27 ff.

⁷ *Chronicon*, ed. J. R. Lumby (1889-95), I, 18 ff. For a discussion of the evidence see H. E. Heyman, *Studies in the Havelok-Tale* (1903), pp. 112-13 and 120-2.

on the little Brut of Ralph de Boun written earlier in the same century, and Canute appears as Havelok's son. Knighton's prose account is something of a gallimaufry in which Guy of Warwick and the giant Colbrand have their place. Havelok has fifteen children, all of whom die except four. Of interest to me, but not I am sure to my audience, is the fact that the senior boy bears the name Garmundus and is the heir apparent, while Canutus is to be made King of Dacia, presumably Denmark. Unfortunately Garmundus breaks his neck when trying to manage a spirited horse, so after Havelok's death and burial in St Paul's, Canutus comes from Denmark and rules with honour.

On 12 November 1035, Canute died at the early age of forty after ruling nineteen years. By 1042 Canute's three sons were dead, and the throne passed to Edward the Confessor, Emma's son by Ethelred the Unready. Had Canute lived for three score years and ten, there would, in all likelihood have been no Stamford Bridge and no Battle of Hastings, with what consequences for English history who can say?

He died at Shaftesbury and was buried at Winchester in the Old Minster. No finer epitaph could be found for him than the words of Sir Frank Stenton¹: 'He was the first viking leader to be admitted into the civilised fraternity of Christian kings.'

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 391.