

# 1016 *and all that*

## Excavating the Viking conquest of England

The Norman Conquest in 1066 is often described as the most famous date in English history, but 50 years earlier – almost to the day – the country had been captured by another foreign power: the Danish army of Cnut the Great. As we mark the 1,000th anniversary of these momentous events, what trace of the Viking conquest can be seen in the archaeological record? **Carly Hilts** reports.

**I**t was an October day in the 11th century that would prove to be a watershed moment in English history. On a battlefield in the south of England, opposing armies clashed in a brutal engagement that saw the flower of the English aristocracy slaughtered, the native ruling dynasty swept away, and ultimately the country's conquest by a foreign power.

This might sound like an account of the 1066 Battle of Hastings in Sussex, but instead these events played out almost exactly 50 years earlier in Essex, at the Battle of Assandun. Here the armies of Cnut of Denmark and the Anglo-Saxon king Edmund Ironside (Edmund II) fought a furious battle for the English throne. Assandun, whose 1,000th anniversary was on 18 October, delivered a final blow following decades of hit-and-run Viking raids that had more recently seen a sudden escalation as Denmark set its gaze on all-out conquest.

In 1013, a teenage Cnut had accompanied his father, King Svein Forkbeard, on the Danish ruler's own attempt at conquest. Although Svein was victorious, he died unexpectedly the following year, and Cnut fled home. In 1015, however, he was back, at the head of his own fleet of 200 longships. His campaign was swift and bloody, climaxing in a decisive meeting with Edmund's army in Essex that saw the

**LEFT** In 1016, Cnut of Denmark conquered England. He reigned until 1035 and placed the country under Viking rule until 1042. Runestones such as U194 in Uppland, Sweden, record the deeds of members of his retinue – but how far can we trace his footprints on this side of the North Sea?



PHOTO: Berig

Danes seize the day, and left Edmund grievously wounded.

In the resulting negotiations, the country was divided between the two men, with all of England north of the Thames ceded to Cnut, and an agreement forged that Edmund's southern portion would also go to the Dane after the Anglo-Saxon king's death. This was not long in coming: Edmund only lived another few weeks, and from 30 November all of England lay under Danish rule, as it would remain until 1042.

The Viking conquest has left a vivid legacy in the written record. It is described in historical and literary sources ranging from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* (produced in 1041 or 1042 in honour of Queen Emma of Normandy – the widow of Edmund's father and predecessor, Aethelred the Unready – whom Cnut married in 1017) to Old Norse praise poetry: the conqueror's achievements are lauded in compositions such as the 11th-century *Knútsdrápa*, which includes an account of the Battle of Assandun, and the *Liðsmannaflakkr*, which describes Cnut besieging London. These often dramatic descriptions colourfully evoke the events of his campaign, but how far has this game-changing period left its mark on archaeology?

### ON CAMPAIGN

It is notoriously difficult to pin down specific historical events in the material record, but earlier Viking invasions have left visible footprints. When the Great Viking Army swept across England in the 9th century, they left clear archaeological evidence of their activities. Recent investigations at Torksey, near Lincoln, have revealed large numbers of objects hinting at the presence of a winter camp described in the *Anglo-Saxon*

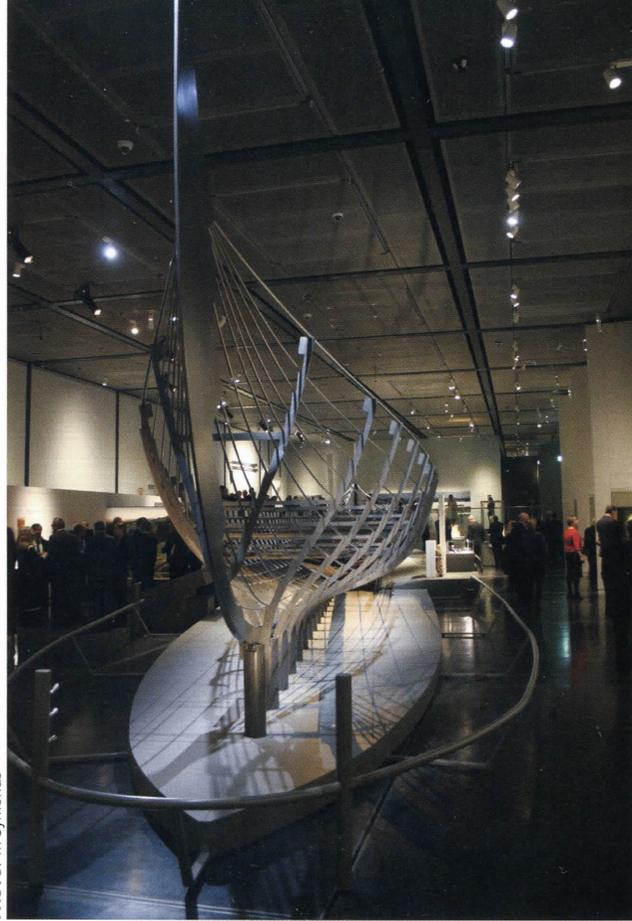


PHOTO: M. Symonds

*Chronicle* entry for AD 872 (CA 281), while the distinctive D-shaped enclosure of another camp, as well as the mass grave of over 260 Viking warriors, were excavated at Repton in the 1970s and 1980s (CA 100). Camps from the 9th century known as *longphuirt* ('ship-landings') are also known in Ireland, such as at Woodstown (CA 304) – but to-date no such sites or burials have been identified that can be attributed to Cnut's campaign.

What about one of the most dramatic episodes of Cnut's invasion: the siege of

**LEFT** The partial remains of Roskilde 6, the longest Viking warship yet discovered, on display at the British Museum during their *Vikings: Life and Legend* exhibition (CA 290). This ship is of the right date to have formed part of Cnut's invasion fleet.

London in 1016? The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* paints an impressive picture of Danes digging a great ditch on the southern side of the Thames to allow them to drag their boats past London Bridge, and building siege earthworks outside the city. You might hope that such ambitious constructions would have left detectable traces in the historic landscape – yet, so far, no clear evidence of them has been identified. The truncated remains of a 4m-wide

ditch, excavated at Hibernia Wharf in Southwark by Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee in 1979, has been proposed as one possible candidate for the Viking channel, but it has also been suggested that it is more likely to represent part of the defences of the Late Saxon burh. ➔

**BELOW** These axes and spearheads, now on display in the Museum of London, form part of a hoard of Viking weapons and tools that was found close to London Bridge and may have belonged to Cnut's warriors.



IMAGE: Museum of London



PHOTOS: Berig

Soldiers of mixed fortune: runestones in Sweden (such as these two examples), Norway, and Denmark record the fates of men who journeyed to England in Cnut's retinue. Sö 160 (**LEFT**) pays tribute to a Skerðir, who died during his expedition, while U 344 (**ABOVE**) proclaims that Úlfr was paid three times for his service in England, the last time by Cnut.

If Cnut's siegeworks are conspicuous by their absence, however, there are artefacts that could possibly be linked to his arrival in the city. Among these are a number of terrifying axeheads so large that they could easily cleave a skull in two, which have been recovered from the Thames in both the antiquarian and modern period. Dated to the late 10th or early 11th century, might some of these have been wielded by Cnut's warriors? Another promising find from this period is a hoard of Viking weapons and tools now on display at the Museum of London, which was found on the Thames foreshore near the northern end of London Bridge. Comprising eight Scandinavian-style battle-axes, six spearheads, a small axe or carpenter's tool, a pair of firetongs, and a four-pronged grappling iron, was this also part of the marauders' toolkit?

## STONES AND SHIPS

For now, it seems, direct evidence for Cnut's campaign remains somewhat elusive – in England, at least. In his

native Scandinavia far more explicit traces can be found. Here, runestones commemorate men who fought and died in his retinue, their names and deeds recorded in terse inscriptions. One from Norway testifies that 'Arnsteinn raised this stone in memory of Bjórr, his son. He was killed in the retinue when Knútr [Cnut] attacked England'.

Examples from Sweden also speak of expeditions under Cnut: Sö 160 at Råby pays tribute to Skerðir, 'who died in the retinue in England', while others stand as cenotaphs for men buried in Bath and London. Other inscriptions describe journeys with more auspicious outcomes. A runestone known as U 194, in Väsby, Uppland, bears the somewhat self-congratulatory message that 'Áli raised this stone in memory of himself. He took Knútr's payment in England', while U 344 in Orkesta records that Úlfr received three payments in England, the third of which was given by Cnut.

Four more stones describing military endeavours in England are found in

Denmark (two at Hedeby-Schleswig, and two at Skåne) – a country that is also home to another striking find that might be attributed to Cnut's campaign: Roskilde 6, the longest Viking warship ever found. Discovered in the 1990s (serendipitously, during work to improve the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum), only 20% of the longship's timbers have survived, but we can tell that it measured some 36m in length. Sleek and fast, this would have been a formidable warship, carrying a crew 100 strong. Dating evidence suggests that it could have been built for Cnut. Might this exceptional ship have been part of his 200-strong invasion fleet?

We also have evidence of Viking vessels from this period in England. During their 1990-1996 excavations at Waterfront 5, Bull Wharf, in London, MOLA archaeologists revealed the remains of an 11th-century timber revetment incorporating part of a Scandinavian-style boat. With its shallow moulding, large iron lap rivets, and tarred hair sealing its planks, the



**LEFT** Cnut minted three kinds of silver pennies in England, all very similar in design to their Anglo-Saxon predecessors: quatrefoil type (**TOP LEFT**); short cross type (**BOTTOM LEFT**); and pointed helmet type (**LEFT**).

“It is in artistic innovation that we can clearly see Scandinavian influence: animal and plant motifs were the height of fashion during Cnut’s reign.”

craft is typical of early 11th-century Scandinavian warships like *Skuldelev 2*, a 30m-long craft found 20km north of Roskilde in 1962. The Bull Wharf ship was made from trees felled after AD 1000, and analysis of other timbers in the revetment place the construction of this feature in c.1020-1021 – squarely in the reign of Cnut.

**ARTISTIC INSPIRATION**

Even if Cnut’s military activities have not left many clear traces in England’s archaeological record, can we see subtler signs of the impact of his conquest in terms of cultural influence? To some extent, such changes are harder to spot than those introduced by the waves of Norse newcomers who arrived in the 9th and 10th century. Thanks to those earlier invaders, by the 11th century there were already areas of England with a strongly Anglo-Scandinavian culture. The difficulty of precisely dating artefacts, particularly metal-detector finds that have been removed from their context, further muddies this picture. Yet we should be careful not to paint too pessimistic a portrait: objects that can be positively placed in Cnut’s reign do exist.

Chief among these are the coins he issued. By the

start of the 11th century, England’s coinage was a sophisticated system with up to 70 mints operating in a coordinated network that stretched from York to Exeter and Dover, all using the same imagery and changing designs at roughly the same time – and, despite what you might expect, the installation of a foreign ruler brought no dramatic changes to English coins. Cnut immediately began to issue silver pennies in the style of his Anglo-Saxon predecessors, using three key styles: quatrefoil, pointed helmet, and short cross types. From these we can see that the same mints and moneyers were operating as usual – the only real change was the name of the king that appeared on the coins.

That Cnut was comfortable with Anglo-Saxon money is unsurprising. Danish coinage had been entirely modernised along English lines under his father, and Cnut continued this trend: during his reign craftsmen from these shores were making coin dies to be used in Denmark, while his adoption of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of recording the names of mints and moneyers on his Scandinavian coins reveals that many of the men producing them in Denmark were also English.

It is in artistic innovation that we can clearly see Scandinavian influence on 11th-century England. Particularly distinctive are weapons, personal dress items, and stone

carvings decorated with a set of animal and plant motifs called Ringerike style. This imagery was the height of fashion in Scandinavia during Cnut’s reign, and it is in the early 11th century that



**LEFT** Decorated with striking Ringerike-style imagery, the St Paul’s Cathedral gravemarker (now housed in the Museum of London’s medieval gallery) is thought to have covered the burial of one of Cnut’s followers. A runic inscription records that it was commissioned by ‘Ginna and Toki’, perhaps the wife and son of the deceased, whose name presumably appeared elsewhere on the tomb.

IMAGES: Portable Antiquities Scheme / Northamptonshire County Council; Museum of London



**ABOVE** Might horse equipment with Ringerike-style ornamentation, such as this stirrup strap mount (left), found in Hampshire, and bridle fitting (right), found in Kent, reflect a fashion introduced by Cnut's retinue?

it seems to have spread to this side of the North Sea.

One particularly striking example of this artistic style is a gravemarker found near St Paul's Cathedral, now on display in the Museum of London, with its relief carving of a lion fighting a serpent. It is thought to have covered the burial of a follower of Cnut.

Ringerike style is also seen on items from brooches and pins to fragments of masonry – but one class of object that is proving particularly promising to researchers is equestrian equipment.

### CHANGING TACK

We have the Vikings to thank for the increased use of horses in military

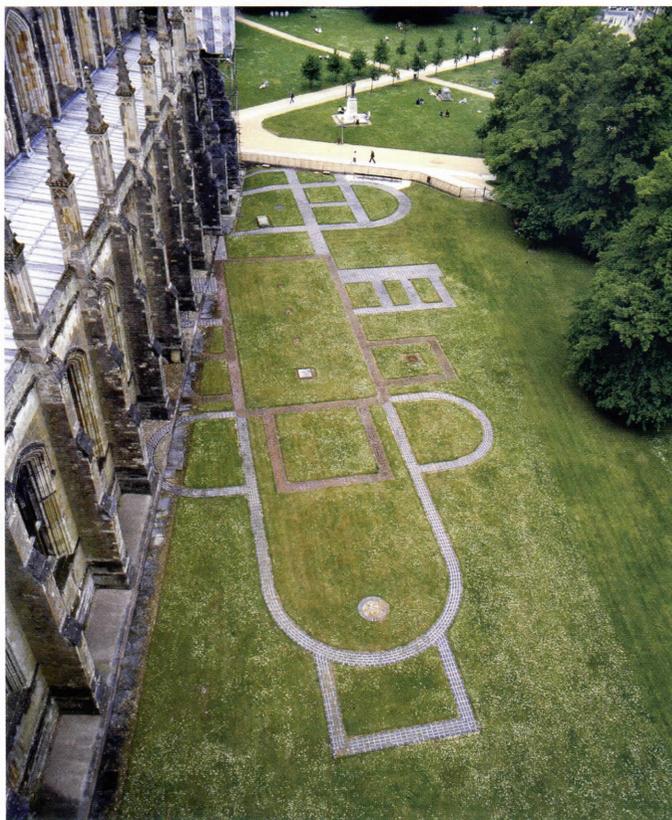
contexts in Anglo-Saxon England – dating from the time of the Great Viking Army – while certain pieces of horse tack are also thought to represent Scandinavian introductions. The earliest post-Roman spurs known in England come from 9th-century Viking burials in Norfolk and Cumbria, while metal stirrups – common in Scandinavia from the 10th century – arrived across the North Sea in the early 11th century.

This latter period also saw the appearance of distinctive harness and bridle fittings, stirrup terminals, and stirrup strap mounts – many so elaborately decorated that they were interpreted as box- or book-mounts until similar objects were found in

graves together with other equestrian equipment in Denmark – bearing the classic hallmarks of Ringerike style.

Stirrup strap mounts in particular have formed the focus of a recent study by the Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy (VASLE) project, which revealed them to have broad distribution across southern England, with particular concentrations in Norfolk, Suffolk, Kent, and Hampshire/the Isle of Wight. But what do they signify?

Back in Denmark, a fashion for fine riding gear decorated in strikingly similar ways to these English examples had begun to evolve in the 10th century, appearing in sets of ornate equestrian objects in a number



**LEFT** Cnut swiftly turned Winchester's Old Minster into his dynastic mausoleum. Today the church's footprint is marked with modern brick; the Danish burials probably lay in the eastern apse in the foreground. **BELOW** A fragment of decorative frieze from the minster, possibly a scene from the Old Norse *Völsunga saga*.



IMAGES: Dr John Crook, www.john-crook.com

IMAGES: Oxfordshire County Council / Sussex Archaeological Society, courtesy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme

of elite male graves. These have been interpreted as signs of the emergence of a new high-status social group linked to equestrianism, who prized such items as symbols of their aristocratic and military status. Might these tastes have spread to England a century later when the Danes took power and a new Scandinavian administrative/martial elite was established here?

If so, this might explain why many of the Ringerike-style horse trappings from England seem to be of poorer quality. Perhaps they represent a trickle-down of mass-produced cheaper versions owned by individuals wanting to imitate Cnut's warriors.

### SEARCH FOR A KING

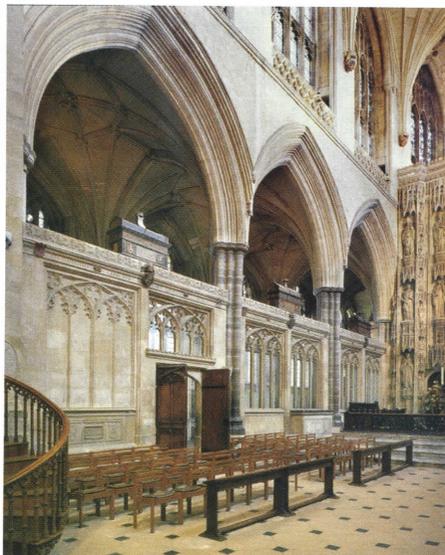
What of Cnut himself? More personal traces of the conqueror can be found in Winchester, originally the dynastic stronghold of the rulers of Wessex, which Cnut quickly appropriated as a centre associated with his own line. The apse of the Old Minster was transformed into a family mausoleum – in time, Cnut (who died in 1035), his wife Emma, his son Harðacnut (who ruled England from 1040-1042, succeeding his half-brother Harold Harefoot), and his nephew Beorn would all be laid to rest there – and the fabric of the minster itself bore the marks of Scandinavian influence. In 1965, the Winchester Excavations Committee uncovered a fragment of a decorative frieze that appears to show a bound, prone man with a wolf standing over him, thrusting its muzzle towards his face.

This has been interpreted as a scene from the Sigmund story in *Völsunga saga* – an Old Norse narrative, it was one that was certainly also known on this side of the North Sea, since references to the legend are found in Old English poetry including *Widsith* and *Beowulf*. The royal houses of Wessex and Denmark claimed descent from a common legendary ancestor,



**ABOVE** Does this chest, normally placed with five others on the Presbytery Screen in Winchester Cathedral (**BELOW**) contain Cnut's mortal remains, as its label suggests? Ongoing forensic investigation may hold the answer.

Scyld, in a lineage that also featured Sigmund. Archaeology gives us a terminus ante quem of 1093-1094 for the frieze, and the eastern part of the Old Minster that it is thought to come from was not begun until 980. Given this timeframe, and the fact that the frieze could be interpreted as celebrating the shared heritage of the Danish and Wessex royal families, might it have been created



in connection with Cnut's marriage to Emma in 1017, by which the two dynasties were united?

New research may even soon bring Cnut's physical remains to light once more. The king's bones were moved to Winchester's new Norman cathedral when the building was consecrated in 1093, and by the 16th century we know they were enclosed in one of a set of decorative chests. During the Civil War, however, many of the caskets were smashed and their contents scattered by Parliamentarian soldiers. New boxes were created that survive to this day, but it is not known how mixed the bones within have become. An ongoing investigation may change this: the caskets have been scanned and recorded in detail (CA 301), and their contents are currently undergoing forensic analysis. It could be that, during the 1,000th anniversary of his reign, we may encounter King Cnut again. ■

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