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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT (1) CNUT THE GREAT AND HIS EMPIRE

Niels Lund

In a letter of 1027 *Cnut* (Eng. *Canute*, ON *Knútr*) styles himself 'king of all England, and Denmark, and the Norwegians, and part of the Swedes'. He appears, by then, to have restored the power his father had at his death. When he died in February 1014 Sven Forkbeard was king of England and Denmark and overlord of Norway and Sweden. *Cnut*, however, could not take over his father's position immediately. He was outlawed from England when the *witan* (the king's council) chose

to recall Æthelred from Normandy to resume power, in Denmark his elder brother Harald succeeded their father; in Norway the earls of Lade, Erik and Sven Hakonsson, who had acknowledged Sven's overlordship, were driven out by Olav Haraldsson, returning from England, and in Sweden Sven's stepson Olof Skötkonung took the opportunity to assert his independence.

Cnut was therefore reduced to a landless viking leader and had to start all over again. He recruited a fresh army in Scandinavia, including Swedes and Norwegians as well as Danes, and attacked England again in 1015. His first battles were not particularly successful but his campaign took a lucky turn at Assandun in Essex on 18 October 1016. After this Edmund Ironside, who had succeeded Æthelred in April of that year, and Cnut agreed to share England. After Edmund's death on 30 November Cnut succeeded to all England. He divided it into four large earldoms, giving Northumbria to Erik Hakonsson, Mercia to Eadric Streona – who was, however, killed soon after – and East Anglia to Thorkel the Tall, while taking over Wessex for himself. His position as king of England was agreed with the English magnates in Oxford in 1018. This involved royal promises and legislation resembling a coronation charter.

Cnut's elder brother Harald is probably the Danish king about whom least is known. His reign has left practically no record. Even his death was not recorded and we can only guess that Cnut paid his visit to Denmark in 1019 in order to succeed his brother. Very little is known also about how Denmark was ruled in

the rest of Cnut's reign. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Cnut outlawed Thorkel the Tall in 1021; they were reconciled in 1023 and Thorkel immediately given custody of Denmark and Cnut's son Harthacnut. This is, however, the very last thing heard of Thorkel, he disappears from history and Harthacnut remained in England for the time. A few years later Cnut's brother-in-law Earl Ulf appears to have been viceroy in Denmark. He was killed in Roskilde for conspiring with King Anund Jakob of Sweden and St Olav of Norway to overthrow Cnut in Denmark and replace him by Harthacnut. They failed in the battle of the Holy River (probably not the *Helgeå* in Skåne), after which Cnut was able to go to Rome to attend the imperial coronation of Konrad II in the Easter of 1027, but had to return to Denmark to negotiate a settlement with his adversaries. After these events Harthacnut, still a young boy, may have taken over; coins were apparently struck in his name before 1030 and certainly before Cnut's death in 1035.

Cnut tried to introduce a Danish coinage modelled on the English system by which types were centrally controlled and exchanged at regular intervals. The main mint appears to have been in Lund but, as in England, a number of mints were in operation, evenly distributed across the country.

Cnut made little effort to unite his kingdoms politically or administratively. He did, however, draw on the English Church for clergymen to work in Denmark, and very likely he was planning to raise the see of Roskilde to archiepiscopal status, subordinated to Canterbury in the same way as York was. This brought him on a

collision course with the archsee of Hamburg–Bremen, keen to protect its position in Scandinavia. Almost 200 years after its foundation the archsee still did not have the suffragans in Scandinavia needed to justify its existence. Archbishop Unwan of Hamburg went to the length of capturing newly appointed Gerbrand of Roskilde and holding him prisoner till he promised to acknowledge him as his proper head. This problem was probably settled when Cnut and Konrad met in 1027.

Cnut's grandfather Harald Bluetooth claimed on his runic monument in Jelling (c. 970) ([Figure 48.4](#)) that he had conquered Norway, and Sven Forkbeard maintained Danish overlordship over Norway for most of his reign; his position was challenged, with English support, by Olav Tryggvason, who was killed in the battle of Svold in 999 (or 1000). There was a long tradition, certainly going back to the beginning of the ninth century, of Danish rule in south-eastern Norway and for attempts to control the rest through native earls. After Sven's death, however, Olav Haraldsson, who had been campaigning in England with Thorkel the Tall and been in the service of Æthelred with Thorkel, returned from England with Æthelred's support and possessed himself of Norway at the expense of the earls of Lade. Erik joined Cnut in England and Sven was beaten in the battle of Nesjar.

Cnut probably never meant to give up traditional Danish claims to overlordship over Norway and before 1023 styled himself king of Norway. Only in 1028, however, did he send a force to Norway, before which Olav Haraldsson yielded without a battle and went to Russia. Cnut now appointed Hakon Eriksson, whose

father was earl of Northumbria, to rule Norway. When he was drowned on his way to take up this position, Olav Haraldsson returned from Russia and made a new bid for power but was beaten and killed by the Norwegian magnates at Stiklestad on 29 July 1030. Perhaps short of suitable Norwegian candidates Cnut then sent his concubine Ælfgifu of Northampton and their son Sven to rule Norway. They quickly became very unpopular, apparently because they tried to introduce English habits of administration and taxation. Christmas presents became particularly unpopular, being a tax to be paid at Christmas. 'Alfiva's time' is remembered in Norway as a period of harsh rule. In 1034 Ælfgifu and Sven had to leave England, and before Cnut's death Magnus, the young son of Olav Haraldsson, was brought back from Novgorod and proclaimed king of Norway.

Cnut's claim to be king of part of the Swedes is less straightforward. After the death of his stepfather Sven Forkbeard, whom he had acknowledged as his overlord, Olof Skötkonung began to pursue a more independent policy towards the Danes. He married a daughter to Olav Haraldsson and he requested a bishop for the see of Skara in Västergötland from the archsee of Hamburg–Bremen; Thorgut, who had himself attended the consecration of Unwan as archbishop in 1013, was consecrated to this see by Unwan. According to John of Worcester, Cnut sent the sons of Edmund Ironside, Edward and Edmund, to the king of Sweden to have them killed by him, clearly expecting the Swedish king to obey his orders, but Olof refused to do so and sent the boys to Hungary. He also included Jaroslav, prince of

Novgorod, who married a daughter of Olof in 1019, in his anti-Danish alliance with Olav of Norway.

Olof's successor Anund Jacob continued his hostility to Cnut and joined Olav Haraldsson and Ulf Jarl in an attack on Denmark in 1026. The outcome of this battle is uncertain but it certainly was not any subjugation of the Swedes by Cnut. A series of coins struck in Sigtuna in the name of Cnut has been regarded as evidence of his rule in Sweden, but these coins are more likely to be imitations of Cnut's English coins than coins struck in Sweden for Cnut. The reality of Cnut's claim to be king of part of the Swedes probably is that in an extremely decentralised land a number of Swedes had recognised Cnut as their lord, and had probably helped him conquer England in 1015–16. They appear in a number of runic inscriptions commemorating 'thegns' and 'drengs'.

Cnut, thus, had a hard job trying to recreate the sort of control that his father had in Scandinavia and England. He was immediate lord of only England and Denmark, and his only attempts to unite his possessions in any sense was his plan to subordinate the Danish Church to Canterbury. He never held joint meetings of the magnates of his realms, neither does he seem to have appointed English officials to serve in Denmark, or Danes to serve in England on any noticeable scale. His plan seems rather to have been to leave a kingdom for each of his three sons. At his death Norway was already lost, and seven years later, after the death of Harthacnut, the old West Saxon dynasty was reinstated in England, and a Norwegian king was accepted in Denmark.

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