



Canute the Great and the Rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age

Laurence Marcellus Larson

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Canute the Great and the Rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age Laurence Marcellus Larson "King of all England and Denmark and the Norwegians and of some of the Swedes" – Cnut's self-proclaimed title "Knut was exceptionally tall and strong, and the handsomest of men, all except for his nose, that was thin, high-set, and rather hooked. He had a fair complexion none-the-less, and a fine, thick head of hair. His eyes were better than those of other men, both the handsomer and the keener of their sight." - Knytlinga Saga In a sense, Cnut the Great was practically destined for greatness, if only because he came from a distinguished Danish royal family. Cnut's father was Sweyn Forkbeard, and his grandfather was Harald Bluetooth, both prominent and legendary kings of Denmark. Meanwhile, his mother was the widow of the Swedish king Erik the Victorious, the daughter of the Polish duke Mieszko, and a sister of the Polish king Boleslav Chrobry (Lund 1999: 28). Thanks to his background and his own abilities, Cnut became the most prominent of the Danish kings of England (from 1016), but he was also at times king of Denmark (from 1018-9), Norway (from 1028), and parts of Sweden (after 1026). During his reign, he united England, protected Denmark, and had a lot of influence throughout Scandinavia, a remarkable feat that he managed to accomplish through careful alliances and diplomacy, yet most often through direct force. For that reason, Cnut has been referred to as the greatest Anglo-Saxon king of England, despite the fact he wasn't actually Anglo-Saxon. His death in 1035 came shortly before the Norman conquest of England by William the Conqueror. For centuries, the Vikings had been raiding throughout the region, including in the British Isles, and Cnut's campaigns represented the apex of that activity. Somewhat ironically, Cnut is one of the best-documented leaders of the Vikings, a civilization that fascinates people mostly because they still seem mysterious and different compared to their European counterparts. Like many rulers of that era, Cnut was mostly forgotten in the centuries after his death, even though some medieval texts and chronicles documented his life and reign. However, an association with the Vikings has helped resurrect interest in Cnut nearly 1,000 years after his death. Interest in the Vikings peaked across Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly during the so-called Viking Revival of that era. With that came scholarly pursuits that sought to discover more about the Viking Age, as archaeologists began digging for Viking remains in earnest and linguistic enthusiasts looked to the Old Norse languages to better understand the English language. During that same time, the Vikings became ubiquitous in pop culture; the cultural depictions of Vikings in art and literature all contributed to the colorful mischaracterizations still associated with the Vikings today.

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