

Remembering Cnut the Great

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Scandinavica
An International Journal of Scandinavian Studies

Scandinavica is a scholarly journal published twice yearly, in spring and autumn. Its focus is the literature and culture of all the Nordic countries; submissions are welcome from specialists in any field of Scandinavian Studies, including (but not limited to) literary studies, history, art, film and media studies, linguistics, and Medieval Scandinavian Studies. Each article considered for publication is peer-reviewed (double blind) by specialists in the appropriate field(s). Publication is supported by the Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS). Submission guidelines for authors can be found on the inside back cover of this journal.

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The special issue is funded by the AHRC through a Research Networking Grant

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Subscriptions:

Volume 57 (2018): United Kingdom £20.00 (individuals), £41.00 (institutions) inclusive of postage; overseas US\$62.00 (individuals), US\$95.00 (institutions) inclusive of postage. Subscription orders should be placed either with your usual bookseller/agent or else send direct to Norvik Press at the above address.

Scandinavica is designed and produced from UCL, and printed by Page Brothers.

Cover Design:

Cover image:

Layout: Marita Fraser

ISSN 0036-5653

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Introduction

'Remembering Cnut the Great': Introduction

Erin Michelle Goeres

UCL

Just over 1000 years ago, in the autumn of 1016, a Danish prince was crowned king of England. Ruling from 1016 to 1035, King Knútr Sveinsson inn ríki (known in English as 'Cnut the Great') drew England into a Scandinavian empire that stretched from Ireland to the Baltic. Born of a Danish father and a Polish mother, the king rewrote England's place in Europe, altering the political and cultural landscape for decades to come. Winchester, the site of his royal court, became a crossroads of linguistic, ethnic and cultural exchange for two decades. Icelandic poets flocked to the king's court to perform Old Norse skaldic verse, even as Knútr and his advisors crafted important announcements and new legislation in Anglo-Saxon English. Knútr's marriage to Emma of Normandy, widow of the defeated King Æthelred of England, further promoted links with Continental Europe, and Emma herself commissioned a Latin account of the king's conquest and reign shortly after his death. Under Knútr and his family, eleventh-century England saw a bloom in cultural productivity that fused Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, Norman and Latin traditions. Perhaps for this reason, Knútr appears in a myriad of guises in later accounts of his reign: at times Danish and at other times English, the king is described variously as a viking warrior, a benevolent legislator, an invader and conqueror, a devout Christian, a diplomat and a poet. Knútr's was a hybrid identity, one that mirrored the complex intermingling of different languages and cultures that took place under his rule.

This themed issue of *Scandinavica* commemorates the millennial anniversary of Knútr's accession to the English throne. Inspired by a conference held at UCL to mark that anniversary in July 2016, the articles presented here investigate the ways in which the king and his

reign have been remembered in a range of literary and historical texts – including poems, sagas, chronicles and plays – from the medieval period to the present day. Many of the articles were first presented at the conference, and the two contributors to the ‘Comment and Debate’ section worked as postgraduate helpers both before and during the event itself. Part of a larger, AHRC-funded project entitled ‘The Siege of London: Immigration, Government and Europe in the Age of Æthelred and Cnut’, the conference sought to situate the reign of Knútr within a broader understanding of how Britain’s medieval past intersects with a number of current debates, including those about British and English identities; different modes of governance and the responsibilities of those in positions of power; the role of multiculturalism, multilingualism and hybrid communities in Britain and Scandinavia; and the ongoing relationship between Britain and Europe. The articles presented here cannot encompass all of these concerns; nevertheless, the investigation of how a single figure, King Knútr inn ríki, has been presented and re-presented in literary and historical texts of the past millennium represents one aspect of this wider project. Together, the articles demonstrate the instability of the historical record and the surprising malleability of stories surrounding this Anglo-Scandinavian king. They focus on Knútr’s shifting identities and the uses to which the remembrance of the king has been put in different political contexts. They reveal, moreover, the inextricable link between the histories of Britain and the Nordic countries, reminding us of the great creativity that link has inspired – and continues to inspire – in the diverse array of historians, poets, dramatists and visual artists who have engaged with it during the past 1000 years.

In the first of the four main articles, Eleanor Parker discusses a short English verse preserved in the *Liber Eliensis*, the twelfth-century chronicle of Ely Abbey. The poem is one of the earliest examples of Early Middle English verse and it is claimed that King Knútr himself composed it while on a visit to the abbey. As Parker observes, the association of a twelfth-century poem with the eleventh-century king is surprising, to say the least; however, when set against the backdrop of Knútr’s multilingual, Anglo-Danish court, the verse helps to shed light on the function and status of vernacular poetry, both in Knútr’s

day and during the century that followed. Parker details the important role played by the performance of Old Norse skaldic verse at the court of Knútr, and considers the ways in which vernacular poetry was used to commemorate publicly the king and his deeds. Noting the highly political nature not only of the Old Norse poems, but also of Old and Middle English verse, she suggests that the performance of commemorative poetry may have provided an opportunity for members of the different language communities of medieval England to find common ground.

The multiplicity of languages associated with Knútr's reign is a theme picked up by Haki Antonsson in the second article of this volume. There, Haki explores the representation of the king in Scandinavian historical works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Starting with the Latin-language histories of Denmark, Haki compares accounts of the king's reign in the *Roskilde Chronicle*, Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis* and Sven Aggesen's *Compendiosa regum*. He notes the ambivalent way in which these texts present Knútr and his short-lived North Sea empire, but demonstrates how Knútr's conquest of land outside of Scandinavia was used to foreshadow later, and perhaps greater, accomplishments by the king's descendants. Haki then turns to the so-called 'Norwegian synoptics', or accounts of the Norwegian royal house, including the *Historia* of Theodoricus Monachus, the anonymous *Historia Norvegie* and the anonymous Old Norse text known as *Ágrip*. In these tales, the story of Knútr is seen almost exclusively through his relationship with the royal martyr Óláfr Haraldsson, king of Norway. As young men, Knútr and Óláfr are depicted working together to conquer England, although Óláfr regularly outshines Knútr in both intelligence and military skill; from the Norwegian perspective, Knútr is undeserving of the title of king and is finally exposed as a traitor to his erstwhile friend. Haki concludes by examining the Old Norse sagas of the kings, including the hybrid Icelandic-Norwegian *Legendary Saga* of St Óláfr, as well as the Icelandic compilations *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna* and *Knýtlinga saga*. While the *Legendary saga* follows the Norwegian material, centring on the contrast between the saintly Óláfr and the envious Knútr, the Icelandic kings' sagas give a decidedly more positive portrayal of Knútr, particularly in descriptions of his conquests abroad

and of his pilgrimage to Rome. Haki's article demonstrates the variety of ways in which medieval historians understood Knútr's character, and the markedly different ways in which the king's relationships with England, Norway and the Continent were perceived in the centuries following his death.

Moving from the medieval to the early modern period, the article by Nicolas Moon and Pragya Vohra focuses on the representation of Knútr in a play from the early seventeenth century, Anthony Brewer's *The Love-sick King*. Setting this play in the wider context of Elizabethan and Jacobean engagements with the early history of Britain, they demonstrate how the ambiguity of Knútr's identity as both English and Danish reflects contemporary anxieties about English nationhood in the years following the death of Elizabeth I. Moon and Vohra discuss the ways in which Knútr sought to portray himself as an English monarch in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon kings, as seen for example in his 'Letters to the English', his promotion of English noblemen and his patronage of the English church. They contrast this with Scandinavian-language texts, such as the work of the Icelandic skalds, who focus instead on the king's Danish identity and heritage. The ambiguity of Knútr's dual identity, they argue, provided a useful exemplar for James I, king first of Scotland and then of England. In *The Love-sick King*, Brewer presents contrasting models of kingship, embodied in opposing English and Danish monarchs. Knútr, however, emerges as an ambiguous figure onto whom Brewer and other playwrights could project contemporary concerns. In these works, Knútr's mixed heritage is used to demonstrate the unifying potential of such a king, even as James I is encouraged to emulate his distant Anglo-Danish predecessor in the negotiation of his own dual identity.

The fourth and final article of this volume brings the story of Knútr into the present day as Alison Finlay examines one of the most famous stories told of the king: that of Knútr and the waves. She traces the evolution of this tale, starting with its first appearance in the twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum* of Henry of Huntingdon. Although in modern times the tale is often used as an example of vanity or pride, and of the futility of opposing unstoppable forces, Henry's version emphasises both the king's power and his pious submission to God's

authority. Couched in the language of conquest and domination, the tale metaphorically examines Knútr's own acquisition of foreign lands, but demonstrates as well the limitations of earthly kings. Finlay places the tale in the wider context of other medieval texts that focus on Knútr's piety and support for the church, including skaldic verse performed during or shortly after the king's reign, and the near-contemporary *Encomium Emma Reginae*. She also discusses possible analogues in the Classical and Celtic traditions. While the story was retold in a similar vein throughout the early modern period, Finlay notes a marked change in the eighteenth century, as the addition of Knútr's courtiers turn the story into a warning of the dangers of sycophancy. She observes further that the nineteenth century then saw an increased interest in identifying and commemorating the exact location of where the encounter took place. Finally, she notes the twenty-first century use of the term 'King Canute syndrome' as a short-hand for climate change denial and the ongoing uses of the story as a cautionary tale about the limitations of human power against such forces as the Internet, the economy and environmental change.

While the four articles together demonstrate the surprising variety of adaption, permutation and out-right invention that characterises later representations of Knútr and his reign, the section of 'Comment and Debate' that follows examines the king's relevance in the present day, and reflects on some of the ways in which younger scholars are now engaging with the early medieval period. In the first article of this section, Calum Cockburn discusses the virtual exhibition created by university staff and students as part of the wider project on 'The Siege of London'. Detailing the range of textual, audio and visual sources presented on the site, he links the exhibition to the growing importance of digitisation in the preservation and dissemination of medieval objects. He considers the many benefits of digitisation to the public understanding of the medieval period, but notes also the challenges posed by their presentation online, particularly in contexts that often lack reliable information and scholarly analysis. Nevertheless, Cockburn calls on medievalist scholars to embrace the increased visibility digitisation provides, and to engage actively with new ways of communicating and disseminating research. This is

followed by Arendse Lund's account of a speech given by the Danish ambassador as part of the July 2016 conference. She describes the ambassador's quasi-comical history of the Danes in England, as well as his heartfelt comments on the results of the UK referendum on leaving the EU; having been held only two weeks before the start of the conference, it was an event that overshadowed much of the discussion among speakers and audience members alike. Lund's piece is a moving reminder of the profound and immediate effects the referendum result had on EU citizens living in the UK. Weaving her personal experience into a broader consideration of migration in the present day, Lund nevertheless describes with optimism the many ways in which Denmark and Britain remain closely connected. She concludes with a compelling reminder of the highly international character of British-based academics and institutions and warns of the consequences of severing those ties.

As Lund's article so eloquently demonstrates, this issue of *Scandinavica* appears at a time when public debate centres on Britain's identity as a nation, and particularly on the ways in which British engagement with people and policies from other parts of the world – including Scandinavia, Europe and beyond – affect that identity. Although Knútr became king just over a 1000 years ago, the critical analysis of his reign and legacy has much to teach us about the broader context of Britain's relationship with the wider world. It is my hope that this issue comes as a timely reminder of the contributions made by so many different languages, cultures and peoples to the development of England, and to indeed Britain as a whole, from the medieval period to the modern.