

Cnut, The Viking King of England

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Cnut was a viking warrior who became king of England, Denmark and Norway.

The Viking attacks on England can be said to have lasted for some two hundred and seventy three years, from the first recorded attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 to the last invasion led by king Harald Hardrada in 1066. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a main source of knowledge for this period. The Chronicle says that the raiders first wintered in England in the year 851, fifty eight years after the first raids. This was a significant event, and marked the arrival of great armies of Norsemen bent on conquest. Alfred, king of the West Saxons, was given the title "The Great" because he held back this heathen tide and ensured that the island would remain both English and Christian. Even Alfred, however, was forced to compromise. The land north of Watling Street became the Danelaw, the lands which followed Danish customs and laws. Alfred's son, Edward the Elder, restored the north to English rule in 920, almost a generation after Alfred's death. It must have seemed at the time that the threat from the north was ended. There was, however, one more great development to come - the career of Cnut, a viking warrior who was king not only of England but also of Denmark and Norway! Cnut's achievements in England were the result of luck and opportunity more than planning or talent.

Cnut was the son of Sven Forkbeard, king of Denmark since 985, who had spent much of his reign extorting danegeld (i.e tribute) from king Æthelred II.

In 1013 Sven arrived in England again. This is how the Anglo Saxon Chronicle records the events of that year:

And in the same year, before the month of August, came king Sven with his fleet to Sandwich, and very soon after went round East Anglia into the mouth of the Humber, and so up along the Trent until he came to Gainsborough. Then earl Uhtred and all Northumbria straightway submitted to him, and all the people of Lindsey, and then the people belonging to the Five Boroughs, and soon after all the Danes to the north of Watling Street; and he was given hostages from every shire. After he realised that all the people had submitted to him, he gave orders that his host should be provisioned and supplied with horses; he then turned southward with his whole force, committing his ships and the hostages into the charge of Cnut, his son. (ASC 1013)

Sven seems to have been accepted as overlord by the people of Danish descent in Northumbria and Danish Mercia. This "power base" must have been a great benefit to his campaign. It was a power base that would also be useful to Cnut.

Sven ravaged Oxford and Winchester, then turned his attention to London where "the citizens would not submit, but held out against them with the utmost valour, because king Æthelred was inside, and (earl) Thorkil with him."

Sven, unable to take the city, led his host along the Thames to Bath, and received the submission of the English in the west. Æthelred, besieged in London, could do nothing to help his people. The Chronicle tells us that Æthelred spent some time with the English fleet in the Thames, first sending his sons across the channel and then his wife, Emma, to her

brother Richard, Duke of Normandy. Æthelred then moved to the Isle of Wight for a time, and finally "crossed the sea to Richard. "

By the end of 1013, Sven had driven Æthelred from his kingdom. However, the Chronicle tells us that he died a few weeks after Æthelred's flight, at Candlemas, 1014. According to the Chronicle, the Viking fleet then elected his son Cnut as their king.

The road to kingship was not that easy for Cnut. Following Sven's death, the English again turned to Æthelred, proclaiming that "no lord was dearer to them than their natural lord" (ASC 1014). Æthelred agreed to come back and rule them as long as they pledged loyalty to him. "Then a complete and friendly agreement was reached and ratified with word and pledge on either side, and they declared every Danish king outlawed from England for ever." Presumably the English lords, who had submitted to Sven's power, did not see Cnut as a comparable threat. Æthelred then returned to England and led his army against Cnut, who had remained in Gainsborough, having reached an agreement with the Danes of the north that, if they provided him with horses, they could go pillaging together. Æthelred, however, surprised them and drove Cnut out, killing every man they could find. Cnut was forced to put to sea and go to Denmark, first putting his hostages ashore at Sandwich, where he "cut off their hands and noses." (ASC 1014)

Cnut had been driven from England, and Æthelred had returned as king. The events of 1015 are confused. Æthelred seems to have taken steps against the chief Danish leaders of the Five Boroughs. According to the Chronicle:

In this year there was the great council at Oxford, and it was there that ealdorman Eadric betrayed Siferth and Morcar, the chief thanes belonging to the Seven (the Chronicle means Five) Boroughs, by enticing them into his chamber where they were basely done to death. The king then confiscated all their property, and ordered Siferth's widow to be seized and brought to Malmesbury. Then, after a short time, prince Edmund came and abducted the woman against the king's will, and made her his wife. (ASC 1015)

This is interesting because it hints at conflict between Æthelred and his son. Ealdorman Eadric also plays an interesting part, carrying out what seems to have been the king's plan to remove powerful and untrustworthy subjects. This is rather curious, since Eadric was shortly to betray Æthelred and join with Cnut.

Edmund then seized all the property of Siferth and Morcar, and "the people all submitted to him" Was Eadric disappointed that his part in the destruction of the Danish thanes was not better rewarded? Perhaps. According to the Chronicle, Cnut came with a fleet to Wessex, and began to raid Dorset and Wiltshire. Æthelred was now a sick man. The Chronicle records:

Ealdorman Eadric gathered levies, and prince Edmund gathered others in the north; and when they joined forces, the ealdorman intended to leave the prince in the lurch, and for this reason they parted without giving battle and left the field clear for their foes. Then Ealdorman Eadric won over forty ships from their allegiance to the king, and then did homage to Cnut. (ASC 1015)

It is clear that there was conflict between Eadric and the king's son, but the Chronicle does not explain why. Nevertheless, when Cnut went ravaging the following year, Eadric joined him. Edmund, in an attempt to stop Cnut, gathered an army which later dispersed because

Æthelred failed to join it. Another attempt was made to gather a second army, and this time word was sent to London asking Æthelred to join it. The king agreed but then changed his mind, believing that it was a trick to betray him.

In the end it did not matter, as Æthelred finally passed away on St George's day, some time between the 7th and 9th of May. His son Edmund was elected king in his place. By this time, the Viking fleet was already on its way to London. Edmund defeated this fleet, and then pursued them north, both armies losing many men. After their defeat at Brentford, the Danish army went back to London and, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 'besieged the borough, attacking it strongly both by water and by land, but the Almighty God delivered it' (ASC 1015)

Cnut then turned his army inland, going through Mercia to Kent. The English army caught up with them at Kent and drove the Vikings out, "and the king slew as many of them as he could overtake". Once again Eadric swapped sides, surrendering to Edmund at Aylesford. As far as the Chronicle was concerned "there was no greater error of judgement ever made than to take him back into favour." His forgiveness proved to be the undoing of the English.

Edmund pursued the Danish host into Essex, where they met in "fierce battle" at Ashingdon. Edmund was defeated, according to the Chronicle, because ealdorman Eadric and his levies "were the first to set the example of flight, and thus he betrayed his royal lord and the whole nation." According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, many of those killed on the English side were of noble lineage, the "flower of England".

Cnut's victory over the English proved to be the beginning of the end for English rule. After the battle, Cnut rode inland to Gloucestershire to find Edmund, who was advised by his councillors to make peace with Cnut. They exchanged hostages, became friends by swearing oaths and pledges, and Edmund gave tribute. It was agreed between them that Edmund should hold Wessex, and Cnut Mercia. Edmund was unable to do anything for London, which bought peace from Cnut and allowed his army to spend the winter there.

King Edmund died suddenly on St Andrew's Day in 1016, a mere twenty two years old. No reason is given for his death. There was no English leader to take his place, and Cnut, in 1017, thus "succeeded to the whole realm of England." The Chronicle tells us that he divided it into four areas, keeping Wessex for himself and giving East Anglia to Thurkil, Northumbria to Erik, and Mercia to Eadric. This Eadric may have been the ealdorman who fled at Ashingdon, but this is not certain. If it was, he did not live long to enjoy his power. The Chronicle goes on to say "in this year (1017) was ealdorman Eadric slain.." Cnut also banished Edmund's son, Eadwig. At the beginning of August he sent for Æthelred's widow, Emma of Normandy, and married her. He thus forestalled any opposition from across the Channel, and from Æthelred's descendants. Then, in the following year, Cnut sent many of his supporters back to Denmark, keeping forty ships with him.

According to Churchill, the spiritual chiefs of England had agreed at Southampton, while Edmund still lived, to relinquish all the descendants of Æthelred for ever, and to recognise Cnut as king. There is no mention of this in the Chronicle. However, it is possible. If Cnut was not already a Christian, he must have become one in the next few years, since, according to the Chronicle, he went to Rome in 1031.

Cnut ruled the English until his death in 1036. He led a combined English and Danish host against the Swedes, unsuccessfully, and he received the submission of Malcolm, king of the Scots, and "two other kings, Macbeth and Ichmarc" (ASC 1031) He was succeeded by his Danish son Harold, who was supported by all the Danes in England. The English lords, however, " remained in opposition as long as ever they could, but they could put no obstacle in the way" (ASC 1037)

Harold was followed by his half brother, Harthacnut, son of Cnut and Emma of Normandy, who was therefore half brother to king Edmund. The Viking line ended with Harthacnut's successor, Edward the Confessor. The English were to have one more English king before the advent of the Normans.

Bibliography

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