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SAMPLES OF AN ANGLO-SAXONIST'S RESEARCH: Cnut THE GREAT

A teacher's contribution by Thijs Porck, MA



Upon my arrival at Nijmegen as a substitute lecturer for English from Old to New, I was struck by two awkward 'phenomena': the fact that toilets in Nijmegen are locked by turning the lock counterclockwise and the symbol for GAG. As an Anglo-Saxonist, I was pleased to see that GAG has decided to pay tribute to their historical roots by including the word Anglo-Saxon in their name. Their symbol, however, shocked me as it included a depiction of a Viking ship: Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, as a history filled with raids and hostility shows us, are unlikely bedfellows (despite the occasional rape). All awkwardness aside, by combining Anglo-Saxon with Viking imagery, the GAG symbol reminded me of the topic of my BA-thesis (and subsequent research): Cnut the Great.

Cnut was a Danish prince and later king of Denmark, Norway, parts of Sweden and England. He was the first 'foreigner' to conquer all of England, since the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons around 450 AD. In spite of his Danish 'nationality', he managed to rule England relatively peacefully for nineteen years, from 1016 until his death in 1035. For my BA-thesis, entitled *A Viking taking on English Aairs*, I discussed one of the reasons for his success: propaganda! Three strategies of image building can be discerned in texts produced in Cnut's name: Cnut placed himself within an Anglo-Saxon tradition of government, he identified himself with the Anglo-Saxons (even against the Danes) and he fought a 'dirty campaign' against his predecessor: Æthelred the Unready. In this article, I want to give you some glimpses of these early medieval political strategies and shed some light on an exciting research project I am currently involved in.

If you ever decide to conquer a country, take Cnut's first strategy by heart: do not change too much and try to show continuity of government. Cnut achieved the latter by marrying the former queen Emma, widow of king Æthelred (who had been king of England between 1002 and 1016). Cnut also employed one of Æthelred's main counselors, Wulfstan, archbishop of York, to be his right hand man. A similar concern for showing continuity can be seen in the laws that Cnut issued. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes that in 1018: "Dene 7 Engle wurdon sammale aet Oxnaforda to Eadgares lage" (the Danes and English came to an agreement in Oxford to [follow] the law of Edgar). 'Edgar' is King Edgar the Peaceful of England (943-957) and Cnut appears to have modeled his own law codes on those of Edgar, e.g. by copying the introduction of Edgar's laws *verbatim*. By presenting his own laws as being in line with those of Edgar, Cnut places himself within an Anglo-Saxon tradition of government. He is a 'conservative': Change? No, we won't.

Cnut's second strategy was to identify himself explicitly with the Anglo-Saxons. He did so, for example, by addressing the Anglo-Saxons with words like 'we' and 'us' in his *Letter to the English of 1020*. In this letter Cnut describes how

he went to great lengths to ensure peace with the Danes:

“Þa cydde man me þæt us mara hearm to fundode þonne us wel licode. And þa for Ic me sylf [...] into Denmearcon þe eow mæst heorm of com and þæt hæbbe mid Godes fultume forene forfangen, þæt eow næfre heofonforþ þanon nan unfriþ to ne cymþ þa hwile þe ge me rightlice healdað and min lif byþ.”

“When it was revealed to me that we were threatened with more danger than we could handle. And then I myself travelled [...] to Denmark, from where the most harm came to you, and then with God’s help I have taken a stand, so that from now on no hostility will ever come to you from there, as long as you are justly ruled by me and as long as my life last”

Notice how Cnut presents Denmark as a great danger to himself and the English people? This is rather strange, coming from the guy who had been king of Denmark since 1018. Another instance in which Cnut seems to align himself on the side of the Anglo-Saxons, against the Danes, is by favouring the cults of specific Anglo-Saxon saints who had been martyred by Vikings. An example of such a saint is Ælfheah (‘elf-high’), a bishop who was brutally murdered in 1012 by drunk Danes (they pelted him with bones and the heads of cattle). Cnut’s involvement in his cult may be seen as an expression of his loyalty to the Anglo-Saxon cause.

Another means by which Cnut tried to make himself popular, was by playing ‘dirty tricks’ on his political predecessor: Æthelred the Unready. History, as you know, is written by the victors and the set of annals from 983-1022 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which describe Æthelred’s reign and part of Cnut’s reign, were written (in hindsight) by someone at Cnut’s court. Æthelred is described in these annals as an incompetent and willfully violent king, who ravages the lands of his own people and blinds some of his nobles, like Ælfgar (‘elf-spear’), Wulfheah (‘wolf-high’) and Utegeat (‘out-gate?’), for no apparent reason. On one occasion the annalist explicitly remarks: “seo fyrding dyde þære landleode ælcne hearm, þæt him nather ne dohte ne inghere ne uthere” (the English army caused the people of the country every sort of harm, so that they profited neither from the native army nor the foreign army). Another way in which Cnut and his followers tried to highlight Æthelred’s violent behavior was by supporting the veneration of Æthelred’s older brother: Edward the Martyr. Edward had been killed by Æthelred’s followers to help young Æthelred gain the throne. Cnut’s favouring of the cult of Edward can be seen as another attempt to discredit Æthelred; a reminder to the Anglo-Saxons that their former king had been involved in fratricide – the killing of a brother.

Cnut’s political propaganda – evident in his actions, laws, letters and

parts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle written in his time – makes him an interesting figure, particularly in this time of elections. This was a Viking who presented himself as more Anglo-Saxon than the Anglo-Saxons. In a way, he is a Great Anglo-Saxon Gobbler *avant la lettre*, providing, like the GAG symbol, a perfect blend of Viking and Anglo-Saxon.

-- Now for something completely different. I recently started a research project about Cnut's name. As son of Swein Forkbeard and grandson of Harold Bluetooth, one would think that Cnut has the least interesting name of his family (despite the German polar bear). However, somewhere along the way, the English started writing his name as "Canute" and we are not quite sure why.

The variant 'Canute' has always been considered to be an English variant of his name; to make his name sound more English. Linguistically, there is a good reason for this change: the Old English consonant cluster /kn/ was simplified to /n/, as we can see in words like 'knee', 'knight' and 'knave', which have retained the spelling of an original /kn/ cluster. If we assume this to be the underlying factor for the "Canute"-spelling, the English simply added a vowel between the /k/ and the /n/ so as to retain both consonants; perhaps to save themselves from saying "in 1016, we were conquered by king Nut the Great".

Allan and Burridge, however, argue for an alternative *raison d'être* for the variant 'Canute'. They hold that this variant arose to avoid confusion with the word 'cunt'. This would be an example of *taboo deflection*, a process by which a word is changed or replaced because it is considered to be taboo (or looks like a taboo word). An example of taboo deflection is the great variety of names that we have for toilets (Johns, crappers, bath rooms, etc.). A less famous example is the word 'bunny', which is derived from the same Germanic stem that gave Dutch 'konijn' and the archaic English word 'coney'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word 'coney' fell out of use in the 17th century, when it started to be pronounced (and spelled) 'cunny'. It is in the same period that we first find the word 'bunny' used for a pet rabbit (first occurrence 1690); it seems likely to suggest that the 'c' of coney was changed into a 'b' to avoid sounding perverted when talking about rabbits!

So did Cnut's name change to 'Canute' to make his name sound more English or to make his name look less like 'cunt'? This is the kind of question that you could find yourself dealing with once you become an Anglo-Saxonist!

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