Cnut the Great in British Folk-Legends

THIS PAPER explores the historicity of a representative selection of folk-legends in Britain associated with Knútr III Svensson of Denmark, known to British history as Cnut the Great. Elected viking leader on the death of his father Sven I 'Forkbeard' Haraldsson at Gainsborough in February 1014, Cnut was accepted as king of the West Saxons (Wessex) on the death of Edmund II 'Ironside' in November 1016. He ruled as conqueror for a year, consolidating his position and gaining popular support, was then married to Emma of Normandy – widow of Aethelraed II 'Redeless' – in July 1017, and finally had his complete regnal rights observed at the *witenagemót* at Oxford in the summer of 1018. Cnut was, in fact, the first true king of all England, a title often ascribed in error to the earlier Wessex kings.

Until the death of Edmund II there were no indications that Cnut's reign would be any different from those local despotic rules of the wilder viking kings of York, as one by one Cnut's enemies – and those simply 'in the way' – were eliminated, directly or otherwise, in the period up to 1017. Hostages and war captives were brutally treated at his command, while other Anglo-Saxon claimants to the throne escaped abroad to avoid a similar fate.

Over the following fifteen years, Cnut established a Nordic federation with England as the 'capital'. It was an empire in all but military and ideological pride, exceeded in scope and prestige only by the so-called Holy Roman Empire, while Cnut himself, the 'Emperor of the North', steadily gained a firm reputaion as a 'wise Christian king', (1) Yet the last five years of his reign are shrouded in a pall of such inscrutability that the first Cnutonian scholar to write in English could say that after about 1030 Cnut 'almost disappears from the stage of English history'. (2) The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is virtually silent on his entire reign, and a scholar once observed with great insight that 'As a reward for his [Cnut's] obedience to their [the bishops'] teaching, his rule in England came to be regarded through a haze of kindly tradition which obscured the fact that he was an alien king with an alien force always at his command'. (3)

It is this 'hazy tradition' that forms the bulk of what we may learn about the man who ruled the English for almost two decades. Regrettably, it remains a finer historical source than the few dry charters and misleading remarks in chronicles used by orthodox academics who, by ignoring folklore, automatically limit their appreciation and knowledge of a man to the extent that they are obliged to make statements such as those quoted above. Such has been the fate of Cnut in the so-called 'biographies' dedicated to his life and times (there are two, separated by 80 years). In fact, Cnut is very much on the English historical stage, only rooted in topographical, or pseudo-topographical, folklore still maintained by quiet local tradition rather than strutting and fretting his last hour in the limelight provided by some Asser or Notker.

However, these stories rarely appear in academic folk collections because, with one exception, (4) they generally lack standard motifs; but, when a historian who appreciates the inestimable value of folklore is also an archaeologist, every thrust of the trowel into English soil reveals a small Cnutonian fragment that may be used to reconstruct the original artefact.

1) *Cheshire: Knutsford.*

According to the account officially upheld by the armorial bearings of the town, granted in 1955, this was the site where Cnut forded a local stream now known as the Lily. It is said that he then sat down on the opposite bank and shook the sand from his shoes just as a bridal procession passed by, which he graciously acknowledged (in one account by wishing the bride as many children as there were grains of sand tipping out of his shoes!). This incident is supposed to have originated not only the settlement of Knutsford itself but also the peculiar Knutsford tradition – still extant – by which women have coloured sand sprinkled on their doorsteps just before their marriage. In addition, there is a variant on Royal Festival May Day, an event dating to 1864 and celebrated on the first Saturday in May, when more coloured sand is used to decorate the town.

The Lily drains the south end of Tatton Mere, less than one mile directly north of the town, and runs into a brook, the Birkin, which may once have run along the course of the present Brook Street and separated Other from Nether Knutsford.

Literary references date back to the 17th century, although in their present tidied-up form they are, like so many others, Victorian. In 1860, the old market place area was renamed Canute Place, and at about the same time the curious nuptial practise was described by a local man:

> 'On the occasion of a wedding, when the bride has set out for the church, a relative invariable spreads on the pavement … before her house, a quantity of silver sand, there called "greet", in the form of wreaths of flowers and writes, with the same material, wishes for her happiness. This, of course, is soon discovered by others, and immediately … appear before most of the houses numerous flowers in sand. It is said that this custom arose from the only church they had being without bells, and therefore, to give notice of a wedding, they adopted it'. (5)

Here we have a non-Cnutonian origin for the 'Sanding Ceremony', which of course is part of the universal tradition of heralding the bride. Another, promoted by local author Elizabeth Gaskell (*ob.* 1865), states that coloured sand was used only because flowers were not readily available, though why that should have been the case was left unexplained.

Clearly, the etymology of the place-name and the local style of nuptial declaration have to be separated from each other. This has been done in another mid-nineteenth-century variant Cnutonian tradition in which the bride and sandy shoes were omitted and Cnut was given an army, (6) while the town was claimed to derive its name from the Knotts family who had a mill on the stream whose operation governed the level of the water, making it sometimes fordable and at other times not; certainly the town name had been given in previous centuries as 'Knotsford' (7) and 'Knottesforde'. (8) Another non-Cnutonian derivation tells the obviously legendary/mythological story of an old nut-seller who when she died asked to be buried with a bag of nuts as a pillow. Finding it uncomfortable, she rose from the dead, ate all the nuts but one (which she had accidentally dropped), and returned to her grave.

Subsequently, a great hazel sprouted from the dropped nut, the remnants of which could still be seen in 1859.

Historically, only the Knotts family tradition concerns us here. That orthographical form became current only around 1300, and an earlier source preferred *Vadum Canuti* for the town, (9) supported by the Domesday Book which gave 'Cunetesford', (10) an acceptable variant spelling of the name. (11)

Unfortunately, the Domesday Book – a generation after Cnut – described the site as a wasteland, held by one William FitzNigel. In fact there is no archaeological evidence for a settlement at Knutsford before the twelfth century, although absence of evidence in archaeology is not evidence of absence, and some believe that the earlier settlement had been abandoned following the border wars with the Welsh during the first decade of the Norman Conquest. (12) Others believe that the town resulted from William the Conqueror's establishment of manorial estates around Tatton Mere, but that nonetheless the bare site still had its Cnutonian associations as outlined in the army-crossing-the-river story. (13)

The Knotts family certainly existed, perhaps even as millers; however, the story as it now stands would appear to be of later origin and grafted onto the existing town as an example of a personal nomenclative foundation legend. According to *Lysons Magna Britannia*, the family name is spelled 'Knotsford'. (14) They lived at Twemlow [Green] southeast of Knutsford, having done so for five generations by the reign of Richard II (*ob.* 1400), which by any calculation could not take them back beyond the 13th century. Of course, a previous generation may have moved to Twemlow from Knutsford, subsequently taking their name from their town of origin, but this then reverses the legend.

The matter of the mill is also anachronous. The earliest known post-mill in England is that at Lewes, Sussex, in 1155. (15) Thousands of water mills are mentioned in the Domesday Book along with hammer- and stamping-mills; but the only type that could have affected water levels is the tidal mill, the earliest of which may have been at Dover introduced after the Conquest but not known to have existed before 1135 at Bromley-by-Bow. In any event, the topographical requirements for a potential tidal mill are hardly satisfied by an inland stream running off from a lake.

The present town name is closer to the true Scandinavian orthography well established in Britain by the 13th century. Danish settlement did penetrate as far as the Wirral and the north and east of the present county of Cheshire, and Old Danish words are still found in these areas. (16) Which historical Knútr was involved is one matter, but it has recently been suggested that the origin of the word is not personal at all and that the hybrid name is a Scandinavian form of the earlier *Cnottan Ford*, a 'ford at a knoll or hillock', from *Cnotta(es)* for 'small hill'. (17) But the problem with this is that *cnotta* in Old English (OE) is actually 'a knot or fastening' and not knoll (a small hill) for which the OE form had *cnoll*, which has given us its own place-names such as Knowlton in Kent and Church Knowle in Dorset. *Cnotta* did not become synonymous with *cnoll* until Middle English (ME), providing Knott End-on-Sea in Lancashire (*Hacunshou Cnote* in 1265).

The troublesome etymological similarity between all forms of*Knut* and *Cnotta* should be borne in mind: Old Dutch [Odu] *knot*; Middle Dutch [Mdu] *knotte*; Low German [LG] *knütte*; Middle High German [MHG] *knotze*; and Old High German [OHG] *chnot/o*. The prosaic definition of *cnott* might suggest common usage for OE place-names, but there is no such settlement in the Domesday Book with this spelling denoting such a topographical origin, with even Knotting in Bedfordshire known in 1086 as *Chenoting*, (18) while *cnotte* retained its spelling and meaning into ME alongside *cnoll*. Although some of these various sites may be explained (or explained away) by their vicinity to a hillock or 'knot', many, like Knutsford, cannot.

Another suggestion proposes that*Cnotta* was a personal nickname actually derived from 'knot', with the implication that the town took its name from some Knut other than the king and whose by-name originated in a prominent buckle or belt knot. (19) This is unprovable either way, of course, but it requires an considerable leap of faith. Common sense dictates that celebrated historical figures are much more likely to leave an impression on topographical folklore than someone with a larger than average buckle. The current fashion to disassociate place-names from celebrated persons in favour of the 'common man' in this case meets with the fact that 'Knut' was not widely adopted as a personal name by Anglo-Danes, and no persons named Knut other than three monarchs who bore that name have made any impression on English history.

But the suggestion that the popular legend is an onomastic tradition recalling Cnut's attempt, successful or not, to found a community, is not very likely. Cnut has no recorded history of secular settlement foundation in Britain, and quite why he would have wished to found one on the edge of Tatton Mere is incomprehensible. Of course, and bearing in mind the entire thrust of this paper, the folklore may be a remnant of precisely the sort of historical material that has not found its way into orthodox historical records. But folklore is not that straightforward and often conceals that which is not immediately apparent in the surviving tradition. There is, as an example of this, a possibility that Cnut attempted to construct a causeway nearby, with the now lost site of that structure in the extensive marsh around Tatton Mere (now much receded) having been transposed to a local stream by an emerging community searching for a name and coming into contact with a folk-memory of a generation earlier. (20) This causeway has been associated with an extension of the military story mentioned above in which it was claimed that Cnut was on his way to Scotland to subdue Malcolm II when he forded the Lily with his forces. (21) Cnut obtained the recognition of his overlordship from Malcolm in 1027, and we are told that the two kings met in Cumbria, the ancient kingdom south of Strathclyde, which would certainly place Cnut in the right area for a movement north through Cheshire, for which purpose Cnut may indeed have needed to move his army across marshy ground, necessitating the construction of a causeway. (22)

As for the other elements here discussed, a different aspect of folklore operates, no less significant for the study of Cnut as a man. In folklore, there is *always* a reason why one figure is selected over another when intruded into foundation tales contrived to explain traditions. The Sanding Ceremony, as many have noted, may be related to common Mediterranean traditions associated with the Feast of Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday) in which sand and/or flowers are used to decorate processional routes; but the inclusion of Cnut in the Knutsford tradition has more to it than the similarity of names: as this paper will show, it is the memory of the man's character.

2) *Cambridgeshire: The Legend of Swordes-Delf.*

It is said that Cnut’s children and some retainers were crossing Whittlesey Mere from Ramsey Abbey to Peterborough, at the king’s behest, when, as described by the antiquary William Camden in 1607:

‘A most violent storm arose … and enveloped them on every side … But the mercy of the Almighty did not quite fail them … but … delivered some of them from those raging waves … When the report of this danger reached the king’s ears … to prevent for the future the misfortunes occasioned by this raging element, he caused a dyke to be marked out by his soldiers and servants with their daggers and swords in the adjoining marshes between Ramsey and Whittlesey, and afterwards … as we learn from the credible testimony of our predecessors, some of the neighbouring inhabitants give that dyke the name of “swerdesdelf” from its having been marked out with swords, and others will have it called “Cnoutsdelf” from the king’. (23)

Further local tradition adds that Cnut maintained a ‘fishing box’ at Bodsey and that two of his children are buried there. (24) The implication here is that perhaps these children perished in that tragedy.

Unlike the causeway suggested in the Knutsford story, this one exists. The problem is that what appears to be a single dyke is in fact two constructed at different periods but for which there have been (and still sometimes are) at least three names: Whittlesey Dyke; King’s Dyke; and Cnut’s Dyke. (25) Archaeology has established that what is now formally known as Whittlesey Dyke is the earlier of the two, commencing at Flood’s Ferry from the course of the Old Nene, and running northeast to Whittlesey where King’s Dyke replaces it and runs into Peterborough. Formerly, King’s Dyke was used to refer to the earlier earthwork and Cnut’s Dyke to the extension. Camden distinguished between the two earthworks but ascribed both to Cnut, explaining how ‘Kingsdelf’ was also constructed when Cnut found his way ahead subject to severe inundations. (26)

Camden may have been influenced by the chronicler Matthew Paris, who in about 1250 wrote the earliest known literary reference to what he called ‘Kingsdelf’ but which ought to have been Cnutsdelf. (27) Modern authorities have also added to the confusion, noting in one case that Roman building materials ‘reached the Cambridge region by water, probably along the Welland, the Lincolnshire Car Dyke, Cnut’s Dyke, [and] the former course of the Ouse’. (28) Clearly, if the Romans had used ‘Cnut’s Dyke’ then Cnut could not have constructed it, and the problem would be to explain how such an earthwork attracted Cnut’s name to it when it had been around for a thousand years already. It has been noted, rightly, that an immediate pre-Norman association with the earthwork is unlikely to have arisen if it dated either to the Roman period or to more recent times, and the connection must therefore be at least partly true. (29) Current thinking is that a late Anglo-Danish dyke was extended by Cnut into Peterborough. How the Romans were able to use it before it existed, or why they did not extend it, remains a mystery known only to those who seek facile solutions to difficult problems.

As an aside, there is a genuine Cnutonian misascription concerning anothe Cambridgeshire earthwork, the Devil's Dyke, or Rechdyke, southeast of Newmarket. (30) This story is first mentioned in William of Malmesbury in the 12th century, (31) in which Cnut makes amends for his father's brutal treatment of the monks of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk by granting the abbey all the land up to the dyke, even though earlier references in the Worcester and Parker MSS of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* described that dyke as lying between Rechdyke and Fleam Dyke and a certain river lying in the opposite direction. (32) This tradition may originate in false monastic claims to territory, but of course it also points to Cnut's character and how venerably it came to be regarded. This dyke is in fact part of a series of earthworks dating to between the Iron Age and the early Anglo-Saxon period.

The Fens were always notoriously difficult to cross, being a flooded Jurassic clay plain topped with an organic (peat) layer. Building work is possible only on the protruding 'islands' of chalk in the north and south, and the rock to the west. (33) Drainage and reclamation began in earnest only with Bishop John Morton of Ely in the 15th century, and although Camden supplied a contemporary map that indicated Ramsey and Whittlesey Meres as separate bodies of water with am area of marshy land in between, in Cnut's day they were both part of what was then the largest natural lake in southern England, measuring about six miles by three. Only in 1851 was it drained almost completely for cultivation.

Both Ramsey and Bodsey used to be beside this lake, as the place-names Ramsey Mereside and Bodsey Bridge indicate, and these facts are embedded in the 'fishing-box' addendum. The burial of Cnut's children there is part of a separate tradition, dealt with below.

Certainly it does seem strange that travellers had to wait until the 11th century for someone to join up by so obvious a solution an early earthwork with one of his own in order to make a passage by-passing a notoriously tempestuous lake. It is entirely possible that some incident like the one reported by Camden did occur, and that Cnut was clear-sighted enough to consider a causeway across the Fens around the Isle of Ely – an area he certainly knew well.

Camden's association with swords seems to be derived from either magical traditions or from the *Sweodora* tribe who occupied the area north of Ely and who also gave their name to the now lost Fenland peninsula on the southern side of Whittlesey Mere (34) These facts may even have archetypal elements, showing how readily Cnut – uniquely for a 'British' monarch – could be associated in the public mind with biblical references. (35)

3) *Cambridgeshire: The Monks of Ely.*

St Etheldreda founded the original double monastery on the Isle of Ely in 673, which grew into a substantial foundation by the 11th century. A hugely popular story says that one day, when Cnut was being taken there by boat, the only easy was to reach the abbey, (36) accompanied by Emma and some nobles for the Feast of the Purification ('Candlemas'; IV *nones Februarius*), he heard the monks chanting and spontaneously broke out into a song of his own:

Merie sungen □e Muneches binnen Ely,
□a Cnut ching reu □er by;
Rowe□ cnites noer tha land,
and here we thes Muneches sæng.

This verse first appears in the chronicle of Ely, and as it stands cannot have been composed earlier than the mid-12th century. (37) The entry claimed that more verses followed and that ‘everywhere today the people sing them in remembrance’ of the event. (38) Although the monks supplied their own Latin translation of this verse, (39) they had first noted it in a rather awkward version of OE, (40) a language that Cnut perhaps knew slightly better than he knew Latin, since it was related to the Germanic dialects of the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, but which was nonetheless *not* the language of medieval Denmark, which was Old East Scandinavian, a linguistic classification of the North Germanic tribes. (41)

This being the case, for the verse to have survived for more than a century before being committed to parchment and translated suggests genuine oral transmission. One scholar reckoned this to be ‘probably a true story’, although it was doubted that it had been the monks who had inspired Cnut with songsmithing. (42) Another, like so many before and after, relished noting it (who would not?) but was content to leave it be, judging the power of memory alone to be a fitting memorial to the king. (43)

It may be admitted that impulsive versifying would not be untypical of anyone but the grimmest of monks, let alone a Scandinavian king – a quondam Viking – and his crew who may well have been drinking something other than water as they approached the abbey on a Fenland February. (44) However, this verse contains a certain amount of interesting internal evidence. It has been pointed out that the Latin translation of *nyr* (noer) as the comparative *propius* of the adjective *prope* for ‘row *nearer* the land’ is more correct, although this is a strange injunction if the ‘land’ (in other words the abbey) had been the intended destination from the outset. In addition, there is the supplicatory *hyre we* of the corrected text again suggesting an alteration of some previously unspecified intention.

We are not told about the ‘et cetera que sequuntur’ verses that are supposed to have followed, suggesting either that the monks were being selective because of the contents of those verses or that they knew of them but not their contents. Either way, what might the other verses have told us? What would have been their purpose, particularly since the alleged sole survivor appears to relate an episode in its entirety and does not read like a stanza removed from a set to which it was germane? (45) It is, after all, unlikely that even a talented Skald – let alone a king not famed for versifying – could have composed a set of verses under such circumstances. The story does seem to continue a long tradition of ‘remarks of a sarcastic or satirical kind, witticisms, pithy sayings or rebukes’ inserted into narrative structures as verse under the influence of Saga writing, (46) and it is difficult to see further verses (if they ever existed) as other than consequential in origin.

The lengthy *prefatio*, or *exordium*, supplies much additional information, some of it very curious. The *capitula* speaks of the unspecified ‘difficulty’ (‘Qua difficultate’) with which Cnut approached the abbey, and that he ‘heard the monks from a [substantial] distance’ (‘de longe audiens monachos’). In the text, Cnut hears them as he approaches the small doorway ('portus pusillus') of the abbey grounds, which building is described as being 'not at all near' ('que haut prope eminet') to Cnut's boat. (47) With this reference to the portal at which boats could be moored, a less injudicious adjective might perhaps have been used with *brevis* and *distantia* as these do not imply the 'from [substantially] far away' of *longe*, altogether more believable considering the closeness implied in the verse.

The fact that the monks were supposed to have already begun the hours ('divinas horas') presents another difficulty. The incident was not dated, nor was the precise canonical hour that Cnut heard stated, although we may suppose it to have been either Prime or Terce, just before the Divine Liturgy. (48) In any event, the story implies that the royal party was late, which does not accord with Cnut's later character. Even if it is supposed that the mysterious 'difficulty' had prevented punctuality, we are still left with the picture of Cnut adding insult to injury by contriving such a 'ditty' ('cantilena') as the monks began chanting the hours. Cnut was married to Emma of Normandy in July 1017 when he was still just capable of the sort of behaviour traditionally associated with Vikings. If the story has a basis in historical fact, it must have fallen within the first five years of Cnut's reign. Perhaps it did, and the *capitula* was the chronicler's own invention designed to forestall subsequent criticism of a monarch who had by then acquired the status of *Rex Christianissimus*, defender of the church and monasticism.

The text also asserts that Cnut had been present at Ely for the Feast of the Purification because it was then that the abbot assumed, for four months, the office of '*Cancellari dignitatem*', a function he shared equally each year, in rota, with the abbots of Glastonbury and St Augustine's, Canterbury, from the reign of Ethelred II to the Conquest. (49) This is, however, the sole reference in any source to such an arrangement, whose sense here has now been reinterpreted. (50) Respecting immediate pre-Conquest monasteries, a standard work states: 'Nor did any kind of federation or interdependence exist between the English houses … even the bond of common origin or tradition which, less than a century before, had to a certain extent grouped together the filiations of Glastonbury, Abingdon and Ramsey had by 1066 ceased to have any kind of influence'. (51)

This is important because Ely is said to have been traditionally independent of both ecclesiatical and royal jurisdiction on account of Etheldreda's royal lineage and marital connections. Sacked and destroyed in 870, the monastery was refounded a century later by St Dunstan, consecrated by him on the Feast of the Purification in 970 under the auspices of King Edgar, and it is from this event that the 'Liberty of Ely' can be traced. (52)

We may note the similarity between this Ely/Cnut footnote to the many developed by Norman writers after 1066 in which their regulations of dubious authority were enhanced in this way in order to suggest Norman respect for the Anglo-Saxon consuetudes they had usurped. Ely had been the centre of north-eastern opposition to the Conqueror. Some of Hereward the Wake's party lived in or about the abbey for a year, ably supported by Abbot Thurstan, a local man, and in 1075 the abbey was implicated in the rising led by Earl Roger of Hereford. (53) Interestingly, the monks of Ely, Glastonbury, and St Augustine's suffered – uniquely – deliberate shufflement with other communities between 1072 and 1086 by order of the Conqueror. We may suspect that, like errant schoolboys separated in class, the monks were split up to reduce the risk of future collusion. If so, it may well have been thought that a special bond existed between the three monasteries.

This is circumstantial, but a pattern does emerge. After a vacancy of several years, Simeon of St Ouen was translated to Ely from Winchester in 1081, making himself respected by his community as Ely's first Norman abbot, a situation that was to continue. The chronicler wrote under the episcopal authority of Bishop Nigel of Ely who espoused the cause of Empress Matilda against Stephen for most of the civil war of the mid-12th-century, and perhaps his inclusion of the specious consuetude served to promote Ely's traditional primacy at a time when this was being questioned – and he did it by invoking the name of a by then respected and much-loved monarch of England's past. Why an Anglo-Saxon king had not been employed instead again says much about Cnut and his known associations with Ely.

What of the singing itself? Medieval musicologists no more accept the ecclesiastical *chorus angelorum* presented in modern period films than did contemporary satirists such as Langland, Chaucer, Gower, or the truth enshrined in many episcopal records. Ely is not known as a choral abbey, there is no Ely music extant before the dissolution of the cathedral-abbey in 1539, and its very brief choral heyday was under Christopher Tye as *magister choristarum* in the early 16th century. Music is the sublimest of all the Arts, but it is also the most transient, and we can never know how any music truly sounded before the advent of recording technology. One scholar, wafted away on dreamy wings supplied by his own monastic vocation, has thought otherwise: 'The Mass and Office on high festivals must have provided a musical feast of great richness, and we can readily understand the admiration with which Cnut, in the well-known story, heard across the water the singing of the monks of Ely'. (54)

Unfortunately, here 'must have' really means 'don't know'. It is interesting that the origins of the story fall within a period when monastic plainchant as developed by such seminal reforming centres such as Cluny, St Gall, St Martial, and, in England, Winchester, was, technically, in decline, anticipating the *organum* style developed in Paris in the 12th century. Perhaps the real truth behind the story is that it is ironic, and Cnut thought not a great deal about Ely's choir monks, and that in a subsequent sea of musical indifference the Ely monks wished that posterity should believe that they were an island of purity, just as their topographical island set them apart from the rest of the world. By employing the motif of ship-board jollity (mead- rather than monk-inspired), the verse also tells us what the Ely monks believed of their abbey as a repository of England's pre-Conquest heritage.

4) *Cambridgeshire: 'How Littleport Began'.*

This story should be studied in conjunction with the singing at Ely (see above), principally as it paints a very different picture of the abbey and its monks. Following Cnut's famous meeting with the tides in the tradition that places this incident in the Fens (see below), he is said to have made his way over to Ely to take refreshment. But the monks were – as usual – drunk and refused to let him in, so Cnut was forced to stay with a local man named Legres who told him a terrible story. Eighteen years previously, the monks of Ely had raped his wife and flogged him for intervening, and she had died nine months later while giving birth to the child resulting from her ordeal. Each anniversary of her death since, Legres had marked by hunting down and killing a monk. Cnut was so incensed by their behaviour that he immediately ordered his fleet to destroy Ely, which it did. The surviving monks were then orderd by him to construct the town of Littleport, naming it such because Legres' dwelling had been his 'little port in a storm'. Legres was then installed as the first town mayor.

There is another version of the same foundation legend. Cnut had been called in to Ely by the monks in order to deal with the incursion of the water into the abbey, after which he rowed himself out across the Fenland waters to catch some eels for Emma when a storm suddenly rose up and propelled him to a distant shore where he took shelter with Legres. This time, Legres is presented as a brewer for the monastery, and when Cnut found out from him that the local settlement did not have a name he named it Littleport, for the same reason as given above. After a meal of eels, Legres took Cnut to a grange building where the visiting monks refused to let them in, threatening the pair with their vicious dogs. On their return, Legres told Cnut the terrible story of his life, only now it was apparently a legitimate son that he had *before* the rape and he did not kill monks but cut a notch into a stick for every monk accidentally drowned in the Fens, notches that he relished. Cnut went to sleep in the punt where some splashing about revealed a girl bathing, and who, on leaving the water, covered herself with mud as a disguise. Thus Cnut learned that Legres in fact had a daughter whose identity had to be kept secret from the rapacious monks. Moved by her plight, Cnut held the monks prisoner within the grange, but fighting broke out when they attempted to escape. He ordered the grange burnt down before forcing the abbot to build Legres a new home, whom Cnut made a freeman and appointed royal brewer. The monks were then obliged to brew beer in his brewery while the nuns were forced to make shirts for him and his family. As a mark of respect for his saviour, Legres ruled that the eldest son of his family should always be known as 'Canute', which injunction his decendents observed for many generations until one key member drowned. The family fortunes were thus ruined, and the name changed to Legges. (55)

The obvious historical absurdities of this foundation legend – though highly amusing in their anachrinisms – need not detain us, but once again it is Cnut's inclusion in them that is crucial, as well as the local folk-memory of Ely's very different reputation. Here Cnut is invoked as, on the one hand, a firebrand with a strong sense of moral probity, and on the other as a model of chivalric restraint, both characteristics revealed by historical study but in this form more appropriate to later centuries. Also very prevalent is Cnut's long-standing association with water, which few Cnutonian folk-legends are without in some form or other.

5) *Cnut and the Sea.*

This celebrated legend, in which Cnut humbled himself before God by showing to all vain and inflated humanity that even all the earthly powers invested in his kingship could not hold back the encroaching tide, first appeared in the *Historia Anglorum* of Henry of Huntingdon, archdeacon of Lincoln, in about 1125. (56) This story is not strictly folkloric but is an aspect of archetypal myth using standard motifs, and as such it has no place here [see paper ‘Who Rules the Tides?’ on this website]. However, in the medieval mind its historicity was never in doubt, and subsequent generations, abhorring the vacuum of acausal dramas, have made it folkloric; and, although by doing so they have often debased it, the result is that a number of real locations still vie with one another in recognition as the site for the incident.

Henry, who knew precisely what he was doing when invoking Cnut as his *deus ex machina* in his peerless moral, did not, of course, name a location. How could he, when he knew it was not history? But those who could not resist the temptation to do so – and they were subsequently legion – have left us with an amusing catalogue of loctions. Galfridus Gaimar, the Anglo-Norman Fenlander poet and the first to incorporate Henry’s tale into another work, placed the incident on the Thames opposite Lambeth. (57) Gaimar cannot have known his location, or the history of it, very well since his ‘Palace of Westminster’ did not exist in Cnut’s day, and had he known the stinking Thames he might have had second thoughts about dragging Cnut down to the river bank in London.

Both the Thames and Southampton were mentioned as contenders by Raphael Holinshed in 1577, the Hampshire location having emerged in literary contexts only with Polydore Vergil in 1535. Vergil had arrived in England in 1502, subsequently charged by Henry VII to compose a history of England. Since he had arrived via Southampton he probably heard local stories connecting that port with the incident, or named it as such simply from having seen it and thought it as good a location as any, though he knew no others.

In case it is thought that such trivia occupied idle minds of former times alone, it is worthwhile noting that many modern authorities have also wrestled with this phantom. Sir Arthur Bryant favoured the South Bank of the Thames, although – curiously – he is otherwise suspicious of the story. (58) Sir Charles Oman favoured Southampton Water, (59) while Sir Arthur Mee supported Bosham in Sussex but noted a strong local tradition at South Stoneham (Swaythling). (60) Thomas Stephenson also catalogued the two most supported contenders: Southampton and Bosham. (61) Edward Lucas also supported Bosham, though not without confessing a personal preference for the ‘margin of the ocean itself than inland at an estuary’s edge’. (62)

At Southampton, on the wall of the Canute Hotel, Canute Road, a plaque still boldy assures visitors in 2007 that: ‘Near this spot AD1028 Canute reproved his flattering courtiers’. The sea today is nowhere ‘near this spot’, but it once was, at Canute’s Point, a projection of the shore near the mouth of the Itchen extant up to the 1830s, at the tip of which the reproof is supposed to have taken place. This may represent the same tradition noted at South Stoneham, respecting which a Hampshire writer in the 1980s stated candidly that ‘there is no historical evidence for the familiar story in which Canute demonstrated his worldly frailty by failing to stop the advance of the tide’. (63) Earlier, however, another Hampshire author stated with equal conviction that: ‘all good citizens know that this was the scene of [Cnut’s] famous rebuke to his flatteres by the sea’. (64) To refute the story’s historicity has itself become as pointless as trying to hold back the tide.

It was at Gainsborough on the river Trent in Lincolnshire that Sven I died and Cnut was proclaimed leader of his late father’s forces ‘sea-king’, in Viking terms. One historical tradition claims that Cnut assassinated his father in the Old Hall (destroyed in the 15th century) and that the reproof took place there on the Trent, which is still tidal up to that point. In the National Museum at the Palace of Frederiksborg near Copenhagen, there is even a 19th century mural (by Lorens Frohlich) depicting this incident, and it is perhaps with this tradition that the Littleport legend (see above) is associated, although the Lincolnshire Fens are some considerable distance from Ely.

In any event, it is extremely unlikely that Cnut had added parricide to his early list of crimes, and his subsequent contact with Gainsborough was rather slight, preferring to leave the Northern Danelaw in the hands of competent appointees. The rebuke, as given by Henry of Huntingdon, with its idea of world-weary dignity and authority, does not exactly marry well with a teenage Viking sea-king about to go a-slaughtering; nor for that matter does the Littleport story.

Another location for the rebuke is on the northern coast of the Wirral Peninsula in Cheshire, in the grounds of what became Leasowe Castle in the 16th century. There, facing the sea, used to be an ancient oak throne-like carved seat known as 'Canute's Chair' inscribed with the words: 'Sea come not hither nor wet the sole of my foot', and from which the rebuke was supposedly conducted. Although this was a practical joke instituted by General Sir Edward Cust in the 19th century, one of the castle's owners, visitors to the gardens used to be taken to the nearby shore and have the precise spot solemnly pointed out by a guide! The chair itself fell into disrepair and was described as falling to pieces by the mid-1950s; ten years later it had disappeared, probably quietly hauled onto a bonfire and disposed of along with its Cnutonian attachment. However, although it may be easy to burn a bad chair it is not so easy to burn a good story, especially this one. After lying in ruins for twelve years, in 1982 Leasowe Castle was restored as a hotel and conference centre, with the legend of 'Canute's Chair' so deeply ingrained in the local memory that visitors still walk to the spot where the chair *used to be* and peer out across the shore and sea, no doubt imagining how the incident must have looked.

Henry of Huntingdon's seminal *inversion* of the anticipated motif (most people even today still think that Cnut was a medieval idiot who thought that *he could* hold back the tide but failed) has propelled Cnut into the superstructure of myth-as-reality, and this is now surely the best-known story anywhere in the world associated with a medieval European king. Perhaps, then, it is small wonder that so many topographical locations have been selected for it, as this satisfies a deep need.

This may be seen with the Leasowe Castle joke, which, in its mode of operation, has close parallels with modern 'conspiracy theories' and 'secret societies', none of which has ever existed in reality but where *belief* in such existence has engendered hoaxes ('Priory of Syon') that subsequently acquire an existence for having been named, and, by circular argument, are thereby 'proven' to have always existed. So it is at Leasowe Castle. A practical joke gave the Wirral a Cnutonian location even though Cnut is not known to have ever been there and no reason can be found for placing him there. 'Canute's Chair' has long been exposed as a hoax, but nonetheless far too late: the hoax is now itself viewed as an expression, a remnant, of the true incident, which took place on the Wirral precisely because a man was inspired by it to perpetrate a hoax.

6) *Sussex: Bosham.*

All extant local traditions concerning the story of Cnut and the Sea (see above) have survived without much more than the enthusiasm of their supporters and the force of Cnut's personality to merit attention, but an exception to this is met with at Bosham. In the words of two writers:

> 'At Bosham Canute attempted, unsuccessfully, to reclaim the land. As in this part of Sussex a mud bank erected to keep out the sea during land reclamation is known as a "chair", Canute's activities have been misinterpreted to become the popular legend that he put a chair on the beach and forbade the tide rise any further'. (65)

And, in the course of describing a genuine attempt to build a dyke at Bosham:

> 'This dyke recalls the story of Canute, who is said to have sat on a chair, surrounded by his courtiers, and ordered back the tides – unsuccessfully, the chroniclers state. It is probable that Canute built a dyke, the Saxon word for which is "char", but for some reason the dyke did not hold back the sea water. Mud Wall would be the most likely place for Canute to have built his "char"'. (66)

It must be stated right at the start that the two stories cannot be historically related, for the kingly mythotype motif employing Cnut as its worthy expression was entirely the invention of Henry of Huntingdon, one of the most subtle and individual chronicler-historians of the 12th century. It had no historical basis whatsoever, other than in a deep appreciation of Cnut's extraordinary character. What must be examined in this section, then, is the quite separate folk-legend of Cnut having constructed a dyke at Bosham, whether successful or otherwise, and whether subsequently certain similarities enabled the two stories to become conflated as a means of transmission.

Naturally enough, those who mention the association cannot quote a source or authority while at the same time failing to explain the curious and anachronistic etymology. This is certainly why many standard sources stay clear altogether from either the supposed historical dyke-building or the popular belief in it. (67) One standard source goes so far as to say that 'popular "tradition" of Canute's association with Bosham seems to have started about the end of the eighteenth century'. (68) This is a date that should be borne in mind.

One recent history of the county has this to say about both Cnut and the 'chair':

> 'At the other end of the county lies Bosham which a popular, though recent, tradition associates with the story of Canute's chair. Conceivably such a legend might have stemmed from the construction of groins for the protection of an anchorage or of a building such as a palace. The story first appears a hundred years after Canute's death; since then local patriotism has identified it with at least half a dozen places including Wareham and Southampton'. (69)

The origins are thus reckoned to be architectural, since a groin vault (clearly here intended) is the intersection at right-angles of a pair of identical tunnel vaults, and the groin itself the separation between them. Quite how such a small technical feature could have become so memorable as to have launched a folk-tradition is not clear, and in any event the word 'chair' is not an architectural term.

In the absence of records of any kind, whether documentary or archaeological, the entire Bosham account hinges on the word 'chair', or 'char', meaning a dyke or some similar construction. Moreover, because the story of Cnut and the Sea dates to Henry of Huntingdon (who used *sedile* for seat, or chair, and not *solium* for throne), if the Bosham story is claimed to date to a misascription in his day for a real dyke-building incident, then the similarity must be more than contemporary colloquial: it must be traceable to the 12th century. (70)

The modern word 'dyke' has altered little since*Offandic* in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Offedik* in ME sources for Offa's Dyke. Literary Latin of Cnut's day would have given us *Agger Offanii*, or some construction around the more vague *moles* for a heap or mass of earth. A more plebeian medieval derivation might have used either *fossa* or perhaps *vallus* for a wall (of earth). In Welsh, the famous dyke is *Clawdd Offa*, while in modern Danish usage *dige* is derived from Old Norse *diki*. More importantly, *dic* has always been used for 'dyke' in East Sussex. There is a suggestion that *walu* from *vallus* was occasionally used in the Anglo-Saxon period for a ridge or bank, with the combination *dicwalu* unconfirmed for a ditch-wall.

Now, in Cambridgeshire,*chare* (*car/char/chair/chaire*) is a known word used to refer to low, marshy ground, derived from Norwegian dialect *kjerr* for a bog. This has found its way into the Car Dyke, which runs from north of Cambridge to the river Witham at Lincoln. However, this Roman construction was not thus known in Saxon times, the name becoming used only after Viking settlement in the Fens. (71) Previously, it took its name from a form that had given its title to the town of Spalding, meaning 'dwellers by the ditch', (72) who were neighbours to the *Sweodora*. Thus the dyke has nothing whatsoever to do with being a 'chair' but with cutting its way through 'chare' – the Fens.

In Lancashire, *char/e* may in certain contexts be used to mean 'stop', or 'turn back', and in Yorkshire 'work' (modern 'chore'). But it is never a noun outside this usage, and so 'eard-char' for an 'earth-work' to 'stop' encroaching water would be simply unacceptable. In South Norfolk, *car* is again used to describe boggy ground with trees (Alder Car Fen Broad, now Alderfen Broad) while open boggy ground is always 'marsh'. The combination 'ch' at the beginning of a word is extremely rare in OE.

'Chair' does not, in fact, appear to be a Sussex word at all, where there are fifteen colloquial words for mud or earth, from *cledge* to *sleech*, and *dobbin* for sea-gravel mixed in with sand used to construct a 'boulder-head', the Sussex term for a work erected to keep out the encroaching sea, made with stakes embedded in *dobbin* and *cledge*. There is much chalk in Sussex, the word for which is *chaark*, the literal spelling of the provincial accentuation, and perhaps today a 'chaark-dic' might somehow become a 'chair-dyke' in the memory of someone from another county. But in Cnut's day the native English word for chalk was *cealk* with, of course, no corresponding provincialism. However, as with 'eard-char' in Yorkshire, 'chaark-dic' in Sussex is simply not feasable.

The Bosham account is better explained by the historical attempt to construct a dyke there, mentioned above, in the 18th century, erecting it across the tip of Chichester water. It worked for about fifty years until it was destroyed by a severe storm. Thus the people of Bosham, recalling their own failure to build a secure dyke in the 18th century, ascribed a similar disaster to Cnut, expiating themselves of their own incompetence while at the same time acquiring the story of Cnut and the Sea.

Unconnected with this folk-legend is another concerning the death of a daughter of Cnut:

> ‘There [Bosham] he had a palace and through the centuries there was handed down a tradition that his infant daughter had been buried in the church. During restorations in 1865 a stone coffin and some bones of a child were found on the legendary site and this spot is now marked by a title bearing the Danish raven’. (73)

The history of this alleged Cnutonian princess is fascinating. It began in 1776 when the antiquary Sir William Burrell visited the parish church of the Holy Trinity to gather material for his monumental history of Sussex. While there, he was informed by a church dignitary that the mutilated effigy of a diminutive woman, dating he was told to the 15th century, in fact concealed the remains of a Saxon Princess. (74) And that was how matter stood until about 1800 when the ‘Saxon Princess’ changed her nationality and was ‘identified’ – without an exhumation – as a daughter of Cnut, presumably on the basis of the concomitant folk-legend that Cnut ‘had a palace’ at Bosham.

In 1865, the church underwent a programme of restoration, and the Sussex Archaeological Society took the opportunity to investigate the coffin, as here related by the Director of the excavation:

> ‘The fact of the internment of Canute’s child within their ancient church was never for one moment doubted by the people of Bosham, and when the opportunity offered I was resolved to test the truth of the tradition … I directed the masons … to sound the spot which tradition had pointed out as the site … The iron bar at once struck upon a stone, and on removing the mould which covered it a stone coffin was presented to our delighted gaze … when it [the lid] was raised the remains of the child were distinctly visible … From the size of the body the child must have been, as handed down by tradition, about eight years of age … the stone coffin also corresponds in rudeness of style with coffins of Canute’s period; and the piscina which still exists appears to have belonged to the altar before which masses were said on behalf of the soul of the young princess’. (75)

Further restoration work during the 1950s and 1960s again necessitated the opening up of this tomb. The remains were confirmed as belonging to a young female, but no scientific analysis was conducted. There has been no further work of the remains.

The excavation as conducted and interpreted by the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1865 would horrify any reputable archaeologist today, from the method of excavation (the coffin lid broke on lifting) to the emotive *non sequitur* of the piscina. Even a fellow Victorian, albeit a generation later, remarked that: ‘A stone coffin containing the remains of a child was desecrated by the archaeologists in 1865'. (76) Mid-Victorian archaeology generally had an agenda: to set out to *prove* what was already *believed*. Additionally, a sharp lesson here is that archaeologists who have no knowledge of history should abandon their labours and take up another profession, for the births and deaths of all royal progeny were diligently recorded at all times – even those on the distaff side distant from the succession or excluded from it on the Continent by Salic Law. It was well recorded that Cnut had three sons and a daughter, (77) and the birth and death of any other, no matter what their ages, would have been noted by the same chroniclers who recorded the histories of Sven Cnutsson, Harald Cnutsson, Harthacnut Cnutsson, and Gunhild Cnutsdöttir.

In the light of this, it is interesting that the Cnutonian princess at Bosham is often described as Cnut's *second* daughter, presumably to avoid conflict with Gunhild. Also, the date of death of this child is given – where it is given – as 1020, which if she was eight at the time would have made Cnut a father at sixteen, in Denmark, bringing her to England as a toddler, unnoticed by anyone.

Although some local guides and Internet sources on the church still give this information out, the remains are certainly those of an ordinary (or indeed perhaps extraordinary) young late-Anglo-Saxon girl. But once again it is not the jumbled and anachronistic historicity that disappoints so much as Cnut's involvement that impresses. For even if the legend of Cnut's *second* daughter at Bosham is a device contrived to avoid the issue of his long-lived fist-born, it demonstrates that Gunhild was also remembered across centuries when many history books completely ignore her.

But why should Cnut be associated with Bosham at all? The little daughter is said by some traditions to have drowned either in the sea or a mill stream (again, water, as with Cnut's other allegedly drowned children in *The Legend of Swordes-Delf* – see above) while her father was visiting Earl Godwine of Wessex in *his* 'palace'. The earl certainly had connections with Bosham (the church and hall of the Bayeux Tapestry), although an 11th century 'palace' would have been very far from modern ideas of palatial structures, and it may well be that the peripatetic Dane visited him there – he was, after all, one of Cnut's principal advisors.

Perhaps it is absurd to state that 'beyond question Canute had a palace here, and his daughter was buried in the church', (78) or: 'Canute had a palace there, and it was at Bosham that he rebuked his courtiers when they asked him to hold back the tide'. (79) But it must then be equally unwise to assert that 'it is necessary to dissociate Canute from Bosham'. (80) As the body in the church proves, a centuries-old tradition certainly transmits information, even if the details may have become corrupted. The entire folk-legend in fact proves that historians *must* associate Cnut with Bosham in the absence of conventional records.

7) *Dorset: Wareham.*

Both Sven I and Cnut first entered England through Wareham, and a persistant local tradition claims that St Martin's Church was destroyed by Cnut in 1015/16: '[The] stalwart barbarian … became a devout Christian, restored law and order and encouraged the rebuilding of churches, like those at Wareham and Wimourne, which in his younger days his raids had destroyed'; (81) and, 'It is likely that Knut, then a pagan, in this 1015 raid destroyed the monastery at Wimbourne as well as Canford Church and St Martin's, Wareham'. (82)

If Cnut had destroyed any church at Wareham it should have made it the first Christian foundation – perhaps even the very first building – that he sacked in England. (83) Thus the identity of this site has caused some interest over the generations, although a consensus has still not been reached, with some traditions claiming that the sacked church was that founded by St Aldhelm (*ob.* 709), first bishop of Sherborne, when a storm prevented him from continuing on to Rome. (84) But this tradition is based solely on a single passage in William of Malmesbury, who is also one of only two sources for the life of St Aldhelm. William mentions that Aldhelm constructed a church *near* Wareham ('juxta Werham') and that its ruins were still visible in his day. (85) Unfortunately, the dedication of his church was not mentioned and remains unknown, as does its location.

It has been pointed out that in St Aldhelm's day such a church *would* have been 'juxta Werham' as the town was then concentrated on the quay area, now at the opposite end of the town, and therefore St Aldhelm's church was in fact the precursor to St Martin's. This view also notes that there may have been a diversion in the course of the river Frome after William of Malmesbury's day, which would explain his use of 'ii milibus' for the distance between Aldhelm's church and the town, seeing that St Martin's church is now 'less than 3236 yards' from Poole Harbour although seven miles from the open sea. St Aldhelm's church was probably constructed from wood, as many early Saxon churches were, and progressive sackings in 875, 998, and by Sven and Cnut prevented it from being rebuilt. (86)

This confusion has led some researchers to suggest that the church was in fact St George's at Langton Matravers, east of Swanage, where local quarries would have led to the building of a stone church, thereby explaining William of Malmesbury's use of 'maceriae' when describing the ruins. (87) Unfortunately, *maceriae* is the plural feminine form for a wall of *any* material enclosing a small space, whether of masonry, wood, or earth. It is not enough simply to look for any church that happens to be 'two miles from the sea, near Wareham' somewhere by Corfe Castle.

The official report on Dorset's monuments agrees with William of Malmesbury over Wareham, but prefers the rival parish church of Lady St Mary: 'it appears that the early church at Wareham Lady St Mary should be ascribed to the time of St Aldhelm with alterations to the N. Porch and possibly also to the corresponding S. Porch at more than one date, and the remodelling of the E. end of the S. Aisle in the early post-Conquest period'. (88) The report points to the number of early Anglo-Saxon inscribed stones used in the walls of the current structure, although these stones prove only that the original church was rebuilt in the mid-11th-century and not that Cnut (or anyone else) had destroyed it. Moreover, if St Martin's church *had been* destroyed *before* the later reconstruction of Lady St Mary's there should have been nothing to prevent stones from the ruins of St Martin's being used in the second reconstruction prior to the rebuilding of the first church. In fact, in the medieval period this was quite common practice, and churches were certainly not rebuilt in the order in which they had been despoiled or had fallen into disrepair. Commenting on this, one authority has stated:

‘Despite the description “iuxta Werham”, Aldhelm’s church has been taken to be Lady St Mary’s in Wareham itself. However, William of Malmesbury’s long description of the church, which was in ruins when he wrote, suggests that the church was in the country, since shepherds frequently sheltered in it, and that no church in Wareham can be a candidate. Kingston, to the south of Corfe Castle, is perhaps a more appropriate site’. (89)

The question requires to be divided, before half the churches of Dorset are drawn in as candidates: a) can St Aldhelm’s church be located at or near Wareham? b) can the destruction of *any* local church be dated to 1015/16?

a) It is unlikely that St Aldhelm’s church will ever be satisfactorilly located other than through serendipity and archaeological investigation. For one matter, local topography and geography have undergone considerable changes over the last eight centuries since William of Malmesbury’s description – Poole Harbour, for example, loses an average of one acre at high water neaptides every three years, a process that has been taking place since at least the Neolithic period. (90) It is also possible that William of Malmesbury was simply mistaken, or there was an error either in his original manuscript or a subsequent scribal recension, and that St Aldhelm’s church was in fact nowhere ‘near Wareham’ and for that reason has either not been found archaeologically or been identified in a later structure.
b) Archaeology has, however, established that St Martin’s church had no precursor and so cannot be even the former site of St Aldhelm’s church. Interestingly, its foundation date was once reckoned to have been about 1020, although a post-Conquest date is now preferred by some archaeologists. (91) It is worth stressing, however, that precise foundation dates can be known only through documentation, and that it is notoriously difficult to date a medieval church to within 50 years either way archaeologically *without* indisputable supporting contextual evidence, such as a coin sealed within the foundation cementing, for example. With St Martin’s, no such evidence has yet been found, so it remains a possibility that St Martin’s was sacked by Cnut in 1015/16 and rebuilt by him within a decade (but *after* July 1017 – see n81), using the same material, two events so close together that they would be unlikely to reveal themselves archaeologically but which would be entirely consistant with Cnut’s psychological progress at that period of his life.

8) *Cnutonian Fragments.*

So far, this paper has concerned itself with the major folk-legends associated with Cnut the Great, but there are numberless minor or passing references to him in various local beliefs, and we may end this study by briefly outlining a representative selection.

Cnut never enjoyed direct rule in Scotland, but a Scottish folk-legend associated with him purports to survive from his formal subjugation of Malcolm II in 1027. A small peninsula known as Knoydart in the northwest Highlands by the Sound of Sleat is thought to mean 'Cnut's Inlet' as a reference to it. (92) Inverness is, however, too far north to have been directly responsible as the subjugation had taken place in Cumbria, and no reason can be found for the additional long journey through difficult territory. On the other hand, a more recent historical account of the subjugation suggests that Cnut may have reached as far as the Tay on the other side of Scotland. (93) If so, then some might say that perhaps Cnut made it to Knoydart after all.

The problem here is that the settlement of the peninsula in question dates to 1309, when it was known as *Knodworath/Cnoideart/Knockaird/An Cnoc Ard* in various local linguistic forms. Although these have been interpreted as meaning 'Knut's Fjord', Knoydart has known associations with another historical Knut – an otherwise little-known rebel from Northumbria who escaped to the peninsula, and who is also linked by rival tradition to the place-name. In this case, we must assume that the two Cnuts have been confused, although the memory of *both* men have thus been preserved. The absence of personal folklore does usually indicate the absence of the person in question, and Cnut's association with Scotland was slight; he never went to Wales or Ireland, for example, and both Welsh and Irish Cnutonian folklore is entirely absent.

A persistent tradition has associated the Knot-bird (*Calidris canutus*), of the Sandpiper (*Scolopacidae*) family, with Cnut as they were also thought to be from Denmark and as such were his favourite birds; also, as waders, they spent much of their time splashing about on the tide-line, like a certain Danish king. They may well have been Cnut's favourite birds, but a more plausible derivation of the common name is onomatopoeic: 'knot' spoken with the back of the throat imitates the low, grunting call of the bird, the word not known in this context before the 15th century. The association with Cnut is not known in literature before Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* of 1612, subsequently confirmed by William Camden and eventually given systematic authority with the Latin tag by Carl Linnaeus in the 18th century.

A similar tradition in Lancashire associates Cnut with the cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*), a member of the Rose family, which they know as the 'Knoutberry' on account of the roving monarch who was said to have preserved himself and his forces on their fruit during a forced march.

Problems with this tradition are legion, but interesting. This subalpine shrub is found only in the north of England and rarely fruits here because of the preponderance of male plants – but it *does* fruit often in Scandinavia where the sexes are in balance. On the other hand, the fruit makes poor eating, and another common name is the Nowtberry, in North Yorkshire, because, apparently, it tastes of 'nowt very much'. The received view is that both 'knot' and 'cloud' (from OE *clud*) derive from the 'hills' on which the plant is generally found. It may, though, be a tranference of some Scandinavian association with Cnut – perhaps genuine – that has become lost in the trasfer. But more interesting is the kernel of historical truth respecting Cnut's mobility – his was the most travelled court in British history up until the following century – and the marching army, which may refer to the long drive up to Cumbria in 1027.

Cnut's greatest early victory over the Anglo-Saxons was at the battle of 'Assandun' ('Ass's Hill'; 'Ash-tree Hill') in October 1016, a site now identified as Ashingdon in southeast Essex, just north of Southend-on-Sea. However, a tradition claims the site as Ashdon, a few miles southeast of Cambridge, where Cnut buried the pagan Danish dead under the seven (now four) spectacular round barrows known as the Bartlow Hills, north of Ashdon and now in Cambridgeshire. Proof of this is that Dane-wort proliferates there, and that these plants acquired their name from the Danish blood that nurtured them.

Danewort, also known as Dane Weed, is the dwarf elder (*Sambucus ebulus*) whose stems and leaves turn blood-red in September, the same colour as the juice squeezed out of their black fruit. Since the plant prefers undisturbed ground, barrows and battlefields certainly make the ideal place for it (rather like red poppies after the Battle of Waterloo). The Anglo-Saxon name for the plant is *wealwyrt*, indicating either its foreign origins or, in this legendary connection, its nurturing by foreigners' blood. This association was first made in literary sources in the 15th century when the old Latin name for the plant, *ebullum* (contrived by the Roman poet Vergilius Maro) , was said to have come from *ebullio* for the 'ebullition' of blood, again expanded on and confirmed by William Camden.

This etymology is a nonsense, and the barrows probably date to the late-Iron-Age, but the folklore is real enough and perhaps retains a local memory of some other battle between Saxons and Danes, with or without Cnut the Great. It is interesting that the blood connection is known in Scandinavia where in Southern Sweden where dwarf elder is known as *mannablod* ('Men's Blood'), in this case nurtured by Danish/Swedish blood. It must aslo be noted that exactly the same belief is associated with the Iron Age hill-fort of Borough Hill at Davenport, Northamptonshire, first written down by Daniel Defoe in his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26). All the Bartlow Hills elements are here also present, other than the noticeable absence of Cnut the Great. (94)

Notes and References

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Abbreviations used: CHS: Camden Historical Society; DB: Domesday Book; EP-NS: English Place-Names Society; PCAS: Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society; PDNHAS: Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Society; RS: Rolls Series; RCHM: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments; VCH: Victoria County History.

1) Medieval chronicles are full of eulogistic references: ‘Cnut the most Christian king’ (*Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis* RS 83: lxxx 125); ‘illustrious king’ (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Worcester MS 1023); ‘pious and religious king of the English’ (Symeon of Durham, *Historia Ecclesiae Dunhelmensis* RS 75: III viii). These went far beyond monastic convention, but it should be borne in mind that Ramsey Abbey – always particularly kind to Cnut – was the only major abbey (with Bath) to still be in English hands after the death of the Conqueror, and may also have upheld Cnut as a symbol against the enforced changes instituted by the invading Norman dynasty.
2) Laurence Larson, *Canute the Great and the Rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age* (New York, 1912), 310.
3) Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 3rd ed. 1971), 397.
4) Dean Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Copenhagen, 1958), L.414.
5) Russell Gole in *Notes & Queries* I:8, 24 Dec. 1852, 617.
6) Samuel Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (London, 1849) ii 711.
7) William Camden, *Magna Britannia* (London, 1720), I 286; also ‘Canutesford’.
8) John Leland, *Itinerary* (London, 1964), v 24.
9) Nicholas Carlisle, *A Topographical Dictionary of England* (London 1808), I ‘Knutsforde’.
10) DB 26: 9/13; EP-NS xlv (1970) ii 72-78 supports OD *knútr* and OE *ford*, noting Knot(t)esford(e/is) and Knut(e)sford(e) as variants from 1281 and 1294 respectively.
11) *Canotus* (Adhémar de Chabannes, 1030); *Canuc* (Raoul Glaber, 1040); *Cnuth* (Galfredus Gaimar, 1150); *Chnuht* (Annals of Hildesheim, 1050); *Knout* (Robert of Gloucester, 1270); *Cnuto* (John of Fordun, 1380); while *Cnutus, Canutus, Canuti* and *Cnutonis* are just a few of the Latin nominative variants found up to about 1500.
12) *The Domesday Book: England’s Heritage Then and Now* (London, 1985), 49-51.
13) Charles Bennett, *The Story of Knutsford* (Knutsford, 1976), 1.
14) Rev. D. Lysons & S. Lysons, *Lysons Magna Britannia* (London, 1808), II ii 386.
15) Martin Brunnarius, *The Windmills of Sussex* (Chichester, 1979), 1.
16) VCH Chester I 259.
17) Gillian Fellows Jensen, *Scandanavian Settlement in the Danelaw in the Light of the Place-Names of Denmark* (Odense, 1977), 133-45.
18) DB 20: 3/1. It was *Cnotting* by 1163 and *Cnotinges* by 1224.
19) Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Place-Names* (Oxford, 1960), 282.
20) M.Gelling/W.Nicolaisen/M.Richards, *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain* (London, 1970), 120.
21) Alfred Ingham, *Cheshire, its Traditions and History* (Edinburgh, 1920), 22.
22) John of Fordun, *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation* IV xli.
23) *Britannia, op.cit.* (London, 2nd enlarged ed. 1806), II 249.
24) J.Wise & W.M.Noble, *Ramsey Abbey* (1881; Huntingdon, 1981), 95. The fishing rights would have belonged to the abbot, not to Cnut. Possibly this Bodsey appendix remembers some sort of trade agreement.
25) VCH Cambridgeshire IV 123; see EP-NS xix 207-08 for all the variant spellings.

26) *Britannia op.cit.* II 248. In this 1808 revised edition, it is pointed out (Add. 255) that the dyke was known before Cnut's time.

27) *Chronica Majora*, RS 57: I 509.

28) VCH Cambridgeshire VII 67.

29) Larson, *Canute, op.cit.* 314.

30) VCH Cambridgeshire II 6; RCHM N-E Cambridgeshire II 144.

31) *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, RS 52: II 154-55.

32) This river, named as the *Wusan*, is either the Wissey in one edition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Garmonsway, 1953) or the Ouse in another (Whitelock, 1961). In the most recent edition (Swanton, 1996), it is 'possibly the Ouse'. Both rivers, however, are more-or-less in the opposite direction to William of Malmesbury's location.

33) H.C.Darby, *The Medieval Fenland* (Newton Abbot, 1974), 1-14.

34) W.T.Potts, *The Pre-Danish Estates of Peterborough Abbey*, PCAS lxv (1974) 22-23.

35) The parallel between this story and the New Testament plight of the Disciples on Lake Gennesaret (Matt 8:26-27; Mk 4:35-41; and Lk 8:22-25) is obvious. See 'Who Commands the Tides?' on this website.

36) Permanent causeways were not constructed until at least 1109, until when it was possible to access the eastern and western ends of the island's southern shore during dry seasons only. See G.Fowler, *Fenland Waterways, Past and Present, South Level District Part II* PCAS xxxiv (1934) 17-33; also Darby *op.cit.* 106ff.

37) *Liber Eliensis* CHS lxlii (1962) II:85 153 'Qua difficultate ad suam festivitatem rex Canutus in Ely pervenit et, de longe audiens monachos, cantilena composuit'.

38) *Ibid*. 154.

39)

Dulce cantaverunt monachi in Ely,	[The monks sang sweetly in Ely
dum Canutus rex navigate prope ibi;	as Cnut the king rowed by;
Nunc milites navigate propius ad terram,	Row, fellows, nearer the land,
et simul audiamus monachorum armoniam.	and let us hear the monks sing.]

40) According to William Skeat (William Stubbs, *Historical Memorials of Ely Cathedral* [London, 1897], 49-52), the verse in Cnut's day would have read:

Myrige sungon tha munecas binnen Elige,
tha Cnut cyning reow be strande;
Rowath, cnihtas, nyr tham lande,
and hyre we thara muneca sang.

Skeat noted six errors between his corrected version and the one in the chronicle.

41) The years 800 to 1100 represent a distinct linguistic period known as Runic Danish, with the separation of the four Scandinavian languages noticeably completed in Cnut's time. That there was no Old Danish original of this verse is clear from the fact that there are no words analogous to *myrige* and *cnihtas* in Old East Scandinavian, and these words are germane to the alliterative style of the verse, as well as to both rhyme and rhythm. Danish *knegt* is etymologically identical with OE *cniht*, but it was a loan-word from Middle Low German at a later date. Only in OE could the word indicate a boy, youth, or any male servant, and the military implications of recent translations are ungrounded. By

the end of his reign, Cnut may have acquired a working knowledge of OE, as did William I, for example; but, unlike with the Conqueror, there is no evidence of this.

42) Larson, *Canute op.cit.* 325.

43) G.N.Garmonsway, *Canute and his Empire* (London, 1964), 26.

44) *Lysons Magna Britannia, op.cit.* II i 186 tells us that this was not the only such visit. The *Liber Eliensis, op.cit., loc.cit.*, continues with the account of how another attempt to approach Ely from Soham was frustrated by ice and how he was 'saved' by a Saxon.

45) Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to 'complete' or 'round-off' the famous verse, including a sonnet by William Wordsworth ('A pleasant music floats along the mere / From monks in Ely chanting service high') and a ballad by Arthur Cleveland Coxe ('When old Canute the Dane / Was merry England's king').

46) C.E.Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1939), 35-38.

47) The location of this 'portus pusillus' is problematical. The Ely chronicler may have been referring to a gateway of his day but which may not have existed in the time of Cnut. Since the great Norman complex was built on top of St Etheldereda's foundation, it has been difficult to determine the extent of her structure, or that constructed after the subsequent fire. A pre-Reformation plan of the essentially Norman grounds (S.Inskip Ladds, *The Site of the Medieval Monastery at Ely* [Ely, 1930]) indicates that much of the later wall has been uncovered, but with only the great Ely portal of the 14th century as an access point alongside the western Galilee porch of the cathedral. The grounds, vaguely L-shaped, measured about 300x220 metres with the abbey-cathedral occupying the base of the letter running east-west, about 35m from the north wall, with the choir approximately 700m from the new course of the Ouse to the east (the course of the Great Ouse was altered before the 13th century to its present one, but not before 1109 and Ely's novel status as a cathedral town and market centre). All that may be said with certainlty is that the earlier structure and grounds were smaller than the Norman replacement and that water completely surrounded it.

48) In a Cambridgeshire February, Prime would have been served at about 7:40am, immediately after sunrise, and Terce at about 9:00am. A monastic calendar written at Winchester and contemporary with Cnut (Rouen MS Y.6 ff6-11b, published as part of the *Missal of Robert of Jumiège* [Henry Bradshaw Society xi 1896] and alone in *Migne Patrologiae Latinae* lxxii 619-24) indicates that there was no departure from standard Benedictine practice of the early 11th century. The 'difficulty' then could well have been ice, as in the account mentioned in n45, but floating sheets rather than extensive.

49) *Liber Eliensis op.cit.* II: 78 146-47; Sir William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (London, 1846), I 459, which notes the belief that Ethelred merely confirmed a privilege first granted when the monastery was refounded in 970.

50) *Ibid. loc.cit.* n1, in which the editor corrects *Cancellari dignitatem* to 'custody of the royal sanctuary'. In other words, for four months of the year each abbey provided a legal sanctuary for alleged criminals pending judiciary investigation of their cases.

51) Dom David Knowles O.S.B., *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge, 1963), 100.

52) *Ibid.* 105-06.

53) *Ibid.* 113.

54) *Ibid.* 61.
55) W.H.Barrett, *Tales from the Fens* (London, 1963), 150-62.
56) Diana Greenway, *Historia Anglorum* (Oxford, 1996), 367-69.
57) *Lestoire des Engles,* RS 91: 4699-4701.
58) *The Story of England Volume 1* (London, 1953), chapter 5.
59) *A History of England* (London, 1895), 56.
60) *The King's England: Hampshire* (London, 1939), 353; the remark was excised from the revised (1956) edition.
61) *Romantic Britain* (London, 1950), 57.
62) *Highways & Byways in Sussex* (London, 1904), 55.
63) Barry Shurlock, *Portrait of the Solent* (London, 1983), 30.
64) Lacy Collison-Morley, *Companion into Hampshire* (London, 1940), 68.
65) Jim Cleland, *A Visitor's Guide to Sussex* (Buxton, 1985), 115. The location given is Quay Meadow, an acre of which now belongs to the National Trust; not, however, on this account but because this is from where Harald Godwinsson sailed to Normandy in 1064.
66) Angela Bromley-Martin, *Bygone Bosham* (Chichester, 1978), plate 74.
67) T.W.Horsfield, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Sussex* (1835) and M.A.Lower, *A Compendious History of Sussex* (1870).
68) VCH Sussex IV 182.
69) J.R.Armstrong, *A History of Sussex* (Chichester, 3rd ed. 1974), 48.
70) For this and the following etymologies, see: *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1894; 4th ed. Toronto 1960); *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words, Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs and Ancient Customs from the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1872); *A Glossary of the Provincialisms in use in the County of Sussex* (London, 2nd ed. 1853); *A Dictionary of the Sussex Dialect and Collections of Provincialisms in use in the County of Sussex* (1857; 2nd ed. Chichester, 1957); *English Dialect Dictionary* (Oxford, 1970); *A Middle English Dictionary Containing Words used by English Writers from the 12th to the 15th Centuries* (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1897); *Ordbog Over det Dansk Sprog* (Copenhagen, 1926); and *A National Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (Denbigh, 1891).
71) G.J.Copley, *English Place-Names and their Origins* (Newton Abbot, 1969), 132.
72) *Ibid.* 138.
73) *Romantic Britain, op.cit. loc.cit.*
74) VCH Sussex IV 186 n94.
75) Esther Meynell, *Sussex* (London, 1947), 75-76.
76) Augustus J.C. Hare, *Sussex* (London, 1896), 190.
77) Larson, *Canute, op.cit.* 321-22.
78) Lucas, *Highways, op.cit. loc.cit.*
79) *Companion Guide to Kent & Sussex* (London, 2nd ed. 1989), 452.
80) Armstrong, *Sussex, op.cit.* 49.
81) Cecil Cullingford, *A History of Dorset* (Chichester, 1980), 33. The 'profound change' in Cnut's character – a genuine if partly manipulated transformation – was the result of his baptism, which occurred sometime between his union with Emma in July 1017 and his

coronation at Winchester after the *witenagemót* at Oxford the following year [see 'The Baptism and Coronation of Cnut the Great' on this website].

82) Cecil Cullingford, *A History of Poole* (Chichester, 1988), 22.

83) Charles van Raalte (PDNHAS xxvi [1904] 187) notes the story extant in 1545 that after Cnut's subsequent sacking of Cerne Abbey he took his spoils to Brownsea Island for safe-keeping and where he noticed the hermitage of St Andrew. This he immediately destroyed, an act 'for which Canute afterwards made some reparation'. If so, this 'reparation' may have been complete rebuilding, as the hermitage remained intact until at least 1581/82 (see K.S.Jarvis, *The Chapel on Brownsea Island – a note* PDNHAS cix [1987] 139). This supposed action of Cnut, certainly not out of character for his early period, exactly fits the pattern suggested at St Martin's.

84) E.S.Duckett, *Anglo-Saxon Saints and Scholars* (New York, 1947), 70.

85) *Gesta, op. cit.* V *Vita Sancti Aldhelmi*.

86) G.S.Williams, *The Site of St Aldhelm's Church 'juxta Werham'* PDNHAS lxv (1944), 60-67.

87) E.Jackson & E.Fletcher, *St Aldhelm's Church, near Wareham* (Journal of the British Archaeological Association xxvi [1963] 1-5).

88) RCHM Dorset II ii 310.

89) Laurence Keen, *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England* (Chichester, 1984), 213.

90) V.J.May, *Reclamation and shoreline changes in Poole Harbour, Dorset* PDNHAS lxl (1968), 151.

91) D.A.Hinton & C.J.Webster, *Excavations at the Church of St Martin, Wareham* PDNHAS cix (1987), 48. The evidence presented here, while in part persuasive, is not wholly convincing. In any event, the church continues to promote itself as having a Cnutonian foundation date, now sometimes given as 1030.

92) J.B.Johnson, *The Place-Names of Scotland* (London, 1934), 35 & 231.

93) A.M.Duncan, *The Edinburgh History of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1975), I 99 & 126 n11.

94) For plants and animals in this section, with related folklore, common names, *etc.*, see Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London, 1997); Stefan Buczacki, *Fauna Britannica* (London, 2002); Roy Vickery, *A Dictionary of Plant Lore* (Oxford, 1995); and T.F.Thiselton Dyer, *The Folk-Lore of Plants* (London, 1889).

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