

The Baptism and Coronation of Cnut the Great

PRECISELY when, where, and by whom Cnut the Great (c. 994-1035) was baptised and crowned has not come down to modern historians from any conclusive original sources. However, in this paper I shall attempt to shed light on these issues by approaching the problem, at least initially, somewhat laterally, suggesting that a great deal of information lies ready to be usefully employed once the absence of precise documentary evidence has been acknowledged.*

The last two decades of relative peace and economic growth established during Cnut's reign, after almost two centuries of warfare and division in Britain, make this issue one of great significance to scholars of medieval kingship and its relationship to Christianity. Students of the Cnutonian period in Britain know only too well that after several hundred words describing events during the crucial years of Cnut's establishment as king (1016-17), the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* becomes infuriatingly silent on the subsequent nineteen years of his rule. Of course, it is regrettably the case that medieval chronicles, as with modern newspapers, preferred to consider bad news as the only news worth reporting, and this is a pattern often repeated with the other contemporary accounts of Cnut's reign. The problem is compounded by the substitution of entirely, or at best semi-fictional, historical interpolations used as moral instruction by chroniclers who themselves had no solid material to work with; one thinks in particular of Henry of Huntingdon's celebrated quasi-folkloric inversion of 'Cnut and the tides'.

But this silence does coincide usefully with the overall pattern Cnut's reign displayed; one that should be borne in mind, and which may be represented thus:

Cnut I 1015-17: *attitude marked by ostentatious brutality.*

Cnut II 1018-c.27: *reign exhibits immediate decrease in acts of needless violence; growth of personal wisdom, governmental stability, and acts of piety. Military achievements abroad.*

Cnut III c.1027-35: *delegation of responsibility; withdrawal from public life; disintegration of empire.*

In common with all such breakdowns, this is certainly simplistic; but the two periods of change a decade apart have not and cannot be challenged. It is the first of these remarkable transitions, marking the point between Cnut I and Cnut II, with which this paper will be principally concerned; not because baptism in itself represented a Paulician road to Damascus for Cnut, but because it formed the central part of a concerted attempt, by certain members of the English church, to extract something of the Christian lamb from the viking lion whose inevitable reign presented an unusual potential for the betterment of their nation. It was clear to them from the outset that he had the necessary qualities to achieve this – qualities that had so often been conspicuously lacking in his predecessors for at least thirty years.

The Baptism

Professor Freeman believed that Cnut had been baptised in 1016 during the period of conquest,¹ but subsequently contradicted himself by supposing that this alleged rite ‘can hardly refer to his baptism. I suspect therefore that it refers to confirmation, and that Cnut was confirmed at the time of the Southampton election’.² Professor Larson, writing some fifty years later in a book that was to become the standard work for eighty years, accepted this notion of ‘confirmation’, but suggested an even earlier date for the baptism, certainly before Cnut’s conquest of England:

Canute was a Christian, probably baptised in his youth by some German ecclesiastic, as the Christian name Lambert, which in harmony with custom was added to the one that he already possessed, seems distinctly German. But the new name was evidently not much employed, except, perhaps, on occasion when the King wished to emphasize his Christian character. He seemed to have entered into some sort of fraternal relations with the monks of Bremen; in the book of our brotherhood, says Adam the monk, he is named Lambert, King of the Danes.³

In the most recent general study of Cnut, by Dr Lawson, ‘it is fairly clear that Cnut, who received the name Lambert at his baptism, was a Christian when he acquired the English throne’.⁴

The detailed examination of all the relevant extracts from primary sources used to establish this view, and also some that have not, bears consideration. Larson admitted that the Aquitanian chronicler Adh mar de Chabannes (*ob.* 1034) implied that Cnut’s baptism took place *after* his conquest of England:

Rex vero Canotus de Danamarcha paganus, mortuo Adalrado rege Anglorum, regnum ejus dolo cepit, et reginam Anglorum in conjugium accepit, quæ erat comitis Rotomensis Richardi, et factus Christianus, utraque regna tenuit, et quoscumque potuit ex paganis de Danamarcha ad fidem Christi pertraxit.⁵

In fact, the implication is rather a strong one. This passage does not appear in the earliest of the three chief manuscripts of Adh mar’s chronicle, which can be dated to about 1020-30; in other words, while Cnut was still alive.⁶ Since the two versions that do contain this passage are not in Adh mar’s hand, we may conjecture that they were separated in time from his. We may further conjecture that the original autograph had been composed either when Cnut had not yet been baptised, or when news of it had not reached Adh mar, while the scribes who prepared the subsequent versions were aware of the event and so inserted it. And surely the point here is that had Cnut’s baptism taken place in his childhood it would not have occasioned any remark at all.

Another contemporary chronicler, Raoul Glaber (*ob. c.* 1044), I shall argue also implied the same in his brief and very garbled note on Cnut:

Canuc inserviens jurgiis, ad postremum tamen predicti Richardi Rotomagorum ducis ejusque sororis persuasionibus pro Dei amore omni prorsus deposita feritate, mittis effectus in pace deguit. Insuper et Scotorum regem amicicie gratia diligens illiusque filium de sacro baptismatis fonte excepit.⁷

A third, Guillaume de Jumi ge (*ob. c.* 1071), makes this oblique reference in the course of noting Cnut’s union with Emma of Normandy:

Rex igitur Chenotus, audita morte regis, suorum consulat fidelium, precavens in futurum, Emmam reginam, abstractam ab urbe, post aliquot dies sibi junxit christiano more, dans pro illa cuncto exercitu in auro et argento pensum illius corporis.⁸

Some seventy-five years after Cnut's death, the Anglo-Norman monk of St Evroul, Orderic Vitalis (*ob. c. 1142*), when comparing Cnut against his father Swegn I 'Forkbeard' (*ob. 1014*) says 'Chunutus autem christianus factus est; et Emmam Edelredi regis relictam cum medietate regni coniugem sortitus est'.⁹ Three centuries after Vitalis there is evidence that a post-conquest conversion to Christianity was still accepted in some literary quarters, derived from an interpolation in the anonymous fifteenth-century translation of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon*, which states: 'Thaughe Canutus the kynge come to Ynglande a pagan, he was *soon after* convertede to the feithe of Criste, and devoute in his servyce'.¹⁰

Larson believed that Adhémar's implication, though clear to him, 'cannot be so weighty as that of the records of the church of Bremen',¹¹ as noted by the canon Adam (*ob. c. 1081*) in the thirty-eighth *scholium* to his *Gesta Pontificum Hamburgensis Ecclesiae*, composed in the 1070s. This refers to the capitula headed 'Dani Angliam navigant', and states:

Knut, filius Swein regis, abjecto nomine gentilitatis, in baptismo Lambertus nomen accepit. Under scriptum est in libro fraternitatis nostrae 'Lambrecht, Rex Danorum, et Imma regina et Knut, filius eorum, devote se commendaverunt orationibus fratrum Bremensium'.¹²

But these 'records' are in fact nothing of the kind, and the 'fraternal relations' – actually the commemoration of Cnut and Emma in the litany of the Divine Office – may be explained in a more obvious and commonplace manner.

The early bishoprics of Denmark were founded under the auspices of Cnut after their uncertain origins under his grandfather Harald Bluetooth (*ob. c. 988*), whose baptism occurred in about 960 at the behest of Emperor Otto I. These early Jutland bishops were ordained in the empire and made suffragan to the powerful and important metropolitan see of Hamburg-Bremen, headquarters (at Hamburg before the amalgamation in 845) of missionary work in Scandinavia since Pope Gregory VI. Iceland's episcopacy remained vacant until 1056 when Ísleifur, the son of Gizur the White who had persuaded Icelanders to accept Christianity in 1000, became first bishop of Skáholt. He had been educated and ordained by Archbishop Adalbert of Bremen, but until then the archbishop had been diocesan *in locum tenens*. This association with Bremen was of the utmost importance to Skáholt, which even attempted to establish itself as a patriarchate.

It was during Cnut's reign that the Danish church was finally organized and permanently established within the national mentality, and German ecclesiastics were certainly employed by Cnut as they penetrated Denmark from England; one had been ordained by Archbishop Æthelnoth of Canterbury.¹³ If for Cnut's sympathetic aid and posthumous reputation the brotherhood of Bremen rewarded him by remembering him in their daily prayers they did no more than any ecclesiastical centre for numerous benefactors either of the church in general or their house in particular. This cannot be used as evidence that Cnut was baptised at Bremen, in addition to which the remark was not, of course, at all contemporary. It should also be noted that Cnut did enter into confraternity with the community at Christchurch, Canterbury, in 1018 after confirming what was probably a forged charter, and this was entered into a contemporary gospel,¹⁴ but none has drawn the conclusion from this that Cnut may have been baptised in the cathedral in Canterbury, a point that will be examined in due course.

This is not all, however, and Cnut's association with Bremen may stem from a visit in 1027. According to the received view, after the battle of 'Holy River' in Sweden in the autumn of 1026, Cnut spent the winter in Scandinavia before undertaking a

celebrated penitential journey to Rome early in the New Year, in time to be present there for Easter. He took a leisurely and circuitous route east along the German coast – in other words passing Bremen – to Flanders, and then either via Kent or straight through Lorraine to Italy, visiting many ecclesiastical establishments along the way. Dr Lawson has cast enough doubt on the enormous contradictions surrounding the date of this journey to Rome – whether 1027 or 1030/31 – and has even postulated two journeys covering both dates, since the 1027 journey cannot be removed.¹⁵ Certainly we may agree with him that the matter should no longer be pressed unduly, though it is still unclear why, without exception, English chroniclers referred to the presumed second visit alone if this was not an error universally copied from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the 1027 journey. Although many of these religious centres have preserved pious accounts of Cnut's visit and Bremen has not, it is probable that he did visit this important centre in 1027 and/or 1030/31. Either way, Adam's (or, of course, the scholiast's) brief reference may be a vestige of it, and nothing more.

If negative evidence can be employed, there is a fine example of it from Germany itself. Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg (*ob.* 1018), in a comment on Cnut's accession to the English throne noted in March 1018, compares him – with literary ingenuity and effective Biblical symbolism – to the hybrid reptile known as the basilisk: 'In Anglis triginta navium habitatores piratae a rege eorum, Suennis regis filio, Deo Gratias occisi sunt: et qui prius cum patre huius erat inuasor et assiduus destructor provinciae, nunc solus sedit defensor, ut in Libicis harenis cultore vacuis'.¹⁶ Once again, we have the notion that a man who entered the 'sands of the Libyan desert' (a literary motif for the state of England) like a basilisk rapidly became its saviour. Thietmar was writing just two hundred miles away from Adam of Bremen, and it seems unlikely that he would have made no reference to a pre-conquest baptism to contrast it with Cnut's behaviour – especially a German baptism at Bremen, or by Bremen churchmen – if there had been one. Thietmar had good access to current knowledge through having a large and far-flung literate family, and such an event would probably not have simply escaped his attention. It should be noted that his detailed account of the repulsion of this viking fleet is the sole source for the incident, which does not appear to be spurious.

Both Larson's argument for a pre-conquest baptism, and Freeman's implication of the same, hinged on one apparent fact. They noted that Osbern, precentor and subprior of Christchurch, Canterbury, stated that hieromonk Æthelnoth had anointed Cnut with Holy Chrism some time prior to the translation of the relics of St Ælfheah (martyred by Danes in 1012) in 1023. This suggested to Freeman and Larson that this rite must have represented what they called 'confirmation', and indicated to them, as has been noted, that baptism must therefore have occurred some time earlier. Osbern's words are:

... directa legatione vocavit Egelnothum Archiepiscopum, qui tunc temporis sumum in sancta Dorobernensi Ecclesia gerebat sacerdotium; vir sanctus et bonus, et Regi propterea quod illum sancto Crismato livisset valde acceptus. Qui Sabbato vigilarum Pentecostes Lundoniam adveniens, mandavit Regi in balneas forte descendenti se adesse, et quid ipse velit statuere in Ecclesia Beati Pauli Apostoli expectare.¹⁷

Since Osbern is known to have been still living in 1088, he cannot have been more than a small boy in 1023, and in fact it seems that he derived all his information about both the martyrdom and translation from Godric the Dean, one of St Ælfheah's students.¹⁸

What is far worse than relying on the evidence of a boy, however, is working from the ignorance resulting from the religious prejudice to which both Freeman and Larson were subject. As Protestant scholars, they committed the unpardonable error of interpreting medieval ecclesiastical history through the narrow limits imposed on them by their relatively novel faith. The translation of the body commenced on 8 June, arrived at Canterbury three days later, and was liturgically translated to the High Altar on 15 June.¹⁹ On such an occasion it would have been church practice to administer to all present at Divine Liturgy not the *olea sacra* of the second sacrament, but the *Chrisma sacra* of the ancient ritual of ‘Mirochrystos’, to which we may cautiously suppose Osbern referred, administered on the day the translation of the relics were liturgically celebrated, one octave after their removal from ‘St Paul’s’ in London. It should be noted that this translation had been effected in the face of considerable opposition from London, and the presence of a Christian king who accepted such an anointing from Æthelnoth underscored, for Osbern, Canterbury’s right to have the relics of the martyr.

It cannot be stated too strongly that even if Osbern had been referring to *olea sacra* then he still could not have intended ‘confirmation’, and once again Freeman and Larson confused nineteenth-century Protestant church practice with medieval canon law, since at whatever period Cnut received this rite it must have included full baptism. Since the formulation of the rite of baptism in the fourth century, the early and medieval church *always* combined the first and second sacraments to form one continuous rite, which did not become separated by the now customary seven to twelve years (at any rate in the West) until the thirteenth century. At whatever time Cnut received this rite, it must have been immediately preceded by the thrice total corporal immersion in blessed water (as was also immutable practice), and the notion of separating the two sacraments would have been alien to a churchman of Cnut’s day. Furthermore, this baptism cannot have occurred in Cnut’s infancy or boyhood. Baptism was a privilege of wisdom and sin, and therefore of adulthood, and was not administered to those who were unable to understand it, or had not yet sinned and therefore on early death would automatically be acceptable to God.²⁰

Larson, following Freeman, at least argued correctly that this rite – whatever it may have been – could not refer to Cnut’s coronation as this could not have been performed by a minor ecclesiastic, and he therefore placed the baptism itself in the winter of 1015, or early in 1016, when both Æthelnoth and Cnut are known to have been together in the south of England. But Larson ought to have known that at least half of what we should know about medieval history is simply missing, and to ascribe an event to a date merely on account of a slender known association, rather than to one that may not have survived on parchment but which may make better sense, has little to recommend it other than intellectual comfort. An appreciation of the evolution of Cnut’s Christian character makes implausible – if not frankly ridiculous – the suggestion that he should have voluntarily submitted to baptism and all it implied in the pre-Reformation Church during Cnut I, a period of great, and sometimes perhaps even unnecessary, brutality. If this were the case, then supporters of this early date should be obliged to originate another theory as to why Cnut altered his attitude so dramatically in 1018; and this they have not done.

It is also unnecessary to suppose, as Larson did, that an ecclesiastic in Germany – or one from Germany – *must* have baptised Cnut as Æthelnoth would not have given him the German name Lambert. That Cnut carried this baptismal name is certain since apart from the somewhat later Adam of Bremen the contemporary *Leofric Missal* records the death, on 11 November 1035, of ‘Landberti piissimi regis’.²¹ The most

celebrated *exemplum* of this surname was the martyr St Lambert (Landebertus) of Maestricht, or Liège (*ob. c. 705*), and Larson was correct to observe that this saint and his name in its Continental orthography was unknown in England before the importation of popular stories concerning him during the vigorous Flemish contact of the twelfth century. But even ignoring the possibility that Æthelnoth might have had the proselytizing bishop in mind a century earlier, Larson was unaware that there *was* an Anglo-Saxon equivalent, derived from the same compound roots, which was *laenbeorht*, or more distantly *Ead(Ean)briht(berht)*.²²

Æthelnoth the Good, who was a sage and a scholar, would have known that one of the archbishops of Canterbury had been St *laenbeorht* (*ob. 792*), whose vigorous support of Egbert II of Kent (*ob. c. 780*) against the *Bretwalda* Offa, king of Mercia (*ob. 796*), earned for himself a rapid *cultus* as the defender of Canterbury's primacy against Offa's successful – albeit temporary – attempt to carve Lichfield out of Canterbury and make it the new archiepiscopacy. But there is even one more possibility: as the grandson of Æthelweard the Chronicler, who in turn was the grandson of Alfred the Great's brother, Æthelnoth must also have known – so proud of his lineage we know him to have been – that through Egbert of Wessex he was descended from Eadberht II Praen of Kent (*ob. 798*). Thus although the Continental inspiration is not rejected, there is the possibility, much closer to Æthelnoth's heart, that he theoretically bestowed on Cnut the baptismal name *laenbeorht*, or *Eanbriht* in one of its forms, but who was known in practice as *Lambrecht* (or one of its variant forms), as this would have been closer to Cnut's knowledge of the name. For the same reason, no Continental monk – least of all one writing in Latin – would have used an old Anglo-Saxon form but would have automatically employed the one with which he was familiar.

I have argued against infant, boyhood, or conquest baptism. But then when might Cnut have been baptised? One aspect of Cnut's life has not yet been broached, one that figures rather prominently in most of the original sources. Emma of Normandy (*ob. 1052*), Cnut's consort, was the sister of Richard II, duke of Normandy – or Rouen, as the contemporary chroniclers put it, as the see of Rouen (the capital) was then virtually synonymous with the duchy of Normandy. Adhémar and Glaber in particular suggest a close connection between Duke Richard and Cnut's change of character, while Orderic Vitalis and Guillaume de Jumièges imply that the transition followed Cnut's union with Emma, whose politically-motivated union with Cnut took place in July 1017.²³

If so, this would have been only natural, for the Norman settlers by this time took their faith – or at least professed faith – as seriously as their Capetian and Salian neighbours, and this entailed the observation of religious form perhaps even more closely than pious content. The first self-styled 'duke' of Normandy, Rollo, according to Dudo of St Quentin (*ob. c. 1043*), made baptism a condition of future ducal rule,²⁴ and Richard II made his faith public by turning his father's church at Fécamp – served by secular canons – into a notable Cluniac house. Glaber, in an often-quoted and much abused passage, said of this period that the 'world' – actually perhaps no more than the districts of Lyons and Sens – seemed to be shaking off its old age and dressing itself in 'a white mantle of churches'.²⁵ This, an architectural comment, we may interpret as the flourishing Romanesque ambitions of the early Norman dukes, rather than as millenarianistic eschatology.

Richard II died at Fécamp on 28 August 1026 and was briefly replaced by his eldest son Richard III, who held the duchy for less than a year, during which time he disputed possession of it with his brother Robert before his death solved the issue at

Rouen on 3 February 1027. Robert I remained duke of Normandy until shortly before Cnut died. Meanwhile, he formed an alliance with Cnut's sister Estrith, then almost immediately repudiated her and possibly even contemplated an invasion of England of behalf of Æthelræd's exiled sons; products of course, of Emma's former union with the dead king. Cnut's bloodless subjugation – probably a compact between monarchs – of Malcolm II of Scotland took place in 1027, after his journey to Rome and therefore not sooner than the beginning of May at the earliest.²⁶ He was attending the imperial coronation of Konrad II on Easter Sunday, which in 1027 fell on 26 March. Even if Cnut returned to England directly, a medieval journey from Rome to Kent could not – and never was – completed in less than one month, which record seems to be held by Richard I Plantagenet.²⁷ To this we would have to add the time taken to assemble a force and move it into Cumbria through Cheshire – the eastern side of Scotland.²⁸

In any event, Richard III would have been dead by the time of the subjugation, yet Glaber refers to Richard and not Robert. Dr Lawson suggests that Glaber, who was in Italy in 1028, may have had his information from people who had been told it when Cnut had been in Rome the previous year,²⁹ in which case the informants were singularly unhelpful, and in any case could not have provided Glaber with Scottish knowledge, as of course the subjugation took place after their return. At any rate, Glaber seems to be referring to events that had taken place in one year (1027), and it is possible to suppose that it was Cnut's sister Estrith who was intended by 'ejusque sororis', and the late Richard III by 'Richardi rotomagorum ducis'.³⁰ But in such a case the facts make no sense, because Richard III's hold on the duchy was insecure, and it is not likely that he had anything like his father's influence with Cnut, if any at all. Estrith had previously been joined to Jarl Ulf, whom Cnut appointed regent in Denmark, and who then probably helped orchestrate the rebellion of 1026 that led to the battle of 'Holy River' and his death. What part – if any – Estrith played in the uprising against her brother is unclear, but what is certain is that she did not have great influence over him.

The best reading of this intriguing but abstruse passage is that Glaber, who could not have intended events of 1018 when Malcolm invaded and annexed Lothian against the men of Durham, since Cnut was not involved in this as his conquering forces had just been disbanded, must have leaped from the union of Cnut and Emma to the subjugation of Malcolm. Glaber is therefore referring, anachronistically, to Richard II and *his* sister Emma. The mention of the 'son' in 1027 is another aspect of the confused passage. It is difficult to twist even Glaber's poor grammar to propose that the son mentioned belonged to Malcolm, who had three daughters (married off years earlier) and no sons.³¹ Dr Lawson suggests that this may have been an otherwise unknown son of the king.³² However, in view of the assiduity with which the lives of royal progeny have always been chronicled, this is highly unlikely, particularly as the son in question would have been an only one. In addition, we would have to ask what Glaber could have meant by his statement, as the concept of 'godparent' was taken very seriously in the medieval church, and would have been recorded in every official register and by every pious chronicler.

But there is in fact no need to postulate the existence of Malcolm's son at all. The child must surely belong to Cnut. Swegen (*ob.* 1035) and Harald (*ob.* 1040) were sons of the union between Cnut and Ælgifu of Northampton, his first consort taken on to gain a local footing, but for whom he acquired an affection that rendered her his concubine after 1017. Harthacnut's (*ob.* 1042) date of birth is unknown, but certainly fell within two years of Cnut's union with Emma of Normandy. Once Glaber's

anachronism is understood, we may conjecture that the ‘*persuasionibus pro Dei amore*’ by Richard II and Emma belongs to the marriage terms of 1017, and the violence to the period of conquest that the union terminated with the promise to bring a male heir – whom Glaber made already living – into the world as a Christian.

Cnut’s position in England before 1018 was not as secure as may be supposed. He had been accepted as sea-king of his father’s forces in 1015, accepted as potential king at Southampton in April 1016, and as king of the West Saxons on the death of Edmund II in November 1016. He then ruled for a further year as conqueror, establishing a firm military presence while consolidating his rule by gaining the trust and respect of his new subjects, as with his marriage to Ælgifu of Northampton, whose father had been an ealdorman. As though by theory of extension, Cnut’s union with Emma sought to promote similar results, but on a wider scale, removing the threat of ducal intervention from Normandy. His full regnal rights in England were not finally observed until the *witanagemót* at Oxford in the summer of 1018 at which Archbishop Wulfstan II of York presented him with the ‘codes of King Edgar’ by which he would agree to rule.

What becomes clear from the transition to Cnut II is the extent to which religious men and women successfully influenced and guided their new monarch, meeting with little or no resistance. To suggest that Cnut humoured the clergy in order to maintain his power would be a modern notion stemming from a society rooted in cynicism and unbelief. Æthelnoth had clearly been appointed as Cnut’s spiritual guardian since although there is no documentary evidence to support this church practice at the time made it the prerogative of a bishop or spiritual guardian to select and bestow a baptismal name, and it is as certain that Æthelnoth selected the name as it is that he was not a bishop. Wulfstan of York also influenced Cnut, in particular with respect to Cnut’s wise adoption of existing legal consuetudes,³³ and it is not difficult to picture a viking under Christian tutelage from Æthelnoth through Wulfstan to the abbess of Shaftesbury, where in fact he died from an unspecified sickness while the court was on the move.

I argue, then, that Cnut was joined to Emma of Normandy on the understanding that he should already be baptised, or shall have made arrangements to be baptised before his coronation. It should be noted that Christian marriage with a heathen was not proscribed in canon law, provided that – following the case of some of the Apostles – a swearing to proselytise the heathen partner was undertaken by the Christian one, and a swearing to undergo such conversion was undertaken by the heathen partner. Since the union between Cnut and Emma had been a political one, we may conjecture that Emma and Richard insisted on at least a nominally Christian husband as part of the deal that ensured stability with Normandy. From the point of view of the English church, this conversion would bring Cnut in line with his political peers on the Continent. The situation in England after St Dunstan would by itself have obliged Cnut to rule as a Christian king, but in fact the whole socio-political world was on the threshold of momentous reforms in the papacy, monastic life, and popular spirituality. For an international political figure with imperial aspirations to be still adhering to heathen customs in the age of Lanfranc, Peter Damien, Pope Sylvester II, and Cardinal Humbert of Silva-Candida, would have resulted in political suicide, and I suspect in practice not even possible.

Church tradition, based on theological reasoning, requires that catechumens be baptised, where practically possible, on the feast day of their personal patron saint, with whose earthly lives they are then inextricably bound up and are obliged to emulate. I have argued that common sense dictates St Ikenberht of Canterbury as

Cnut's name-saint, whose feast day falls on 12 August. Both 1017 and 1018 therefore present themselves as possibilities, a question to which I shall return when discussing the coronation.

To identify the location of the baptism does present certain additional problems, since unlike a coronation, a baptism may be an entirely private affair. What can be said is that baptism by a priest alone was uncanonical, and a bishop must have been present. However, had he been a prelate of archiepiscopal rank, or enormous influence, it is likely that a record of the baptism would have survived. Little more than this may be said in the light of current knowledge, but it may tentatively be supposed that Cnut's very close association with New Minster and Nunnaminster at Winchester was not merely the acknowledgement of England's arguably most important town. His extravagant donations to the monasteries, and choice of burial in New Minster (where his remains still lie), may result from his having been baptised there at the very least. If imaginative speculation may be married to the interpretation of serious historical practice in the absence of documents, it only needs to be noted that in the early and medieval church adult converts preferred, where possible, to end their Christian lives where they began them. In such a case, the bishop would have been Ælfsige II (1015-32), presumably assisted by Æthelnoth.

The Coronation

A heathen king-to-be may marry a Christian, but he cannot be crowned unbaptised, and the last possible day for such a baptism – and then only in theory – would have been the day before the coronation. But what did a coronation mean in Cnut's day? In Anglo-Saxon England the full anointing of a monarch was practised according to the several references contained in the Old Testament, based in practice on the highly-developed Carolingian tradition. Under St Dunstan, and until the early twelfth century, coronation was considered a sacrament not distinct from that of ordaining a bishop, and Cnut's coronation fell roughly mid-way in the historical period that accepted the 'pentecostal' nature of royal anointing at its most fundamental level.³⁴

A king's coronation, in this period, was always theologically linked to a feast in the Christian calendar with which a significant association could be derived, endowing it with a biblical legitimacy, potency, and authority it would otherwise not have had. The three principle feasts in the calendar were Easter Sunday, Pentecost (or Whitsun, the seventh Sunday after Easter), and Christmas Day, which from their pre-Christian origins (Anglo-Saxon/Teutonic *Eostre*; Hebrew *ruah*; Mithraic *sol invictus*) contained the sense of re-birth and spiritual endowment.³⁵

A hasty coronation on some other day was never encouraged, as it would be self-defeating. Expediency must, occasionally, prevail of course, and St Edward the Martyr's coronation was arranged by St Dunstan in order to frustrate his opposition, and after he was murdered, on 18 March 979, his brother Ætheræd was crowned, by SS Dunstan and Oswald, two weeks after Easter on Sunday 14 April. The necessity for the speedy coronation of a murdered king's brother – who has never been fully exonerated – does not require emphasis. But what should be noted is that this emergency coronation was often subsequently viewed with suspicion, to the extent that accusations of illegitimacy were made, a situation that always arose when a coronation was not dignified and relaxed.

Dr Lawson, following an interpretation of Radulph de Diceto, dean of St Paul's in London, and Gervase of Canterbury, believes Cnut to have been crowned and anointed either at Southampton in April 1016 or London later in the same year.³⁶

Freeman, misled by the same sources, stated that there was ‘every reason to believe that the ceremony was performed in St Paul’s by Archbishop Lyfing’.³⁷ I shall argue that there is every reason to believe that it was not. The second ‘St Paul’s’ (which in any event was not then known as such) had been hastily constructed after having been sacked by Danes, before succumbing to a fire in 1087. It did not acquire its subsequent prestige as the cathedral of the bishop of London until after the Norman Conquest. Furthermore, the traditionally independent-minded Londoners were not favourably disposed to Cnut, and he was never popular in London. It should be remembered that on the death of Ætheræd, Londoners elected Edmund as their king, not Cnut, and only reversed their view, accepting his election, in November 1016, after a show of force and when faced by what was already inevitable after Edmund’s death.

Radulph de Diceto clearly referred to Edmund, and not to Cnut: ‘At civis Lundoniæ Eadmundum Ferreum Latus dictum, regis Ægelredi filium, regum levavere. Consecratus autem est a Livingo Doroberniæ archiepiscopo apud Lundoniam’.³⁸ This passage, written as late as about 1190, is nevertheless the earliest reference to this coronation, and appears to be an interpolation in an extract from Florence of Worcester. The account by Gervase, written about twenty years later, is merely a repetition, with the Cnutonian appendix: ‘Eadmundum Ireneside, quem sacraavit Livingus Cantuariæ archiepiscopus apud Lundonias ... Rex autem Cnuto regnum adeptus coronatus est a Livingo Cantuariensis archiepiscopus apud Lundonias’.³⁹ This double election is difficult to disentangle, and the only viable explanation – given the late date and uniqueness of the passage – is that Gervase confused the coronation of Edmund with the acknowledgement of the election of Cnut in November 1016.

To postulate a coronation during Cnut I is at best unwise, since neither Cnut nor the English church was that foolish. Since Cnut was without serious opposition only after the *witenagemót* held at Oxford, logical necessity places the date of coronation at the earliest opportunity after it: that is, 25 December 1018. Such a lengthy interval between partial election, recognition, and coronation should not cause surprise. St Edward the Confessor was elected king at London in June 1042 but not crowned until the spring of the following year.⁴⁰ ‘Election’, in medieval parlance, by no means indicated a coronation, and conversely the number of narratives headed by the promising words ‘de coronatione’ that went on to describe fealty, election, or simply regnal authority, would suggest that the word has undergone a semantic change. For immediate support a leader required only loyalty, which has its origins in heathen values associated with honour and valour. It is this Cnut most required in 1016. But a Christian coronation was something else altogether, being a symbolic means with which to consolidate that which had already been achieved precisely by its leisurely pomp and outward form.⁴¹ A confused, hasty, or only partial coronation was more often than not worse than useless, for far from consolidating rule it became a weapon in the hands of enemies, used against the monarch who had ‘seized the crown’.

This loyalty would now enable Cnut to have been baptised, in good time for his coronation, on 12 August 1017, or just conceivably the same date the following year. Bishop Ælfsige probably oversaw the completion of the *Liber Vitæ* (c. 1031), formerly held at Winchester Cathedral, in which Cnut’s endowment to the former monastery (New Minster) is pictorially represented.⁴² The illuminator has shown an angel placing the crown on Cnut’s head as he holds the Winchester crucifix in his right hand – the very cross on which he is said to have placed his crown (or had his crown placed on his behalf) before journeying to Rome. If this was not intended as theological symbolism, or moral metaphor, it may have referred to the coronation

itself, which we may then conjecture was celebrated at Winchester – the capital of the kingdom of Wessex, seat of the treasury, and an important ecclesiastical centre – by Archbishop Lyfing on Christmas Day 1018. Thus the reign was able to enter Cnut II, and Cnut himself was able to become ‘the first viking leader to be admitted into the civilized fraternity of Christian kings’.⁴³

* I am grateful to Dr Kenneth Lawson, Assistant Master at St Paul’s school, London, for kindly agreeing to read the initial draft of this paper in 1994 and making several useful comments.

Abbreviations: A-SC – Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; DNB – Dictionary of National Biography; EHR – English Historical Review; LPFR – Llanerch Press Facsimile Reprint; PL – Patrologia Latinae Cursus Completus; MGH – Monumenta Germaniae Historica; RS – Rolls Series.

¹ Sir Edward Augustus Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England* (Oxford, 3rd edition, 1877-79), vol.i p.381 [henceforth cited as Freeman, *Conquest*].

² Freeman, *Conquest*, p.689 n.TT.

³ Lawrence K. Larson, *Canute the Great and the Rise of Danish Imperialism*, (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1912), pp.324-25 [henceforth cited as Larson, *Canute*]. Larsen had been even more explicit: ‘it may have been in childhood, and it must have been before the conquest of England’, *ibid.* 164-65.

⁴ (Mark) Kenneth Lawson, *Cnut*, (Longman, London, 1993), p.129 [henceforth cited as Lawson, *Cnut*]. My argument does not deny Cnut any pre-conquest Christian knowledge. Both his father and grandfather were nominal, and vacillating, Christians. More importantly, his noble Polish mother, Swietoslawa Storrada, sister to one king and daughter of another, had possibly raised Cnut in Poland after her repudiation by Swegen I, before Cnut’s transfer to Jomsberg. Her Christian background was solid enough, and Cnut later brought her back from exile to spend her last years at the Danish court. Swegen’s only nominal faith may well have been based on desiring a political union with Swietoslawa, a situation more satisfactorily achieved between Cnut and Emma. To admit to possessing some Christian knowledge is one matter, but to having faith is quite another.

⁵ Adamarus Cabannensis, *Chronicon*, (in *Annales Gandenses*, ed. F. Funck-Brentano, Paris, 1896) lib. lii, cap.lv. This important passage may be translated: ‘Cnut, true pagan king of Denmark, after the death of Æthelræd king of England, took his kingdom by deceit, and took the queen of the English, who was of the house of Richard of Rouen, as his wife, and having become a Christian, he held both kingdom’s and drew away as many of the pagans of Denmark as he could to Christianity’.

⁶ Jules Lair, *Études critiques sur divers textes de Xe et Xie siècles*, (Alphonse Picard, Paris, 1899), tom.ii p.208 [MS ‘A’], and Appendix IX, pp.277-84.

⁷ Maurice Prou, *Historiarum*, (Paris, 1886), lib.ii. cap.ii, p.29 [henceforth cited as Prou, *Historiarum*].

⁸ Jean Marx, *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, (Rouen, 1914), lib.v. cap.ix, pp.82-83.

⁹ Marjorie Chibnall, *The Historia Ecclesiastica of Orderic Vitalis*, (Oxford, 1978 *et seq.*), vol.i lib.i, p.157.

¹⁰ Churchill Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, *Polychronicon*, (RS 41, 1865-86), vol.vii p.115. The emphasis is mine. This interesting sentence appears neither in Higden’s original Latin (by 1340) nor in the subsequent close translation by Sir John Trevisa (by 1387). It is of course possible that this is literary insouciance, or even that the author was familiar with Adhémar. But for a casual interpolation to coincide with a historical tradition would be unlikely, while Adhémar’s influence is undetectable elsewhere. It is far more likely that the translator was aware of an independent tradition.

¹¹ Larson, *Canute*, p.165 n.1.

¹² Adami Canonici Bremensis *Gesta Pontificum Hamburgensis Ecclesiae Liber ii cap.lxxxix* in PL cxlvi; MGH *scriptores* vii.

¹³ *Ibid. loc.cit.* lib.ii cap.liii: ‘Quo tempore episcopus ab Anglia multos adduxit in Daniam. De quibus Bernardum posuit in Sconiam, Gerbrandum in Seland, Reginbertum in Fune. Zelatus est hoc noster archiepiscopus Unwan. Et dicitur Gerbrandum redeuntem ab Anglia cepisse, quem ab Elnoldo, Anglorum archiepiscopo, cognovit esse ordinatum’.

¹⁴ Lawson, *Cnut*, p.88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp.102-05.

¹⁶ *Chronicon* liber viii, MGH *scriptores* iii cap.v, p.863. This fabulous monster, with the wings of a fowl, tail of a dragon, and head of a cock, is usually known as a Cockatrice (Cockatrix) as in Isaiah 11:

18, and there is a fine early twelfth-century depiction of one on a capital in the lower nave at the abbey church of La Madeleine, Vézelay. However, when the head of this Cockatrice is crowned, it is called the basilisk, from the Greek for 'king' and also 'serpent', becoming the 'king of the serpents'. Thietmar's entry refers to the penultimate viking raid on England – before the last attempt by Cnut's grand-nephew St Cnut IV in 1085.

¹⁷ *Vita S. Elphegi Archiepiscopi Cantuariensis* (in Henry Wharton, *Anglia Sacra*, London, 1691), vol.i pp.144-45.

¹⁸ Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, DNB xlii.

¹⁹ A-SC [MS D}. Osbern gave 1 June as the commencement date, but this is possibly too early if the arrival date is accurate. The argument, however, is unaffected.

²⁰ William Smith & Samuel Cheetham, *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, (J. B. Burr, Hartford, 1880), vol.i under 'Confirmation'; *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, (James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 1992), vol.i under 'Baptism'; J. F. Van der Stappen, *Sacra Liturgia*, (H. Dessain, Mechelen, 1905), tom.iv 'De Administratione Sacramentorum et de Sacramentalibus', Titulus II 'De Sacramento Baptismi', pp.20-91, especially 'Ritus antiquus Baptismi', pp.82-88. Any present-day member of one of the uncompromised denominations, in particular of the Græco-Russian Orthodox (Oriental and Occidental), Old Catholic, and Baptist, traditions, that uphold this unbroken practice, can testify to both its early origins and continuation.

²¹ J. Gerchow, *Die Gedenkübelieferung der Angelsachsen*, (Berlin, 1988), p.338.

²² Lambert is more correctly spelled Lambrecht, whose compound roots mean 'Land Bright'. Berht, Briht, Beorht, and Bierht are all derived from 'bright', 'clear', 'glorious', or 'sublime'. It may also have had a pastoral derivation, in that 'lam' was the Anglo-Saxon and Old Low German for 'lamb' as well as 'land'. Iæen (or Jaen) is unknown other than as a compound, but appears to have been derived from 'ongean', meaning 'towards' or 'return to', or perhaps even a corruption of 'lam'. 'Ead' was the word for riches or prosperity, while 'Eard' is again associated with land, or more specifically 'native place'. For this analysis, see William G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum, from Bede to King John*, (Cambridge, 1897); Hans Bahlow, *Deutsches Namenlexikon*, (Munich, 1967); P. H. Reaney, *The Origin of English Surnames*, (Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd, London, 1967); E. G. Withycombe, *Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names*, (Oxford, 1977).

²³ Lawson, *Cnut*, 86-88 for a discussion on some of the minor objection to this precise dating.

²⁴ *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniæ Ducum*, liber secundus, 'Rollo' (PL cxli, pp.627-56). This work is an apology and panegyric ('O dux Rollo, potens, et præstantissim princeps...'), and must be approached with caution. It is probable that when Karolus III, king of West Francia, conferred the 'duchy' – then comprising land around the lower Seine and the town of Rouen – on Rollo at the semi-legendary 'treaty' of Sainte-Claire-sur-Epte (which Dudo alone records) in about 911, it would have been clear to Rollo, who was no fool, that the strong and complex Christian traditions of the Carolingians were being upheld in this attempt by them to contain the new wave of northern assaults. Rollo may have lapsed into the old faith before his death, but his son Guillaume I 'Longsword' was unquestionably a committed Christian, wishing (vainly) to become a monk in his own refounded abbey at Jumièges.

²⁵ Prou, *Historiarum*, lib.ii p.62.

²⁶ As an adjunct to the earlier discussion on this date, A. M. Duncan, *The Edinburgh History of Scotland*, (Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1975), vol.i p.99, states that Cnut's subjugation of Malcolm occurred in 1031, simply because the English chronicles gave only this date for the journey to Rome.

²⁷ Austin Lane Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta 1087-1216*, (Oxford, 1955), p.452 n.1 [henceforth cited as Poole, *Domesday*].

²⁸ See John of Fordun, *Scotichronicon*, book iv ch.xli.

²⁹ Lawson, *Cnut*, p.104 n.77.

³⁰ No published translation of this passage clarifies the confusion. The French of the statesman and historian François Pierre Guillaume Guizot (*Chronoque*, 'Collection des Mémoires de France, Paris, 1823, tom. vi) renders the distinction even less easy to make: 'Cnut ... cédant aux conseils de Richard, duc de Rouen, et de sa soeur, il dépouilla toute sa férocité naturelle pour prendre un coeur moins farouche, et consentit, pour l'amour de Dieu, à menor désormais une vie paisable ...' In the most recent English translation: '... when he [Malcolm] realized that Cnut was seeking to invade his realm he gathered together the whole army of his own people and resisted mightily. In his pride Cnut continued the strife for a long time, but at last he ended his barbarous behaviour for the love of God on the advice of duke Richard of Rouen and his sister, and mending his ways he lived in peace. Indeed he sought the friendship of the king of the Scots, receiving his son at the font of baptism', J. France *Historiarum libri quinque*, (Oxford, 1989), pp.54 & 55. France also points out (p.56 n.1) that Glaber was 'not well

informed' about the history of northern Britain, and is also of the view that he confused two events a decade apart.

³¹ Sir Archibald Dunbar, *Scottish Kings*, (Douglas, Edinburgh, 1899), pp.4-5.

³² Lawson, *Cnut*, p.104.

³³ For this and Wulfstan's general influence over Cnut, see Dorothy H. Whitelock, 'Wulfstan and the Laws of Cnut', *EHR* lxxiii (Oct. 1948), pp.433-52, and 'Wulfstan's authorship of Cnut's laws', *EHR* lxx (Jan. 1955), pp.72-85.

³⁴ For this I have relied on P. E. Schramm, *A History of the English Coronation*, (Oxford, 1937), pp.115-40; related entries in the reference works cited in n.20; and descriptions of successive coronations in Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England 550-1087* (Oxford, 3rd edition 1971[henceforth cited as Stenton, *A-SE*]) and Poole, *Domesday*.

³⁵ During this period in England: Edgar, 972 Pentecost; St Edward the Martyr, 975 Christmas Day [contentious]; St Edward the Confessor, 1043 Easter Day; William I 'the Conqueror', 1066 Christmas Day.

³⁶ Lawson, *Cnut*, p.82.

³⁷ Freeman, *Conquest*, vol.i p.693 n.TT

³⁸ William Stubbs, *Abbreviationes Chronicorum*, (RS 68, 1876), vol.i. p.169.

³⁹ William Stubbs *Gesta Regum*, (RS 73, 1879-80), vol.ii p.55.

⁴⁰ Stenton, *A-SE*, p.423.

⁴¹ Nevertheless, the content of a late Anglo-Saxon coronation should not be confused with any familiar image derived from modern times. The first coronation to resemble the popular concept was Richard Plantagenet's in 1189.

⁴² British Library Stowe MS 944, f.6.

⁴³ Stenton, *A-SE*, p.397.

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