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# Image-Making in Cnut's Reign: A Discussion on Nationality, Ethnicity, and Identity for the Conquering King

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Image-Making in Cnut's Reign  
Undergraduate Research Awards  
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## Image-Making in Cnut's Reign

### *A Discussion on Nationality, Ethnicity, and Identity for the Conquering King*

In the late tenth and early eleventh-centuries, Anglo-Saxon England faced a series of raids from enemies in the North. Danes under the leadership of Svein Forkbeard and his son, Cnut, attacked the shores of England – raiding and pillaging the English countryside in a barbaric, unforgiving manner. During this period of Norse raiding, Anglo-Saxon kings eventually succumbed to the Vikings after years of destruction and broken treaties. The result was the ascendancy of Cnut to the English throne in the early eleventh-century.

When Cnut came to power in 1016, he took on many of the roles of a traditional Anglo-Saxon king, adopting their ways of policymaking, laws, and even religion. Rather than forcing his Norse cultural traditions onto the people of England, he adopted their culture and was generally accepted as a great English king. However, he simultaneously had several skalds write his praises in the form of Nordic poetry that is now compiled and referred to as the *Knutsdrapur*. The presence of such poetry that reflects his Scandinavian and traditionally pagan heritage appears to be the antithesis of the Christian role that Cnut adopted when he came to the English throne. The existence of this text alongside Cnut's intention to portray himself in the role of a traditional Anglo-Saxon, Christian king raises several questions: Why did Cnut have the *Knutsdrapur* written? What purpose did the praise poetry serve in his kingship? Why did he take on a Christian persona and yet choose to keep the Nordic praise poetry? And how did these actions aid him in ruling a conquered territory?

I intend to address these questions by discussing the use of image-making tactics in Cnut's kingship. In order to do so, I will first outline the abstract concepts of nationality, ethnicity, and the term *Angelcynn* in order to give my argument a frame to work in. I will then delve into a historiographical discussion on the subject of the nature of medieval kingship, including the topics of legitimacy and image-making and how Cnut's policies created an image of an Anglo-Saxon king despite his Scandinavian background. I will then discuss the *Knutsdrapur* as a type of image-making tool and analyze how the praise poetry served Cnut's kingship. Finally, I will conclude my argument with the topic of identity and argue that Cnut was able to self-identity with both his Scandinavian heritage and the English customs he had adopted – previously presumed by scholars to be utilized solely for the sake of his reputation as a king.

In order to discuss how Cnut was successful as a foreign king who had recently conquered the territory over which he ruled, there must first be an understanding of medieval ethnicity and nationality. In order to create such an understanding, it is important to look at how people identified themselves and others and what consequences were created by these identifications. However, the topic of ethnicity is a modern construct and not something that medieval contemporaries considered as a way to categorize and classify themselves. This modern construct is often intertwined with a discussion of nationality or nationalism – another modern construct used by scholars to discuss a historical shift in the 1800's (Geary 1988, 1). The difficulty with using these constructs is that the examinations of ethnic identity runs the risk of establishing antagonisms or sources of conflict that did not exist in the period (Geary 1988, 12). The concern is that by studying a period through modern constructs, the period is misunderstood and analyzed incorrectly.

Despite these concerns, there was still a form of ethnic consciousness during the medieval period and the time of Cnut, as can be seen from scarce sources from the sixth through tenth centuries in which contemporaries refer to a group of people as a *populous* or a *gens* (Geary 1988, 2). Moreover, in c. 900, Regino of Prum offers four categories for classifying ethnic variation as he states: “the various nations differ in descent, customs, language and law,” (Foot 1995, 28). Thus, medieval understanding of any concept of identification is not in racial differences so much as through social construct and cultural distinctions (Foot 1995, 28-29). That being said, ethnicity then becomes an extremely flexible form of categorization. Ethnicity is opened up so that a group could define themselves by a variety of categories such as dress, weapons, geography, or religion. A person’s ethnic category becomes so arbitrary that Patrick Geary questions why a person was labeled at all, rather than why a specific individual was labeled as they were (Geary 1988, 6-9).

Geary’s conclusion is that since medieval ethnic-identification was most commonly applied to groups (*gens, populous*) rather than individuals and because ethnic-identification was so flexible, the most important subject for scholars to consider is *how* a certain ethnic definition was used and *why*. Geary explains that the criteria for an ethnicity: origin, customs, language, law, and religion were all legitimate characteristics of cultural ethnicity despite the fact that they were easily manipulated. However, the circumstances in which ethnic labels have been used seemed to have been political or for military purposes. A political leader could manipulate “preexisting likenesses” in order to create a form of ethnicity, individuality, and nationality and mold a community in opposition to a political enemy (Geary 1988, 7-12).

This definition of ethnicity is vital in studying Cnut and considering how he adopted the cultural and social customs of the locality over which he ruled and questioning why he chose to

take on the ethnicity at all. The ethnicity that Cnut adopted was referred to as *Angelcynn*. The term is derived from the Germanic tribe of modern East Anglia, the “Angle”, and the word “cynn” is the Old English word for kin. Thereby, the ethnic term *Angelcynn* refers to the kin of the Angle. In Sarah Foot’s article on the origins of the *Angelcynn* identity, she attributes the promotion of this terminology to King Alfred of the late ninth century, only a century before the time of Cnut. One of the most interesting aspects of Foot’s argument is that she suggests that King Alfred promoted the *Angelcynn* identity to unite the people under his charge against the Danes. Foot argues that through a common language, Alfred was able to give the people of Kent, West Mercia, and West Saxon a common identity that bonded them against the “other”. Through a unified language, Alfred could manipulate the laws and history to create a sense of one people with a common heritage, one faith, and a shared history. Thereby he brought them all into one common cause under one leader in opposition to the Danes (Foot 1995, 25-49). In Foot’s example, Geary’s argument that ethnicity was used primarily for political gain and against a definitive “other” comes to life. The *Angelcynn* ethnic-identity was born out of a need to establish a people under a king in order to successfully fight against the Danish in England. From this need, Alfred began the formation of a people who bonded together primarily through a religious background, through common laws, and through a shared history.

Keeping in mind this discussion of flexible ethnicity, political uses, and the nature of the *Angelcynn* identity, this paper can then turn to Cnut and the situation he is placed in as a young king coming to the throne as a cultural and social outsider. One of the most important things to consider in this moment is that one of the reasons Cnut was so successful as a king was because he was able to blend in with the Anglo-Saxon culture. But such consideration begs the question: why? Why would Cnut take on the Anglo-Saxon identity when he could rule in the traditional

Scandinavian fashion? His father Svein Forkbeard did not adopt the policies of the Anglo-Saxons in his short rule to the same extent that Cnut would – why does Cnut feel the need to come into this ethnicity? These questions lend themselves to a debate on legitimacy and image-making policies in medieval kingship and more particularly, the kingship of Cnut. In order to discuss these topics, I will take a historiographical approach to understanding the requirements of a Anglo-Saxon king and the image-making techniques he utilized in pursuance of the *Angelcynn* identity in the following paragraphs.

In Austin Lane Poole's short report on the theory of medieval kingship, Poole talks about what a medieval king was supposed to be in the eyes of contemporaries. As Poole explains, the king was almost absolute. Unlike the early Stuart kings who claimed to be absolute through the theory of divine right, the early medieval king was absolute based on a number of considerations. He must have some sort of kinship with the royal house, be nominated through popular election (which was more often for ceremony since his appointment was already an accomplished fact), been designated by the late king, and be of personal fitness. Until a successor was crowned, he was only a territorial lord and only began to reign from his coronation day from which he derived divine authority through the process of coronation rites and anointment (Poole 1951, 2-3). Poole's description of a legitimate absolute medieval king does not seem to encompass conquerors such as Cnut, lending to the idea that a conquering king could not be legitimate as he was not of kinship to the royal house nor had he been designated by the late king.

However, in Susan Reynolds article "Secular Power and Authority in the Middle Ages", Reynolds gives a different perception of legitimacy and argues that power and violence was not what granted medieval kings authority. Rather, they had to be perceived as legitimate (Reynolds 2007, 11). Her argument is that legitimacy comes from the maintenance of lawful hierarchy

which was ordained by God and from which came the common community and customs of the governed (Reynolds 2007, 21). Reynolds' description is key when analyzing Cnut and thinking about ethnicity in the medieval period. If legitimacy comes not through power and violence – both of which Cnut was capable of as can be seen by his conquest of the Anglo-Saxons – then legitimacy must then come through the acknowledgement of the common custom of the governed. That is, their ethnic-identity as *Angelcynn*. If Reynolds assumptions are correct, then it seems like the only option for Cnut to be seen as successful and legitimate would be to take on the polices of the people whom he now looked over.

Moreover, Reynolds talks about how kings had to look to the representatives of the community about what was customary, right, and just by the people there (Reynolds 2007, 13). This means that Cnut had to rely on other figures of the local nobility in order to create a network of support and legitimacy. Chris Dennis' article "Image-Making for the Conquerors of England: Cnut and William I" echoes these sentiments. Dennis argues that a king's claim to rule over an ethnic group was limited and confined to the area in which he was located. With this limited reach of authority, communication difficulties, and instable political situations, the king had to rely on the loyalty of local lords to retain his power and legitimacy. As a foreign king who owed his position to military success, Cnut needed to give off an effective image in order to retain these local lords as well as reconcile his conquered population (Dennis 2007, 33-34).

Editors Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek further explain Dennis' argument by expressing how image-making was important to those trying to impress on their audience a particular view of themselves or their authority as they wished to be perceived. They make an interesting point that Cnut had the ability to maintain his rule through force and military power easily at his disposal. Cnut could claim his right to rule through conquest, but he instead sought

other justification for his new position (Bolton and Meek 2007, 2-3). However, just as Reynolds so clearly pointed out, Cnut's best chance at gaining authority through legitimacy was to prove to the local lords that he could take on the customs, laws, and religion of that locality.

With these theories of legitimacy and image-making in mind, many of Cnut's actions in his years as king of England seem to fit the agenda of a ruler seeking legitimacy through the adoption of the local ethnic identity. Among some of these tactics was Cnut's marriage to King Ethelred's widow, Emma, which allowed for a representation of her second marriage as a transfer of the kingdom from Ethelred to a Danish conqueror who would rule over the English and the Danes (Nelson 1997, 57). This transfer seems so seamless and easy in the available text that an image of continuity must have been created, putting many Anglo-Saxons to ease. Cnut also took up the royal prerogative of coin minting, a practice that was reformed during the reign of Edgar c. 973 and which continued through Cnut's reign up until c.1125. Scholars have uncovered three different types of coins struck during his reign: *Quatrefoil*, *Pointed Helmet*, and *Short Cross*. In all of these versions, Cnut is dressed in a similar fashion to the kings depicted in coins before him. He is also pictured in the traditional style in which the bust of the king and his name and title feature one side and the reverse shows a small cross. In his first issue of the *Quatrefoil* coin in 1017-1018, Cnut leaves Ethelred's name and cross on the coin, leaving a trace of the king before him (Jonsson 1994, 194-195, 199). His use of the coinage system and the remnants of Ethelred's coin on Cnut's first coin again likely provided a sense of continuity for the Anglo-Saxons.

While Cnut's use of these image-making tactics among other examples are extremely important to see in relation to the discussion of legitimacy, perhaps the most important tactic to consider was Cnut's adoption of Christianity and his relationship with the Christian church.



When thinking about the *Angelcynn* identity and Alfred's the Great's promotion of the term *Angelcynn*, one of the key things to notice is that in order to bring together people under a common banner, Alfred focused on the Christian religion as a common ground for the people of Kent, West Saxon, and West Mercia. In the late 800's, King Alfred brought these groups into the *Angelcynn* identity by stating the Christian inheritance was in jeopardy due to Viking invasions and it was up to the people under his kingship and under God's laws to preserve Christianity and the condition of survival of all 'Englishmen' in the future (Saul 1997, 4). Due to this basis of the *Angelcynn* identity in Christianity, the most important aspect of Cnut's ethnic adoption and the strongest rallying point for a common people lay in Christianity and Cnut's ability to represent himself as a good, Christian king.

In the historiography of Cnut's kingship, the majority of scholars would agree that Christianity was the most vital image-making tool that Cnut had at his disposal. Chris Dennis' main argument is that the most effective way to legitimize a conqueror's reign was to perform acts of generosity towards the Church (Dennis 2007, 34). M.K. Lawson also notes in his book covering Cnut's reign in England that Cnut's relationship with the church covered his questionable past and perhaps a shady present. Thereby, his generosity to Christ Church, Canterbury, and to the Old and New Ministers at Winchester, as well as his pilgrimage to Rome in 1027 and his gifts to foreign churches, helped to associate his reign with the tradition of Christian kingship to which his predecessors belonged and giving his government an aura of legitimacy (Lawson 1993 153-154, 159). Moreover, Janet L. Nelson makes an excellent point that geographic ethnic consciousness was considerably less important to contemporaries than the pagan/Christian divide (Nelson 1997, 48). Meaning that the heritage differences Cnut

demonstrated in his life and rule were excusable to contemporaries whereas refusal to be converted to the Christian tradition would not be.

Cnut's adoption of the Christian religion for the sake of image-making and legitimacy seems extremely clear in the laws he had rewritten and in the letters he wrote to the people he ruled over. The task of writing Cnut's laws and letters to the people was delegated by Cnut to Archbishop Wulfstan of York – the same man who had written the laws of Ethelred II before him (Lawson 1994, 162). What's compelling about these laws in this discussion is the consistency provided to the Anglo-Saxons by using Wulfstan to write Cnut's laws as well as the extreme Christian language with which he addresses the audience. Cnut's laws are important to consider first because of their draw on the common law necessary to create an ethnicity and identity as stated earlier in this paper. By creating a common law that was so similar to King Ethelred II's law that Cnut had the same man write the new laws, Cnut was employing an effective image-making tactic in the form of continuity. Secondly, the language used in these laws and letters is a straightforward example of how Cnut took on the image of a Christian king.

For instance, in Cnut's letter to the people of England in 1019-1020, Cnut begins the second line of his address with this phrasing written by Wulfstan: "And I inform you that I will be a gracious lord and a faithful observer of God's rights and just secular law," (Whitelock 1979, 452). The first thing that is striking about this excerpt is the way in which Wulfstan portrays Cnut as a ruler promising to do right by God and by the people he rules over. What's interesting about his language is that it almost sounds as if Wulfstan is promising for Cnut that he will be taking on a new persona. The use of the phrasing "And I inform you that I will be" makes it sound as if Cnut was not previously a "gracious lord" or a "faithful observer". He does not say "I will continue to be" or "I will remain as"; rather this first phrase seems like a promise to the

people that he will adopt the practices that they stand for and take on their ethnicity as his own. It's also interesting that Wulfstan orders these descriptors from "gracious lord" and "faithful observer of God's rights" before "just secular law". This arrangement gives insight to the priorities of not only the Archbishop, but also the priorities of the audience receiving the letter. From even just this small excerpt it seems clear that Cnut is issuing out an image as an honorable, God-loving king in antithesis to a barbaric, pagan Viking that would be expected from the Danish conqueror.

What can be taken from this entire discussion are a few key points: as a foreign king that has conquered a territory and wishes to rule over it peacefully, Cnut must legitimize his rule through the adoption of the local ethnicity. Thinking back to Geary's point stated at the beginning of this paper, ethnicity in this period was not necessarily considered unless it was used in a political or military situation. Therefore, the image-making tools Cnut uses through his marriage to Emma, his adoption of the practice of coin minting, the rewriting of his laws and his letters to the people through Archbishop Wulfstan, and most importantly his adoption of the Christian religion was all a political motion to adopt the *Angelcynn* identity. From this discussion the importance of continuity and legitimacy in a new kingship was emphasized, as was the focus of the *Angelcynn* identity on the Christian tradition and how essential adopting the Christian tradition was for Cnut's success.

And yet, while Cnut is so adamantly portraying himself as the Christian Anglo-Saxon king, he is simultaneously having skalds perform skaldic praise poetry for him and his court. In fact, Cnut was historically one of the most prominent patrons of extant skaldic verse (Townend 2001, 146). What is strange about the presence of such poetry in Cnut's court is that skaldic poetry was a distinctly Norse cultural tradition; counter to the image Cnut was working towards.

In the practice of skaldic poetry, a named author celebrates an event, a glorious victory, or a heroic defeat and death of a great Nordic hero. The skald typically praised a prince or a chieftain for attributes such as valor or generosity and they were often commissioned to create a poem in memory of a deceased ruler. Within this poetry, the poets used the Norse literature style and specific syllable-counting measure in order to tell the praises of a hero (Turville-Petre 1976, xvi-xvii). These poems are considered as a more pagan form of cultural story-telling because of their association with the Scandinavian past which was considered pagan and barbaric before the introduction of Christianity to the North. The poems that Cnut had performed in his court were of this Norse tradition and once compiled have been referred to by scholars as the *Knutsdrapur*. The very Nordic nature of the *Knutsdrapur* is demonstrative of Cnut's Scandinavian heritage and background. The act of having such story-telling methods displayed in Cnut's court seems questionable compared to his image-making policies.

Skaldic poetry was an oral tradition that was preserved through the prose of later Icelandic sagas (Townend 2001, 147). Therefore, it is largely fragmented and difficult to untangle. However, several inferences can be deduced from the information we do have on the *Knutsdrapur* and the skalds that created it. In one piece dedicated to Cnut by the poet Ottar, the poet praises Cnut for his conquest of England. In the fourth stanza of the poem, Ottar describes how Cnut raided England and how "settlements of people burned before [him] in [his] youth." In this short excerpt, Ottar describes Cnut as "the destroyer of the house" (Whaley 2012, 769-783). The language of this passage creates an image of Cnut as the great Viking, warrior king and the destroyer of English homes and people. Ottar describes Cnut as the man who watched "settlements of people [burn]" – people who now his own people, people he promised to guide

and protect. This image is extremely contrary to the one Cnut gives off as the great Christian Anglo-Saxon king – here he is the antagonist, not the protagonist he is so often featured as.

Moreover, in stanza ten, Ottar goes on to claim Cnut as a member of the “Skjodung dynasty” thereby connecting him to his Nordic past, rather than the English present he wishes to embody through image-making tactics. Even more striking, Ottar talks about “the blood-bird [receiving] dark morsels at Ashingdon” in the same stanza (Whaley 2012, 769-783). Ashingdon was one of the most decisive battles of Cnut’s conquest in England. Here Ottar describes the carrion birds preying upon the dead bodies of Anglo-Saxons as Cnut rises to the English throne. The tone of this passage is war-loving and violent. Such phrasing hardly matches the Cnut who gives alms to the English churches and makes a pilgrimage to Rome. Cnut here is the Nordic king that has conquered the English, watched them burn and allowed the birds to pick away at their dead bodies.

However, within the same decade (and debatably within the same year), another poet by the name of Sigvatr composed a very different piece of work. In the tenth stanza of his poem, Sigvatr describes Cnut’s journey to Rome. In this excerpt, Sigvatr describes Cnut as “dear to the emperor” and “close to Peter” (Whaley 2012, 661-663). Such a description gives off the impression that Cnut was close to both the political figure of Rome, the emperor, and the symbolic religious figure, Saint Peter. Through this excerpt, Sigvatr has created an image of Cnut as extremely powerful and holy to the eyes of contemporary Anglo-Saxon Christians. Not only is he recognized by one of the most powerful rulers of his time, but also by God and his saints. Additionally, Sigvatr describes him as “the ruler bearing a staff” who felt a great desire for a journey. Such a description paints Cnut in the typical imagery of a pilgrim who often carries a staff on a long journey to a holy place. In medieval Christianity, a pilgrim would have

been seen as someone who is holy and earnest in his attempts to follow the way of God (Whaley 2012, 661-663).

After reading this text, the question becomes: what is Sigvatr's description of Cnut as a Godly king doing here? And even more importantly, why is Cnut having such a war-like, Nordic presentation of himself created through Ottar when his legitimacy lies in adopting the *Angelcynn* identity of which Christianity is the most important divider? In Matthew Townend's article "Contextualizing the Knutsdrapur", he spends a great length describing the difficulties and many debates behind the context of both of these sources such as dating and location. In Townend's conclusion, both Ottar and Sigvatr's poems were created in the year 1027 at Cnut's court in Winchester after the Battle of Holy River and Cnut's pilgrimage to Rome (Townend 2001, 153-156, 162, 168). By dating these poems to their origins a discussion on the context of these poems and the potential meaning behind Cnut's motivation in their commissioning can be made clear.

If indeed both of these poems were located at Winchester in 1027 as Townend asserts, then the audience receiving these poems would have been the king himself and his court: Danish's aristocratic followers and courtiers (Townend 2001, 174; Jesch 2004, 59-60). The *Knutsdrapur* was then a form of public art, not private art for Cnut alone as it is sometimes considered. Few scholars discuss the *Knutsdrapur* as an image-making tool but rather place it in its own category as Cnut's personal form of art and enjoyment. However, in a court such as Cnut's, there were two vernaculars being spoken: that of Old English and of Old Norse. What few scholars have taken into account is that the linguistic similarities between the two languages allowed for there to be some understanding between Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia in Cnut's court and the praise-poetry performed in Old Norse. In fact, there were at least two Icelandic saga poets who came to England in the mid-tenth and eleventh centuries in order to perform poetry for

the likes of King Ethelred II who was able to understand and appreciate their work (Fjalldal 2005, x). If this is true, then it would also seem to be true that the Anglo-Saxons in Cnut's court would have understood the poetry presented by Sigvatr and Ottar. This information can potentially change the entire way scholars understand the utility of praise poetry. Rather than considering it a source of private art, it can be seen as public just as Cnut's laws, letters, and policies have come to be seen.

What then is the *Knutsdrapur*'s purpose as an image-making tool and why was it accepted by the highest levels of Anglo-Saxon society? The answer to this question lies in Judith Jesch's term 'cultural-paganism' which she defines as "an acceptance of certain aspects of the heathen past in a society that is otherwise officially Christian," (Jesch 2004, 57). In particular, she refers to the acceptance of references to pre-Christian beliefs and myths in certain cultural and social contexts (Jesch 2004, 57). This concept presents the idea that Anglo-Saxons could be forgiving of such pagan behavior in certain situations. That being said, perhaps the Anglo-Saxons could allow Cnut to have this pagan background without it infringing on his reputation as a Christian *Angelcynn* king. In addition, these texts could have an didactic function. Considering that his court is primarily Danish, these texts could acknowledge the cultural heritage of his Scandinavian followers while also reminding them of the Christian and royal context in which he must be viewed as the king of England (Jesch 2004, 59-60). Such an educational method can be seen by placing Ottar's text of the Viking king Cnut next to Sigvatr's representation of the pilgrim king who has the approval of the emperor of Rome and Saint Peter. Thus, the benefits of the *Knutsdrapur* as an image-making tool become extremely clear as Cnut reaches out to every part of his empire: both the Anglo-Saxon and the Danish.

Cnut takes on the ethnicity of the Anglo-Saxons as the king of England for the purposes of legitimacy. However, it is vital to remember that when Cnut came to the England, he brought with him a large transfer of Danish people who still connected to the Scandinavian heritage. While the Danes were in the process of converting from their pagan background to the Christian tradition in England, many still followed the old ways and did not immediately convert upon entering England. Furthermore, in conquering England, Cnut took not only the Anglo-Saxon land but also that of the Danelaw, populated by the Danes whom Alfred created the *Angelcynn* identity against. With all of these factors under consideration, it seems highly possible that Cnut was utilizing Jesch's 'cultural paganism' in order to bring together two different ethnic groups under his one rule and a new common ethnic background.

After considering all of these elements in Cnut's reign from his acceptance of the *Angelcynn* identity and ethnicity for political legitimacy through image-making tactics to his implementation of his Scandinavian heritage as a source of image-making for the Danish sections of his reign, we are left wondering who Cnut truly identified with. As a king over a conquered territory with a diverse ethnic makeup, Cnut plays the game of image control by appeasing both types of subjects incredibly well. He does it so well that every scholar cited above is still unsure if Cnut actually adopted any of the Christian principles or if it was all just a show. But, could it be possible that Cnut, as young as he was when he came into power in Anglo-Saxon England, sees himself in the way that he's representing himself? Rather than simply putting on a show, could it be possible that he believes in the reputation he created? When considering Cnut's personal identity, these considerations and debates become increasingly complicated so that the answer is still unclear. However, I argue that due to the presence of image-making in both the Christian tradition and the Scandinavian heritage, Cnut



was able to identify with both ethnic identities. Thereby, he was able to take on the role of king over a territory that was in the beginning stages of creating its own ethnicity in which the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes would eventually come together to form a greater English identity.

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