

2014

Literature and the Reign of Cnut

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Funderburg, Kathryn, "Literature and the Reign of Cnut" (2014). *Undergraduate Student Research Awards*. 22.
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Literature and the Reign of Cnut

Cnut's final victory in 1016 placed all of England in his power was a culmination of the violent conflict of the previous decade and a half, as the English attempted to stave off the calculated and forceful attacks of the invading Danish. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle details a near constant struggle between the two nations, with entire towns and monasteries being destroyed and laity, noblemen, and clergy being killed indiscriminately. During this period of bloodshed England was ruled by King Æthelred II, the "Unready", who was indeed unprepared and incapable of protecting his people from the superior naval and military prowess of the Danes. His son, Edmund Ironside, was the active leader in warfare, but he too had little success combatting the swift cunning of the seamen from the North.

In 1013, Cnut's father, Swein Forkbeard, was able to obtain partial control of England, while the English royal family took shelter with away from the conflict with the Queen's brother Richard in Normandy until King Swein's death in 1014. Following the death of his father, Cnut was elected king by the men of the Danish fleet, yet the English councilors decided to send for Æthelred to return as king (Whitelock 246). Æthelred returned, and fought to maintain the English kingship until his death on April 23, 1016 (Larson 1910, 720). After King Æthelred's death, Edmund was recognized as king by the English people, though no real election was ever held and he only held a fragment of the English kingdom—East Anglia and Wessex, as Cnut reigned sovereign over Northumbria and Mercia (Larson 1910, 720). The fighting escalated throughout the year 1016, with Cnut and his army successfully ravaging all in their path, except for London, which remained unscathed for the entirety of the war between the English and the Danes. Edmund, however, struggled to control his army, and was often less successful opposing

Cnut due to their fickleness (Whitelock 1979, 249-250). Indeed, in what was to be the final battle, at the hill of Ashingdon in Essex, Ealdorman Eadric betrayed Edmund and “there Cnut had the victory and won for himself all the people of England” (Whitelock 1979, 250). Peace was established, and with Edmund’s death on November 30th, St. Andrew’s day, Cnut gained control of England in its entirety.

Historical scholar, Laurence Larson emphasized that Cnut’s right to the throne was “only that of the sword” (Larson 1910, 721). Cnut, while a prince, had no kingdom other than the newly won England, as Denmark was ruled by his older brother Harold. Now in command of an entire nation forcibly taken from a native line of kings and ruler of a people not culturally his own, who might have been understandably apprehensive about his reign, Cnut had to establish himself as the rightful king of England (Larson 1910, 721). His marriage to Emma of Normandy, which most likely occurred mid-1017, was a significant step to increasing the legitimacy and stability of his rule (Lawson 2004, 85). The widow of King Æthelred, by whom she had two sons, and daughter of Duke Richard I of Normandy, Emma was vital to Cnut’s ability to prevent hostility between his kingdom and Æthelred’s sons, and by extension the Norman military force (Lawson 2004, 85). Another fortuitous event occurred in the formation of Cnut’s identity as king: his brother, King Harold of Denmark, died in 1018. After travelling back to his home country during the winter of 1019, Cnut returned to England, not only as their king, but King of Denmark as well, with the chance to unify and draw support from both nations.

Of the numerous strategies used to establish Cnut’s validity as king the use of literature during his administration is one of the most fascinating and perplexing. Appearing in various forms, the works produced during the reign of Cnut can be placed into two main categories. First is the praise poetry, the *Knútsdrápur*, composed in his honor by his court poets, or skalds, in the

Old Nordic tradition. The laws and letters written by Cnut, or under his guidance make up the other half of the major genres influential during his kingship. By addressing the following questions I plan on assessing the impact of literature produced during the reign of King Cnut. How is literature used to establish Cnut as king of the English? What was the goal of having skaldic court poetry recited, and how did the poet attempt to achieve those goals? What was the significance of praise poetry among the Danish culture? How effective were the praise poetry and the letters at promoting a view of Cnut that would help advance his position as ruler? How might the different genres of literature target different groups of people? What aspects of these genres of literature limit our ability to view them as historical sources?

It has been wryly suggested by certain scholars, such as Roberta Frank, that the reign of Cnut has so little scholarship written about it because the king was so successful in his position, “fewer the documents, the better the king” (Frank 1994 ,107). While it is true that Cnut has not received the same attention as Charlemagne, or even Otto the Great, scholarly interest in his reign continues to progress, including numerous notable works on the literature produced. Providing much needed context for the *Knútsdrápur*, Stefanie Würth discusses the issues, circumstance, process, and impact of skaldic poetry, and attempts to address questions such as, “How or how far did the audience understand the stanzas or the poems? Can we compare this kind of understanding with our modern approaches to skaldic poetry” (Würth 2007, 264)? Würth’s delineation of the steps of how skaldic poetry would have been composed and presented is also a valuable contribution to our understanding of the genre. In addition, Sigrun Davidsdottir strives to provide perspective for the larger concept of skaldic verse by moving away from the evaluation of specific poems or poets and examining the intent and function of Old Norse court poetry as a whole in her article, “Old Norse Poetry: Some Notes on Its Purpose, Transmission and Historical Value.” Beyond analyzing the political impact of the poems, she asserts the

necessity of critically evaluating the historical value of such poetry, including the *Knútsdrápur* (Davidsdottir 1979, 190-202).

Unsurprisingly, several other scholars have also included discussions on the historical viability of these texts. Shami Ghosh's chapter, "Skaldic Verse and Saga Prose: Transmission and Reliability," gives an extremely critical analysis of the historical value of skaldic poetry. Ghosh is opposed to the idea that skaldic verse is "indispensable" in revealing to us the "mentality" of the warriors of medieval Scandinavia (Ghosh 2011, 97). She also objects to the concept that the poems' "authenticity can only rest on strong probability, established by source criticism; but that is good enough for most historical purposes", as expressed by Eric Christiansen (Ghosh 2011, 97). Judith Jesch, however, argues strongly in favor of the historical worth of praise poetry, in her article, "Knútr in Poetry and History." Through a thoughtful evaluation of the discourse features, content, poetic diction, and metrical patterns of Hallvarðr háreksblei, and briefly Óttarr Svarti's, *Knútsdrápur*, Jesch asserts that the alternating vocative and descriptive nature of the stanzas can be used to gain information about audience and context of the text.

Other scholars choose to focus specifically on Cnut's poets and the praise poetry, the *Knútsdrápur*, written about him. In his article, "Contextualizing the Knútsdrápur: Skaldic Praise Poetry at the Court of Cnut," Matthew Townend establishes the significance of the extensive production of praise poetry in honor of Cnut, the *Knútsdrápur*, noting that Cnut was "one of the most prominent patrons of extant skaldic verse" (Townend 2001, 146). He also discusses valuable contextual aspects, establishing details of royal court of Cnut, such as that it was located in Winchester based on inferences from the poems. Townend also provides a unique observation on how the depiction of Cnut in the poems changes over time, explaining that the

two earliest *Knútsdrápur*, the *Lismannaflokkur* and the *Eiríksdrápa*, depict Cnut as a charismatic leader—one who overthrows the status quo to gain power; whereas the later poets show Cnut as a absolutist—one who wishes to maintain the status quo and maintain control (Townend 2001, 167-168). Also assessing the cultural impact of Cnut's relationship with his skalds in his chapter, "Northern Culture in the Days of Canute," Laurence Larson discusses the evolution of Northern culture during his reign, arguing that Scandinavian civilization was gradually approaching the more European variety (Larson 1970, 286). Larson forms a convincing argument that establishes the four decades of the reign of Canute as the "grand age" of Old Norse Poetry, with three main poets that held the favor of the king: Thorarin Praisetongue, Ottar the Swart, and Sighvat the Scald (Larson 1970, 293).

Roberta Frank provides a more in depth examination of the function of praise poetry in her article "King Cnut in the Verse of His Skalds." She analyses the purpose of skaldic verse at the court of Cnut, specifically examining how their praise poetry served as promotional material for the king. By examining particular themes and goals of the works composed in Cnut's honor, Frank is able to compose a compelling argument detailing the political impact of the *Knútsdrápur*. Frank is also the author of "Anglo-Scandinavian Poetic Relations", which expands the discussion of literature beyond the Scandinavian culture by evaluating the interaction between Old English and Old Norse poetry through drawing connections between the relationship of literature and the evolution of the Danish and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

To best understand the *Knútsdrápur* and their impact and influence among Cnut's subjects, one has to first understand the process and role of Old Norse, or skaldic, poetry in the Scandinavian culture of which the Danish are a part. Despite extensive research pertaining to the position of skalds in society there is a limited understanding of how the poets interacted with

their audience. It is known that the skalds presented their works orally, however, the high level of literary understanding required to grasp the intricacies of skaldic verse leaves historians questioning the ability of the audience, even the king, to fully comprehend the praise poems (Würth 2007, 263-264). The complexity of the poems leads scholars to believe that the works were only intended to be received by the social elite and were certainly only composed for those at the highest echelons of power (Würth 2007, 264). It seems as if the process of the presentation of skaldic praise poetry remained fairly constant. The poet, who may have belonged to the king's retinue or arrived at his court, would ask permission to recite a poem for king, who would agree. The skald would present his piece, and occasionally the opinion of the audience might be recorded. After the recitation, the king would reward the skald, usually quite handsomely, and perhaps ask him to remain as his official court poet (Würth 2007, 267).

It is unclear whether skalds were rewarded for their performance or the content of the poem, however a passage from the *Heimskringla* suggests that there were certain expectations that had to be met (Würth 2007, 267). The saga tells of a skald, Þórarinn loftunga, who composed a poem of inadequate length, a *dræpligr*, for Cnut and was threatened with hanging. Once he added the appropriate verses and stanza, loftunga was rewarded with five pieces of silver (Würth 2007, 268). Cnut's offence by the lesser poem being such that he threatened to kill the poet highlights the significance placed on praise poetry's role in their culture. An incomplete or poorly formed poem could indicate a lack of respect towards the king, which Cnut could not allow if he desired to maintain the stability of his rule. Despite the difficulty in comprehending this type of composition, the recitation event itself had the possibility of being influential on all those present, regardless of their social or intellectual status. The implications of a skald presenting Cnut with a poem honoring his ability as a warrior and a king would not have been lost on his subjects, and would have aided in solidifying his image as a worthy king.

Fortunately for Cnut, he had not just one skald producing praise poetry honoring him, but eight. Matthew Townend takes great effort to examine the chronology of each poet's *Knútsdrápur*, with the final conclusion being: "*Lismannaflokkr* c. 1016–17; Þórðr's *Eiríksdrápa* c. 1016–23; Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa* (with or without stanza 11) c. 1027 and *lausavísa* c. 1027; Sigvatr's *Knútsdrápa* c. 1027 (probable date); Þórarinn's *Hofuðlausn* c. 1027–8 and *Tøgdrápa* c. 1029; Hallvarr's *Knútsdrápa* c. 1029; and Arnórr's fragment c. 1031–5" (Townend 2001, 161-162). However, some were more active than others. Larson claims that Thorarin Praisetongue (Þórarinn loftunga), Ottar the Swart (Óttarr svarti), and Sigvat the Scald (Sigvatr Þórðarson) were the most involved at Cnut's court (Larson 1970, 293). For one king to have eight skalds composing poetry in his honor was an unusual concentration of talent. The draw of poets to Cnut's court indicates an awareness of the importance and widespread significance of Cnut and his kingship.

As was previously mentioned, skalds were rewarded generously for the recitation of their poems. For Cnut to have been able to patronize eight skalds not only demonstrates his wealth, but also his dedication to his native cultural ways. While several scholars such as Susan Ridyard and T. A. Hessop emphasize the rapidity in which Cnut adopted and patronized the English, Townend argues that the *Knútsdrápur* provide a valuable assertion of the, "continuing 'Norseness' of Cnut's court, and of the continuing importance to Cnut of his Scandinavian inheritance" in light of his more ecclesiastical actions (Townend 2001, 176). For Cnut to maintain the support of his fellow Danes it was vital that they believe he would remain true to their shared culture, and not cast his Scandinavian origins away in order to pander to his new English subjects. By supporting the skaldic tradition, Cnut demonstrated that he was committed to observing aspects of both the Danish and English culture, actively depicting an ability to compromise between the two nations.

The purpose behind this composition and presentation of praise poetry is multifaceted, yet most characteristics can be related back to the concept of skaldic court poetry as a social institution that helped shape the political environment. On the most basic level, the poems signify a king as praiseworthy. The creation and recitation of *Knútsdrápur* would have been a testament of honor to Cnut, and would serve as a lasting monument to his kingship (Davidsdottir 1979, 190). In an era and culture where oral tradition was the primary way to preserve history, having poems that laud his success as king would have been advantageous for Cnut and how he was perceived by his contemporaries and later generations. Because of the mutual relationship of gain between Cnut and his poets, it seems that skalds would most likely focus on what the king wished to depict about himself, what he wanted others to believe and what he wanted to disseminate, as over time the information in the poems would become undisputed fact.

The poems had the greatest impact as a method for Cnut to assert himself and his position: “skaldic poetry was an instrument for moulding public opinion and for presenting a ruler’s ideological platform,” (Frank 1994, 109). For Cnut, the *Knútsdrápur* achieved this in multiple ways. Cnut’s aptitude as a warrior is stressed in his praise poems because it would have been seen as proof of his ability to govern a society founded on military power (Davidsdottir 1979, 190). Cnut was capable of conquering England, so he should be able to control it. Lineage was also used to emphasize a king’s right to power (Davidsdottir 1979, 190.) Indeed, Frank notes the use of a genealogical reference in Sigvatr Þórðarson’s *Knútsdrápa* that establishes Cnut as the descendant of Ívarr, who was responsible for the death of the Northumbrian king Ælla, and promotes the idea that Cnut, as king of England, is rightfully inheriting the conquests of his ancestors (Frank 1994, 110-111). This possibility would have been a popular argument due to the substantial history of previous Scandinavian interaction with England and the existing Danish population already present at the time of the conquest (Lawson 2004, 16-17). Frank also details

other elements of the praise poetry, including the advertisement of his superior technology—such as longer warships—and aligning the king with the Christian god, although pagan elements are still readily apparent throughout skaldic literature (Frank 1994, 113-124). Through the work of his skalds, Cnut is again able to demonstrate his willingness to embrace both Scandinavian and English tradition, even faith. Cnut, while an ardent supporter of the English church, would not deprive his people of the mythology and spiritual lore of their cultural heritage that also enlivened his praise poems. Interestingly, it also seems that the poems were a way for the king's subjects to bring to his attention any serious grievances by using the skald as their spokesperson as can be witnessed in sections of Snorri Sturlson's *Heimskringla* (Davidsdottir 1979, 189-190). That the creation of the praise poetry also allowed citizens to be vocal about major issues depicts Cnut as an involved and caring king who was not afraid to face difficult situations or criticism. Cnut's subjects, knowing that they had an outlet for their concerns, would be more likely to utilize the skalds than to become disloyal or resentful because of an inability to effect any kind of change within their society.

Of all the aspects of the *Knútsdrápur* that are discussed in scholarship, the most frequent, and possibly most crucial evaluation that has to be made is on their historical value. Because of the fragmented nature of the remaining texts, ordering the stanzas, or even attributing sections to the right poem can be a challenge. Shami Ghosh is highly critical of the practice of using skaldic poetry as a factual source of historical information, and even is opposed to using the poems as a way to gain insight into the culture due to the lack of proof of authenticity (Ghosh 2011, 97). She believes that praise poems, such as the *Knútsdrápur*, “should, still be utilized for some historical purposes, but normally only in conjunction with the prose, and principally about the time in which it was written rather than of which it purports to tell, unless external, contemporary evidence is available” (Ghosh 2011, 97). Ghosh's evaluation of the praise poems and

conceptualization of their use, while logically founded, is unnecessarily restrictive. By discarding the merit of the genre due to its lack of historical accuracy, a supposed inability to inform on the culture of its creators without the aid of further evidence, Ghosh limits the amount of information to be gained by the poems that falls beyond the scope of historical value.

Sigrun Davidsdottir also scrutinizes the poems' historical merit, but presents certain understandings historians have about the genre that, if kept in mind, can help shape the scholarly approach to utilizing the poems to the fullest. She stresses the poetry's tradition of oral, rather than written, transmission and also notes that praise poetry was never intended to serve as an exact historical record, and contains the perspective and shading of the poet that would occur in a composition meant to glorify and popularize a ruler and their deeds (Davidsdottir 1979, 189202). The variances that could have occurred within the poems while being orally passed through the generations is an issue of which to be aware, yet the coloring of history that is present in the praise poems, even the changes that gradually transpired as the poems were recited by another skald, are valuable to our understanding of how Cnut wanted to be, and was, perceived.

Although aware of the issues surrounding the historical worth of Cnut's praise poems, Judith Jesch finds value in the *Knútsdrápur* through an appreciation of how the content was composed and presented. She asserts the importance of understanding and valuing how the skald's work shaped previous events to impact future ones through choices in composition style, reaffirming a quote from Gerd Weber's *History and the Heroic Tale*: "poets are united in their universal power to shape history corresponding to and at time anticipating the conceptual world of their audience" (Jesch 2002, 243). Cnut's poets had the ability, even the responsibility, to depict the king in a way that would show his current and future subjects his validity and effectivity as a ruler. Perhaps then, the value of praise poetry in understanding how Cnut used it to further the stability of his reign is not dependent on the genre's historical accuracy. That such

poems were written and how they portray Cnut as a king are more relevant aspects to consider than if they can establish a precise timeline. Through a close reading of Hallvarðr háreksblesi's *Knútsdrápa*, Jesch illustrates an effective method of ascertaining the most pertinent quality of Cnut's praise poetry: its ability to glorify the king.

Through the analysis of selections from the *Knútsdrápur* the methods the skald's employed to promote Cnut as the epitome of an effective and worthy king can be evaluated. The skald, Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*, composed in approximately 1027, rapidly begins establishing Cnut as the rightful king by connecting his conquest of England to previous Danish warrior, "Ívarr, who resided at York, had Ælla's back cut with an eagle. (Whaley 2012, 651-653 and 661-663). As noted by Frank, this genealogical tie between Cnut and Ívarr creates a sense of continuity in the history of Scandinavian combative relations with England. By beginning his *Knútsdrápa* with a verse depicting Ívarr's victory over King Ælla, which included the subjugation of a prominent ruler to the torture of gruesome blood-eagle death—in which the back is cut open and the lungs removed from the ribcage while the person is still alive— successively followed by Cnut who, "soon defeated or drove out the sons of Æthelred, and indeed, each one", Sigvatr Þórðarson reminds the audience of the ongoing aggressive opposition against the English, an opposition that is resolved due to the Cnut's ability to triumph over Æthelred and his sons. In bringing all of England under his rule, Cnut did what the legends of the past could not, elevating him among his people. Presented in this manner, Cnut's success entitles him to claim the inheritance of his predecessors' attempts, making his kingship appear as the logical conclusion to the conquest. In addition to establishing Cnut as the rightful king, Þórðarson states that he "soon" defeated the English, stressing the military prowess of the king.

Cnut's ability as a warrior is also upheld in the 1027 *Knútsdrápa* of the notable skald, Óttarr svarti, who, based on the reconstruction of his stanzas, begins his praise poem by proclaiming, "destroyer of the sea-chariot, you launched ships forward at no great age" (Whaley 2012, 769-783). That Óttarr svarti chose to begin his poem by telling of Cnut's aptitude for wrecking the ships of others highlights the importance of warfare, especially marine warfare, was in their society. As their culture was a seafaring one, prowess with ships and combat at sea was an important skill, and might reasonably have been a consideration in calculating the worth or usefulness of a Dane. As a king in this culture, it was for Cnut's image for him to have a reputation for being a stellar sailor and sea-chariot destroyer. Not only would being recognized as a capable fighter raise the level of his social esteem, it would also be reassuring to his people. After an extended period of conflict the Danish population in England would want a strong leader, qualified to aid them in battle.

In addition to the mention of his youth in the first verse, Óttarr svarti continually stresses how young Cnut was when he began fighting: "no ruler younger than you went from home" (Whaley 2012, 769-783). Depicting Cnut as having been a successful a sailor and warrior at so young an age makes him seem uniquely capable and eager to engage in warfare. The superlative use of "youngest" shows how the skald attempts to portray Cnut as special, implying that by venturing forth at an age unmatched by any other ruler, his desire for martial involvement exceeded all other rulers as well. Being known for taking part in battles at an early age would be advantageous for Cnut because it demonstrated his eagerness, practice, and successfulness—all aspects that could be appreciated by his subjects. His long military career gave him the advantage of being experienced, and the fact that he did not die despite that long career indicates that he is either quite lucky or rather deadly, both of which would be useful to his people.

Óttarr svarti also works to establish Cnut as the ideal leader: “the Danes, reluctant to flee, accompanied you abroad, wealth-generous one” (Whaley 2012, 769-783). Cnut is depicted as being the one to organize the Danes to journey to England and fight. That the Danes are described as “reluctant to flee” confirms the idea of theirs being a fierce, warlike culture, so while it does not seem likely that Cnut would have faced much opposition, it is still significant that he is given credit for being the one the warriors followed. The skald calls Cnut “wealthgenerous one” referencing the cultural norm of rulers giving the warriors who serve him rings or other treasure as a means of securing their dedication and loyalty. For Cnut to already be in a position to act as giver of wealth, the head of the social hierarchy, would have shown his people that not only did their king have experience fighting, but also leading. Cnut is depicted as a king who could successfully guide his people, as well as protect them.

How effective these works were at impacting Cnut’s subjects’ perception of their king is debated. As several of the scholars, including Würth, note, the poems were not easily understood and were performed for a select audience, limiting their initial ability to be broadly disseminated. Davidsdottir’s assertion that the skalds were used as an intermediary between the king and his subjects, however, indicates that the common people were more involved in skaldic court environment than the difficulty level of the praise poetry would lead us to believe. And while the oral transmission of the *Knútsdrápur* may have negatively affected the historical value of the poems, it would have increased the poem’s rate of spread. Townend and Frank best capture the impact of the poems in their discussion of the purpose of Cnut’s praise poetry, which is evident even in the small selections discussed. Although it is difficult to appraise who effectively received the content of the poems, the motives behind their creation—to establish and promote Cnut’s image as a rightful, capable king, still connected to his cultural heritage can be witnessed in several sections of the *Knútsdrápur*, such as Sigvatr Þórðarson’s assertions on Cnut’s lineage

and Óttarr svarti's promotion of the king's fighting and leadership abilities. So while the exact demographic of the subjects who heard the poems is uncertain, the strength of persuasion present in skaldic praise poetry would have had an effect on those who did. By having eight skalds, each whom produced at least one work that glorified Cnut in a similar manner to Sigvatr Þórðarson and Óttarr svarti, it seems that the potential for reaching a significant number of his subjects would be greater than most ruler's ability to use spoken literature to influence his people.

However, Cnut did not rely on the *Knútsdrápur* alone to disseminate his political ideology and emphasize his position. In addition to his utilization of laws, Cnut addressed letters to the English people in 1018 or 1019, and again in 1027. The scholarship on this aspect of Cnut's reign is even more lacking than which discusses his praise poetry, but fortunately in recent years there seems to be a developing interest and evaluation of such texts. One of the foremost scholars of Cnut's laws and letters, Dorothy Whitelock's influence can be seen in Laurence M. Larson's "The Political Policies of Cnut as King of England," M. K. Lawson's *Cnut: England's Viking King*, as well as Patrick Wormald's "Legislation as Legal Text", all of whom attempt to bring clarity to the complexity of Cnut's English political writings.

Of all the details pertaining to the political texts the most essential to evaluate is the influence of Wulfstan, Archbishop of York on Cnut's laws and letters. Lawson notes that Wulfstan wrote extensive law codes for both Æthelred and Cnut that are, "shot through with sermonizing, piety, and concern for good government," and depict the kings favorably (Lawson 2004, 59). Wulfstan served as the official writer of court literature during the reign of King Æthelred, and remained as such during the majority of Cnut's reign despite certain conflicts of values. It must be noted however, that throughout his invasion and kingship in England Cnut was a Christian with an evident respect for the power of the Church. However, he was as Larson

points out “also a shrewd statesman and a consummate politician” (Larson 1910, 737). In short, Cnut patronized the Church, yet because of the large population of non-Christian Danes who made up his fighting force and later the Danish population of England, the king had to remain lenient with both sides to maintain the maximum amount of support (Larson 1910, 737).

Archbishop Wulfstan, in a possible attempt to control and counterbalance any inconsistencies he felt occurred between his ideal policies and Cnut’s compromising approach, formed the 1018 law code using reproductions of his previous work for Æthelred, as well as father, King Edgar.

Wulfstan’s influence on Cnut’s letters is more easily determined. While still active in 1018, the archbishop died in 1023, four years before the letter of 1027 was issued, making it impossible for him to manipulate the text directly.

In Cnut’s letter of 1018-1019, however, the fingerprints of Wulfstan are clear to be seen; according to Wormald the text, “contains all the archbishop’s usual suspects: breakers of oaths and pledges, kinslayers and secret slayers and perjurers and witches and Valkyries and adulterers and incest and married nuns” demonstrating his characteristic fervor against what he perceived as evil in the world which might have very well included the Danes (Wormald 2001, 347). Yet the king is shown as presenting an amiable demeanor, especially towards the clergy, at the beginning of the text, “King Cnut greets in friendship his archbishops and diocesan bishops” (Whitelock 1979, 452). By reaching out so quickly to the bishops, Cnut signifies that he does not wish there to be any strife between his administration and the Church. After the violence of the conquest that involved the death of several high ranking clergy members, including the archbishop of Canterbury, establishing a working relationship with the Church was extremely important, yet would have taken effort and reassurance on the part of Cnut. Despite the pleasant greeting there seems to be a controlling edge to the missive. Cnut possessively calls the archbishops and diocesan bishops “his”, firmly putting them under his command and

incorporating them into the society he was creating. When examined as a whole, the introductory paragraph of Cnut's letter of 1018-1019, could read more as a veiled threat than a friendly greeting. His emphasis on bestowing his friendship on all of his people, gives the feeling that he might be trying to forcefully create the impression of goodwill between himself and other parties, as well as implying that he expects friendship in return. In its own way, Cnut's letter seeks to achieve the same goal as the *Knútsdrápur*—to solidify Cnut's position as king. He projects an image of himself that would be the most appealing to his English subjects, claiming he will, “be a gracious lord and faithful observer of God's rights and just secular law” (Whitelock 1979, 452). Just as his praise poetry assures the Danes that he will be the king they want and need, by acknowledging his intent to follow the laws of God and man Cnut indicates that his kingship will be compatible with the standards of the people of England.

By circulating both the *Knútsdrápur* and his letters throughout his kingdom, Cnut effectively communicated his stance as a king to the majority of his subjects. His praise poetry, obviously geared towards the Danish population, asserts Cnut's position as king in a way that also allows him to maintain his connection with Scandinavian culture after becoming the ruler of the English nation. Interestingly though, such poetry may not have been as foreign to the English people as one might think. In her article, "Anglo-Scandinavian Poetic Relations," Roberta Frank discusses the interaction between Old English and Old Norse poetry, drawing connections between the relationship of literature and the evolution of the cultures, and highlighting their shared “skaldic culture” (Frank 2003, 76). So the audience impacted by the *Knútsdrápur* might have been larger than considered. Cnut's letters, although addressed to the English people, are more inclusive, addressing all of his subjects, including the Danish ones. As a conqueror first, and a king second, the letters provide valuable assurance of Cnut's peaceful intentions, as well as a declaration of his Christian faith. That such diverse literature occurred simultaneously

exemplifies Cnut's desire to be seen as a fitting king by both the Danish and the English.

Through the *Knútsdrápur*, laws, and letters, Cnut reached out to all of his subjects in effort to create a stable kingship that would further the security and unity of both nations.

Word Count: 5606

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