

The Thousandth Anniversary of the Danish Conquest of England

by Norman Berdichevsky (January 2016)



One of Hans Christian Andersen's most beloved poems and the most often cited as a popular choice for a national anthem instead of the current two (one for royal occasions and another for civic celebrations), entitled "I Danmark er jeg født" (I was born in Denmark), expresses what has been a recurrent theme and dilemma in Danish self-identity – the knowledge that the present country's small size and very modest power as a factor in international affairs masks a glorious past when...

...."du engang herre var I hele Norden, bød over England – nu du kaldes svag, et lille land, – og dog så vidt om jorden end høres danskens sang og mejselslag. Du danske friske strand, plovjernet guldhorn finder. Gud giv dig fremtid, som han gav dig minder!" Dig elsker jeg! Danmark mit fædreland!

(Translation) You once were master in "All the North, ruled over England" – but now you are called weak, just a small country, yet nevertheless as wide across the world as wherever the Danes' song and chisel blow are heard. You cheerful Danish beach, the plough finds, the golden horn. May God give you a future as he gave you memories! I love you Denmark, my homeland!

Where did Andersen get this notion of "Master in All the North, ruled over England"? January 2016 marks the one thousandth anniversary of the conquest of much of England by King Canute of Denmark and will be celebrated by festivities in both Denmark and the U.K. King Canute (ca.990 – 1035), also known as Knut or Cnut Sweynsson was a Viking king of Denmark, Norway and parts of both England and Sweden. Although brief, the extension of Danish rule over areas bordering on the North Sea established Denmark as the major factor in West and North European affairs at the dawn of the eleventh century.

Canute's military successes made him one of the greatest figures of early medieval Europe and set the stage for Danish involvement in European matters. Had it not been for the victory of another branch of Scandinavian adventurers – the Normans, who first raided then conquered and settled the northwestern coast of France (Normandy) and went on to conquer England in 1066, Canute might have gone down in history as more important than Charlemagne in the formation of the modern European states.

Starting in approximately the year 790, waves of Danish assaults on the coastlines of the British Isles for plunder were followed by settlers from Denmark. By 865, Danish chieftains wintered in East Anglia, moved north and captured York in 867, defeating various Saxon contenders for the throne. The Danes placed a puppet Saxon Englishman on the throne and gradually extended considerable influence throughout the region of Northeast England, north of the Humber River. This tribute was simply blackmail paid to the Vikings to prevent the land from being plundered.

Most of the English kingdoms lay in turmoil and were unable to oppose the Vikings. Danes arrived in 870 in a force called "The Great Summer Army" to overrun large areas of central and Eastern England. They then planned to move on to Wessex but were defeated on January 8, 871 at The Battle of Ashdown. By 878, an agreement was signed recognizing an autonomous Danish region in the Northeast of England known as the DANELAW. Viking chieftains agreed to respect the authority of the English king and to desist from further attempts at expansion beyond this fixed boundary line.

The Danish controlled area lasted for approximately two centuries and was formalized between King Alfred the Great of England and the Danish ruler Guthrum the Old. The border ran roughly north of a line drawn in London trending to the northwest to Chester. Five fortified towns became particularly important in the region: Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Stamford and Lincoln, today referred to as The East Midlands.

In 991, the English crown started to 'buy peace' by making regular protection payments known as the DANEGELD. Events soon proved the truth of Kipling's famous couplet on appeasement: *'If once you pay him the Danegeld, you never get rid of the Dane'*. In Great Britain, Danegeld has acquired the meaning of any coercive payment, whether in money or kind. Once the DANEGELD has been paid, and the

thing about DANEGELD is that one keeps on having to pay it. Concession after concession must be made. What will be the next one? To emphasize the point, the phrase was widely used by critics of the Munich Agreement at the time of Chamberlain's appeasement policy towards Hitler over the Sudeten question.

Objectively however, the reign of the Danish King Canute the Great (1016–1035), brought stability with his proclamation of a joint monarchy embracing Denmark and England. His grandfather was Harald Blaatand (Bluetooth) who had been the first acknowledged king of a united and Christianized Denmark embracing Jutland, the Danish islands and Southern Sweden.

What brought him to England was the ambition to rule not only over the Danelaw but establish a united kingdom embracing the British Isles and Denmark. The Saxon King Ethelred plundered parts of the Danelaw and the Isle of Man in the year 1000 thus violating the old treaty and recognized border. It was an apparent first step to evicting the Danes from all of Britain.

On the death of his father Sweyn, after only 5 weeks as king, in February 1014, Canute's brother Harald succeeded him as King of Denmark. Canute was proclaimed as king by the Danish army in England. However, the English nobility opposed the Danes and recalled their leader King Ethelred from Normandy to lead an army against Canute. Canute then retreated back to Denmark and proposed a shared rule with his brother Harald in a joint kingship. Harald rejected this proposal but offered Canute command of his forces for another invasion of England, on the condition he did not continue to press his rival claim.

Canute managed to assemble a large fleet to launch another invasion of England with the help of Polish and Swedish allies, relatives of his mother. In the summer of 1015, Canute's fleet sailed to England with an invading Danish army of 10,000 in 200 long ships with many Vikings from Norway and Sweden. The invasion force battled the English in a grisly campaign for the next fourteen months. Practically all of the battles were fought against Ethelred the Unready's son, "Edmund Ironside." A passage from a contemporary document *Encomium Emmae Reginae* paints a vivid picture of Canute's fleet. Moreover the description of the social and economic character of the Danish force is illuminating.

"There were so many kinds of shields, that you could have believed that troops of all nations were present. ... Gold shone on the prows, silver also

flashed on the variously shaped ships. ... For who could look upon the lions of the foe, terrible with the brightness of gold, who upon the men of metal, menacing with golden face, ... who upon the bulls on the ships threatening death, their horns shining with gold, without feeling any fear for the king of such a force? Furthermore, in this great expedition there was present no slave, no man freed from slavery, no low-born man, no man weakened by age; for all were noble, all strong with the might of mature age, all sufficiently fit for any type of fighting, all of such great fleetness, that they scorned the speed of horsemen."

Canute's army crossed the Thames in early in 1016, causing the English army to disband and leaving London unprotected. Canute was then accepted as king of all England in November 1016. At its height, the area of England under the control of Danes and their Scandinavian allies occupied much of the North European coast facing Britain – pure Danes in Denmark and a mixed Danish-Saxon population in the Danelaw, with Danes eventually transformed into Normans in France.

In 1016, following the Danish victory at the Battle of Ashingdon over Edmund "Ironside," Canute and Edmund drew up the Treaty of Olney, which allotted The Danelaw and the English midlands to Canute. Edmund died shortly after this treaty leaving Canute as the first Danish-Viking king of all England. To seal his victory and claims, Canute married Ethelred's widow, Emma in 1017 but her two sons by her first marriage remained in Normandy (their heirs were the invading Norman force that conquered all of England in 1066).

After a major victory against Norway and Sweden in 1026 and on his way to Rome for the coronation, Canute proclaimed himself "King of all England and Denmark and the Norwegians and of some of the Swedes."

So what lasting effects did all this ancient history leave behind in modern Europe? What were the consequences for England and the English language as a result of these dynastic struggles and conflicts in the North Sea of the eleventh century? During the more than two centuries of distinctive Danish presence in England, Anglo-Saxon speech was influenced by its contact with Danish in the direction of simplification especially with regard to the conjugation of verbs. Danish dropped the cumbersome case endings (as in Latin) that were still current in Anglo-Saxon and moreover has today only one form for verbs in the present and the past tenses whereas Anglo-Saxon like old Germanic and Latin

tongues had distinctive forms for each person. Another feature of cultural borrowing by English speakers from Danish took place in areas of vocabulary and spelling. Compare for example the Danish terms closely resembling English such as kniv (knife) and vindue (window) with the German equivalents of messer and fenster. Incongruous spellings (in English) like knees, kneel, knave, knight, gnaw, and gnome derive from their Danish equivalents.

The lasting Danish influence in England can be seen and heard to this day. There are more than 1,500 Scandinavian place names in England, mainly in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire (within the former boundaries of the Danelaw). More than 600 end in -by, the Scandinavian word for “village” or “town” – for example Grimsby, Naseby, and Whitby. Many others end in -thorpe (“farm”), -thwaite (“clearing”), and -toft (“homestead”). An analysis of family names showing Scandinavian influence (especially those ending in -son and -sen shows a distinct concentration the north and east, corresponding to areas of former Viking settlement. More than 60% of personal names in medieval records in Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire show Scandinavian influence.

Why bother with so much ancient history, and geography? Most Danes today probably can't recall a great deal of the old medieval kings and their intrigues but they do retain a sense of historical continuity as a great nation and grasp that terms like the Danegeld and Danelaw reflect an honored and important tradition their ancestors played in the fortunes of Scandinavia, and the British isles. Even abroad, many educated people who know little or nothing about Canute or Denmark have heard the legendary story of the great king who commanded the tide to stop before the water reached his feet.

“Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy of the name but God, whom heaven, earth and sea obey.”

This is the legendary remark Canute is supposed to have spoken while seated on his throne on the seashore with the waves lapping round his feet. The story relates that flattering court followers claimed that his power was so great he could command the sea. The king played along and had his throne carried to the seashore and sat on it as the tide came in, commanding the waves to advance no further. When they didn't, he had made his point that, though the deeds of kings might appear “great” in the minds of men, they were as nothing in the face of God's power. Canute died in 1035 and his great kingdom across the North Sea only

survived him by a few years as neither of his sons proved capable of holding it together.

One of the most beautiful of Danish poems set to music speaks of the enduring love of the people for their ...*“Danmark i tusind aar, hjemstavn og bøndegaard... og fri mands arv.”*; Denmark through a thousand years, our native soil and farmsteads,...and the legacy of free men. The Danes, like much older peoples such as the Jews and Greeks have had the capacity to carry recognition of their long history as a psychological element of stability through great epochs in the past, full of many trials, tribulations, achievements, adventures and celebrations that enrich their everyday lives.

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