So Far and No Further: The Story of Cnut and the Waves

Alison Finlay
Birkbeck, University of London

Abstract

This article traces the history of the legend of Cnut's abortive attempt to rebuke the waves, from its first appearance in the twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum* of Henry of Huntingdon to modern critiques of climate change. Early versions located it in accounts of the king's demonstrative piety, emphasising the limits of imperial power and the need for monarchs to acknowledge the superior power of God. Comparable tales in classical sources and medieval Welsh legends and saints' lives suggest a possible oral origin for the story. From the eighteenth century the accusation of vainglory was transferred to an audience of courtiers who were rebuked by the pious king; claims were also made about the physical location of the scene. In modern journalistic parlance, Cnut is a byword for a delusional attempt to avert the inevitable, the most recent example being the coining of the term 'Canute syndrome' to describe climate-change denial.

Keywords

Cnut, twelfth century, saints' lives, piety, climate change

In the modern mind, the name 'Canute' is synonymous with the story of his futile command to the tide to bend to his authority.[1] Whether the great eleventh-century Danish conqueror of England and Norway is represented as a monomaniac rebuked for his delusion of control over the forces of nature, a wise ruler rebuking his sycophantic followers for their belief (actual or pretended) in his omnipotence, or – as in the earliest recorded version of the story – a pious king acknowledging the superiority of God's might over his own, the fable has resonated down the centuries as a lesson in acknowledging one's own limitations. In modern allusions, forces such as the Internet replace the Almighty as the greater power foolishly challenged by puny mortals: in 2011 Ryan Giggs was referred to by a lawyer as 'the King Canute of football' for attempting to stem 'the unstoppable tide of information' on the Internet by means of a legal injunction preventing revelations about his private life in the tabloid press (Westcott 2011). But the moral may still be addressed to legislators: also in 2011 Frank Field MP warned David Cameron to 'stop being King Canute' if he wanted to avoid being 'overwhelmed by the incoming tide of local authority cuts' (Westcott 2011). Furthermore, in 2013, 'announcing plans to clean up the Internet...David Cameron invoked King Canute, saying he had been warned, "You can as easily legislate what happens on the Internet as you can legislate the tides"' (Reidy 2013). This article investigates how the story of Canute and the waves became ingrained in popular consciousness, and the transformations it underwent in passing through the accounts of sober historians to collections of moral tales put together for the benefit of children. It is likely that its universality partly depends on the general lack of understanding of its historical context, of when and how Cnut achieved the great power alluded to in the story; it is something that happened in a vaguely apprehended time long ago. This was probably the case even when the story first emerged, as far as we know, in the twelfth century, when according to Malcolm Godden, 'historians were always making up stories about kings from Anglo-Saxon times' (cited in Westcott 2011). The separateness of these figures from the prevailing regime made it easier to see them in an exemplary light.[2]

In the modern era the story has traditionally been encountered first

in early childhood. As a representative example, James Baldwin in his collection of school readings, *Fifty Famous Stories Retold*, first published in 1896 and reprinted and adapted ever since, includes it among 'the half-legendary tales of a distinctly later origin [than those of the Greeks and Hebrews], which have for their subject certain romantic episodes in the lives of well-known heroes and famous men, or in the history of a people' (Baldwin 1896: 4). It is notable that Baldwin stresses the story's instructive value not as a moral tale, but as a literary allusion that the educated reader needs to be able to recognise: 'There are numerous time-honored stories which have become so incorporated into the literature and thought of our race that a knowledge of them is an indispensable part of one's education' (Baldwin 1896: 4). The story follows on from another in the same vein, that of King Alfred burning the cakes, and is inevitably illustrated with a drawing of the king sitting on the beach surrounded by a group of courtiers:

> *King Canute on the Seashore*
>
> A hundred years or more after the time of Alfred the Great there was a king of England named Canute. King Canute was a Dane; but the Danes were not so fierce and cruel then as they had been when they were at war with King Alfred.
> The great men and officers who were around King Canute were always praising him.
> 'You are the greatest man that ever lived,' one would say.
> Then another would say, 'O king! there can never be another man so mighty as you.'
> And another would say, 'Great Canute, there is nothing in the world that dares to disobey you.'
> The king was a man of sense, and he grew very tired of hearing such foolish speeches.
> One day he was by the seashore, and his officers were with him. They were praising him, as they were in the habit of doing. He thought that now he would teach them a lesson, and so he bade them set his chair on the beach close by the edge of the water.
> 'Am I the greatest man in the world?' he asked.

> 'O king!' they cried, 'there is no one so mighty as you.'
> 'Do all things obey me?' he asked.
> 'There is nothing that dares to disobey you, O king!' they said. 'The world bows before you, and gives you honor.'
> 'Will the sea obey me?' he asked; and he looked down at the little waves which were lapping the sand at his feet.
> The foolish officers were puzzled, but they did not dare to say 'No.'
> 'Command it, O king! and it will obey,' said one.
> 'Sea,' cried Canute, 'I command you to come no farther! Waves, stop your rolling, and do not dare to touch my feet!'
> But the tide came in, just as it always did. The water rose higher and higher. It came up around the king's chair, and wet not only his feet, but also his robe. His officers stood about him, alarmed, and wondering whether he was not mad.
> Then Canute took off his crown, and threw it down upon the sand.
> 'I shall never wear it again,' he said. 'And do you, my men, learn a lesson from what you have seen. There is only one King who is all-powerful; and it is he who rules the sea, and holds the ocean in the hollow of his hand. It is he whom you ought to praise and serve above all others.' (Baldwin 1896: 10–12)

In contrast with the note of piety that, as will be demonstrated, is essential to the story in its earliest incarnations, the emphasis in this version is sternly on the rational; rather than the embodiment of exceptional wisdom or piety, the king is merely 'a man of sense'; the foolish courtiers, who are there to be 'taught a lesson' as they are in all post-medieval versions of the story, simply doubt the king's sanity until the point of his object lesson has been explained. Entirely missing is the keynote of the earliest versions of the story, the representation of the king as a model of piety.

The story is generally dismissed as apocryphal, since no contemporary version of it survives from Cnut's own lifetime. It first appears in the *Historia Anglorum* of Henry of Huntingdon as a coda to the record of Cnut's death in 1035:

Cnut rex, cum uiginti annis regnasset, uiuere destituit apud Scatesburi, et sepultus est apud Winceastre in Veteri Monasterio. De cuius regis potentia pauca sunt perstringenda. Nec enim ante eum tante magnitudinis rex fuerat in Anglia. Erat namque dominus tocius Dacie, tocius Anglie, tocius Norwagie, simul et Scotie. Enimuero extra numerum bellorum quibus maxime splenduit, tria gessit eleganter et magnifice. Primum est quod filiam suam imperatori Romano cum ineffabilibus diuiciis, maritauit. Secundum, quod Romam pergens omnes malas exactiones in uia que per Gallias Romam tendit, que uocantur tolonea uel transuersa, data pecunia sua diminui fecit usque ad medietatem. Tercium, quod cum in maximo uigore floreret imperii, sedile suum in littore maris cum ascenderet statui iussit. Dixit autem mari ascendenti, 'Tu mee dicionis es, et terra in qua sedeo mea est, nec fuit qui impune meo resisteret imperio. Impero igitur tibi ne in terram meam ascendas, nec uestes uel membra dominatoris tui madefacere presumas.' Mare uero de more conscendens, pedes regis et crura since reuerentia madefecit. Rex igitur resiliens ait, 'Sciant omnes habitantes orbem, uanam et friuolam regum esse potentiam, nec regis qempiam nomine dignum, preter eum cuius nutui celum, terra, mare, legibus obediunt aeternis.' Rex igitur Cnut numquam postea coronam auream ceruici sua imposuit, sed super imaginem Domini que cruci affixa erat, posuit eam in eternum, in laudem Dei regis magni. Cuius misericordia Cnut regis anima quiete fruatur.

(When King Cnut had reigned for twenty years, he departed this life at Shaftesbury and was buried at Winchester in the Old Minster. A few words must be devoted to the power of this king. Before him there had never been in England a king of such great authority. He was lord of all Denmark, of all England, of all Norway, and also of Scotland. In addition to the many wars in which he was most particularly illustrious, he performed three fine and magnificent deeds. The first is that he gave his daughter in marriage to the Roman emperor, with

> indescribable riches. The second, that on his journey to Rome, he had the evil taxes that were levied on the road that goes through France, called tolls or passage tax, reduced by half at his own expense. The third, that when he was at the height of his ascendancy, he ordered his chair to be placed on the sea-shore as the tide was coming in. Then he said to the rising tide, 'You are subject to me, as the land on which I am sitting is mine, and no one has resisted my overlordship with impunity. I command you, therefore, not to rise on to my land, nor to presume to wet the clothing or limbs of your master.' But the sea came up as usual, and disrespectfully drenched the king's feet and shins. So jumping back, the king cried, 'Let all the world know that the power of kings is empty and worthless, and there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws.' Thereafter King Cnut never wore the golden crown on his neck, but placed it on the image of the crucified Lord, in eternal praise of God the great king. By whose mercy may the soul of King Cnut enjoy rest.) (Greenway 1996: 366–369)

Because of its long gestation, the age of particular elements within the *Historia Anglorum* are difficult to date. The Norman historian Henry started putting together his Latin *Historia* sometime before 1130 at the instigation of the Bishop of Lincoln as an account of the origins and history of the English people. Divided into ten books, it narrates the national history of the English from Roman times to Henry's own lifetime. The first seven books, ending with the death of Henry I, were completed by 1130, but the *Historia* was a work in progress: surviving manuscripts show that further books were added and the earlier ones revised until the date of the last recorded event, the coronation of Henry II in 1154. Henry the historian died sometime between 1156 and 1164 (Greenway 1996: lvii).

History has an exemplary function in Henry's eyes. In his Prologue he invites his reader to profit from the examples of the great deeds of the past:

> Sic etiam in rebus gestis omnium gentium et nationum, que utique Dei iudicia sunt, benignitas, munificentia, probitas, cautela et his similia, et contraria, non solum spirituales ad bonum accendunt et a malo repellunt, sed etiam seculares ad bona sollicitant et in malis minuunt.
>
> (Yes, indeed, in the recorded deeds of all peoples and nations, which are the very judgements of God, clemency, generosity, honesty, caution and the like, and their opposites, not only provoke men of the spirit to what is good and deter them from evil, but even encourage worldly men to good deeds and reduce their wickedness.) (Greenway 1996: 4–5)

His narrative is structured around five great invasions, by the Romans, the Picts and Scots, the Angles and Saxons, the Danes and the Normans, which 'are seen as five punishments or plagues inflicted by God on a faithless people' (Greenway 1996: lix; 15). His perspective, therefore, while implying a degree of judgement on the English, afflicted as they have been by successive conquests, does not privilege the Normans as current holders of power over, for instance, Cnut, as one of the important conquerors of the period.

Henry's sources for the Anglo-Saxon period largely comprise (for the earlier period) Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* very similar to the E version, the so-called Peterborough Chronicle, with some reference also made to other versions (Greenway 1996: xci–xciii). Besides the hagiographical material supplied by Bede, he seems also to have used independent lives of saints for his book ix, 'De miraculis Anglorum' ('The Miracles of the English'). In her survey of Henry's sources Greenway lists oral tradition as a possible resource for a number of narratives in the *Historia* for which no written source can be identified. She notes that 'many of these are found in book vi, covering the first half of the eleventh century' (including the anecdote about Cnut), and that they have in common the use of direct speech (Greenway 1996: cv). Oral sources are by their nature virtually impossible to pin down, but the common feature of direct speech may support Greenway's vague suggestion that 'it may well be that some

of the other tales were drawn from cycles of English stories or ballads' (cvi). As to the clustering of these stories in the early eleventh century, several instances are observed where Henry links his narrative with his own memory – as in his account of the St Brice's Day massacre in 1002: 'in puericia nostra quosdam uetustissimos loqui audiuimus' (in my childhood I heard very old men say) (Greenway 1996: 340–341), suggesting that the span of Henry's own life governs the span of oral record on which he was able to draw. It may be noted that two of these tales, as well as that of the admonition to the waves, are about Cnut and present him in a favourable light: the account of his duel at Ashingdon with Edmund Ironside, and the subsequent murder of Edmund and Cnut's punishment of its instigator, Eadric Streona.

At this point, closer analysis of the anecdote may yield information not only about the possible nature of oral sources that may have been available to Henry, but of the role of the story in his overall project and the meaning it conveyed in his time – and possibly in Cnut's own time, if an earlier origin of the legend can be assumed. In the first place, it is clearly part of a retrospective review of Cnut's reign pronounced after the king's death. In accordance with Henry's overarching theme, it is a story about extreme power brought down by submission to the superlative power of God but also, in the context, by death; although 'before him there had never been in England a king of such great authority', these words are, in effect, Cnut's obituary, and it follows shortly afterwards, with the death of his son Harthacnut in 1042, that 'Proceres igitur Anglorum, iam Dacorum dominio liberati, hilares' (the English nobles are joyful now to be freed from Danish rule) and about to be engulfed by the larger and more lasting impact of the descent upon them of the Normans (Greenway 1996: 370–371).

The story is related so as to juxtapose Cnut's unprecedented power and his pious humility. The story of his confrontation with the tide is presented as one of three 'great deeds' (*tria essit eleganter et magnifice*), which are to be added to his proven success in warfare, about which Henry no doubt judges his narrative has already provided ample evidence, and are introduced with an urgent underlining of his power: 'A few words must be devoted to the power of this king', and the emphatic enumeration of the constituent parts of his empire.

The 'three deeds' are miscellaneous in their nature. First, Cnut has married his daughter to the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 'with indescribable riches' – a slight telescoping of the truth, which was that Cnut's daughter Gunnhildr was married only in the year after her father's death to the son of the emperor Conrad II, and that she in fact died before her husband became emperor. Nevertheless, as Lawson points out, 'Not since Æthelstan, a century earlier, had an English king married a female relative to the German imperial heir; no Danish monarch had ever done so' (Lawson 1993: 115). Henry's singling out of this achievement reinforces his clear desire to represent Cnut as an important figure on the international stage, as well as Cnut's own evident ambition to position himself in this way.

The second 'great deed', the reduction of tolls on the way through France for pilgrims to Rome, artfully combines the themes of piety and magnificent wealth that are the hallmark of this evaluation of Cnut's reign. Cnut's own journey to Rome has been related immediately before the passage under consideration; this is a significant chronological displacement considering Henry's sources apparently place the visit in 1027, eight years before Cnut's death. Cnut was certainly in Rome that year attending the coronation of the emperor Conrad II, but owing to confusion among the sources historians are unclear whether he made a second visit in 1031 (Lawson 1993: 102–104; Townend 2001: 150). Henry refers to the visit as a pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*), but the undoubted context of the imperial wedding may account for the emphasis on material wealth in this passage, where even Cnut's piety is demonstrated through his munificence in alms-giving:

> Rex uero Cnut Romam splendide perrexit, et elemosinam que uocatur Romescot, quam antecessores sui dederant, ecclesie Romane perhenniter assignauit. Quis autem numeret elemosinas eius, dapsilitates eius, et magnalia que gessit rex magnus in peregrinatione illa? Non fuit rex sub occidentali mundi limite qui tam splendide, tam famose, Rome sacta loca petisset.

> (King Cnut travelled to Rome in splendour, and assigned in perpetuity the alms called Romescot which his predecessors had given to the Roman church. Who may number his alms, his bountiful gifts and the mighty deeds that the great king performed on the pilgrimage? There was no king within the bounds of the western world who visited the holy places of Rome in so much splendour and glory.) (Greenway 1996: 366–367)

It is thus in the context of great worldly power and wealth, and the successful acquisition of an empire, that the account of Cnut's challenge to the tide – the third of his 'great deeds' – is introduced. It is not strictly delimited chronologically, but placed 'at the height of his ascendancy' (*in maximo uigore floreret imperii*); nor is a specific setting identified, in contrast to the ambition in some later retellings of the legend to tie it down to a particular location. Despite the reliance on direct speech already noted in the anecdote, no audience is sketched in – again in contrast to later versions, in which a group of sycophantic courtiers is introduced in order to receive the king's reproach. Cnut's address to the tide mimics the address of an invader laying claim to the land he has encroached upon – in this case the shore underlying the water. The water is addressed as a potential subject: 'no one has resisted my overlordship with impunity', himself cast as its master (*dominator*). To the extent that Cnut is a figure for kingship in general, though, the inexorably rising tide can itself be seen as a figure of conquest, as would not be the case if the challenge had addressed the sea in general. He places his seat on *terra firma*, on the still-dry seashore demarcating the land over which he has dominion; despite his admonitions to those he claims as his subjects, they (personified as the waves) continue to rise 'disrespectfully' (*sine reverentia*), forcing him into 'jumping back' (*resiliens*). The moral of the tale is drawn in a speech of universal address: 'Let all the world know' (*Sciant omnes habitantes orbem*). It reinforces the limitations of the earthly power of kings by comparison with God's control of the natural world, but also implies a more earthly warning to conquerors, who may encroach upon the territories of their rivals so far, but no further.

Although the anecdote appears even in the earliest version of the

Historia, the concluding sentence, in which Cnut renounces the wearing of a 'golden crown', instead placing it on a crucifix at Winchester, is a later addition (c. 1140), suggesting either the continuing evolution of the story or perhaps dependence on an alternative source, such as the *Translatio sancte Mildrethe virginis* of Goscelin de Saint-Bertin. According to this saint's life, Cnut one Easter refused to wear his crown and placed it instead on a crucifix at Winchester (Rollason 1986: 163).

Analysis of Cnut's relationship with the Anglo-Saxon church suggests a combination of personal piety and diplomacy, though the relative proportions of these elements are impossible to disentangle in retrospect. There is ample evidence of Cnut's fostering of the cults of Anglo-Saxon royal saints, no doubt a strategy to cement the legitimacy of the Danish dynasty among his English subjects. To give one instance, Susan Ridyard comments that 'Cnut, if Goscelin is to be believed, proved in his veneration of St Edith to be almost more West Saxon than the West Saxons' (Ridyard 1988: 195). The near-contemporary *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, written probably in 1041 at the instigation of, and in praise of, Cnut's widow Emma, presents an unashamedly laudatory account of the identification of Cnut's rule with the approval of the Church:

> Amicus uero et familiaris factus est uiris ecclesiasticis, adeo ut episcopis uideretur coepiscopus pro exibitione totius religionis, monachis quoque non secularis sed caenobialis pro continentia humillimae deuotionis. Defensabat sedulo pupillos et uiduas, sustentabat orphanos et aduenas, leges oppressit iniquas earumque sequaces, iustitiam et equitatem extulit et coluit, ecclesias extruxit et honorauit, sacerdotes et clerum dignitatibus ampliauit, pacem et unanimatatem omnibus suis indixit.
>
> (He indeed became a friend and intimate of churchmen, to such a degree that he seemed to bishops to be a brother bishop for his maintenance of perfect religion, to monks also not a secular but a monk for the temperance of his life of most humble devotion. He diligently defended wards and widows, he supported orphans and strangers, he suppressed unjust laws

> and those who applied them, he exalted and cherished justice and equity, he built and dignified churches, he loaded priests and the clergy with dignities, he enjoined peace and unanimity upon his people.) (Campbell revised Keynes 1998: 34–37)

The encomiast's account anticipates Henry of Huntingdon's in its emphasis on Cnut's concern to cut a figure on the international stage, and in its depiction of lavish munificence to emphasise the role of royal piety. Cnut's pilgrimage to Rome is recorded, as it is by Henry, with reference to the king's generosity to institutions as he passed through 'Italia…Gallia…et magis omnibus…Flandia' ('Italy, Gaul and Flanders above all') (Campbell revised Keynes 1998, 36–37), ending with an eyewitness account of his benefactions in St Omer:

> Ingressus monasteria et susceptus cum magna honorificencia humiliter incedebat, et mira cum reuerentia in terram defixus lumina et ubertim fundens lacrimarium ut ita dicam flumina tota intentione sanctorum expetiit suffragia. At ubi ad hoc peruentum est, ut oblationibus regiis sacra uellet cumulare altaria, o quotiens primum pauimento lacrimosa infixit oscula, quotiens illud pectus uenerabile propria puniebant uerbera, qualia dabat suspiria, quotiens precabatur ut sibi non indignaretur superna clementia! Tandem a suis ei innuenti sua porrigebatur oblatio, non mediocris, nec quae aliquo clauderetur in marsupio, sed ingens allata est palleati extento in gremio, quam ipse rex suis manibus altari imposuit, largitor hislaris momitu apostolico. 'Altari' autem cur dico, cum uidisse me meminerim, eum omnes angulos monasteriorum circuisse, nullumque altare licet exiguum preterisse, cui non munera daret et dulcia oscula infigeret? Deinde adsunt pauperes, munerantur etiam ipsi protinus singulatim omnes.
>
> (When he had entered the monasteries, and had been received with great honour, he advanced humbly, and with complete concentration prayed for the intercession of the saints in a manner wonderfully reverent, fixing his eyes upon the ground,

> and freely pouring forth, so to speak, rivers of tears. But when the time came when he desired to heap the holy altars with royal offerings, how often did he first with tears press kisses on the pavement, how often did self-inflicted blows punish that revered breast, what signs he gave, how often did he pray that the heavenly mercy might not be displeased with him! At length, when he gave the sign, his offering was presented to him by his followers, not a mean one, nor such as might be shut in any bag, but a man brought it, huge as it was, in the ample fold of his cloak, and this the king himself placed on the altar with his own hand, a cheerful giver according to the apostolic exhortation. But why do I say on the altar, when I recall that I saw him going round every corner of the monasteries, and passing no altar, small though it might be, without giving gifts and pressing sweet kisses upon it? Then poor men came and were all forthwith given gifts one by one.) (Campbell revised Keynes 1998: 36–37)

The performative aspect of Cnut's piety is also attested in accounts such as that of Symeon of Durham, who claims that Cnut walked barefoot for five miles to reach the church of St Cuthbert (Arnold 1885: Symeon, I: 90, quoted by Lawson 1993: 133). Lawson notes parallels to Cnut's placing of his crown on a crucifix in accounts of displays of humility from other eleventh-century rulers. The same ideology of royal identification with Christ, though in a less humble guise, seems to lie behind the otherwise highly unusual refrains of the *drápur* composed for Cnut by two Icelandic poets, the *Hǫfuðlausn* of Þórarinn loftunga:[3]

> Knútr verr grund sem gætir
> Gríklands himinríki. (Townend 2012: 850)
>
> (Cnut defends his land as the guardian of Greece [i.e. God] defends heaven)

and the *Knútsdrápa* of Hallvarðr háreksblesi:

> Knútr verr jǫrð sem ítran
> alls dróttinn sal fjalla. (Townend 2017: 239)
>
> (Cnut defends the earth as the lord of all defends the splendid hall of the mountains [i.e. heaven].)

Eleanor Parker has analysed the account of Cnut's rebuking of the waves in the context of other stories from the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries in which 'travel, generosity, and the king's power over the sea' are thematically constant, suggesting that the story provides a link between conventional Scandinavian ideologies of the importance of the king's dominance over the sea, as expressed in the skaldic eulogies, and a new tradition dictated by the relationship established by Cnut with the Anglo-Saxon church: 'the traditional Scandinavian expression of sea-power is given a new interpretation, which simultaneously validates its central meaning and reimagines it to suit a new cultural and religious context' (2014: 284). In this context, it is not out of the question that the story of Cnut's rebuking of the waves has a basis in fact, as a 'planned act of piety' (Lawson 1993: 136), though if so it escaped mention in any written source earlier than Henry's *Historia.* If this were the case, the story could fall into the category of reminiscences from Henry's own childhood, an act intended as a public demonstration of piety and passed down to posterity by those who witnessed it. Alternatively, the story may have been fathered on Cnut as a commentary on the contrast between his perceived power and the image of humility that he constantly fostered. In either case, the story may draw on earlier legends about attempts by rulers to control the sea.

Evidence of this can be assembled from Celtic regions, though it is possible that the attempt to control the elements is a motif likely to arise in any culture in which a ruler's power is measured against that of God, or the gods. This is suggested by the story told by the Greek historian Herodotus of the Persian commander Xerxes' attempt to bridge the Hellespont in his invasion of Greece in the fifth century

BC. The commander angrily punishes the sea after his bridge has been destroyed by a storm, in a speech in which, like Cnut, he personifies the elements:

> Ὡς δ᾽ ἐπύθετο Ξέρξης, δεινὰ ποιεύμενος τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον ἐκέλευσε τριηκοσίας ἐπικέσθαι μάστιγι πληγὰς καὶ κατεῖναι ἐς τὸ πέλαγος πεδέων ζεῦγος. ἤδη δὲ ἤκουσα ὡς καὶ στιγέας ἅμα τούτοισι ἀπέπεμψε στίξοντας τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον. ἐνετέλλετο δὲ ὧν ῥαπίζοντας λέγειν βάρβαρά τε καὶ ἀτάσθαλα· “ Ὦ πικρὸν ὕδωρ, δεσπότης τοι δίκην ἐπιτιθεῖ τήνδε, ὅτι μιν ἠδίκησας οὐδὲν πρὸς ἐκείνου ἄδικον παθόν. καὶ βασιλεὺς μὲν Ξέρξης διαβήσεταί σε, ἤν τε σύ γε βούλῃ ἤν τε μή· σοὶ δὲ κατὰ δίκην ἄρα οὐδεὶς ἀνθρώπων θύει ὡς ἐόντι καὶ θολερῷ καὶ ἁλμυρῷ ποταμῷ.” τήν τε δὴ θάλασσαν ἐνετέλλετο τούτοισι ζημιοῦν καὶ τῶν ἐπεστεώτων τῇ ζεύξι τοῦ Ἑλλησπόντου ἀποταμεῖν τὰς κεφαλάς.
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> (When Xerxes heard of that, he was very angry, and gave command that the Hellespont be scourged with three hundred lashes, and a pair of fetters be thrown into the sea; nay, I have heard ere now that he sent branders with the rest to brand the Hellespont. This is certain, that he charged them while they scourged to utter words outlandish and presumptuous: ‘Thou bitter water,’ they should say, ‘our master thus punishes thee, because thou didst him wrong albeit he had done thee none. Yes, Xerxes the king will pass over thee, whether thou wilt or no; it is but just that no man offers thee sacrifice, for thou art a turbid and a briny river.’ Thus he commanded that the sea should be punished, and that they who had been oversees of the bridging of the Hellespont should be beheaded.) (Herodotus 1938: 346–48)

The fact that Xerxes’ second attempt to bridge the waters is successful may suggest an element of ritual underlying the account, a feature that has also been attributed to a legend of Maelgwn recorded in the Welsh laws, not written down until the twelfth century but probably of earlier

origin. According to this, a contest was held among a number of kings to determine who should be paramount:

> Sef lle y gossodassant, ar draeth Maelgwn yn Aer Dyui…Ac yna y dodes Maelda hynaf kadeir winithedic o adaned evyredic y dan Vaelgwn; a phandoeth y llanw; ny allawd neb y arhos namyn Maelgwn ehun, oachaws y gadeir. Ac o achaws hynny y kafas ynteu bot yn vrenhin pennaf.
>
> (The place they appointed was on the Maelgwn sand at Aber Dyvi…And there Maeldav the Elder…placed a chair composed of wax wings under Maelgwn; so when the tide flowed, no one was able to remain, excepting Maelgwn, because of his chair. And by that means Maelgwn became supreme king.) (Owen 1841, II: 48–51)

Ellen Ettlinger cites this story along with other Celtic tales of kings laying claim to land against the encroachment of the sea, sometimes by means of an implement such as a weapon which is used to mark a boundary that the sea is unable to breach. Vague as the evidence is, she argues from the assumption that the king had a ritual power to mark out the boundaries of his territory: 'In the Celtic stories we...are left guessing how the king performed the ceremony, but you will see immediately that it was his prerogative' (Ettlinger 1950: 235). Lord Raglan makes a similar assumption, remarking that the Maelgwn tale 'seems to be a myth, that is to say a description in narrative form of some ritual, but no coronation ritual in which the candidate is seated on the seashore seems to be known…Whatever the origin of the story, it may well have reached Henry in some form, and inspired him to compose his moral tale' (Raglan 1960: 8).

The evidence is too sketchy to confirm the supposition that kings and rulers asserted their powers against the elements, or called on divine powers to augment their own, as a matter of ritual. But it is possible that the idea of a ruler's power to challenge the sea was transferred to saints, which is suggestive in the light of the pious import of the tale in Henry's version. The Welsh saint Illtud's exploits

in his twelfth-century *Life* include taming the sea that was flooding his dwelling, the boundary marker now a *bachall* or crozier. Three times he unsuccessfully tries to build a dyke to contain the flood, but on his proposing to give up and move away, an angel instructs him in a dream:

> 'Precipio tibi, et interdico, ne deseras, quod uis deserere. Non uult enim Deus, ut recedas ab hac ualle, quia exaudite sunt uestre preces a summo Auditore, qui liberat omnes sibi confdentes et exorantes. Te liberabit ab hac nociua et anxia curiositate. Crastino die, postquam ueneris de oratorio, baculum tenens, festinanter ad mare fluctuans tendito, quod fugabis per uirtutem diuinam ex minaci baculo. Pro te fugiet continuo sine reditu refluxionis, ad consueta loca iterato, quasi profugus formidabit apud sequente inimico.' Mane itaque summo, ut preceperat angelus in sompno, tetendit ad equor fluctiuagum. Incepit ille procedere, cepit mare fugere, uelut fieret sensibile animatum. Undositas quieta constitit, et statio in littore fuit.
>
> ('I command thee and forbid thee to leave what thou wishest to leave, for God is not willing that thou shouldst withdraw from this valley, because your prayers have been heard by the supreme Auditor, who delivers all who confide in him and pray. He will deliver thee from this injurious and troublesome anxiety. Tomorrow, after that thou comest from the oratory, take thy bachall and hasten thy steps toward the restless sea, which thou shalt drive back by divine power from thy threatening bachall. It will fly before thee continuously without return of flow, going again to its wonted quarters, as a fugitive will fear before a pursuing enemy.' So in the early morning, as the angel had commanded him in his sleep, he took his course to the wave-driven sea. He began to go forward, the sea began to retreat, as though it were become capable of feeling and life. Its wavering became still, and its stopping-place was on the shore. (Wade-Evans 1944, 210–213)

The story of Cnut as told by Henry of Huntingdon was repeated by numerous medieval and early modern historians. Their accounts clearly derived from Henry's with little change of emphasis: the point is universally Cnut's piety; his address is made directly to the waves; and direct speech is used to draw the moral, as a preacher draws a moral from his exemplum. It was told, for example, in the fourteenth century by Ranulf Higden in his universal history *Polychronicon*, translated in the fifteenth century by John Trevisa:

> he sette ones his sittynge and his chaier in þe banke of þe see, when it bygan to folowe, comaundynge þe see þat it scholde nouȝt ascende uppon his londe, or þat it schulde nouȝt wete his lordes cloþes; þe see forsoþe of þe custome of his kynde ascended and weted þe kynges legges; þe kyng forsoþe, lepynge abak, seide: 'Witeþ al mortal and dedley men þat þe power of kynges is vayne, ne none worþe of þe naem of kyng, outtake hym to whos lawes all þinges are underloute;' and fro þat tyme and houre he bare no crowne on his heved, but sette it on þe heved of þe crucifex at Wynchestre. (Lumby 1879, VI: 134–135)

It was the eighteenth century that brought about one of the most conspicuous adaptations of the tale, which in modern versions is consistently rendered as a rebuke to sycophancy. Whereas in medieval accounts there is no supporting cast, with Cnut addressing his admonition only to the waves themselves, modern retellings and illustrations consistently feature a backdrop of courtiers, whose role is to be reprimanded for their foolish adulation of the king. These all apparently derive from David Hume's influential *History of England*, the first volume of which was published in 1762. Hume's is an Anglocentric perspective, painting Cnut in harsh colours as devious and power-hungry; his Protestant bias gives him little sympathy for the demonstrative piety with which the medieval historians credited Cnut: 'Unfortunately, the spirit which prevailed in that age gave a wrong direction to his devotion: Instead of making compensation to those whom he had injured by his former acts of violence, he employed himself entirely in those exercises of piety, which the monks

represented as the most meritorious. He built churches, he endowed monasteries, he enriched the ecclesiastics' (Hume 1778: I, 124).

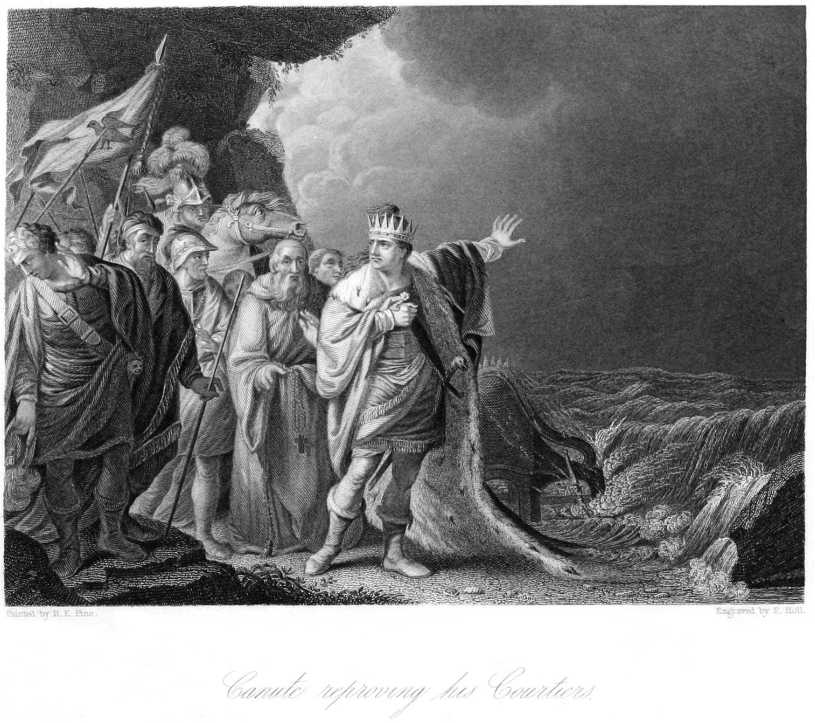
Turning to the story of the encounter with the waves, Hume addresses the lesson squarely to the flattery lavished by courtiers on even 'the meanest and weakest princes', not only those who, like Cnut, could claim to have earned it:

> Canute, the greatest and most powerful monarch of his time, sovereign of Denmark and Norway, as well as of England, could not fail of meeting with adulation from his courtiers; a tribute which is liberally paid even to the meanest and weakest princes. Some of his flatterers breaking out, one day, in admiration of his grandeur, exclaimed that every thing was possible for him: Upon which the monarch, it is said, ordered his chair to be set on the sea-shore, while the tide was rising; and as the waters approached, he commanded them to retire, and to obey the voice of him who was lord of the ocean. He feigned to sit some time in expectation of their submission; but when the sea still advanced towards him, and began to wash him with its billows, he turned to his courtiers, and remarked to them, that every creature in the universe was feeble and impotent, and that power resided with one Being alone, In whose hands were all the elements of nature; who could say to the ocean, *Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther;* and who could level with his nod the most towering piles of human pride and ambition. (Hume 1778: I, 125; Hume's emphasis)

Something, Hume implies, was rotten in the states of England and Denmark. The story is no longer about the relationship of a ruler with the divine, and has come to denote his relationship with his own subjects – and the responsibility of those subjects to hold to account any over-mightiness in their ruler, rather than maintain a posture of uncritical praise.

The historians of the nineteenth century followed this line, the king inevitably surrounded by his ingratiating entourage, the story told as a rebuke for their foolishness. While it was less easy to represent this

as the stimulus for the tale in visual form, illustrations often bore a caption such as 'Canute Reproving his Courtiers', as seen in this 1848 engraving, based on Francis Edge Pine's painting of 1763:



Canute Reproving his Courtiers by Francis Holl
Engraving after a painting by Robert Edge Pine,
Canute Rebuking his Courtiers on the Seashore (1763).

Image source: *The People's Gallery of Engravings* (1848).

Lord Raglan cites nineteenth-century histories, Freeman's *Norman Conquest of England*, Charles Oman's *History of England* and Trevelyan, which all contain versions of the tale. The main nineteenth-century contribution to the legend comes in the form of claims to identify the site of the incident, though the evidence is non-existent. An edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* that must have been current when Raglan wrote in 1960 locates it on the Thames at Westminster (Raglan: 8), a reference removed in later editions; Oman places it 'by the incoming waves of Southampton Water' (Oman 1904: 56).[4] Both are still among places promoted as rival sites, with no evidence at all other than variously strong associations with Cnut. Westminster – known in medieval times as Thorney Island – was of course not then the seat of government it is today, but it is the probable site of a palace built by Cnut in London. Although all versions of the story refer to 'the waves', suggesting the seashore, the Thames is a tidal river and there may well have been a river crossing at this point, which adds credibility to the concept of the encroachment of the sea. Southampton to this day boasts a plaque that reads, 'Near this spot AD 1028 Canute reproved his courtiers', adding an unwarrantable date to its unfounded location. The rationale of the claim in this case rests on proximity to Cnut's base in Winchester, bolstered by a similarly unfounded legend that Cnut was crowned in Southampton (his coronation in fact took place in London). Another candidate is Bosham near Chichester in Sussex, also close to a palace owned by Cnut; a local tradition also claims that an eight-year-old daughter of Cnut was drowned in the village's mill-stream and is buried in the still-standing, tenth-century church. An apparently less likely claim is made by Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, a base for Cnut and his father, Sveinn, on their first invading England in 1013. Gainsborough is far from the sea, but the story claims a location on the Aegir, a tidal bore in the River Trent.

There is no way of establishing how old these claims, based on 'tradition' or 'legend' may be, though the lack of any reference earlier than Oman's 1895 history suggests they may not predate it by much. The impulse to own and locate the legend testifies to the degree to which it had lodged itself in the national consciousness. The absence of any specific location in the earliest accounts must in itself have been

a spur to attempts to attach the legend to any site with which Cnut already had an association.

This history of the legend demonstrates how what may originally have been a display of royal piety or, more likely, a somewhat later invention intended to demonstrate the same, developed into an object lesson to subjects in speaking truth to authority. It lives on in the modern consciousness, divested of its regal associations, as a metaphor for those who imagine that their own human or individual powers can rival the power of some of the more impersonal forces of the modern world, such as the Internet. In one respect, however, modern invocations of Cnut remain true to one element of the original story. Cnut's confrontation with the forces of nature retains a particular resonance with twenty-first century concerns about climate change. To the medieval mind the powers of nature were the outward manifestation of the almighty power of God. While this emphasis has waned, the story of Cnut is particularly apt in contexts in which man-made presumption is considered to have infringed the physical laws governing the natural world. Perhaps as early as 2008 the term 'Canute syndrome' or 'King Canute syndrome' was coined to describe what one site extravagantly claims as 'the medical term for climate change denial' (Cooper 2012). The details of the original story are recalled for any reader who may have forgotten them:

> King Canute (sometimes spelt 'Cnut') is of course the English and Norwegian King who tried to send back the incoming waves from his throne by a beach in Hampshire and got his feet soggy. I fear there are quite a few 'Cnut's' in the cabinet and even more since the reshuffle. Actually Canute is supposed to have been demonstrating his humility before nature and God to his courtiers when he got his feet wet. This is a humility before nature that our current politicians need to demonstrate by their actions or perhaps they should give up their responsibilities and take the treatment they so obviously need in both their best interests and that of the wider planet. (Cooper 2012)

One of the most recent invocations of the Cnut story was an article written in July 2016 about a controversial attempt by Donald Trump to build a two-mile, 200,000-ton 'rock armour' to protect his golf course at Doughmore-Doonbeg on the Irish coast from erosion, in the teeth of opposition from local environmentalists. Trump's presidential bid was already in full swing, allowing the Cnut comparison to take on the resonance of the rebuking of vainglory as well as that of flying in the face of natural forces:

> In the 11th century, on the other side of the British Isles, Canute the Great ruled an empire that included much of Norway, Denmark and the eastern part of Britain, where it stretched almost as far north as the present site of Trump's Scottish golf course in Aberdeen. According to legend, King Canute once summoned his courtiers to the shore and had his throne placed there during a rising tide. The king ordered the waters to stop, but the tide kept on rising, and a wet-legged Canute announced to his courtiers the futility of opposing forces beyond human control. (Schreckinger 2016)

As the author observes, 'this, of course, is not Trump's style'. The fact that 'the businessman has made clear his intentions to turn back various tides – human, economic, literal' puts him in the position of wilfully ignoring the admonition of Cnut's cautionary tale (Schreckinger 2016). Although Trump's presidential ambitions are not directly addressed in the article (other than in several references to the building of walls), the invocation of this cautionary tale about the limitations of earthly power is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the twelfth.

Endnotes

1 For discussion of how the name Cnut became Anglicised as Canute, see Porck and Mann 2014.

2 Among many accounts of post-Conquest rewriting of Anglo-Saxon history, see Gransden 1974 and Treharne 2012.

3 Matthew Townend contextualises the poems composed for Cnut by Icelandic

skalds, both in terms of the events of his reign and in relation to prevailing Anglo-Saxon culture. He considers both these poems to date from soon after Cnut's conquest of Norway in 1028 (Townend 2001: 151–2, 156–7).
4 It should be noted that Oman does not give credence to the story, but does imply its origin in the time of Cnut's own subjects, as one of 'many tales that survive to show their belief in his sagacity'.

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