

# Cnut's Siege of London: A Virtual Exhibition

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Figure 1: Screenshot of the opening section of [www.Cnutconquest.com](http://www.Cnutconquest.com)

In preparation for the millennial conference commemorating Cnut's siege of London and his accession to the English throne in 1016, staff and students from University College London, Birkbeck College, the University of Winchester and the University of Oxford collaborated to create a virtual exhibition (<http://www.cnutconquest.com>). Its purpose: to explore the historical, cultural and archaeological background of early eleventh-century England, and to highlight pivotal moments and developments that led to Cnut's victory and secured his continuing rule over the Anglo-Saxons. Beginning with the departure of the Danish king's fleet in September 1015, the exhibition goes on to explore the

Battle of Assandun and the death of Edmund Ironside, concluding with Cnut's marriage to Emma at Winchester in July 1017. The site imagines these events as a series of markers on a campaign map, associating each in turn with a range of surviving evidence, including early medieval texts and manuscripts, Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture and material culture. These are combined with modern scholarship and commentary, restorations and reconstructions of significant artefacts, videos of re-enactments of battles between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes, and recitations of poetry and prose composed in England during the period.

The launch of Cnut's campaign from Denmark in September 1015, for example, is presented through the *Encomium Emmae Reginae's* spectacular yet evidently exaggerated Latin account of his fleet. This is accompanied by images of the remains of Roskilde 6, the longest Viking warship ever discovered, and a film of the reconstructed longboat, Draken Harald Hårfagre, sailing from Shetland to the Faroe Islands. Another panel covers the evidence of the English runestones, discussing the circumstances around their different inscriptions and the names they memorialise. The story of Edmund Ironside's death is discussed alongside the inscription on a viking tombstone (now housed at the Museum of London), thought to commemorate the death of one of the king's followers. Cnut's siege of London in 1016 is narrated with a rendition of the poem *Liðsmannaflokkr* (Verses of the Household Troops), performed by Dr Haki Antonsson. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* Old English account of the assassination of Earl Uhtred the Bold is similarly recited by Prof Richard North, the recording accompanying an image of the text as it appears on the manuscript page (British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B. I, fol. 153v). Meanwhile, Emma and Cnut's marriage in 1017 is contextualised by the frontispiece of the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, in which the married royal couple appear as two of the institution's major donors, touching a great golden cross, believed once to have sat on its altar. There is even a concluding section devoted to the now infamous account of Cnut's failure to command the rising tide, with a discussion of its origins in the twelfth-century chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon, its later medieval interpretation by posterity and its influence on the king's reputation after the Norman

Conquest. The result is a project that, while concentrating on only a small cross-section of the Anglo-Saxon period, nevertheless provides an immersive, engaging and far-reaching experience for its audience, without necessitating specialist knowledge of the Anglo-Scandinavian age in England or even of Cnut and the significance of his reign on English and northern European culture.

What I found so fascinating about this project and one of the principal reasons I wanted to be involved in its collaborative construction is that, despite its relatively small size and scale, the site is reflective of a growing trend in information studies and exhibition curation in modern academic institutions; this corresponds with technological advances and the developing role of the digital humanities, as well as the near-universal recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary research and methods of teaching. These developments have been reflected in the large-scale digitisation programmes of previously inaccessible manuscripts undertaken by many libraries, a move with consequences for the study of those manuscripts by researchers around the world. This is particularly significant in the case of the many extant manuscript fragments we possess and even have yet to identify, as scholars have gained the potential to piece together damaged and cut-out pages housed at different institutions thousands of miles apart (see the scholarly Fragmentarium for example: <http://fragmentarium.ms/>, or the famed medieval Twitter social network, through which libraries have tweeted images of different manuscript pages to each other).

Museums too have moved to photograph and digitise their collections three-dimensionally, uploading thousands of objects onto online catalogues. Most notably, the British Museum's recent collaboration and partnership with the Google Cultural Institute has led to the 'Museum of the World' project (<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com>, 2015), an interactive virtual experience for prospective visitors and researchers. The site connects artefacts from different times, cultures and continents, mapping them according to chronology as well as themes such as 'Art and Design', 'Living and Dying' and 'Power and Identity'. Each object is completely digitised and viewable through high-definition images, a feat achieved through Google's Gigapixel

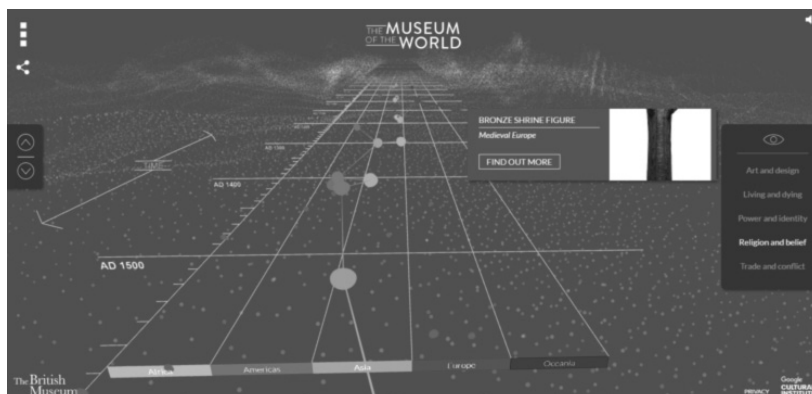


Figure 2: Screenshot of the ‘The Museum of the World’ project:

<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>

technology. Each object is accompanied by a written blurb and audio commentary from the museum’s curators, as well as hyperlinks that invite comparisons with other artefacts either possessing a similar design or function, or originating from a similar period or place of origin.

Consequently, the museum’s collections – not all of which can be realistically placed on display at any one time – are no longer limited by their physical location and the practicalities of their conservation. They can be brought into a classroom environment, reaching an audience that might never have been able to access them before. At the same time, the site removes the conceptual limitations these artefacts inevitably possess if observed in isolation. Placed in its wider context within this virtual – and therefore inherently flexible and expansive – space, each object can now be understood in terms of a multi-dimensional historical narrative, one that has the potential to encompass the changes in rulership and power structures that might have taken place over a specific period, as well as the social, iconographic, artistic and linguistic developments that run concurrently with them: these are the same developments we see mapped in the storyboard-like frames and panels of the conference’s virtual exhibition devoted to Cnut.

Yet the Siege of London’s virtual exhibition space was striking to me for another reason as well: it places an evident focus on the design

and aesthetic of its site (for which Dr Essi Viitanen, Teaching Fellow in Finnish Studies at UCL SSEES, is principally responsible). The site emphasises the appearance and organisation of the Anglo-Scandinavian and Latin material it includes; it reinforces the narrative of Cnut's English invasion and early reign through visual linking and parallels between the frames themselves, and by providing high-definition images of every text and artwork it exhibits. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of many comparable attempts at the digital reproduction of early medieval material culture online, or even of the digital editions of texts and manuscripts by some major institutions. If one of the major benefits of digital humanities projects (particularly those concerning the medieval period) is increased awareness and accessibility and, by extension, making material available online to an audience that might otherwise have been unable to see it, it is ironic that so many contributions in this area have had the opposite effect: privileging the content of the research or the speed with which it is completed over the clarity of its presentation in fact frustrates any attempt to gain a coherent understanding of the material itself, whether this be literary or artistic. High-resolution images are required to read a text or decipher a runic inscription accurately, for example, or to determine the symbolic patterning of ornamentation on an object or on a piece of gold-and-garnet-covered metalwork, to realise the full complexity of the illustrative programme of a liturgical book, and to place any of this material in its wider historical or geographical context. The success of all these important research tasks and many others besides is predicated on the visibility of the material, on the logical assumption that if a medieval text or image cannot be seen, or seen in its entirety, then it cannot be read, interrogated and discussed. Just as significantly, at a time when public engagement and the communication of research beyond academia constitute major factors in decisions regarding awards by funding bodies, and when the continuing value of medieval studies in university departments is measured by its ability to affect our perception of the modern world, it is essential that we, as medievalists, recognise that the impact of our research inevitably relates to the way we communicate and present it, especially to readers or viewers who might possess only a basic understanding of the period on which we work.