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From Viking warrior to English king - Canute (Knud) The Great

'THE KING WHO COULD NOT STOP THE SEA BUT STEMMED THE VIKING TIDE ON ENGLAND'S SHORES'

Written for The Viking Network by [Barrie Markham Rhodes](#)

Canute the politician

"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".

So spoke King Canute the Great, the legend says, seated on his throne on the seashore, waves lapping round his feet. Canute had learned that his flattering courtiers claimed he was "So great, he could command the tides of the sea to go back". Now Canute was not only a religious man, but also a clever politician. He knew his limitations - even if his courtiers did not - so he 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 the Viking

Who was this man, who started his adult life as a Viking warrior and went on to become the ruler of an empire which, at its height, included England, Denmark, Norway and part of Sweden?

Canute (who is known as Knud in Denmark and Knut in Norway) was the son of Svein Forkbeard Canute's grandfather was Harald Bluetooth and his great-grandfather was King Gorm.

In England, in the year 1000, the Saxon King Aethelred plundered the Isle of Man and parts of [The Danelaw](#), to try to crush the independently-minded Scandinavians living there. Aethelred always feared a resurgence of Viking power in England. In 1002 he married Emma, sister of Duke Richard of Normandy. This marriage was probably a 'political' one. But Aethelred's fear of the Scandinavians caused him to make a serious mistake. In the year of his marriage to Emma, perhaps feeling more secure in his new links with the Norman ruling dynasty, he ordered [the massacre of all 'Danish' men in England](#). Svein Forkbeard's sister and his brother-in-law, Pallig, were amongst those killed and this brought Svein to England to avenge their deaths. Svein raided south and east England throughout the years 1003 and 1004, but took his army back to Denmark in 1005 when they could no longer support themselves because of a great famine in England.

Svein carried out many more raids for several years after this, extracting vast amounts of silver as '[Danegeld](#)'. In 1013 he returned with his son Canute, for a different purpose. This time he intended to conquer England. Though he landed his forces in southern England, he made The Danelaw his first objective, probably recognising that, being '[Scandinavian](#)' in character, this province would accept him without too much resistance. He went on to conquer the rest of the country and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded that "...all the nation regarded him as full king". Aethelred fled to Normandy.

Svein, though, died the next year and Aethelred saw a chance to regain his kingdom. He returned from Normandy and managed to expel Svein's army, now under Canute's leadership.

Canute the king

In 1016 Canute returned and was victorious at the Battle of Ashingdon (Ashingdown) over Edmund 'Ironside', Aethelred's eldest son and successor. Canute and Edmund drew up the Treaty of Olney, which allotted The Danelaw and the English midlands to Canute, while Edmund retained control of southern England. This was almost a repeat of what had happened between King Alfred the Great of Wessex and the Vikings in the ninth century. Edmund died shortly after this treaty and so Canute found himself the first Viking king of all England.

In 1017 Canute married Aethelred's widow, Emma. But her two sons by her first marriage remained in Normandy (which was to have far-reaching consequences for England later). Emma had two children by Canute, Harthacnut and Gunhild. Canute was a Christian and very religious-minded. However, this did not stop him having an English mistress, Aelfgifu, who bore him two sons, Harald and Svein

A Viking empire emerges

Canute's brother, Harald, King of Denmark, died in 1018 and Canute went to Denmark to secure his hold over that realm. Two years later, Canute started to lay claim to Norway, eventually capturing it and putting his son Svein and his mistress Aelfgifu to govern it. Scotland also submitted to Canute and, by the late 1020s, Canute was able to claim to be '**king of all England, and of Denmark, of the Norwegians, and part of the Swedes**'. Canute was anxious to consolidate political unity in England and, as part of his drive towards this, he razed some of the [burghs](#) which had been created to defend southern England against The Danelaw Vikings, and vice versa. It is thought that defensive walls and ditches at Cricklade, Lydford, South Cadbury and Wareham were destroyed as part of this move.

Canute's achievements

Most people think of Canute in connection with the story about him commanding the tide to halt. But he should be remembered for more than this. He was perhaps the first king to successfully rule over a truly united realm of England, free from internal and external strife and unrest. Because he also ruled the Viking homelands, he was able to protect England against attacks, maintaining twenty years of badly-needed peace during which trade, Anglo-Scandinavian art and Christianity were able to flourish. Canute had great respect for the old English laws, to which he brought a keen sense of justice and a regard for individual rights. As part of his promotion of himself as an 'English' king, he did penance for the wrongdoings of his Viking forefathers, building churches and making many generous gifts to others.

The passing of Canute and the Viking empire

Canute died in 1035, a relatively young man by today's measure, aged about forty. He was buried in Winchester, the former capital of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex and a town where he was often in residence.

Canute's sons, unfortunately, were not made of the same stuff as their father so, on his death, the Anglo-Scandinavian empire he had acquired began to break up. Aelfgifu's son, Harald, became king of England but died in 1040. Harthacnut then ruled for only two years before he, too, died, leaving behind little to remember him by other than the huge taxes he imposed. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle said of him, "He did nothing worthy of a king as long as he ruled".

None of Canute's children produced any heirs and it was one of Emma's sons by Aethelred, Edward (later to be known as 'the Confessor'), who returned from Normandy to ascend to the English throne in 1042.

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