

From Cnut to Brexit: A Long History of Danes in England

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With medieval manuscripts in the vicinity and the multi-storied glass heart of the British Library providing the backdrop, His Excellency Claus Grube, Ambassador of Denmark, began an impassioned and irony-filled speech, concluding the second day of the ‘Siege of London’ conference. Regaling the audience with a history of Danish rule in England, Ambassador Grube touched on the two countries’ extended and interconnected relationship. Appropriately, the day had been themed around discussions of London and Londoners, and the city in the time of King Cnut. Despite the eminent medievalists in the audience – or perhaps because of that – the ambassador provided a historical overview of the time, complete with a tongue-in-cheek commentary. ‘This year marks the 1000 years since King Cnut of Denmark began his rule of England after the battle of Assendon – and 950 years after it ended at the Battle of Hastings,’ Ambassador Grube intoned before pausing and cheekily adding, ‘or did it?’

While the year 1016 may have marked the beginning of an Anglo-Scandinavian empire, it did not mark the beginning of Danish involvement in England. The descendants of the vikings who had harried England in 886 now lived in the country; trade created strong ties between England and mainland Europe, *Danegeld* was introduced – as the Ambassador quipped, ‘Danes have always been fond of taxes’ – along with a Danish legal and administrative system. Danelaw ruled in the north of England after an agreement formalized between King Alfred the Great of England and Gormr inn gamli (the Old), king of Denmark. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 1001 records the Danes harrying the coast of England against little resistance: ‘Her on ðysum geare wæs micel unfrið on Angelcynnes londe’ (Batley, 1986: 79) (In

this year there was great unrest in England).

Cnut's presence in England in 1016 ushered in a new period of intimacy between the two countries. Cnut was the grandson of Haraldr blátǫnn (Bluetooth), the first Christian king of Denmark, and the son of Sveinn tjúguskegg (Forkbeard), whose death caused the Danes to renew their assaults on England. The Peterborough Manuscript version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes Cnut's triumphant victory in Essex on the Ashingdom hill: 'þær hæfde Cnut sige 7 gefeahrt him eall England' (Irvine, 2014: 74) (There Cnut had victory and he defeated all of England) after 'eall se dugoð on Angelcinne' (Irvine, 2014: 74) (all the host of English) were killed.

More Danes settled in England after Cnut seized the Anglo-Saxon throne. Cnut's marriage to Emma of Normandy, widow of the defeated Anglo-Saxon king, Æthelred II, and Cnut's subsequent children with her helped consolidate his power as an international monarch heading an international dynasty – part Danish, part Norman, and all the while surrounded by England. 'Both in the DNA of many British people and in British law you still find traces of [the Danish presence] today,' Ambassador Grube observed. England had extensive trade ties with Scandinavian merchants, which only deepened as Cnut travelled between kingdoms in his Anglo-Scandinavian empire; his court came to be made up of a mix of Anglo-Saxons and Danes.

Concluding his history of the Anglo-Scandinavian empire, the Ambassador noted that, 'Already with Cnut's death in 1035, the Danish rule began to crumble in England even though they and the English defended their interests with vigour.' In a nod to the University of Winchester co-organizers present, the Ambassador mentioned that Cnut spent the majority of his reign in Wessex and was 'buried with his wife Emma of Normandy and his son Harald Harefoot in Winchester Cathedral'; conference attendees would visit the Cathedral a few days later on an excursion to the city. Even with the death of Cnut, Ambassador Grube pointed out that as Danish attention in the 'following centuries turned to the Baltic and towards Germany to the east and south,' the reality was that 'we never left England.'

In both the conference timing and the subject matter there were ample opportunities to draw modern parallels and conclusions. Prior to

the Brexit referendum in June 2016, Ambassador Grube had remarked to *Embassy Magazine's* Elizabeth Stewart that, 'Paradoxically, many of the arguments the UK-Government puts forward for Scotland staying in the UK could also be arguments for the UK staying in the EU.' (Stewart, 2016) Just two weeks after the referendum results, attendees gathered in the British Library's foyer to hear his thoughts on the UK's relationship with Europe. In a period where there is so much uncertainty about the future of immigrants' rights in the UK, any statements by perceived authorities were bound to lead to much dissection and discussion.

For an event celebrating a Danish king in England, it was natural for Ambassador Grube's speech to turn then towards the future of the UK and the rest of Europe. The complexity of the long history of Anglo-Danish interaction, combined with an invocation of the traditions of Danish settlement, served as the backdrop for a discussion of recent events and efforts to further the relationship between Denmark and the United Kingdom. This is not a new angle but it is one that politicians like to shape for their own purposes. Winston Churchill, in a speech made on receiving his honorary degree from the University of Copenhagen in 1950, said:

Here I may mention a debt which Britain owes to the ancient Danes. We did not regard it as such at the time. The Danish sailors from the 'long ships' who fought ashore as soldiers brought with them into England a new principle represented by a class, the peasant-yeoman-proprietor. The sailors became soldiers. The soldiers became farmers. The whole of the East of England thus received a class of cultivators who, except for the purposes of common defence, owed allegiance to none.... As time passed they forgot the sea; they forgot the army; and thought only of the land - their own land.... The Danish settlement differed entirely from the Saxon settlement 400 years earlier. There was no idea of exterminating the older population. The gulf between the Danes and Saxons in no way resembled that which divided the Saxons from the Britons. Human and natural relations were established.

Ambassador Grube stressed the last part, arguing that not only were these Danish and English relations established, but that in his mind ‘they have lasted ever since.’

The ambassador interwove the Churchill quotation into his own speech, humorously remarking that the speech was given ‘two months before I was born – but I do not think there was a connection!’ The ambassador deftly combined Danish and English elements in his speech, both in his historical recitation and in balancing the futures of the countries together. Whenever the topic seemed to grow long or the outlook poor, he balanced the tone with Danish humour. This was not easy to do as we stood in the foyer of the British Library, many of us foreigners living or working in the UK. Ambassador Grube addressed head-on the uncertainty simmering in the room. ‘I get asked questions – what’s going to happen?’ he began before pointing out the irony of a gathering dedicated to celebrating the millennial anniversary of a Danish invasion of England. ‘The UK wants to be finished with Europe but here we are to celebrate our history together.’

Despite the ambiguous promises and uncertainty for the future of EU citizens the referendum had engendered, the ambassador injected his speech with wryness and a readiness to deal with what was to come next. He pointed out that Britain has the largest concentration of Danes outside Denmark and predicted, ‘We have had a long-standing relationship with England, and it’s not finished now.’ He argued that immigrants ‘formed part of the backbone of a society with rules and laws, which laid the foundation of a later world empire.’ This history of migration is still a touchy subject in the UK; it was only in 2017 that London established its first national museum of migration in an effort to catch up with countries like Denmark, Germany and the United States. Though the museum itself still does not have a permanent home, it is a step in the right direction of coming to terms with how migration, from across Europe and the world, has shaped modern Britain. In *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain*, Robert Winder summarizes this idea: ‘Ever since the first Jute, the first Saxon, the first Roman and the first Dane leaped off their boats and planted their feet on British mud, we have been a [migrant] nation’ (2004: 2). However, he is best known for his oft-quoted statement that

‘We are all immigrants, it simply depends how far back you go’ (2004: x).

Nowadays, the Danish and English royal families are still closely related and the UK is Denmark’s third-largest trading partner. These close cultural-political connections persist, as shown by the Southbank Centre’s year-long festival of Nordic Matters in 2017. London in particular has been a hub with well-known Scandinavian restaurants finding success. Other than bacon, some of Denmark’s most popular exports have been the television shows *Borgen* and *The Killing*, which have inspired widespread fandoms and cult followings among British viewers. The Danes have also made their mark on the English map; according to *The Key to English Place-Names*, created by the University of Nottingham’s Institute for Name-Studies, there are more than 1700 place-names in England that serve as reminders of the Viking Age. At the very least, Danish immigration was key to modern Britain. ‘That’s probably also why we are the only people in the world who share the same sense of humour,’ Ambassador Grube added wryly; ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if research shows that the Vikings actually brought humour to England too.’

With such close ties, it is no wonder that Denmark has closely followed the UK’s scepticism towards the EU – it is one of the reasons the ambassador was posted to the UK. Having served in Brussels for over a decade, he is one of Denmark’s most experienced diplomats with regards to EU matters; he previously served as Under Secretary responsible for EU enlargement. In a 2013 interview with Kåre Gade, Ambassador Grube noted that, ‘The younger generations tend to take for granted that we can work in other countries, make affordable mobile phone calls, travel and trade without restrictions across the borders. But those are privileges which we have been granted through the European cooperation.’ That same freedom of mobility was one of the prevalent concerns of Cnut conference attendees as they discussed the recent events. These concerns revolved around missed opportunities and the uncertainty of being allowed to remain in the United Kingdom after the finalization of the deal to leave the European Union.

According to The Royal Society’s report titled ‘UK research and the European Union,’ in 2014-15 over a quarter of academic staff in UK

universities were non-UK nationals, with 16% of all academic staff being EU citizens. In the same years, half the doctoral students in the UK were foreign citizens, with 14% of all PhD students being non-UK nationals from the EU (2016: 8). The referendum does not only affect migrant academics in the UK; from 1996–2011, around 70% of active UK researchers published articles while affiliated with non-UK institutions, indicating they had worked abroad at some point during that time frame (2016: 9). Ease of mobility allows for the best research – and researchers – to circulate, following the resources available. Depending on the deals struck during Brexit negotiations, one fear is that researchers will either be trapped in the UK or, conversely, become locked out. As global competition for skilled workers increases, an academic brain drain is no one's top choice. The paper's authors concluded that due to the complex factors affecting researchers' decisions to move, it was not possible to predict how mobility or academic collaboration might change post-Brexit. This type of unfocused fear is pervasive in many of the Internet articles, thought pieces and personal blogs that touch on Brexit. Certainly, in talking to academics that sense of helplessness percolates. The possibilities are frightening; after all, the UK has the second most internationally mobile research force in the world (2016: 9). Almost 12% of Denmark's total research output involves collaboration with UK-based authors, placing it in the top ten of collaboration with EU countries (2016: 11).

Insight into the relationship England and Denmark have historically had helps us to understand their future as the UK prepares to cut ties with the European Union after a particularly nasty campaign. A millennium after Cnut invaded England and become king, the propaganda suggesting that immigrants are destructive and hostile to England and its religion has changed very little. We like to think of London as leading the way; the city served as a holdout to Cnut a millennium ago and voted overwhelmingly to stay in the EU. What concessions must be made to allow a city built and run by immigrants to continue functioning as a welcoming, cosmopolitan metropolis?

The Siege of London conference – commemorating a pivotal moment in English history – was held two weeks after another pivotal moment. This article is being written a year later during the millennial anniversary

of Cnut succeeding to the entire kingdom of England and after Article 50 has been invoked, triggering the UK's formal withdrawal from the EU. This article will be published two years after the referendum, after the snap general election results of 2017, and after the Brexit negotiations have begun. By that point, all of this may be accepted as normal. Ambassador Grube provided the obligatory reference to the story of Cnut and the waves when he spoke about how Cnut proved that no one, not even a king, could control the sea. When invoking populism to serve political ends, the ease with which it gets out of control can be stunning. Yet the Ambassador remained optimistic: 'For more than 1000 years we have had close human, cultural, political and economic ties. And I am fully convinced that no matter Brexit and other unforeseen developments, the close ties between Denmark and the UK will continue to exist for the next 1000 years.'

This was the reminder that Danish rule in England did not end with Cnut's death; his sons Harold Harefoot and then Harthacnut succeeded him, continuing Danish rule until 1042, when the Anglo-Saxon king Edward the Confessor gained the throne. Then William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, swept in and claimed England for himself in the most famous moment of English history. With the Battle of Hastings, the Normans – the descendants of the vikings who had once raided West Francia – conquered England. Some could humorously view this as the Danes again invading England, but Ambassador Grube demurred: 'So it was more of an internal family feud than a conquest.' He then appeared to reconsider for a moment: 'or the first Danish civil war?' At least that's how the Ambassador pitched it to the audience during his closing remarks; he concluded with a laugh, 'It's taken 1000 years, and finally the British are kicking us out.'

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