

# ‘Merry sang the monks’: Cnut’s Poetry and the *Liber Eliensis*

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses a short English verse preserved in the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, which is there claimed to have been composed by Cnut during a royal visit to Ely. Often described as one of the first examples of Early Middle English verse, these few lines are also of considerable interest as evidence for Cnut’s reputation in post-Conquest England. The association of Cnut with the public performance of vernacular poetry seems particularly significant in light of the important role played by the composition and performance of skaldic poetry at Cnut’s Anglo-Danish court. This article examines Cnut’s relationship with Ely and argues that reading the Ely verse in this context can shed light not only on the interpretation of Cnut in post-Conquest Ely, but also on perceptions of the role and status of vernacular poetry in eleventh- and twelfth-century England.

## **Keywords**

Cnut, skaldic verse, Ely, *Liber Eliensis*, conquest

One of the most intriguing fragments of English verse to survive from the twelfth century is preserved in the *Liber Eliensis*, a history of Ely Abbey compiled between 1131 and 1174 (Blake 1962: xlvi–xlix; hereafter *LE*). The *LE* is a cartulary chronicle which provides a narrative of the history of Ely, beginning with its foundation by St Æthelthryth in the seventh century, and incorporating numerous earlier documents relating to the abbey. Portions of the *LE* survive in several manuscripts, of which the oldest, Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. O.2.1, dates to the late twelfth century (Blake 1962: xxiii–xxvii; Fairweather 2005: xiii–xxvi). The verse under discussion here consists of four lines said to have been composed by Cnut during a royal visit to Ely, as a spontaneous expression of his delight on hearing the singing of the monks. This song was, the writer says, still remembered and sung in his own day, more than a century later. These four lines – which the *LE* claims were once part of a longer text, although no more survives – have frequently received passing mention in histories of Middle English poetry, and as increasing attention has been paid in recent years to the fertile literary culture of post-Conquest England, ‘Cnut’s Song’ has been discussed alongside other short poems from the twelfth century as ‘the earliest post-Conquest evidence of an English lyric’ (Nelson 2017: 1).

The song’s attribution to Cnut, however, has received surprisingly little critical attention. This link is, on the face of it, very odd: why would anyone in twelfth-century Ely associate an English poem with an eleventh-century Danish king, or choose to compose or perform a song which mentions him by name? The context of the song’s composition, as described in the *LE*, makes the attribution particularly striking, since the occasion of the verse is said to be a public performance of vernacular poetry during a royal event. This seems significant, since we have ample evidence to show that Cnut’s court was an environment in which poetry was composed, performed and rewarded; study of the skaldic poems composed for Cnut in Old Norse has considerably added to our understanding of the culture of Anglo-Danish England (Townend 2001; Frank 1994; Poole 1991; Jesch 2000; Treharne 2012: 43–47). However, the extent to which anyone in England apart from Cnut’s Scandinavian followers might have engaged with this poetry remains unclear. To judge from the lack of any references in contemporary

English sources, the rest of the Anglo-Danish court would appear to have been completely oblivious to this lively poetic tradition going on in their midst – unaware of, or at least not comprehending, poems being composed by and for ‘a Norse-speaking community enisled in a sea of Anglophones’ (Frank 1994: 108).<sup>1</sup>

Is it merely coincidence, then, that a writer at Ely in the twelfth century chose to paint such a vivid picture of Cnut and his men as eager and appreciative participants in the public performance of poetry? Exploring the connections – real and imagined – between Cnut and Ely in the context of ‘Cnut’s Song’ helps to shed some light on this puzzling little poem, and on how it seems to have been understood by the compiler of the *LE*.

### **The Song in its Context**

The four lines of verse appear in chapter 85 of Book II of the *LE*, together with the story explaining the context of their composition (Blake 1962: 153–154). Cnut and his wife Emma, with other nobles, are travelling by boat to Ely, intending to celebrate the Feast of the Purification there. The compiler notes that in the early eleventh century this feast was a particularly significant one, because on that date the abbots of Ely were accustomed to begin a regular term of service in the royal court. As they approach the land Cnut rises up in his boat, surrounded by his men, and raises his eyes to the church, from where sounds of beautiful music are proceeding. The king realises that the monks are singing psalms as part of the Divine Office, and with attentive ears he drinks in the harmonious melody. Then, to express his joy, he composes a song in English:

Merie sungen ðe muneches binnen Ely  
ða Cnut ching reu ðer by.  
Roweþ cnites noer the lant  
and here we þes muneches sæng. (Blake 1962: 153)

(Merrily sang the monks in Ely,  
When Cnut the king rowed by.  
Row, men, nearer to the land,  
And let us hear the monks' song.)

The *LE* translates these lines into Latin and observes that this is only the beginning of the song; 'this and the remaining parts that follow are up to this day sung publicly by choirs and remembered in proverbs' (Fairweather 2005: 182). The king's song unites with that of the monks, who come to greet him and lead him in procession into the church. There, before St Æthelthryth's shrine, Cnut confirms the charters and rights of Ely which had been granted by his predecessors – the chief reason for including this story in the *LE*.

Without further comment, this story is immediately followed by another narrative about Cnut visiting Ely on a separate occasion, also to celebrate the Feast of the Purification (Blake 1962: 154). This time Cnut is almost prevented from reaching Ely by impassable frozen fens, but is enabled to continue his journey by the actions of a 'large and rugged man from the Isle, Brihtmær surnamed *Budde* on account of his bulk' (Fairweather 2005: 183). Brihtmær leads the way from Soham to Ely with the king following behind in a wagon on the ice, 'while everybody marvelled that he should have attempted such a great act of daring' (Fairweather 2005: 183), and Cnut is able to keep his regular custom of celebrating the feast at Ely. The *LE* adds that the king was accustomed to tell how this remarkable feat had come about, paying tribute to Brihtmær and to St Æthelthryth, and that he rewarded Brihtmær with lands and perpetual freedom for himself and his descendants, a right they still enjoyed at the time of writing.

Book II of the *LE* was compiled between 1154 and 1174,<sup>2</sup> and large parts of it are closely based on earlier texts and documents. However, no source for the story surrounding the verse, or for the narrative of Cnut and Brihtmær Budde, has been identified. It seems possible that the verse itself was the source for the first story, and in discussion of this episode it has generally been accepted that the verse was, as the *LE* claims, part of an existing tradition which predated its prose context (Gray: 2011: 170, Allen 2008: 36; Swanton 2002: 255).<sup>3</sup>

Based on the compiler's comment that the verse was sung by choirs and remembered in proverbs, it has usually been assumed that this tradition was a popular, oral one,<sup>4</sup> although a king's visit to the abbey would seem to be a surprising subject for popular song.

In light of this, the Ely song has often been classed alongside other examples of twelfth-century English verse as a short lyric. Ingrid Nelson has discussed the relationship between Cnut's verse and the liturgical singing by which it was supposedly inspired, describing how the verse functions as a kind of *contrafactum* which at once recalls and transforms the monks' Latin chant (Nelson 2017: 1–4). Thomas Hahn links it with the hymns of St Godric of Finchale and other vernacular lyrics 'characterized (often in their Latin manuscript contexts) as inspired or peculiarly expressive':

Often such lyrics, and the increasingly popular genres of 'lofsongs' and 'ureisuns', seem to have functioned as performance texts, inserted into sermons as audio enhancements to the more serious and systematic discourse of a homily, sound bites that captivated an audience's attention by speaking their own language. (Hahn 1999: 78)

These are useful comparisons, especially as parallels to the way the *LE* chooses to present the song; yet Cnut's verse also differs from these other examples in some interesting respects. Although presented as a spontaneous outpouring of feeling, and inspired by liturgical chant, it is not itself a prayer; it does not, for instance, give thanks to God for the monks' singing, but only expresses pleasure in it. The audience addressed is ostensibly the king's men, not God or St Æthelthryth. The implied audience would also, of course, include the monks, since the poem pays compliment to their melodious singing.

If the lines do indeed predate their prose context, we should be careful to distinguish between the verse itself and the statements of the compiler, who may perhaps be extrapolating from the verse (or the longer poem from which it came, assuming such a poem existed). Some of the details of the surrounding prose story have been questioned:

Janet Fairweather is sceptical, for instance, of the statement that the monks' singing in the church could ever be heard from the waterside, as the prose claims (Fairweather 2005: 182). More importantly, the statements of the prose and the content of the verse do not fit easily together, especially in the attribution to Cnut. The song refers to Cnut in the third person, and it is only the prose context which presents the idea that the king himself is the author or speaker of the verse. The first two lines are in the past tense, but the third and fourth adopt the imperative, as if the speaker is at that moment urging the men to row; a switch of speaker between the second and third lines is not impossible, but perhaps 'we' in the last line indicates that the whole verse might more appropriately be interpreted as spoken by one of the 'cnites' addressed, encouraging his comrades to speed their work. Removed from its context in the *LE*, the verse alone shows little sign of being anything other than a secular, occasional poem – less an expression of inspired private emotion than of courteous, politic attention to the king's monastic hosts.

### **Cnut and Ely**

Although the *LE* provides various colourful details about Cnut's delighted reaction to the monks' singing, the point of the story is not his feelings but his actions – specifically, the rights and freedoms he confirms for the abbey during his visit. It is this aspect of the episode which roots it most plausibly in an eleventh-century context, since there is nothing unlikely about the idea that Cnut may have paid such a visit to Ely at some point in his reign. Ely's relationship with royal power was a complex and often tense one, and the history of its interactions with Cnut complicates the harmonious picture sketched by the story of the song.

Cnut was a generous patron of English churches, and in many respects he followed in the footsteps of earlier kings in the direction of his patronage (Gerchow 1992; Heslop 1990; Lawson 2011: 111–47; Bolton 2009: 77–106). In the case of Ely, he seems to have been continuing the practice of Æthelred and Emma, who had a close relationship with the abbey (Ridyard 1988: 194–196; Keynes 2003: 30). In particular, the *LE* emphasises the continuity of Emma's patronage

throughout her successive marriages to Æthelred and Cnut, detailing her gifts of richly decorated altar-hangings and embroidery of her own making (Blake 1962: 149).

However, it seems likely that Cnut's generosity to Ely was not simply a demonstration of continuity with the previous regime, but also a reaction to immediate political necessity. Cnut's patronage of several East Anglian and Fenland religious houses appears to have been a response to resistance from that quarter early in his reign, and Ely seems to have been especially troublesome (Lawson 2011: 143–144; Bolton 2009: 86–94). There was some unrest in the abbey around the year 1019, although the details remain a mystery: in that year Abbot Leofwine was removed from his post for unknown reasons – unjustly, in the opinion of MS. E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Irvine 2004: 75). In the autumn of 1022 Leofwine travelled to Rome with Archbishop Æthelnoth to clear his name, and he was subsequently reinstated at Ely.

The early years of Cnut's reign seem therefore to have been a troubled time at Ely, following the long period of warfare which culminated in the Danish conquest of England. Perhaps significantly for its interactions with Cnut, Ely was the burial-place of several high-profile casualties of recent battles against the Danes. One of the abbey's most cherished patrons was Byrhtnoth, the ealdorman of Essex killed in battle against the Danes at Maldon in 991, whose family had a close relationship with Ely over several generations. The *LE* claims that Byrhtnoth and his men were accommodated at Ely on their way to Maldon, and tells how the abbot and monks recovered Byrhtnoth's body from the battlefield and buried him (Blake 1962: 133–136). It also says Ely possessed a tapestry of the ealdorman's deeds, woven by his wife Ælfflæd – any monastery with such an object on display might well have given Cnut reason to be uncomfortable about its loyalties. Byrhtnoth's son-in-law Oswig, who was killed fighting against the Danes at Ringmere in 1010, is commemorated in later Ely calendars and was also probably buried at the abbey, as was his wife Leofflæd, Byrhtnoth's daughter (Dickins 1937; Locherbie-Cameron 1991).<sup>5</sup>

In light of the complex and rapidly shifting situation in the three decades after 991, when allegiances to English and Scandinavian

leaders did not divide straightforwardly along ethnic lines, we cannot be sure how Cnut and his circle might have viewed these earlier victims of Danish incursions; however, Ely also preserved more recent memories of some who had fought against Cnut himself. Among the benefactors buried and commemorated at Ely was Eadnoth, Bishop of Dorchester, who recovered the body of the martyred Archbishop Ælfheah from his Danish captors in Greenwich in 1012, and was himself killed in battle against Cnut's army at Assandun in 1016. The *LE* describes Eadnoth's death as a martyrdom, and records how his body was cruelly treated by Cnut's men (Blake 1962: 140–142). It also tells how some monks from Ely took the relics of St Wendreth to the battle at Assandun, to aid in the spiritual warfare against Cnut; the relics were seized, and the *LE* says Cnut subsequently presented them to Canterbury – a further grievance against the king (Blake 1962: 147–149).

For various reasons, then, Ely might have appeared in the early years of Cnut's reign as a potential hub of opposition to the new Danish regime, as it was to be a stronghold of rebellion against the Normans, fifty years later. In such circumstances, it is not difficult to see why Cnut might have felt extraordinary measures were needed to win the support of this powerful Fenland monastery. Fortunately, one of his closest advisers had a strong link with Ely: Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, was a long-standing friend of the abbey. The *LE* tells how Wulfstan, whose family origins probably lay in the Fenland, had a particular fondness for Ely, and describes how he chose to be buried there after his staff became miraculously embedded in the church floor during a visit to the abbey (Blake 1962: 155–157). After his death on 28 May 1023 his body was brought from York to Ely, and miracles were recorded at his tomb. In 1154 his remains were translated into the new church, as one of a group of Ely's seven most illustrious benefactors, including Byrhtnoth and Eadnoth, whose bodies were reburied at the same time (Crook 2004). The chapter in the *LE* which tells of Wulfstan's links with Ely is probably based on an account of these benefactors compiled at the time of the translation, which seems to lie behind a considerable portion of Book II (Blake 1962: xxxiv–xxxviii).

This close connection to Ely – and the possibility suggested by the miracle of the staff that Wulfstan visited Ely at least once towards the

end of his life – provides a useful context for the *LE*'s account of Cnut's royal visits. Through his preaching and legislation, Wulfstan played a pivotal role in the early years of Cnut's reign and the establishment of a workable accommodation between the English and the Danes; his influence must have been invaluable in promoting good relations between king and abbey. In light of the grievances associated at Ely with Cnut's victory at Assandun, it is worth noting that it was Wulfstan who, in 1020, consecrated the memorial church Cnut built at the site of the battle; although the location of that church is uncertain, one plausible site, Hadstock in northern Essex, was part of an estate belonging to Ely (Hart 1992: 553–565; Rodwell 1993: 127–158).

The sole surviving grant of Cnut to Ely is dated to St Æthelthryth's feast, 23 June 1022, the year before Wulfstan's death. It deals with two of the Cambridgeshire estates, Wood Ditton and Cheveley, which had been left to the abbey by Byrhtnoth's widow.<sup>6</sup> The grant is witnessed by Wulfstan and Æthelnoth, which suggests that the grant took place before Æthelnoth's journey to Rome in that year with the ousted abbot Leofwine, and Timothy Bolton has suggested that the 1022 grant may be linked to the visit described in the *LE* (Bolton 2009: 92–93; Bolton 2017: 124–125). He notes that the date and the witness-list seem more significant than such a minor land-transaction seems to warrant,<sup>7</sup> and observes:

The fact that in 1020 X 1021 Cnut participated in public reconciliation ceremonies at Assandun and Thorney leads me to suspect that the exchange was agreed during Cnut's visit to Ely, and thus Cnut's visit was staged to occur on a date of great importance to the community. If correct, then this visit was probably accompanied by some similar public ceremony. (Bolton 2009: 93)

Bolton's suggestion is an attractive one, and a date in the early 1020s is a plausible time for such an event. A visit on St Æthelthryth's feast in June would, of course, conflict with the statement in the *LE* that both of Cnut's visits took place at Candlemas, the Feast of the Purification, on 2 February. However, it may be that the compiler or his source

has conflated the date of two different visits: the outdoor procession described in the first story might be more feasible in June than February in an English climate, but the story of Brihtmær Budde is much more reliant on a winter date, since February frost plays a crucial role in rendering the Isle inaccessible.

St Æthelthryth's feast was naturally of great significance at Ely, but Candlemas also held particular importance for the abbey for reasons directly relevant to the *LE* story. In the introduction to the story of the song the compiler observes that the abbots of Ely began a period of service at the royal court on the Feast of the Purification, a privilege which was believed to have been granted to the abbey by Æthelred and continued by Cnut (Blake 1962: 153). Although the exact nature of this service is unclear (Keynes 2003: 30), its memory was highly valued in twelfth-century Ely; the loss of the privilege at the time of the Norman Conquest is lamented elsewhere in the *LE* as a great disaster for the abbey, a symbol of how Ely and all England, 'weighed down under the Norman yoke', have lost their former glory (Blake 1962: 147; Fairweather 2005: 175). This may explain why the compiler makes a point of dating both of Cnut's visits to the Feast of the Purification.

However, Candlemas was also a significant date for the Danish dynasty, which might render a visit on this feast a plausible occasion for royal ceremony. It was the anniversary of the death of Sveinn Forkbeard in 1014, when Cnut was first chosen as king by the Danish fleet;<sup>8</sup> in one sense it was, therefore, the date of Cnut's accession (although given the ebb and flow of events in 1013–1016, there is more than one possible candidate for that anniversary). There is some evidence for the use of such anniversaries as occasions for royal visits in Cnut's reign: Cnut is said to have visited Glastonbury on the anniversary of Edmund Ironside's death, 30 November (another possible anniversary for Cnut's accession to the throne) and presented a cloak decorated with peacocks at Edmund's tomb (Lawson 2011: 129–130). When the new church Cnut endowed at Bury St Edmunds was consecrated, the ceremony took place on the anniversary of the battle at Assandun, 18 October (Lawson 2011: 133). A different kind of anniversary may have been marked in 1020 when Wulfstan consecrated Æthelnoth, from the first a loyal supporter of the Danish regime, as Archbishop of

Canterbury on St Brice's Day, 13 November – a resonant date recalling recent acts of English aggression against the Danes. These examples suggest an awareness of the power of such anniversaries, and might support the *LE*'s dating of at least one of Cnut's visits to Candlemas, with another on St Æthelthryth's feast.

### Poetry at Cnut's Court

If, then, the situation proposed for the Ely verse may to some degree reflect eleventh-century reality, what do we make of the verse itself? Is it possible that the verse may be linked, however distantly, to praise poetry composed and performed to commemorate a royal visit to Ely early in Cnut's reign? The audience for such a visit – and of such a hypothetical poem – would have included not only the monks of Ely and other important churchmen (such as Wulfstan and Æthelnoth, both named as witnesses to the Ely grant), but also Queen Emma and a number of Cnut's English and Scandinavian followers. This mixed audience is typical of the complex cultural and linguistic situation in Cnut's England, where royal power supported the production of texts in English, Old Norse and Latin. As Elaine Treharne has argued, Cnut's use of English in his letters to his people played a key role in the king's presentation of himself as a defender of English interests and a successor to the Anglo-Saxon kings (Treharne 2012: 17–43); in the early years of his reign it was Wulfstan who did most to create this English 'voice', in which the Danish king addressed his conquered subjects.

At the same time, the poetry composed for Cnut in Old Norse provides evidence of a community of Norse-speakers at the English court in the early eleventh century. This corpus of poems consists of the three *Knútsdrápur* by Sigvatr Þórðarson (Townend 2012a), Óttarr svarti (Townend 2012b) and Hallvarðr háreksblesi (Frank 1994: 119–121; Jesch 2000: 245–248), Þórarinn loftunga's *Tögdrápa* (Townend 2012c),<sup>9</sup> the anonymous *Liðsmannaflokkur* (Poole 2012; Poole 1991: 86–90) and a poem composed for Cnut's brother-in-law Eiríkr (Carroll 2012). As far as these texts can be dated, they seem to have been composed throughout Cnut's reign (Townend 2001: 151–162); although several deal with Cnut's conquest of England, others also

treat events of the 1020s, including Cnut's relations with Norway and his journey to Rome in 1027. Cnut's poets commemorated his pious journeys and generosity to the church as well as his military triumphs, and developed an innovative new language of allusion to address Cnut in his role as a Christian king (Frank 1994). In reference to the Ely verse, we might especially note that Hallvarðr háreksblesi praises Cnut for his closeness to the 'Lord of monks', a kenning for God:

Esat und jarðar hq̄slu,  
orðbrjótr Dq̄num forðar  
moldreks, munka valdi  
mæringr an þú næri.

(There is not under the earth-tree [Yggdrasil] an illustrious prince closer to the Lord of monks [God] than you; the breaker [generous sharer] of the earth-ruler's [giant's] words [gold] protects Danes). (Frank 1994: 121)

Hallvarðr's assertion that Cnut could not be 'nearer' (*næri*) to the monks' God draws on the same idea as the command in the Ely verse to row 'nearer' (*noer*) to the land; both poems exploit the language of physical proximity to describe spiritual relationships, though in the Ely verse this is imagined literally. The kenning 'Lord of monks', *munka valdi*, suggests the perspective of a poet who has observed Cnut interacting with the church, presumably in England.<sup>10</sup> It brings to mind the monks clustered beneath Cnut's feet in the frontispiece to the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, an image in which the relationships between Cnut and Emma, Christ and his saints, and the monks are represented in a spatial hierarchy (Treharne 2012: 12–14).

At Cnut's court, poetry was evidently considered to be appropriate for the commemoration of a variety of royal triumphs: not only military success (although this theme predominates) but also international diplomacy, pilgrimage and generosity to the church. The primary audience for this poetry must, of course, have been Norse-speakers at court; this is suggested by the language itself and by the content,

since several of the *Knútsdrápur* deal with Cnut's conquest of England and exult in the defeat of the English. This does not mean, however, that the same people could not also have appreciated the poems which translated the conventions of the form into a specifically Christian context; many of the aristocratic Danish elite who presumably formed the audience for this poetry not only witnessed Cnut's public gestures of royal piety, but also followed his lead in patronage to the English church (Williams 2002; Keynes 1989; Townend 2005). The verse by Hallvarðr quoted above illustrates the complexity of the situation: in the same breath as acclaiming Cnut the friend of the Lord of – presumably English – monks, it also praises him as a protector of 'Danes'.

Was this Norse-speaking elite, however, the *only* audience aware of this poetry, or capable of engaging with it at some level? While the poems celebrate Cnut and the interests of the Danes, we should not assume that support of those interests was correlated in a straightforward way with ethnicity: it must also have included those among the English who had identified themselves with the Danish regime, the most obvious examples being Earl Godwine and Archbishop Wulfstan. In celebrating defeats over the English, the poetry is often said to reflect the taste of a male military elite, but this taste was not necessarily confined to warriors or even to men: Queen Emma, in commissioning the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, was later to show herself as ready to reward triumphal accounts of the Danish conquest as Cnut had been (Parker 2016; Frank 1994: 117). It has long been argued that the poems contain a number of features which would render them more comprehensible to a mixed group of listeners, including a reduced use of inflexions, experimental metre and the adoption of some English vocabulary (Hofmann 1955: 75-93; Poole 1987; Frank 1994: 108-109).

As Matthew Townend has shown, these poems also co-exist exactly in time and space with the very different image of Cnut presented in the English sources, and he has argued that the centre for skaldic composition in Cnut's reign is best located at Winchester (Townend 2001). Contextualising the performance of these poems to Winchester brings into sharp relief the politically charged nature of their references to Cnut's achievements:

The precincts of the royal palace are a remarkable location for Sigvatr and Óttarr to be celebrating Cnut's triumph over named West Saxon kings, the skyline of the monastic complex an unlikely backdrop for Hallvarðr's mythological kennings. For those who have ears to hear, this is a radically different image of King Cnut: in praise-poetry like this, context is an essential part of meaning. (Townend 2001: 174)

Some of Hallvarðr's kennings would indeed sound remarkably daring within the walls of monastic Winchester; equally, however, there could hardly be a more appropriate setting in which to praise Cnut's closeness to the 'Lord of monks'. The pre-eminence of Winchester does not, of course, exclude the possibility of such poetry being performed elsewhere; besides the evidence for legislative activity at such places as Oxford and London, we have numerous later traditions about Cnut's visits to religious houses including Glastonbury, Durham, Wilton and Christ Church, Canterbury – and Ely, of course (Parker 2014). If skaldic poetry could be performed in Winchester, in the heart of Wessex and in the shadow of the Old Minster, there seems little reason to exclude any of these other locations as potential contexts for public verse.

The linguistic situation at Cnut's court was fluid, and it was an environment in which multiple languages thrived side by side and were available to perform different functions. In such a situation, the language in which a text was delivered is not a straightforward guide to the composition of the audience to which it was directed; Cnut's laws, written in English, are explicitly intended for both English and Danes. At any public occasion involving the king's court the participants would presumably include a mixture of Danish and English speakers and listeners, with varying levels of mutual understanding. If, as has been suggested, Wulfstan preached his sermon for the dedication of a church at the consecration of the minster at Assandun in 1020 (Bethurum 1957: 246–50; Wormald 2004: 13), the audience for his preaching included Cnut and Thorkell as well as 'biscopas, 7 eac abbodas 7 manege munecas' (Cubbin 1996: 63) (bishops and also abbots and many monks), and surely other Danish veterans of the battle too. Wulfstan's sermons were presumably more comprehensible

to Danish listeners than the skaldic poems ever could have been to an English audience, but they might have seemed in some ways hardly less culturally alien to a group which probably included some relatively new converts to Christianity (Lawson 2011: 121–123).

Whether or not anyone other than the Scandinavians at court understood these poems, we might wonder whether they were nonetheless aware of their existence. The extent to which any listener to these poems would have understood the full range and meaning of their intricate references is unclear – how much did Cnut himself understand? But such verse is, by its very nature, intended for public performance, and therefore potentially accessible to audiences with varying degrees of comprehension and competence.<sup>11</sup> The number of people at court who fully understood the verse must always have been limited to those who understood the language, but the very fact of its performance may have made an impression on English observers; one would not need to understand any of the *content* of such poetry in order to witness its performance and understand that its function was to praise the king. The *LE* story provides a useful illustration of how such an interaction might work, since the story of Cnut's verse in fact imagines a moment of bilingual interaction: although Cnut presumably does not understand the Latin words the monks are singing, he is still able to appreciate the substance of their song, take pleasure in it, and respond in his own language.

It is worth noting, too, that the Ely verse mentions not only Cnut and the monks but also the king's men, his *cnites*, who are the audience explicitly addressed in the third and fourth lines. These lines create an illusion of spontaneity and immediacy, as if the speaker is urging the men to row, and as he encourages the men he speaks as one of them, adopting a plural collective voice: 'here we pes muneches sæng'. For these rhetorical devices we might compare the opening of *Liðsmannaflokkr*, a series of verses supposedly spoken by Cnut's *liðsmenn* during the siege of London in 1016. In this verse, one of the *liðsmenn* urges his companions to bravery as they prepare to go ashore:

Gǫngum upp, áðr Engla  
 ættlǫnd farin rǫndu  
 morðs ok miklar ferðir  
 malmregns stafar fregni.  
 Verum hugrakkir hlakkar,  
 hristum spjót ok skjótum,  
 leggr fyr órum eggjum  
 Engla gnótt á flóttu.

(Let us go ashore, before the staves of the metal-rain [BATTLE > WARRIORS] and large militias of killing learn that the ancestral lands of the English are traversed with the shield. Let us be brave-minded in battle; let us brandish spears and shoot [them]; an ample number of the English takes to flight before our blades). (Poole 2012: 1016)

Like the Ely verse, this poem creates a fictional sense of immediacy; although *Liðsmannaflokkr* may have been composed as little as a few months after the events it goes on to narrate, it was certainly not spoken in the heat of battle.<sup>12</sup> The speaker is purportedly a member of the army, and after the opening verse the poem swiftly transitions from exhortation to narrative, mixing past- and present-tense narration as the speaker provides an account of the Danish conquest of England (Poole 1991: 107–109).<sup>13</sup> The superficial similarity between the situation in which the Ely and the *Liðsmannaflokkr* verses are supposed to be spoken – in a boat, approaching the land – is matched by the comparable devices both poems use to memorialise this situation in verse: both create a poetic illusion of spontaneous composition, and both adopt a collective voice in which the first-person speaker of the verse speaks on behalf of himself and his companions. These are fictions, which celebrate and recreate a past, shared experience by transporting the audience back into the moment of inspiration.

Without suggesting there could be any direct connection between *Liðsmannaflokkr* and the English verse, it is useful to compare the way in which the parallel literary devices of the poems were later

received and understood. The compiler of the *LE* took these poetic devices literally, and seems to have devised a story which helped to explain them; even his willingness to attribute the verse to the king, rather than to a rank-and-file member of the army, is paralleled by the treatment of *Liðsmannaflokkr* in some of the prose compilations in which it survives.<sup>14</sup> By these means a poem composed to memorialise a particular moment might be later reinterpreted, or misinterpreted, once its original context was forgotten.

### **Cnut in Twelfth-century Ely**

Whatever form Cnut's interactions with Ely may really have taken – and whether or not they were commemorated in verse – the *LE*'s narrative of Cnut's visits is clearly shaped by twelfth-century attitudes to the Anglo-Saxon past. The cosy cheerfulness of the stories of the monks' merry song and Brihtmær Budde's feat of strength belies the charged atmosphere in which such royal visits must have taken place; in the early years of Cnut's reign the wounds of the recent conquest were still raw, and nowhere more so than at Ely, where the dead of Maldon and Assandun were commemorated. This is barely acknowledged in the *LE*, which treats Cnut as a thoroughly English king and, in presenting him as capable of composing English verse, clearly imagines him as a fluent speaker of English.

There were more pressing grievances by the second half of the twelfth century, and the two stories about Cnut both touch on aspects of Ely's history and identity which seem to have had particular resonance for the abbey at that date. One is the privilege of royal service dating to the Feast of the Purification, a casualty, the compiler believes, of the Norman Conquest; another is the fact that in Cnut's time Ely could only be reached by water. This inaccessibility is an important factor in both stories: in the first it provides a contextual explanation for the verse's exhortation to the men to row; in the second it threatens to prevent the king reaching the Isle because of the frozen fens. By the time the *LE* was compiled, Ely was no longer only accessible by boat, but its past inaccessibility was a subject of interest, even of pride, at Ely in the twelfth century. The Preface to Book I of the *LE* describes the geographical situation of the abbey at length, including its former

isolation (Blake 1962: 2–5). William of Malmesbury, who visited Ely while writing the *Gesta Pontificum*, comments there on how the Isle had only recently become more accessible than in former times (Winterbottom and Thomson 2007: I, 491); he also notes that the formerly difficult journey between Soham and Ely (that is, the journey undertaken by Cnut and Brihtmær Budde) had been made easier in the twelfth century by the building of a road across the marshes (Winterbottom and Thomson 2007: I, 234–235). This was presumably information he had learned from someone at Ely, who thought it worth recounting.

The inaccessibility of Ely, with its distinctive, water-bound landscape and its island identity, is something of a fascination in the *LE*, and plays a particularly important role in its narratives about the Norman Conquest: it claims that the first causeway to reach the Isle was built by the Normans in an attempt to overcome the rebellion of Hereward, during the siege described at length in Book II (Blake 1962: 173–193). To a contemporary audience, the stories of Cnut’s journeys to Ely would therefore have demonstrated a sharp contrast between the eleventh-century past and the post-Conquest present. They laud Ely’s special status as a place which must be sought out, almost as if St Æthelthryth herself is being wooed by an enthusiastic royal suitor. Cnut’s arrival by boat, and his humble journey in a cart behind Brihtmær Budde, both act as a pointed contrast not only to the Norman siege but also to his own previous attempts to storm the Isle, mentioned earlier in Book II (Blake 1962: 190; Lawson 2011: 143–144). In the *LE* the question of *how* kings reach the isle – peacefully and humbly, or by force – characterises their relationship with the island abbey: Cnut’s two journeys cast him as a generous patron and as an energetic king, eager and excited to reach the Isle, and his love for Ely is thereby rendered all the more flattering to the abbey. Keynes comments on the story of the song that ‘of course the tale remains no more than a charming story’ (Keynes 2003: 36); to the Ely compiler, however, its charm is a nostalgic one, tinged with a sense of loss. Both narratives were an important reminder of the abbey’s past royal favour, which he must have hoped might one day be restored.

This rose-tinted view of the pre-Conquest past colours the presentation of Cnut and his interactions with the abbey, and suggests

that many details of the story of the song – if not, perhaps, the song itself – are shaped by these later preoccupations. If the poem already existed in some form before it reached the compiler of the *LE*, the story might have been invented or rewritten to explain it. There are suggestive parallels to such use of poetry in the creation of the *LE*: it has been often been proposed, for instance, that the *LE* made use of *The Battle of Maldon*, or a version of it, in its account of that battle (Scragg 2006: 117–120; Hart 1992: 539–541), and something similar may have happened in this case. *The Battle of Maldon* is a reminder that commemorative vernacular verse, dealing with contemporary events and people, would not have been an unfamiliar concept in Ely either at the time of Cnut's visit or during the writing of the *LE*. Since monks from Ely were present at the battlefield to retrieve Byrhtnoth's body, one of them might be a plausible candidate for the author of the poem; alternatively, it has been suggested that *The Battle of Maldon* might have been composed at nearby Ramsey Abbey for performance at a feast attended by churchmen and their aristocratic patrons (Campbell 1993: 1–17). While Maldon, and the anti-Danish attitude of the poem commemorating it, might have been one of the memories of recent Anglo-Danish history around which Cnut had to steer a careful course, the public performance of commemorative poetry was perhaps an area where English and Danes might find common ground.

The story told by the Ely compiler, that Cnut's song was composed during a royal visit, may therefore be a more romantic version of the truth: perhaps a poem commemorating the king's visit really was performed in front of the king and his men on such an occasion, and communicated in some English form to the monks whose singing it praises. While a visit to Ely might not have had quite the same importance as a pilgrimage to Rome, it may nonetheless have been an appropriate occasion for a poem praising Cnut for his generosity to the English church: with the addition of boat-travel to reach the Isle, this is a peace-time, Christian version of the sea-journeys and military expeditions around Cnut's North Sea empire which form the subject-matter of much of the skaldic corpus. Out of this, and the documentary evidence of Cnut's benefactions, the compiler of the *LE* could have constructed his memorable picture of Cnut as Ely's ideal king: a pious lover of St Æthelthryth, a generous patron of her abbey and a poet.

## Endnotes

1 There is one possible exception: for arguments tracing potential echoes of the skaldic poems in the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, see Orchard 2001 and Frank 1994.

2 The dating of the *LE* is complex, but for this part of Book II the evidence is fairly clear; the outer limits are set by Book II's use of an account of the translation of Ely's benefactors, which took place in 1154, and the appointment of Bishop Nigel's successor in 1174 (Blake 1962: xlvi–xlix).

3 Skeat even attempted a reconstruction of the form in which the verse might have existed in Cnut's lifetime:

Myrige sungon thā munecas binnan Ēlīge,  
Thā Cnut cyning rēow be strande;  
Rōwath, cnihtas, nȳr thām lande  
And hȳre wē thāra muneca sang (Stubbs 1897: 51).

4 Richard Greene, for instance, taking 'in choris' to mean 'in dances' rather than 'by choirs', suggested it might have been the refrain of a dance-song (Greene 1977: xlix).

5 Leofflæd's will granting land to Ely, addressed to Cnut and Emma, is included in *LE* II.88 (Blake 1962: 157–158).

6 For the grant, S 958, see *LE* II.82 (Blake 1962: 150–151) and Keynes 1994: 49; its authenticity has been questioned, but Keynes considers it to be genuine. A third estate given by Ælflæd, Soham, is the setting for the story of Cnut and Brihtmær Budde, and in light of his name and this connection it is tempting to associate Brihtmær with Byrhtnoth, in whose family this name-element recurs. However, given the attention the *LE* devotes to Byrhtnoth's descendants, it seems unlikely that such a connection would have gone unrecorded, or that the compiler would describe a descendant of Ely's great patron as *rusticus*. On the identification of Brihtmær, see Blake 1962: 154.

7 Among the witnesses is Gerbrand, bishop of Roskilde, who was consecrated in England by Æthelnoth; on the significance of this in interpreting Cnut's plans for the relationship between the English and Danish churches, see Lund 1994: 41–42.

8 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* C, D and E record for 1014: 'Her on pißsum geare Swegen geendode his dagas to Candelmæssan... 7 se flota þa eal gecuron Cnut to cyninge' ('In this year Svein died at Candlemas... and the fleet

all chose Cnut as king').

9 Þórarinn also composed a *Höfuðlausn* in praise of Cnut, of which only the refrain survives (Frank 1994: 116).

10 For discussion of the mixture of pagan and Christian imagery in the poem, see Jesch 2004: 55–68.

11 On the intelligibility of skaldic praise poetry and the question of how far patrons were expected to understand the verses offered to them, see discussion in Harris and Reichl 2012: 150–154 and Frank 2005: 183. Since skaldic verse was particularly associated with Icelandic and Norwegian warrior culture, it may not have been entirely comprehensible to all Cnut's Danish followers either.

12 On the textual history, date and attribution of *Liðsmannaflokkr*, see Poole 1991: 86–115.

13 Compare Judith Jesch's analysis of the tenses and modes of address in Hallvarðr háreksblesi's *Knútsdrápa* (Jesch 2000: 245–248): as she observes, that poem 'illustrates the shifts between descriptive, narrative and vocative, and past and present tense, that are required in the situation of utterance when the poet recalls the king's past deeds in his presence' (Jesch 2000: 253).

14 The verses survive in three prose sources: two redactions of the saga of Óláfr inn helgi (the *Legendary Saga* and the fragmentary version by Styrmir fróði Kárason), which both identify the speaker of the verses as Óláfr, and *Knýtlinga saga*, which attributes them to the *liðsmenn* (Poole 1991: 90–98).

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