

# Life and cult of Cnut the Holy

The first royal saint of Denmark

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Report from an interdisciplinary research seminar in Odense.  
November 6th to 7th 2017

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Kulturhistoriske studier i centralitet – Archaeological and  
Historical Studies in Centrality, vol. 4, 2019

Forskningscenter Centrum – Odense Bys Museer  
Syddansk Univeristetsforlag/University Press of Southern Denmark

# Erik Ejegod's International Connections and the Beginnings of the Cult of Cnut

By Laura Gazzoli

The recent millennium of the accession of Cnut the Great (1016–35) has given occasion to reflect on the international nature of his reign, not only as a king who controlled England, Denmark and (for a time) Norway, but also as a king who was active on the political map in a far wider area than this (already extensive) empire: his voyage to Rome in 1027 led to important contacts at the highest level, namely with the Pope and Emperor Conrad II. Not long afterwards, Cnut's daughter was engaged to Conrad's son, the future Henry III. Cnut had transformed the Danish dynasty from a recently-Christianised family on the peripheries of Europe into a central player on the European stage.

Cnut's 'Empire' crumbled shortly after his death, and although its legacy as an idea remained powerful for Danish and Norwegian kings in the eleventh century (and even later: see Heebøll-Holm 2015), it was never re-assembled. But the legacy of Cnut's international connections had left its mark as well: his nephew Svend Estridsen (1047–76) had contacts to the courts of England, Sweden and the Empire, as well as the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and Rome itself, and very likely elsewhere. The first of his sons to follow him as king, Harald Hen (1076–80), also received papal letters. Cnut IV (1080–6), the focus of this volume, famously intended to conquer England, and allied himself to Robert the Frisian, Count of Flanders, through marriage to his daughter.

Against this background, it should come as no surprise that the fourth of Svend's sons to succeed him, Erik Ejegod (1095–1103) managed to make his short period on the throne one full of international connections. Here I would like to review these before seeing if there is anything else to add: as I have already argued elsewhere (Gazzoli 2013), I believe that among his travels, Erik visited England, specifically Durham. I would like to expand on this argument by examining the possible company Erik kept while on this voyage and the effects of his exposure to the cult of St Cuthbert and the Benedictines at Durham.

## The sources

The most comprehensive and (probably) earliest source for Erik's travels is contained in the commemorative poem *Eiríksdrápa*, composed by the Icelander Markús Skeggjason sometime after Erik's death in 1103 and before his own in 1107, preserved chiefly in the thirteenth-century *Knýtlinga saga* and seemingly also used as a source by Saxo (Carroll 2009: 432). *Knýtlinga saga* may have been informed by Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, who was said to have got his information from Valdemar II Sejr (1202–41; *Knýtlinga saga* 127, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 315). According to the *Eiríksdrápa*, Erik knew many languages (*Eiríksdrápa* 7, ed. Carroll 2009: 439) and received gifts from the French King Philip I and the Emperor Henry IV, who also gave him an armed following with guides who led him to Constantinople (*Eiríksdrápa* 24, ed. Carroll 2009: 453–4). By contrast, Saxo claims that Erik took the eastern route to Constantinople, through Rus' (*Gesta Danorum* xii.7.1, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 886); although Markús account contradicts this, he does also say that Eirik had visited the princes of *Garðar*, or Rus' (*Eiríksdrápa* 3, ed. Carroll 2009: 435–6). In Italy, we hear of Erik visiting Venice, Bari and most importantly Rome (*Eiríksdrápa* 8–10, ed. Carroll 2009: 439–42), as well as his intention to set out for Jerusalem in the journey on which he ultimately died (*Eiríksdrápa* 26, ed. Carroll 2009: 455–6). The *Roskilde Chronicle*, completed in 1138 but probably the product of several years' work (Gelting 2002: 40), also reports his death in Cyprus on the way to Jerusalem together with his wife Bodil, but is generally critical of his reign, saying he made many unjust laws and that many people wrongly attributed the plenty of the years of his reign (that followed the famine of the reign of Oluf) to him (*Chronicon Roskildense* 12, ed. Gertz 1917–18: I, 25). Svend Aggesen deals with his reign in only four sentences, mentioning his trip to Jerusalem, death on Cyprus and his progeny (*Brevis historia* 12, ed. Gertz 1917–18: I, 128–31).

Aelnoth, although he was present in Denmark during Erik's reign, given that he seems to have written between 1110 and 1113, at which time he says he had been in Denmark for twenty-four years (*Gesta Swenomagni*, Prologue 1, ed. Gertz 1908–12: 77; Gelting 2011: 38–9): says little about the king. Although he mentions that Erik was with Cnut when he was martyred in Odense and the return of plenty to Denmark when he assumed the throne (*Gesta Swenomagni* 25, 32, ed. Gertz 1908–12: 113, 130), there is nothing about how he got away or what he did in the meantime; Saxo says he fled to Sweden, where his wife Bodil had family (*Gesta Danorum* xii.1.1, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 865). Although *Knýtlinga* saga says that he was Jarl of Sjælland during Oluf's reign, *Eiríksdrápa*'s description of Erik's visit to Rus' and arrival in Denmark from the east (*Eiríksdrápa* 3–4, ed. Carroll 2009: 435–7) suggests he may have been in exile there. *Knýtlinga* saga's description of him plundering pagans in the east but leaving Christians in peace (*Knýtlinga* saga 70, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 212–13) possibly reflects a later Crusading ideology of Danish behaviour in the area rather than actual eleventh-century activity.

## Erik on the international stage

Erik's career thus represented a continuation of the international involvement of Svend Estridsen and Cnut the Great before him, in that he was in contact with the western Emperor and the Papacy. His travels to the Mediterranean and Constantinople, although probably considerably embellished by Saxo (*Gesta Danorum* xii.7.1–6, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 886–92), nonetheless also reflect a continuity with the past of a different sort, namely one that recalls the career of the Norwegian King Harald Sigurðarson (or Harald Hardrada, 1046–66) who had travelled to Byzantium via Rus' and had a celebrated career as a soldier there, as recorded in Old Icelandic, Greek and Latin sources (e.g. *Gesta pontificum* iii.13, ed. Schmeidler 1917: 153–4).

His relationship with the Slavs (Wends) between the Elbe and the Oder is another area of continuity: the connection between the Danish royal dynasty and the Slavs extends back to the days of Harald Bluetooth in the mid-tenth century, and most likely longer still. However, the emphasis on violence and dominance in this relationship may represent something of a shift towards a more violent policy towards the Slavs, as previous Danish involvement had been heavily diplomatic, though not always

devoid of violence, such as with Cnut the Great's campaign of 1019 (Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* vi.15, ed. Greenway 1996: 362–4; Gazzoli Forthcoming). But Skaldic verse is a form that lends itself to the celebration of violent deeds, and simply speaking of 'the Slavs/Wends' disguises the fact that this covers a considerable number of different groupings from the shores of the Elbe along the Baltic Coast. The poem specifically invokes the former dominance of a Svend in the region; this could be a reference to Svend Estridsen, who had numerous contacts with the area. As Svend's daughter was married to the Abodrite Prince Gottschalk (Gazzoli Forthcoming), this could have been interpreted as a form of dominance. Alternatively, Svend Tveskæg is recorded to have had conflicts with the Slavs, which, despite Adam and Thietmar's record of his defeat and capture at their hands, may ultimately have resulted in something that could be interpreted as a victory on his part. In addition, as I have argued elsewhere, Svend Tveskæg's daughter married a Slavic prince who may have been Pribignew Uto, prince of the Abodrites; again, this could have been interpreted as Danish dominance (this marriage probably took place sometime in the early- to mid-1010s, as the daughter born of the union is recorded as being married in 1029; it may well have been before Svend's death in 1013: see Gazzoli Forthcoming).

## Erik in England – and his followers?

Against this background, it would hardly have been uncharacteristic of Erik to have paid a visit to England as well. I have argued that just such a visit did take place, and that it may have been linked to the early phases of Cnut's cult in Odense. As Erik and Bodil both appear in the *Liber vitae Dunelmensis*, the confraternity book of Durham, I believe this probably indicates a visit to England on their part.

According to the *Constitutions of Lanfranc*, receiving confraternity (i.e. being prayed for as if one were a member of a community) required personal presence. This rule could be bent on occasion, but I believe the situation at Durham in the final decades of the eleventh century suggests that it would have been strictly enforced. The old Community of Cuthbert had been replaced by Benedictines in 1083, with the justification that standards had declined and there was a need to reintroduce proper monasticism. Lanfranc's *Constitutions* had only recently been written,

and Durham possessed (and still possesses) one of the earliest manuscripts of them, written between 1090 and 1095 (Durham Cathedral Library, B.IV.24, fos. 47r–71v; Knowles and Brooke 2002: xlv). And as Erik is described as *rex Danorum*, he must have visited after 1095 when he became king, and thus it seems likely that the *Constitutions* would have been known and in effect at the time.

Bodil's presence poses no problems: not only do the *Constitutions* make provisions for women to receive confraternity in person as well (Knowles and Brooke 2002: 170), the *Roskilde Chronicle*, as mentioned above, reports that she travelled with Erik on his final journey towards Jerusalem (and Saxo follows this), showing that she was no stranger to travel herself (*Chronicon Roskildense* 12, ed. Gertz 1917–18: I, 25; *Gesta Danorum* xii.6.5, xii.7.6, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 884, 892).

Here I would like to move beyond my previous argument and look more closely at the Durham *Liber vitae* itself. The names are at the top of what is now folio 55v, at the beginning of what was originally a new page – although it is now a *verso*, it was clearly originally bound as a *recto* – and the names are entered in a hand consistent with the end of the eleventh century. Following them there is a group of names that appear to be in the same ink and hand, with a mark at the end, after which a new hand begins. Later entries are crowded around in the margins. Thus, these names seem to form a distinct group.

Can they thus all be associated with Erik? We cannot say for certain; but a sufficient number of the names look Danish enough for this to be a reasonable conclusion. Another, perhaps more interesting question, is the non-Danish names: could these realistically be associated with Erik, or should we assume they received confraternity either on the same occa-

sion for different reasons, or not long after Erik? The marker after the end of this group of names before the second hand begins makes it extremely tempting to look at these names as a group, and that is what I would like to examine here.

The list is as follows: *Eiric rex danorum. Botild regina. Toui. Modera uxor Tuoi. Alf. Sunawas. Anander. Toui uel Siward muntokes sune. Vlf dust. Torkitell muli. Osbern. Eoltkill. Askill. Turkill. Walecho. Gerbrun.* (Fig.1)

Of these, Tovi and his wife Modera are good Old Danish names, as is Alf; Sunawas is unknown, but may be somehow related to the name Sunniva, a name loaned into Norse from English. It is tempting to speculate on some connection to Hákon Sunnifunson, or Hákon the Norwegian, mentioned in *Knýtlinga saga* as Erik's son-in-law (*Knýtlinga saga* 78, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 231; cf. *Gesta Danorum* xiii.7.4, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 943). Anander again looks like a Norse name. As for 'Thor' or Siward Muntokes son, the name Thor on its own rather than compounded with another element is more typical of Anglo-Scandinavian naming patterns than ones from Scandinavia proper. Ulf Dust could be either, while Torkitell Muli looks definitely Anglo-Scandinavian, as the conservative ending in –ketill is typical of Norse names loaned into English in the ninth century, before the form in use in Scandinavia became shortened to –kel/-kil. Thus, after Osbern (again a Danish-looking name), we have a group of names in this ending, Eoltkill, Askill and Turkill, which suggests origins in Scandinavia itself. Finally, we have two continental Germanic names: Walecho (male) and Gerbrun (female) (on all these names, see the linguistic and prosopographical commentary in Piper *et. al.* 2007).

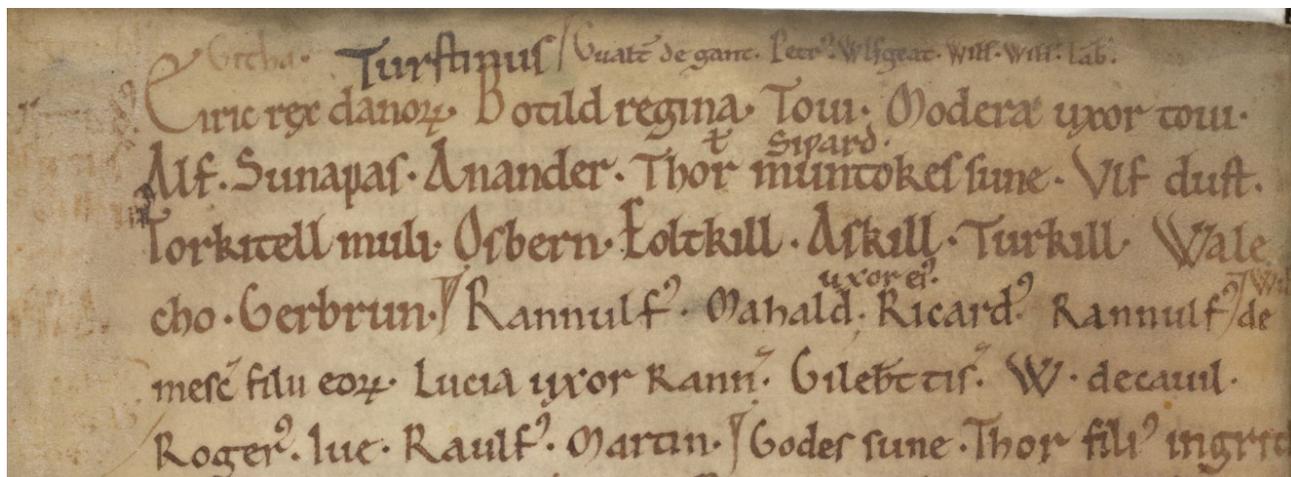


Fig. 1: Durham Liber vitae: London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A.VII, f.55v. Photo: British Library.

Although personal names are not always a reliable guide to the ethnicity or origins of persons, in the case of this group it seems safe to describe this group of people as consisting of some individuals from Scandinavia (and not necessarily only Denmark: for example, if the potential link between *Sunawas* and *Knýtlinga saga*'s Hákon Sunnifuson 'the Norwegian' is correct), others from Scandinavian-settled regions of England and two from the European mainland. If they form a single group, which seems likely from the physical characteristics of the entry, we can then see Erik travelling in England in a multi-ethnic cohort, consisting of people who had travelled with him from Scandinavia, others who had joined him in England – perhaps as local guides – or had possibly migrated from England to Denmark, as others (such as, for example, Aelnoth of Canterbury) had done after the Norman Conquest and entered his service there.

Nor is there any reason why figures with continental Germanic names, and probably origins somewhere on the northwest of the European mainland, could not also have been associated with Erik. It has already been noted that *Eiríksdrápa* refers to the Emperor Henry IV providing Erik with guides to take him to Constantinople: I am not suggesting that Walecho and Gerbrun were among these, but this shows just one instance where persons potentially of similar origins would have been attached to Erik's retinue. Moreover, this list does presumably not include everyone who travelled with Erik, but only the higher-status individuals. And in addition to Bodil, Modera wife of Tovi and Gerbrun show that women were part of the company as well.

## Erik, Durham and the cult of Cnut

*Eiríksdrápa* describes Erik's interest in seeking out holy places in Rome associated with the saints and their relics, adorning their shrines with rich gifts (*Eiríksdrápa* 10, ed. Carroll 2009: 442); Saxo claims that what he most desired in Constantinople was relics, and that he received a fragment of the Cross, and the bones of St Nicholas (*Gesta Danorum* xii.7.4, ed. Friis-Jensen 2015: II, 890). And of course his decision to set out for Jerusalem also shows an enthusiasm for visiting holy places. He thus would presumably also have been drawn by the fame of the shrine of St Cuthbert, to which his predecessor Cnut the Great had also made a pilgrimage.

Many of the monks who had 're-founded' Durham in the late eleventh century had come from Wearmouth, which in its turn had been re-founded by Evesham as part of a drive to re-monasticise Northern England. It was also monks from Evesham who founded Odense Cathedral Priory. Given these connections, it is tempting to see Erik's visit to Durham in the context of his brother's cult: it was a point on a network in a vigorous culture of Benedictine colonisation, and it may have been there that he got the idea for a Benedictine settlement in Denmark to foster the cult of the first native saint, much as the Benedictines at Durham protected and promoted the cult of Cuthbert. Durham, however, as a fairly new foundation itself, would most likely have referred him back to the central point of the network, Evesham. According to later medieval tradition, the monks from Evesham went to Odense in the time of Abbot Robert, who died in 1096 (Gelting 2011: 36–7, n. 7; Gazzoli 2013: 72), so the arrangement – and Erik's trip to Durham – must have been in 1095 (before which point Erik would not have been able to be listed as *rex danorum*) or 1096.

Thus, although the textual evidence suggests that the earliest phases of Cnut's cult owed their origins to clerical rather than royal initiative, I believe that nonetheless we can see Erik taking an important step in promoting his brother's cult (see also Poulsen in this volume). A story in *Knýtlinga saga* tells of a priest from St Alban's church in Odense, where Cnut had been martyred, approaching Cnut's brother, Oluf, and telling him of the signs of Cnut's sanctity. Oluf rejects the idea that Cnut could be a saint and forbids anyone from saying such things in his presence, on pain of death (*Knýtlinga saga* 66, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 204–5). But once Erik had been king *litla hrið* (for a little while), the same priest came to him and Erik asked him about Cnut. As the priest and many other honest men bore witness to the efficacy of calling on his name for help, knowledge of his sanctity spread throughout the land (*Knýtlinga saga* 72, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 215), and Erik called together the wisest men of his kingdom to investigate Cnut's sanctity, as a result of which Cnut's relics were tested and placed in a shrine (*Knýtlinga saga* 77, ed. Bjarni Guðnason 1982: 227–9). Although this is probably not the case – it is contradicted by the earliest account, the anonymous *Passio* of Cnut, which places the elevation while Oluf was still king, and furthermore makes his death a result of Cnut's translation (*Passio* 9, ed. Gertz 1908–12: 71) – it does illustrate the difference that royal sup-

port could make in the fortunes of a cult (even the Cult of St Olav was promoted in Norway by Cnut and his son Svend: Townend 2005; see also Ekroll in this volume). Even if it did not originate with him, Erik's support for the cult – particularly in the establishment of the Benedictine community at Odense – was no small factor in its development.

## Summary and conclusion

The Danish kings had been strongly international in their perspective since at least the days of Harald Bluetooth, and this was only reinforced by the legacy of Cnut the Great's control over Denmark, Norway and England, and his connections to Piast Poland (as a close relative of the ruling dynasty), the Emperor (through his attendance in a prominent role at the imperial coronation of Conrad II) and the Pope. Svend Estridsen and his sons all continued this tradition in various ways.

With Erik, we see a very pronounced international element in his career, stretching from Rus', Constantinople and Cyprus up through Italy all the way, as I would argue, into the north of England, where he travelled with a retinue that consisted of men and women of Scandinavian, Anglo-Scandinavian (or English bearing names of Scandinavian origin) and mainland European origin.

Drawn by the fame of St Cuthbert, Erik was clearly impressed by what he saw, and hoped the Benedictines could serve his brother just as well, which ultimately led to his contact with Evesham – a central point on the network of Benedictine colonisation that Durham was part of – and through that, the establishment of Odense Cathedral Priory. Although the earliest evidence suggests the initial steps in the creation of the cult of Cnut were taken by the clergy of St Alban's in Odense, Erik thus seems to have played an important role in its development and promotion.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aside from the more obscure Thøger of Vestervig, who was supposedly sent by St Olav of Norway to preach in the northwest of Denmark and died in 1065. It is far from clear that his cult originated immediately after this, however, and it was initially only local in its focus. See Gertz 1908–12: 4–26.

<sup>2</sup> Erik is named (and referred to as *sapientissimus rex*) in the Evesham charter relating to the foundation of Odense. The original is lost, but text appears twice in the earliest copy (BL Cotton Vespasian B xxiv), first at fo. 22, again at fo. 48: the former gives three witnesses, namely Danish bishops whose dates give us a range of 1135×1139, but this seems to be a subsequent copy from when the charter was renewed by King Valdemar I, as is attested by a separate document copied on fo. 19 (DD I:2, 67). No *liber vitae* survives from Odense, so we have no way of knowing whether Erik entered into confraternity there as well.

