



Life and cult of Cnut the Holy

The first royal saint of Denmark

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The Odense literature and the early liturgy of St Cnut Rex

By Steffen Hope

Introduction

Cnut IV of Denmark died in Odense in 1086 at the hands of rebellious Danes, as the climax of an insurrection that had spread from the north of Denmark, and which began with the attack on the royal manor at Børglum. The king was killed on the 10th of July in the Church of St Alban, a wooden church to which he, his brother Benedict and seventeen men from his retinue had fled when the insurrectionists had marched on the king's manor in Odense (see also Christensen *et.al.* and Bjerregaard in this volume). When Cnut, his brother Benedikt, and his men were killed, they were buried in the earthen floor of the church, and there the king lay until his remains were unearthed following a synod of all the Danish bishops in 1095. At this synod, the Danish bishops translated the relics of Cnut, and in so doing declared him to be a saint. His bones were interred in the crypt of a limestone church, the building of which had probably been initiated by Cnut himself.¹

When the new stone church was commissioned, it appears to have been intended as a new church dedicated to St Alban, as it was customary in eleventh-century Denmark to replace wooden churches with new buildings in stone (Krongaard Kristensen and Poulsen 2016: 63ff). When the crypt became the resting-place of the newly declared saint, the stone church was instead consecrated to Cnut and became the centre of his cult. In the first few years, the church was tended to by secular clerics, most likely brought over from England. A few years later, in 1095, Cnut's brother Erik Ejegod became king upon the death of Olaf, Erik's brother and Cnut's successor. King Erik established a monastic community at St Cnut's Church in Odense with monks invited from Evesham (cf. Gazzoli 2013: 72; and Gazzoli in this volume). Erik also sought to amplify the fame of his sainted brother by sending a delegation to the pope for the enrolment of Cnut into the canon of saints commemorated by the papacy, i.e. a canonization. The delegation met with success, according to Aelnoth of Canterbury,

and Cnut was canonized in 1100 or 1101. This was uncommon at the time, since in order to be proclaimed a saint it was usually sufficient with the authority of a local episcopal synod (Kemp 1948: 70ff).

In the first decades following the declaration of his sainthood, i.e. the translation of his relics on the 19th of April in 1095, St Cnut was the subject of several texts in which his life, his characteristics, his death, and the miracles associated with him were expounded. These are texts which can be called hagiographical or saint-biographical, as their purpose was to extol the qualities and the holiness of the saint. In the same period there was also composed at least one liturgical office for the celebration of St Cnut's feast-day, his *dies natalis*. This output of cult material testifies to a cult that underwent an evolution in how St Cnut was understood and formulated by the custodians of his shrine at the church in Odense.

The present article aims to follow the development of these texts from the beginning of Cnut's cult to the waning of his popularity towards the beginning of the 1130s. I wish to demonstrate how the formulation of St Cnut, and indeed the story about St Cnut, evolved and changed in the course of the first few decades during which his cult was at its peak in terms of textual and liturgical output. I will discuss the texts produced in this period, and see how the presentation of St Cnut develops as new texts are written and as the story is adapted from the saint-biographical texts and into the framework of the liturgical office, whose formal constraints and whose performative setting put demands on how the story of Cnut was to be presented that differed from the demands of the saint-biographical texts.

In this article, I begin with the inception of Cnut's cult in 1095 until the end of the 1120s, after which dynastic strife and the civil war following the murder of Cnut Lavard, St Cnut's nephew, resulted in a decline in the popularity of St Cnut, henceforth called Cnut Rex to separate him from Cnut Dux, his nephew (see Petersen in this volume). It is precisely

because of this relatively short timeframe that we can properly understand how rapidly the formulation of Cnut Rex developed. In my discussion of this development, I will be talking about textual images, by which I mean how the saint's story and characteristics are formulated in texts in order to present the saint-figure in a coherent and authoritative way, in accordance with how the saint was understood and addressed by those who ministered the cult and were the highest authorities of the saint's cult centre. In the case of Cnut Rex, these were the priests and then the monks and abbot of St Cnut's Church in Odense. This image of the saint that was formulated at the cult centre was put together in order to present the saint in a way that the authorities at the cult centre deemed to be the correct one. It was in accordance with the features of this image that the priests and, shortly after, the monks addressed their patron saint during the liturgical office. Since the liturgical office was the mystical highpoint of the year in the saint's cult, it was during the performance of this office that the saint's community turned to him or her with their supplications as one communal unit (as opposed to individual supplications that could be asked for privately at any time). Due to the solemnity of the occasion, it was important that the community addressed the saint in terms that the saint would respond to, and so in the case of Cnut Rex he was addressed with those titles and epithets that his supplicants believed to be most accurate and respectful. It is, therefore, in the changes, additions and omissions of characteristics and details in the description of the saint that we can come to understand how the cult, and the understanding of Cnut Rex, developed in our period.

Overview of the sources

The present analysis is centred on five textual sources, three of which will be of primary importance. These texts are, in tentative chronological order, *Passio Kanuti*, *Tabula Othoniensis*, *Epitaphium Kanuti*, *Gesta Swenomagni* (collectively referred to as the Odense literature), and the liturgical office. Aside from *Gesta Swenomagni*, which was composed by the English monk Aelnoth of Canterbury sometime between 1110-1117 (Gelting 2011: 38-39), we do not know who wrote the texts for St Cnut Rex. I argue that these five sources comprise four different stages in the development of the image of Cnut Rex, and my analysis will be organized in accordance with this four-fold division of the cult's textual trajectory. My argument about the four stages is founded on

a close-reading of the textual iconography of each source, and this will be fleshed out throughout the analysis.

Before I present the sources in greater detail, I would like to point the reader's attention to one aspect of my tentative chronology of these sources. Traditionally, the scholarship on the literature of the cult of St Cnut Rex has operated on the supposition that *Tabula Othoniensis* was the first textual testimony of his martyrdom. This source was a plaque of unspecified material which was discovered in Cnut's casket on January 22nd 1582, but has since been lost (see Bjerregaard in this volume). Its text has, however, been transcribed and printed in several works. The traditional outline of the *Tabula's* history is that it was placed in the stone sarcophagus into which Cnut was placed at his translation in 1095, and that its text was based on sketches that had been recorded by the clerks at St Alban's Church shortly after Cnut's martyrdom (Gertz 1912: 31-33).

While this hypothetical outline is completely plausible, a close-reading of *Tabula Othoniensis* in comparison with the other sources suggests that the *Tabula* is not the first written testimony of the death of St Cnut (and consequently the trajectory hypothesized by Gertz is no longer tenable). The first to challenge the chronology of the Odense literature was Professor Nils Holger Petersen, who drew the conclusion that *Tabula Othoniensis* cannot be the oldest of the texts of Cnut Rex after a reading of my analysis of the sources in my PhD thesis. I have since come to fully subscribe to Petersen's interpretation, and the outline of the present analysis is shaped around this.² The arguments for this reinterpretation will be presented shortly.

The four stages of the textual development of the cult of Cnut Rex is as follows: The first stage consists of *Passio Kanuti*, the second stage of *Tabula Othoniensis*, the third of *Epitaphium Kanuti* and *Gesta Swenomagni*, while the fourth and final stage consists of the liturgical office. In the following, I will give a brief presentation of each source, before embarking on an examination of the textual iconography of each of the four stages.

Passio Sancti Kanuti Regis et Martiris

This *vita* survives in one single manuscript, Köln Stadtarchiv Handschrift 203 GB quarto, fol.39r-44v, from the beginning of the sixteenth century.³ The title is provided in the manuscript, but we do not know whether this title was used prior to the early sixteenth century. The manuscript itself, a collection of saints'

lives, shows a strong interest in the holy history of the archbishoprics of both Köln and Hamburg-Bremen. Based on the account itself, Gertz concluded that this *vita* was likely written by an eyewitness to the translation of Cnut's relics in 1095, i.e. one of the English clerks at St Alban's that Cnut Rex had brought to Odense, and that it was written before the establishment of a monastic community at Odense by Erik Ejegod (Gertz 1912: 34-35; see also Missuno in this volume). Aidan Conti has suggested 1100 as the *terminus ante quem* (2010: 190) while Gertz suggests 1101, since *Passio Kanuti* does not mention the papal canonization of Cnut in 1100/01 (Gertz 1912: 34-36). I agree with these assessments, and I find it likely that the *vita* was composed very close to the translation itself, possibly already within the first year.

Passio Kanuti was composed by an author well-versed in the textual category of saints' *vitae*, and it shows a typical presentation of its holy protagonist's life, characteristics, death, and related miracles. It is a relatively brief account, and its focus is on the insurrection against Cnut and Cnut's death in Odense, the details of which will be treated in the next section. The *vita* was most likely written with the purpose of providing material for the liturgical readings for Cnut's *dies natalis*. This led Gertz to divide the text into nine parts to correspond with the nine readings of a secular office for Matins (since *Passio Kanuti* was written before the establishment of a monastic community). While practical from an analytical viewpoint, this division is entirely hypothetical (see also Sønnesyn 2016 for this issue).

Tabula Othoniensis

The *Tabula* was, as described above, a plaque of unspecified material placed in the shrine of St Cnut Rex, and its text is very short. It is likely to draw on eyewitness accounts of the martyrdom, but these are more likely to have been oral accounts than the hypothetical sketches suggested by Gertz. As will be argued more thoroughly in the next section, the *Tabula* was most likely written after the composition of *Passio Kanuti*. However, we do not know the relationship between these texts, and it is not certain that the text of *Passio Kanuti* was consulted for the writing of the *Tabula*, although we should expect that whoever wrote the text of *Tabula Othoniensis* had come to learn the story of Cnut Rex in part from the reading or listening to *Passio Kanuti*. We cannot say with any certainty when *Tabula Othoniensis* was written, but it is likely to have occurred after the

writing of *Passio Kanuti* and before the writing of *Gesta Swenomagni*, which suggests a timeframe of c.1096-c.1110 at its most careful. For reasons to be elaborated upon later, I believe that the text of *Tabula Othoniensis* was written before the papal canonization.

Epitaphium Kanuti

Epitaphium Kanuti is a poem comprised of nine lines of Leonine hexameter. The poem was inscribed on a plaque of unspecified material and discovered in Cnut's casket in 1582 along with *Tabula Othoniensis*. This poem was placed in the casket during the translation of his relics in 1101, as is recorded by Aelnoth of Canterbury in *Gesta Swenomagni*. Aelnoth refers to it as an *epitaphio*, hence its modern title. He also provides a transcription of the poem, so we can be certain of this identification. It has moreover been suggested by Gertz that it was Aelnoth who composed the verse (Gertz 1912: 38-39). Although we know that Aelnoth composed poetry based on the verses of his own composition which he included in *Gesta Swenomagni*, we can never prove this hypothesis. Nonetheless, due to the shared textual iconography between *Epitaphium Kanuti* and *Gesta Swenomagni*, to be elucidated in the next section, I consider these two texts to belong to the same stage in the development of the cult of St Cnut Rex, as suggested above.

Gesta Swenomagni Regis et Filiorum eius et Passio gloriosissimi Canuti Regis et Martyris

The oldest sources of this *vita* are two manuscripts from Flanders, both of which are dated to the last quarter of the twelfth century (Myking 2019: 123-24, n.33).⁴ One manuscript is Saint-Omer Bibliothèque municipale 716, Tomus II, fol.60r-71r (Gertz 1912: 46; Dolbeau 1981: 400; 447), while the other is Bruges Bibliothèque Publique MS 403, fol.74r-83r (Gertz 1912: 46). These manuscripts are part of the monumental *Legendarium Flandrense*, and in MS 403 the account by Aelnoth is placed before Walter of Théroutanne's *vita* of Cnut's son, Charles the Good, count of Flanders, who died in 1127.⁵ This also explains why the *vita* of Cnut Rex is included in MS 403, a manuscript containing the saints celebrated in the period January the 28th to April the 4th (De Witte 2009: 179), when Cnut's feast-day is July the 10th

Aelnoth's account is the longest text in the Odense literature, and the story of Cnut Rex is preceded by an overview of the reigns of Sven Estridsen and

Relatu quoq; uirtutum ipsius ac aplice exinde
confirmacionis corroboracione latius puoltan-
te. nūc quicuno uerum ex regionib; artūiacentib;
nobilium sicut & ipsi annuatim innumera
concurrunt multitudo deuotionis sue q; signa
deferentes. cuiusq; suffragia fideliter deposcentes.
Regina etiam ethela prudentissima ei acten^o
ut p̄tūlimus coniunt nobilissima iā ultra ita
he terminos rogeri apulensium ducis illustri-
simi thalami comes effecta tantis & a deo deside-
ratis de carissimo q̄ntā coniuge rumorib; audi-
tis. sup̄no bonorū auctori debita referens p̄ciola
dilecti sui p̄gnora p̄ciolis transmissis donis ador-
nat. ut cui hic coniugij p̄dictis affectib; decenter
inheret. eum iam a se lo sequentatū ac superis
associatū. & nūc recoleret. & quem p̄sentia n̄ po-
terat. munerib; transmissis decentib; honoraret.
Vnde ex collatis & conseruatis regis impio. & reue-
renti eiusdem sedis pontificis hūbaldi consilio
simul & amuniculo ossib; ara sacris insigni se-
mate facta conficit. puro nitido fuluig; metal-
lo. ceruleis troceis pulchre decorat. lapillis quo
possent scī iam p̄gnora scīa recondi. Anno autē
sexto impij magnifici regis herici congregatis
uniuersis dacie pontificib; cum multitudine
cleri & cetero p̄p̄o in numerabili p̄ciolas beati mar-
tyris reliquias ex saxeo sarcophago assūptas atq;
ēcripta ubi actenus seruabant euectas. sollep-
tib; laudib; & ingenti leticia uniuersis comitan-
tib; ab eodem q̄ntē p̄fati sum pontifice hūbaldo.
xiii. kl. mai eadem qua p̄dictū arca oculis pecc-
tores nō inspicimus impositas. ad instar nituis
candidas. & serico decenti inuolutas eptaphio
simul imposito. hoc in composito. Jam celo tu-
tus summo cum rege canutus. Martyr in auro
ta. rex atq; reconditur arca. Qui p̄uultu factis
oculis inuig; (Xp̄m uita. sic morte facit in ip-
sa. Traditus a proprio sicut d̄s ipse ministro. Et
petens potum celoz p̄tulit idum. Lancea n̄
ne latus ut xpi p̄forat eus. Spiritib; q; sacis
moriens sociatur in astris. Ossib; itaq; sacris eis
deq; ap̄ib; decenē collocatis. celestis thesauri p̄-
ciosum loculum recluditur & omib; eius patro-
nia requirētib; mense uitalis conuiuij spec-

tanda supponitur. De hincq; ibidem uirtutū
p̄ficiant insignia. & presentib; p̄spiciua & opem
exquirendo petentib; efficiunt p̄babilia. Hec
ego sacerdotum infimus aulnothus angloy
orbe editus. & dāte paratib; annis numerosis
peregrinatus. rex p̄clare & martyr pretiose tu-
a exorando gesta uidui. certaminum tuoz
conflictus posterum memorie tradenda compo-
si. & pulcrum ut dicit hominem p̄dictor ego
sedus depinxi. monumentū ere phennius ere-
gi. Quod n̄ fluctuum impetus absorbeat. n̄
flamma uorax absumat. sed ad chaos ultimum
usq; p̄maneat. & tue laudis in seclm monūta
teneat. Tu infelicitati mee apud ih̄m p̄b;
succurre. calamitatib; misere angustiarum
miserias releua. in becillitatem sustenta. fragi-
litatem alleua. crassa criminum caligine cir-
cumfusus uirtutum tuarum splendoribus
illustra. sarcina admissorū iam iāq; sub onusta
decidentē sustolle. molib; peccaminum aggra-
uatum erige. ab euangelicis latronib; saucio at
seminuuo relicto miserationis opem admittit. ci-
catricum plagas antedoto intercessionis tue
infuso obducto. uiciorū putredines expurga. ad
stabulum diuine reconciliationis inducto. ut
in tabernacula quatuorūq; intromissē etna.
te cum tuis concubib; inspicere. & ad ianuam reg-
ni uelut in meteat assistere. Et quia de modo
fusus. de mundo spurcius eloq; sum aggressus.
lingue peccati indulge. labis audacib; ignosce. &
uerbo p̄ quod omnia sunt condita. cunctos fideles
reconcilia. cuius maiestatis potentia. n̄ desistat
in seclm. Illi cum patre. & coeterno pneumate. be-
nedictio. honor. laus. & gratiarum actio. sempit-
no maneat & accrescat tempore amen.

Inici p̄p̄o in passione
gloriosissimi karoli flā-
drie comi-
tis & mris.
tō suo & patri merito scitatis. totū reue-
rentia deuotionis excolendo. johanni
sic teruāentis ecclie. frat̄ walterus dig-
nacionis eius mutalis seruus debitum omīmo
de subiectionis obsequium. Preceptū humili-
tati mee auctoritas reuerenda p̄fatuus uir.
ut quia his nris temporib; horrenda nimis a-
nefandis hominib; in partib; istis p̄petrata sunt
crimina uniuerso mundo exetabilia. & in ul-

Fig. 1: The final page of *Gesta Swenomagni* in Bruges Bibliothèque Publique MS 403.
Photo: Openbare Bibliotheek Brugge/Public Library of Bruges.

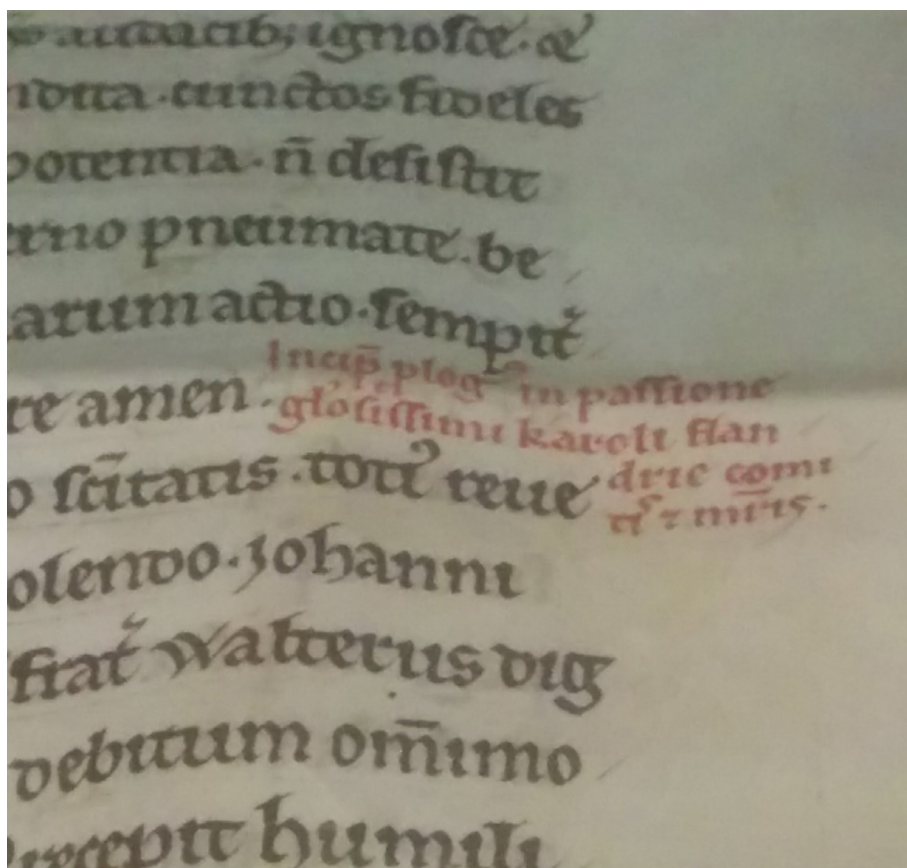


Fig. 2: Opening of Walter of Therouanne's life of Charles the Good in Bruges Bibliothèque Publique MS 403. The rubricated text reads: Incipit prologus in passione gloriosissimi karoli flandrie comitis et martyris (here begins the prologue of the passion of the most glorious Charles, count of Flanders and martyr). Photo: Steffen Hope.

Harald Hen, Cnut's father and brother, respectively. This overview serves as a historical prologue to the story of Cnut Rex. Such a prologue is a relatively common feature in saint-biography, and can also be found in *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* by Abbo of Fleury, a text from which Aelnoth appears to have borrowed in his own work (Hoffmann 1975: 119; Hope 2017: 206, n.585). *Gesta Swenomagni* is also notable for its several classical allusions (cf. Winterbottom 2016), and it is clear from the aforementioned use of *Passio Eadmundi* that its author was familiar with saint-biographical literature. About Aelnoth, we only know what he himself tells us in the *vita*, namely that he was an English clerk, formerly of Canterbury, who had lived in Denmark for twenty-four years by the time he wrote *Gesta Swenomagni*. He does not provide us with his rank but merely states that he is the lowest of the attendants of the divine offices, *diuini officii ministrorum infimus* (Gertz 1912: 77). This might be a form of the humility *topos* common to medieval authors. Judging from the length of time Aelnoth has spent in Denmark, however, it is likely that he was among the English clerics who were in Odense prior to the establishment of the monastic community. This establishment was a reformation of the community of secular clergy, which means that the secular priests were not replaced but had their

status changed from priests to monks.

Gesta Swenomagni is dedicated to King Niels, Cnut's brother, and consequently the timeframe within which the *vita* was written is Niels' reign, 1104-34. Gertz and Albrechtsen have argued for 1122 as the date of composition (Albrechtsen 1984: 15), but more recently, as mentioned above, Michael Gelting has suggested 1110-1117 as the most likely timeframe and I follow this estimate (2011: 38-39).

Historia Sancti Kanuti

The title *Historia Sancti Kanuti* signifies the liturgical office for Matins that was performed around three in the morning on the feast-day of St Cnut Rex, and in which the saint's *historia* was recounted, i.e. the saint's life and death, as well as characteristics. As for the miracles which God worked for the saint, these were predominantly addressed in the chants for Laudes, performed three hours after Matins, i.e. usually around six in the morning. The hours of Matins and Laudes, and also Vespers which was celebrated around six in the afternoon, were the three most important hours in the daily round of eight services that together comprised the divine office, *officium diuinum*, to which Aelnoth alludes in the description of himself in the prefatory letter of *Gesta Swenomagni*. In my analysis of the liturgy, I will draw on chants

from the entire surviving office cycle, not only the chants for Matins, but also from Vesper and Lauds, where appropriate.

The service of Matins was the most important service, because it was the longest and was therefore the mystical apex of the saint's feast-day. It was then that the community of clerics, and later the community of monks, gathered by the saint's shrine and performed chants and readings, as well as psalms, in the saint's honour. As mentioned above, the purpose of this service was for the monks, as a community, to beseech the saint for his intercession before God, so that God would work miracles for them through the saint. During the service of Matins, and throughout the night, laypeople would gather in St Cnut's Church to participate in the vigil, where they would pray for the saint's intercession and in some form witness the performance of the service of Matins (though they themselves were not part of the liturgy and could be physically separated from the ministrant monks by a rood screen).

Matins consisted of three parts called nocturnes, and each nocturne was divided into the performance of psalms, chants and lessons. The length and form of each nocturne depended on whether the cult centre was a monastic community or a community of secular clerics. A secular office consisted of nine readings, each with a chanted responsory taking up the main theme of the lesson, and nine antiphons which are chants performed in relation to psalms and potentially the theme of the related psalm. A monastic office, on the other hand, consisted of twelve readings and twelve antiphons. While the community at St Cnut's Church was still comprised of secular clerics, and before their reform by Benedictine monks from England, it is likely that they performed a liturgical office on the 10th of July. The chants for this early office were, however, most likely taken from the common of martyrs, as was standard practice for any newly established saint's cult. After the establishment of the Benedictine monastic community in Odense, the monks composed an office whose texts were specifically expounding the story of Cnut Rex, i.e. *historia Sancti Kanuti*, what is called a proper office, i.e. an office whose texts are dealing with the story of the saint rather than being based on the common of martyrs or any other part of the *commune sanctorum*. As will be shown in greater detail in the next section, the chants for this office are based on Aelnoth's *Gesta Swenomagni*. It is likely that this was also the case for the readings.

The dating for the office is necessarily specula-

tive, because our only sources to the chants and the readings come from fifteenth-century sources. What is probably the oldest surviving source is a manuscript fragment of an antiphoner (i.e. a book of antiphons) of uncertain provenance, which is now kept at Riksarkivet in Stockholm as MPO Fr 29700. This fragment contains some chants for the feast of Cnut Rex, and these have been treated by Roman Hankeln (2015: 175ff). However, due to the surviving chants' reliance on *Gesta Swenomagni* and due to their old-fashioned scansion, and also due to the period of cultic decline and civil unrest later in the twelfth century, I consider it most likely that the office was composed in Odense in the early 1120s.

Aside from the singular, fragmentary survival expounded by Hankeln, the chants and the readings survive in printed breviaries in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. A comprehensive overview of these breviaries can be found in Hankeln 2015. For the analysis of this article, however, I have relied only on the breviary used in Odense, *Breviarium Othoniense*, which was printed three times in the late medieval period. The first printing of the *Breviarium* was in Odense, c.1482 (København Kgl. Bibliotek LN 29 quarto), and chants and readings can be found for three feasts: *In feriis quintis* (i.e. on Thursdays, fol.286v-289r), *Translatio* (fol. 289r-v), and *Passio* (fol.289v). In the first printing, folio 288 is left completely blank. The second printing took place in Lübeck in 1497 (København Kgl. Bibliotek LN 30), which also contains *In feriis quintis* (fol.262r-264r), *Translatio* (fol.264v-265r), and *Passio* (fol.265r-267). The first two printings are in agreement regarding the office for Cnut's *dies natalis*, i.e. the *Passio* feast, and accordingly I will refer to these two printings of the breviary collectively as *Breviarium Othoniense*. The third and last printing of the breviary took place in 1510, possibly in Basel (København Kgl. Bibliotek LN 31). It also contains *In feriis quintis* (fol.196r), *Translatio* (f.198v), and *Passio* (f.199v). The opening of the office, fol.196, is missing, and I have accordingly not relied on this third printing for my analysis of the chants.

Although the sources for the liturgical material are rather late, there are good reasons for accepting that the chants of *Breviarium Othoniense* are taken from the first proper office for St Cnut Rex that was composed in the early twelfth century. In part, this is because liturgical chant is a very stable form of tonally performed text, and it is unlikely that the first office would be replaced unless there was a particular impetus for doing so. Considering that the cult

of Cnut Rex on the one hand remained popular in Odense, but on the other hand seems to have become relatively neglected throughout the rest of Denmark, there is little reason to think that there would be such an impetus, as the cult seems to have developed steadily on its own without facing encroachment onto its own cult centre. In short, the chants of the breviaries are most likely the chants that were composed shortly after Aelnoth's completion of *Gesta Swenomagnii*, and I follow Roman Hankeln in his suggestion that the office "was in existence at least shortly after 1120" (2015: 165). This argument is further strengthened by the two styles of liturgical composition found in these chants, namely in traditional hexameter form and in syllable counting, rhymed verse, the latter form emerging in the twelfth century (Hankeln 2015: 161).

In the *Breviarium*, the chants are organized in the secular order with only nine lessons and nine antiphons, but by drawing on the other printed breviaries from the period, Roman Hankeln has ascertained that these chants were originally part of a monastic office. The reason why *Breviarium Othoniense* contains a secular office is because the monastic community

at St Cnut's Church was transformed into a secular cathedral chapter upon the dissolution of the Odense monastery in 1474 by King Christian I (Bergsagel 1980: 154; Hankeln 2015: 166).

A final point to be made here before moving on to the next section of the article, is that while we can be reasonably certain that the chants of *Breviarium Othoniense* come from the original, early-twelfth-century office cycle, we cannot be equally certain with regards to the readings. While chants are more durable in part because the combination of music and text requires time, effort and talent to replace – and as mentioned above, an impetus to do so – the readings are easier to replace or to change. Because the chants are based on *Gesta Swenomagnii*, we can be quite sure that the readings were also drawn from this saint-biography. However, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, readings for Matins could be altered in various degrees that had significance for how they present the saint in question (Hope 2017: 84ff). Accordingly, I have not included the readings from *Breviarium Othoniense* in my analysis, simply because I cannot be certain that these readings have retained the form that they had in the twelfth century.



Fig. 3: St Cnut Rex. Woodcut from Syddansk Universitetsbibliotek RARA M 15, the collection of saints' lives *Das leuend der hylghen*, Lübeck, 1492.⁷ Photo: Steffen Hope.

The changing images of St Cnut Rex

The five sources in question all present the same basic narrative: Cnut's brother Harald was elected king in 1076 but Cnut did not challenge his brother's right. Upon Harald's death in 1080, Cnut was elected as king, and proceeded to do many good works for the poor, to fortify the position of the church in Denmark, and to protect the priests and pilgrims. He was a very pious and just king. Eventually, in 1085–86, he prepared a large-scale attack on England – the motivation for which differs according to the source in question – but it was delayed and came to nothing. Because the attack was not carried out, discontentment about the king grew until it erupted into full-blown insurrection. The king was chased from royal manor to royal manor until he came to Odense, where he left the manor to seek refuge in St Alban's Church, which came to be the place of his martyrdom. After the murder, the body was interred in the church, but nine years later a synod of all the Danish bishops gathered in Odense to deliberate on whether Cnut was indeed a holy man. Miracles occurred, the bones were elevated and translated to the crypt of the unfinished stone church that came to be consecrated in his name, and so the cult began.

This is the foundation for all the five sources. Naturally, because the sources have different frameworks for telling this story, not all the aspects are included in every source. Moreover, because the understanding of the figure of Cnut Rex changed within the timeframe of the present article, the sources interpret or present the narrative and its details in different ways. Moreover, because the image of Cnut changed throughout the period in question, the sources have different emphasis regarding what features and what qualities of Cnut Rex they are more concerned with. Furthermore, since describing a saint practically always involves comparing him or her with other saints or with figures from biblical, classical or Christian history, an important question will also be on which figures the different sources rely in their respective formulation of the figure of St Cnut Rex. It should also be stated that because *Gesta Swenomagni* is a more elaborate account and covers a wider historical scope, it also contains several new details that embellish the foundational narrative, the most important of which will be treated in the relevant subsection below. In the following analysis, therefore, I aim to present the development of these changes.

Stage 1 – the image of St Cnut Rex in *Passio Kanuti*

As the first saint-biography of Cnut Rex, *Passio Kanuti* presents the basic narratives on which all later sources are founded. The author begins with a reflection on the veneration of martyrs and their relics, and he presents the purpose of the book. It is noted that the celebration of the feasts of the saints is common to all churches throughout the world, *per totius orbis ecclesias*, and that this is done in order to praise the martyr's victory and imitate their lives and histories (Gertz 1912: 62–63). In this way, the author states that the community at St Cnut's in Odense – by that time probably still a secular community – is a member of the worldwide community of Christendom.

After this introduction, the narrative continues to Cnut's childhood and a description of his qualities: He was of a royal bloodline, he was educated in Christian religion, and he showed a precocious talent for studies (which the author inscribed partly through innate brilliance, partly through the encouragement of his father King Svend). He also displayed great prudence in his youth. This presentation of Cnut Rex is very typical of saint-biographies, and it is noteworthy that his precociousness in studies and his prudence contribute to present him as the *puer senex*, i.e. the young man with the mindset and wisdom of an old and experienced man. This was often seen as a sign of sanctity.

The author furthermore states that it was because of the devil's interference that Cnut did not achieve the throne of the kingdom. Cnut then leaves Denmark for Sweden, and the author of *Passio Kanuti* describes this as an exile similar to when Joseph and Jacob went into exile in Egypt. In this way, Cnut Rex is described as a patriarchal figure. Moreover, the *topos* of exile – which also invokes Christ's exile in Egypt which in turn was the antitype of the exiles of Joseph and Jacob – is a common detail in saint-biographies and serves as a form of *imitatio Christi*.⁶ When Cnut does become king, however, the anonymous author states that he was elected as king, and Cnut put his trust in the Lord in the manner of King David (cf. Psalm 10, *In Domino confido*) and accepted the throne. Cnut's kingship is marked by his good deeds which are all typical of the *rex iustus*, the ideal king based on the good kings of the Old Testament (including David). In other words, Cnut Rex supports the poor, he cares for and protects the clergy, and he commissions the buildings of churches, with particular references to the churches of Roskilde,

Dalby and Lund (Gertz 1912: 64-65). Cnut also tries to inspire his countrymen to zeal for the Christian religion, but this proves to be very difficult. According to the author, the difficulty was founded on the stubbornness and the pride of the Danes, and Cnut Rex therefore decided to invade England in order to expose the Danes to the horrors of war and thus break their pride and turn them to God. The invasion was cancelled, and Cnut's brother Olaf began stirring up resentment. Out of prudence Cnut sought to stop his brother, but out of fraternal love he sent Olaf into exile in Flanders instead of killing him.

We are then told the passion story. It begins with the insurrection and concludes with Cnut's escape from the royal manor and subsequent death in the church. The anonymous author describes this church as an *ecclesia* jointly dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Alban (cf. Christensen *et.al.* in this volume). The author furthermore emphasizes that Cnut had himself, out of a particular devotion to him, brought St Alban's relics to Odense not long before. This is a reference to a raid on England in 1069-70 led by Cnut's uncle Asbjørn, during which Cnut absconded with the relics in question (Gertz 1912: 69; see Misuno in this volume).

Before his death, Cnut takes confession and receives the Eucharist. The death itself is described as an imitation of the death of Christ: He is pierced in the side with a lance and he dies before the altar of St Alban with his arms outstretched like a cross, like the crucified Christ. In his description of Cnut's passion story, the anonymous author extols Cnut's piety, his love of justice and religion, his patience, his seeking for martyrdom, his rejection of earthly glories, and his calm (which is contrasted with the fury of the mob). Cnut is furthermore described as the leader and glory of the Danes, [*d]ux et gloria Danorum* (Gertz 1912: 69). As the final detail of the passion narrative, the date and year of the martyrdom are provided.

The author then launches into a diatribe against the scandalous nature of regicide and God's punishment which resulted in storms, deadly plague, famine, and a shortage of basic necessities. Eventually, however, there occurred several visions, and it was decided to unearth the bones of Cnut Rex because God's punishment indicated he was a saint. A synod of Danish bishops and clerics was convened, and after a three-day fast with singing and almsgiving, the dead were reburied. The author then invokes three miracles as proof of God's favour to Cnut and the dead king's holiness: First, during the translation of

his relics, Cnut's bones were put to the test by fire but were unharmed; secondly, at the time of Cnut's death in 1086 his brother Olaf was set free from his imprisonment in Flanders, a kind of divinely ordained synchronicity that seems to invoke the miracle of the liberation of prisoners on behalf of the saint; and thirdly, during the preparation for the *translatio* of Cnut's relics the clouds threatened to spoil the occasion by raining, but eventually the sun emerged and this was understood as a miraculous, and symbolic, dispelling of the dark.

This is the story as it is conveyed in *Passio Kanuti*, and a few details warrant further comment. Cnut Rex is described as a very typical saint king, namely a *rex iustus* of great faith who gave up earthly riches in favour of the heavenly reward of the martyr. His kingship is of great importance to the author, as can be seen both in the elaborate description of his government and his qualities as a king, but also in the comparison with David and also the patriarchs Joseph and Jacob, as well as the author's emphasis on Cnut's dual role as both king and martyr. It is also significant to note that the author establishes from the beginning that through its celebration of St Cnut, the community of clerics in Odense has proved its membership within the Christian church. Due to the details concerning the elevation of Cnut's relics in 1095, it is likely that the author was an eyewitness, and what we have here is the first formulation of Cnut as a saint, and also the first formulation of the events of his reign, his martyrdom, and his earliest cult.

Stage 2 - the image of St Cnut Rex in *Tabula Othoniensis*

While the first stage of the cult of St Cnut can be delimited to the first years following his *translatio*, it is more difficult to provide a reasonable timeframe for the writing of *Tabula Othoniense*, at least based on its own content. However, as mentioned above, we can propose that the text of *Tabula Othoniensis* was composed in time for the second *translatio* of Cnut's relics in 1100/01, as we learn from Aelnoth's testimony that *Epitaphium Kanuti* was placed in Cnut's shrine and it is likely that this is also the context for placing *Tabula Othoniensis* in that shrine. Be that as it may, I argue that the *Tabula* presents us with a second stage in the evolution of the image of Cnut Rex. The formulation of Cnut's image in *Tabula* is evidently based on *Passio Kanuti*, but there are some important differences which lead me to suggest that

1) the author(s) of the text was not the same as the author of *Passio*, and 2) that the image and understanding of Cnut as a saint had, by the writing of the text of *Tabula Othoniensis*, become more elaborate within the community of clerics at St Cnut's Church in Odense.

First of all, however, it is necessary to emphasize that *Tabula* and *Passio* have very different formal constrictions in their presentation of the narrative. *Passio Kanuti* is a saint-biography that follows the traditional outline of this textual category. *Tabula Othoniensis*, on the other hand, is a brief commemorative plaque consisting of just a few lines. Naturally, there are significant differences in what the two texts convey, so the important part is to note how the texts treat those features that are shared between them.

The text of the *Tabula* can be divided into two parts: The first summarises the martyrdom and the figure of St Cnut Rex, while the second part lists the names of his brother Benedict and the seventeen soldiers who died with him. The second part is not of any particular concern in the present discussion, although it is noteworthy that while they are treated as separate from Cnut Rex, they are described as his *com-militones*, fellow-soldiers, a title that suggests that these eighteen men might have been seen as saints as well, albeit of less importance (Gertz 1912: 60-62; see Bjerregaard in this volume). This is one detail that suggests to me that Nils Holger Petersen is right in his hypothesis that *Tabula* is younger than *Passio*. I find it more plausible to think that the names of these soldiers and their possible sanctity were details that were set down after the writing of *Passio Kanuti*, rather than the author of *Passio Kanuti* deliberately omitting these details which had already been committed to writing. To put it differently, I believe that their names, and their status as saints, were discussed and became part of the recollection of these events once the cult was established after the *translatio* of 1095 and when *Passio Kanuti* had already laid the foundation for the story to be disseminated in both writing and speaking.

Since *Tabula Othoniensis* only provides a summary of the martyrdom, the text is restricted to only the basic details: The date of the martyrdom is provided, but with the addition that this took place in the city of Odense, *in ciuitate Othensya*. We are furthermore told that Cnut died for the faith of the Christian religion and the love of just works, and that he died in the Church of St Alban, whose relics he himself had brought from England. Cnut received the confession and the eucharist, and died in front of the –

unspecified – altar with his arms outstretched like a cross and with a lance having pierced his side.

The basic narrative remains the same, but a few details are different from the text of *Passio Kanuti*. We should note that the text only mentions that the church was dedicated to Alban, not that it was also dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It might also be significant to note that the church itself is described as a *basilica*, whereas *Passio Kanuti* describes the church as an *ecclesia*. Moreover, in the description of Cnut's transportation of Alban's relics, *Tabula* says *transuecti*, transporting, whereas *Passio* says *aduecti*, bringing. These are small details, but they do suggest that whoever wrote this text was not the author of *Passio Kanuti*.

The big difference between *Tabula* and *Passio*, however, and the detail which led Nils Holger Petersen to challenge the previously accepted chronology of the Odense literature, is the description of Cnut himself. In the opening of the text, *Tabula Othoniensis* describes Cnut as *gloriosus rex et protomartyr Danorum*, the glorious king and protomartyr of the Danes. The title of protomartyr is one of great importance in Christian literature, as it is used to describe St Stephen, whose death in Acts 7 was the first martyrdom in Christian history. With the expansion of Christendom, this term came to be used about the first martyrs of a newly Christianized geography, and the title conferred great venerability upon the saint in question, both as an antitype to St Stephen and as, usually, the first saint of the region.

What is important here is that such an important title, with all the weight it carries, cannot be found in *Passio Kanuti*. Nils Holger Petersen argues that it is more likely that such a title would be added to the image of Cnut at a later point, rather than being removed (which would be the case of *Tabula* was written before *Passio*). I agree with this assessment. What this means, moreover, is that in the period between the writing of *Passio Kanuti* and *Tabula Othoniensis* there had emerged an idea of St Cnut Rex as the first martyr in Denmark among the clerics of St Cnut's Church, and this idea was put into writing. This development is noteworthy also because it contradicts a statement that we find in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hamaburgensis Ecclesie Pontificis* (c.1070). In Book 2, Chapter 41 of his historiographical work, Adam states that Denmark has more martyrs than can be fit in one book. While we should probably understand this as Adam boosting the density of holy people within the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen, the foundation for this statement is nonetheless to

be taken seriously. The presence of older martyrs in Denmark might also explain why the author of *Passio Kanuti* does not describe Cnut as protomartyr, because he might have known this to be false. With the development of the cult, however, and with the community's active attempt to strengthen the position of its own institution, there emerged the idea that Cnut was indeed the first martyr. This change from *Passio* to *Tabula* is why *Tabula*, despite its brevity, comprises a second stage in the development of the cult of St Cnut Rex.

Stage 3 – *Epitaphium Kanuti* and *Gesta Swenomagni*

The *Epitaphium* and Aelnoth of Canterbury's *Gesta Swenomagni* comprise the third and the same stage in the development of the formulation of St Cnut Rex. The *Epitaphium* was, according to Aelnoth, composed after the second translation of Cnut's bones in 1101, following the alleged papal canonization. The poem was quoted in full in *Gesta Swenomagni*, which was written about a decade or a decade and a half later. Despite the gap in time between them, the *Epitaphium* and the *Gesta* belong to the same stage because they both present the same image of St Cnut Rex. Naturally, *Gesta* being the lengthier text by far, the image of Cnut as recorded by Aelnoth is much more expansive and detailed than that of *Epitaphium*. When I still treat them as belonging to the same stage, it is because Aelnoth continues every aspect of the *Epitaphium* that appears there for the first time in the development of Cnut's textual image. Aelnoth does not break with the presentation of Cnut as found in the *Epitaphium* in any way, but instead incorporates it into the narrative and quotes it in its entirety. It should be emphasized that even though *Tabula Othoniensis* and *Epitaphium* are closer in time and both contain the feature of protomartyrdom, they are nonetheless two different stages because *Epitaphium* contains even further additions than *Tabula*, i.e. the Judas figure and the cup.

It is also important to note here that both the *Epitaphium* and the *Gesta* were written after the reformation of St Cnut's Church into a monastic community by Erik Ejegod. These texts are therefore representative of a monastic milieu that is likely to have been influenced in its shaping of Cnut's image by the contingent of English Benedictine monks brought over from Evesham by King Erik. This does not necessarily mean that either of these two texts

was composed by members of the new contingent of monks. It is indeed likely that Aelnoth was already in Odense before the community was reformed. In either case, the men responsible for these texts were most likely English, well-versed in saint-biographical literature, and well educated.

The bulk of this section will be dedicated to the image of Cnut as it was presented in *Gesta Swenomagni*, but first it is necessary to address which aspects of *Epitaphium Kanuti* which were novel in the development of Cnut's image. For the most part, the presentation of Cnut in *Epitaphium* follows the established textual iconography, and this is only to be expected. The poet states that he was a king and martyr, that he died for the cause of justice, and that he was pierced in the side by a lance, died before the altar, and that his sacred spirit was taken up among the stars. However, in his description of Cnut's passion, the poet also adds that he was betrayed by one of his own, and the poet overtly likens Cnut to Christ on account of this. Furthermore, in his hour of dying, Cnut asks for a drink but is prevented from drinking because the cup is struck out of his hand. This, in turn, recalls Christ asking for a drink and then, upon being served vinegar on a sponge, refusing to receive it. Because of these two new additions, the *Epitaphium* is an important text: It intensifies the *imitatio Christi* of Cnut's passion by adding these two new features. These two new features are also found in *Gesta Swenomagni*, and Aelnoth continued the poet's elaboration of the Christological dimension of Cnut's death.

Due to the sheer length of *Gesta Swenomagni*, the present article does not allow for a detailed examination of its narrative, and I will therefore have to focus on the key differences between *Gesta* and *Passio Kanuti*, as well as the *Gesta*'s presentation of Cnut. First, however, it is important to emphasize that at its foundation, *Gesta Swenomagni* follows the same narrative structure as had by then been outlined in *Passio Kanuti*. There are, however, several important additions. First of all, Aelnoth provides a description of Denmark's geographical location and a brief outline of its history with an emphasis on the reigns of Svend Estridsen (1047-76) and Harald Hen (1076-80). This is done to establish a history for the reigning dynasty, and we can see this both in Aelnoth's dedication of the book to King Niels, and in the emphasis on the qualities of Svend and Harald, Niels's predecessors and father and brother respectively.

Aelnoth follows the established iconography, and

the young Cnut is described as exhibiting innate prudence, his good works are a monument to himself, he shines like a carbuncle among other gems, he combines prudence with youth (i.e. the *puer senex* topos as seen in *Passio Kanuti*), he is intelligent, he has a face commanding authority, he is skilled in the use of arms, and he is eloquent (Gertz 1912: 92). Moreover, Cnut is elected by God to become his companion in the celestial court, meaning that Cnut's fate was predestined, as is typical of the fate of all saints, drawing on Jeremiah 1:5 where God says to the prophet that God knew him before he was even born (Gertz 1912: 92). Aelnoth also provides a tripartite explanation of Cnut's Latin name, Canutus. This explanation is taken from the story about why Cnut was canonized by the pope, i.e. enrolled in the canon of liturgically celebrated saints, but Aelnoth also includes it in the presentation of Cnut's life, possibly as a foreshadowing of his later canonization. We are told that the name Canutus signifies three things: 1) his *sensus caniciei*, i.e. that Cnut had the wisdom of a grey-haired man; 2) his *candor*, his purity; 3) and that he was *in canone sanctorum connumerandus decernebat*, enrolled in the canon of the saints (Gertz 1912: 92). These are all qualities listed by Aelnoth before the narrative reaches the point where Cnut becomes king, and they are repeated in chapter 33, when describing Cnut's canonization (Gertz 1912: 131).

It should be noted that the etymological details of Cnut's latinized name is an important part of Aelnoth's representation of Cnut's sanctity. First of all, as Aelnoth himself points out in chapter 33, such a changing of the name from Cnut to Canutus is similar to, and thus typologically connected with, God's renaming of the patriarch Abram to Abraham (Genesis 17:4ff). This suggests that Cnut's sanctity rests in part on his qualities as a patriarch of the Danes and chosen by God, just as Abraham became a patriarch of the Israelites. Additionally, as Gertz has noted in his edition, the term *sensus caniciei* might be understood as an echo of Ecclesiasticus 25:6, where judiciousness of grey heads is praised. This would give added typological strength to Cnut's sanctity. This imagery of the biblical patriarch can also be found in *Passio Kanuti* in the form of the anonymous author's allusion to Jacob and Joseph when talking about Cnut's exile.

Secondly, the etymological details are noted because they are thought to prove the existence of these qualities in Cnut. This stems from a belief that names held a key to the person's qualities, and which we see perhaps most clearly expressed in a hagio-

graphical context in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* from the 1260s. Although Jacobus and Aelnoth wrote more than a century apart, they both considered etymology to be a crucial aspect of mapping someone's sanctity.

The addition of a dynastic history expands the narrative of *Passio Kanuti*, and because the passion story now is placed within a wider dynastic history, Aelnoth needed to interpret one historical episode differently from how it had been interpreted by the author of *Passio Kanuti*. This episode is the election of Harald Hen over Cnut at the assembly of 1076. The author of *Passio Kanuti*, as we saw, ascribed this to the Devil's meddling, and as a consequence Cnut went into exile in Sweden. For Aelnoth, however, this was not an acceptable interpretation, because then the entire reign of Harald – whom Aelnoth lauds as a mild man and an important lawmaker – would be the result of the Devil's interference. Instead, Aelnoth states that Cnut did not challenge the election, despite his disappointment, because he was so intelligent that he knew this would result in a civil war of Theban proportions (Gertz 1912: 90).

After Cnut's accession to the kingship upon the death of Harald, Aelnoth describes him as a *rex iustus* who fed the poor and the hungry, who dressed the naked, who took care of orphans and widows, who supported strangers and pilgrims with money, who respected the clergy, who bestowed gifts to churches, and who attended church daily. These are details also found in *Passio Kanuti*, but Aelnoth is a bit more elaborate. He furthermore states that Cnut was chaste, contrary to many kings such as King Solomon, that like Job he consulted wise men to understand the state of the kingdom, and that he secretly (cf. Matthew 6:3) received corporal punishment by two chaplains in order to punish the flesh and thus undertake a metaphorical crucifixion (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16; Galatians 5:24). He also only drank water and ate salted bread, while pretending to eat from the lavish spread of the royal table and instead giving the food to the poor. Like the author of *Passio Kanuti*, Aelnoth states that Cnut sought to reform the Danes and turn them to Christ, but that the innate pride of the Danes made this difficult, and Aelnoth likens the Danes to the Jews who refused to accept Christ. In so doing, Aelnoth adds another detail to the Christological feature of Cnut's iconography (Gertz 1912: 94-96).

Gesta Swenomagni also differs from *Passio Kanuti* in the explanation of why he sought to invade England. In *Passio Kanuti* this was done to put the

fear of God into the Danes through the horrors of war. Aelnoth, however, explains that it was on the invitation of English nobles to drive the Normans out of England that Cnut began planning the attack. Cnut, described as most pious hero and excellent prince, agrees to do so, and this makes his kingship a counterpoint to the tyranny of the Normans. However, as the attack does not happen, Aelnoth surmises that God made it so because “he wanted to make a patron out of the prince and a protomartyr out of the king”, *de principe patronum, de rege prothomartyrem efficere disponebat* (Gertz 1912: 98).

In his description of the insurrection, Aelnoth adds several details to the narrative as it is presented in *Passio Kanuti*, but retains the important details of Cnut’s brother Olaf being a driving force behind the resentment and that the Devil stirred it up further upon Olaf’s forced exile in Flanders. Aelnoth also explains that it was Cnut’s good deeds that caused resentment in the Danes, whom Aelnoth time and again describes as Jews, Pharisees, and Hebrews. We are told that Cnut sought to increase the piety of the Danes by making royal decrees concerning feasts and fasts, and Cnut also acknowledged the liberty of slaves and the manumitted, he gave foreigners the same rights as the native Danes, and he increased the privileges of the clergy to the detriment of the Danish aristocrats. The breaking point, however, was the abuses performed by the king’s officials, and so the insurrection began. Aelnoth describes Cnut’s flight throughout Denmark and calls him religious prince, glorious king and famous hero, while emphasising Cnut’s Christological features by extensive references to Christ’s passion story and by extensive comparisons between the Danes and the Jews (Gertz 1912: 101-10).

In Cnut’s passion story, Aelnoth makes significant elaborations on the narrative of *Passio Kanuti*. Drawing on *Epitaphium*, Aelnoth presents Cnut’s betrayer, a certain Pipero, who is allowed to dine with Cnut in a Last Supper scene in Cnut’s royal manor in Odense. Pipero is described as more evil than Annas, more degenerate than Caiaphas and crueller than Pilate (Gertz 1912: 115). Aelnoth also embellishes the Christological aspects of the siege of the royal manor by describing how the moving of the mob whirled up dust to eclipse the sun and made the earth quake, in imitation of the darkness (Matthew 27:45) and the earthquake (Matthew 27:51) at Christ’s passion (Gertz 1912: 115-16).

As for the passion story itself, Aelnoth further elaborates on its details. Cnut is described as praying

with the humility of David and not with the deceit of Herod, thus demonstrating the *rex iustus* against a tyrant, and the stones and arrows hurled at Cnut are interpreted typologically: The stones connect Cnut with St Stephen, while the arrows connect him with St Sebastian (Gertz 1912: 119). This latter allusion to Sebastian was part of what made Erich Hoffmann suggest that Aelnoth drew on the *vita* of Edmund of East Anglia, *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, when describing Cnut’s death (1975: 119; 209ff). In addition to Stephen and Sebastian, Aelnoth further expands the collegium of saints to whom Cnut is, explicitly and implicitly, compared, by stating that it was not only St Alban’s relics that were kept in the church, but also the relics of St Oswald of Northumbria, a royal saint like Cnut himself (see Missuno in this volume). These relics, moreover, are said to have been knocked over, and Aelnoth compares it with the desecration of the temple described in Psalm 79 (Gertz 1912: 118-19). Aelnoth also gives more space to the men who were together with Cnut in the church, calling them invincible novices and outstanding heroes (Gertz 1912: 119). We are also told about how Cnut asked for a drink, but was prevented from drinking by a spear that knocked it out of his hands, as stated in *Epitaphium*. As for Cnut’s death, Aelnoth follows established tradition and describes how Cnut was pierced by a lance and lay with his arms stretched out in the shape of a cross. Aelnoth furthermore says that the blood of Cnut and his fellow martyrs did not desecrate the church space, but rather consecrated it a second time, meaning that they were saints and thus their blood was holy. After Cnut’s death, Aelnoth launches into a diatribe in which he likens the Danes once more to the Israelites, compares Cnut as a positive counterexample to tyrants such as Agamemnon, Hannibal, Herod and Nero, and lists the calamities that befell Denmark and explains, with a reference to Lamentations 2:19, that these were God’s punishment for the death of Cnut. These calamities continued, Aelnoth claims, until God declared through signs that Cnut was holy, and the enemy of the divine power, Olaf Hunger, had died (Gertz 1912: 121-23).

Aelnoth’s embellishment of Cnut’s *imitatio Christi* continues also in his description of the aftermath of the martyrdom. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in two important additions: 1) Aelnoth describes how Ethel, Cnut’s widow, came to visit her dead husband, buried in the church floor, before leaving Denmark. She found the church bathed in light, and she understood from this that Cnut was a saint. This plays on the Gospels (cf. Matthew 28), in which we

are told that the first witnesses to Christ's resurrection were women, and that an angel of shimmering light guarded the empty tomb (Gertz 1912: 127ff). After this new, first miracle wrought by God, Aelnoth goes on to describe the miracles and the translation of his bones in accordance with *Passio Kanuti*, but he also provides a detailed catalogue of miracles performed by God at Cnut's shrine, including the healing of blind, of lame, of deaf and of leprous people. This echoes the catalogue of healing miracles performed by Christ in the Gospels (Matthew 11:5, drawing on Isaiah 35: 2-6), and thus contributes to the elaboration of Christological imagery (Gertz 1912: 130). We are then told that God performed these miracles to augment Cnut's fame, and we are told how his former persecutors come to beg him forgiveness. As part of this increase in fame, King Erik Ejegod sends a delegation to Rome for canonization – which was highly unusual at this point in history – and Cnut is given a latinized name, symbolically explained by Aelnoth a second time. Aelnoth furthermore likens this to Abraham, who also was given a new name, and Cnut is thus associated with the biblical patriarchs. Cnut's connection to the biblical patriarchs is thus established in a way different from in *Passio Kanuti* (where it is through the exile topos), but the end result is the same. Aelnoth then describes the second translation of Cnut, and praises God for having provided a saintly patron to the distant north, thus making Cnut not only a protomartyr of Denmark and a patron of Denmark, but also of the entire north.

What we see from this overview of *Gesta Swenomagni* is how the narrative of Cnut's story has changed from the writing of *Passio Kanuti* c.1095, and how the image of St Cnut was constructed at the monastic community of St Cnut's Church in the early twelfth century. The most important changes are as follows: 1) the dynastic historical expansion of Cnut's *vita* which results in the omission of the exile topos and a new interpretation of the events surrounding Harald Hen's accession to the throne in 1076; 2) a more elaborate description of the ways in which Cnut's life and passion imitated Christ, including the chastisement of his body, the Danes being described as Jews, the earthquake and darkness at the siege of the royal manor, the Last Supper scene, the elaboration of the Judas figure introduced in *Epitaphium Kanuti*, the description of the cup introduced in *Epitaphium Kanuti*, the light of the first miracle, a woman as the first witness, and the catalogue of cures; 3) the elaboration of Cnut's kingship and its comparison with examples that are both favourable (David)

and unfavourable (Agamemnon, Hannibal, Herod and Nero); 4) the expansion of the catalogue of saints with whom Cnut is associated (Stephen, Sebastian, and Oswald); 5) and the locating of Cnut within a wider geographical and religious context which includes Cnut being described as the protomartyr and patron of Denmark, and also a patron of the northern parts of the world, the Danes coming from all corners of the kingdom to seek forgiveness for their sins at Odense, and Cnut being enrolled in the papal catalogue of saints, making the cult truly widely famous.

Stage 4 – *Historia Sancti Kanuti*

As mentioned above, the surviving office for St Cnut Rex appears to be based on *Gesta Swenomagni*, and there are two main reasons that lead me to this conclusion. First of all, the chants contain elements that are not found in *Passio Kanuti*, but which appear first in the third stage of the development of Cnut's image. These elements are as follows: 1) Cnut is referred to as *athletam dei*, God's athlete, an epithet only found in *Gesta Swenomagni*; 2) Cnut is compared to St Stephen; 3) two of the chants refer to the Judas figure. The second reason why I believe that all the chants are based on *Gesta Swenomagni* is as follows: Even though there are two stylistic forms found in the chants, the old-fashioned hexameter and the modern syllable-counting rhymed verse, chants in both these styles contain elements from *Gesta Swenomagni*. Accordingly, they must all have been based on Aelnoth's work (cf. Hope 2017: 211).

In the development of the image of St Cnut Rex, the liturgical office is the final stage in the cult centre's fashioning of that image. The liturgical office also represents a very different type of text than we have seen in the previous three stages, albeit with certain shared features. Like the earlier texts, the liturgical office also served a commemorative function, and it was also a form of history-writing through which the story and image of Cnut were handed down to future generations. However, the liturgical office had a very specific performative context in that its texts were chanted and read on a specific day of the year within the specific architectural setting of St Cnut's Church. Moreover, that performance was multi-sensorial in that the performance relied on reading, chanted music, the burning of incense, and the dressing of the monks in ritual garments.

Furthermore, the formal constraints of the office differ from those of saints' lives and texts like *Tabula* and *Epitaphium*. Whereas a saint's life is one textual

unit divided into episodes and sometimes numbered chapters, the liturgical office is comprised of several smaller textual units in both prose and verse. Because the chants of the office are subject to formal constraints regarding length, this affects how much information they can contain, and how much of the saint's *historia* they can convey. Consequently, when the *vita* is adapted into a *historia*, there occurs a distillation of material by which the liturgists select only those aspects of the *vita* they deem the most important for inclusion in the chants. This means, in turn, that the fourth stage differs from the preceding three stages in one crucial aspect: While each of the first three stages added something new to the textual image of St Cnut, the fourth stage is instead concerned with selecting that which is of greatest value and then leaving out those details which are less important. Of course, to get the complete picture of this process we need to rely on the lessons, but since we cannot ascertain that the surviving lessons were made at the same time as the chants, as explained above, we have to forego the complete picture and settle for the chants only.

The fourth stage of the image entailed that several of the details of such a voluminous work as *Gesta Swenomagni* had to be left out. Consequently, we cannot rely only on what the chants contain in terms of material, but also on what they do not contain, and I will give a brief overview here (though with the caveat that some of these elements might have been retained in the lessons). The surviving material for the office cycle does not contain any references to the dynastic history which opens *Gesta Swenomagni*. This is only to be expected given that this is rather superfluous to the *historia* since the *historia* is centred on Cnut. Moreover, we do not find any of the several classical references with which Aelnoth embellishes the intertextuality of his account, and neither do we find the reflections on temporal kingship. We also find that some smaller details regarding Cnut's characteristics are omitted, such as him being compared to a carbuncle, a stone of important theological connotations, his chastity, and the chastisement of his body.

What does remain in the liturgical image of St Cnut, however, are the basic outlines of his legend, and the main points of his claim to sanctity. Roman Hankeln identifies three such main points (2015: 169ff), and these are Cnut's kingship, Cnut's martyrdom, and Cnut's *imitatio Christi*. In the following, I will address how these three main points feature in the office cycle.

The kingship of St Cnut is that of the biblical *rex iustus*, as noted above. This is a kingship which entails wisdom, prudence, humility, charity to the sick, munificence to the church, and justice. In the surviving chant material, aspects of Cnut's kingship are mentioned fourteen times. Cnut is referred to by several epithets that outline the quality of his kingship, and these epithets are holy, outstanding or famous (*insignissime*), noble (*regum primate*), pious and devout (*princeps pius*; *rex deuotus*), powerful (*potens*), wise (*sapientem*), and most invincible (*inuiticissimus*). Together, these fourteen references demonstrate the importance of Cnut's kingship to the liturgists, and it is worth noting that Cnut's kingship is the point most frequently referred to in the office cycle. Moreover, the epithets invoke aspects of kingship typically adhered to by the *rex iustus*. It is not only that Cnut is holy, but he is also wise, pious and, in addition, powerful. The presentation of Cnut's kingship is moreover bolstered by references to other qualities typical of the *rex iustus*, but where his kingship is not directly invoked. We see that learning and precociousness (three chants), justice (one proper chant), prudence (two chants), charity (two chants), and humility (one chant) are also included in the office cycle.

The martyrdom of St Cnut is invoked in eleven chants. These chants include direct references to his martyrdom (eight chants), and also references to his martyrdom by way of comparison with Stephen Protomartyr (three chants). The references to Stephen entail an invocation of Cnut as the protomartyr of Denmark, since the references to Stephen suggests a typological connection between the two saints. Aside from the chants referring to Stephen, there is only one chant in which Cnut's role as the *protomartyr Danorum* is invoked, and this is a chant of the second Vesper in which Cnut is addressed as *rex et martir dacie*, king and martyr of Denmark. In addition, Cnut's martyrdom is embellished by epithets such as especial (*precipue*), famous (*inclite*), glorious (*gloriosus*), and martyr of God. In addition, two of the eleven chants point to the martyrdom without using the word, one by describing his death and one by reference to the garland of victors typically associated with martyrs. We can also see from these chants that Cnut's martyrdom is often seen in connection with his role as a king.

The imitatio Christi of St Cnut is invoked in five chants, all of which are found in the material for Matins. In two of these, Cnut's likeness to Christ is invoked by way of contrast, where he is surrounded

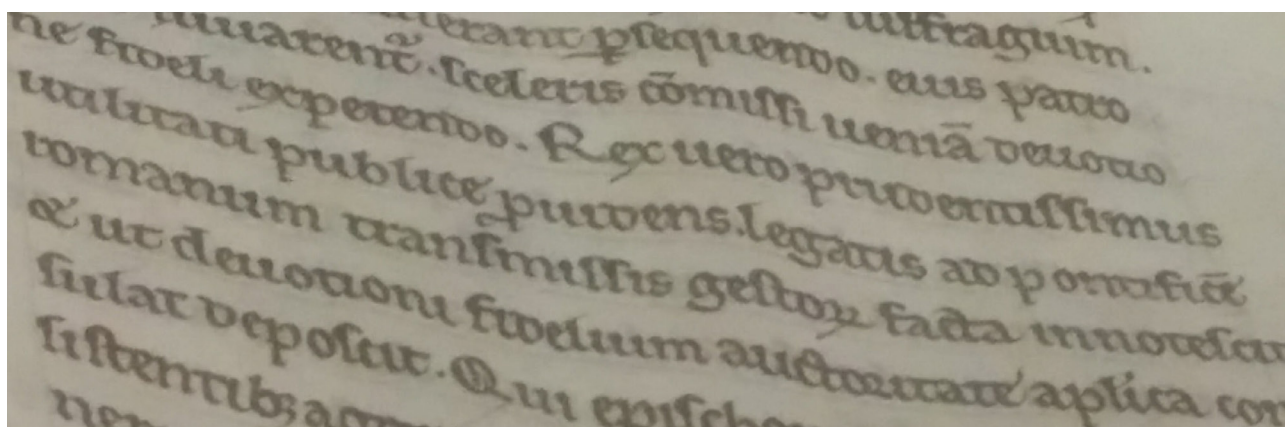


Fig. 4: The description of Erik Ejegod's dispatch of his delegation to the papal court. The text reads: Rex uero prudentissimus utilitati publice providens legatis ad pontificem romanum transmissis gestorum facta innotescit et ut deuotione fidelium auctoritate apostolica consulat deposcit (the truly prudent king, for the usefulness of the people/public affairs, provided for legates to be sent to the Roman pontiff and earnestly ask him, so that the deeds that had been done could become known and be considered – with the zeal of faith – by the apostolic authority (author's translation). Detail from Bruges Bibliothèque Publique MS 403. Photo: Steffen Hope.

by the howling mob and betrayed by Judas, a contrast which serves to cast Cnut's passion in a more clearly Christological mould. The typological connection between Christ and Cnut is further emphasized in one of the chants, the fifth responsory, where the betrayer is called *alter iudas*, a second or a new Judas. These two chants display an *imitatio Christi* of circumstance, where the historical circumstances follow the pattern of Christ's passion. The three remaining chants, however, point to a more active or more direct imitation of Christ, where he is pierced by a lance in the right side (one chant), and where he is standing patiently like Christ amidst stones and arrows with arms outstretched in the form of a crucified man (two chants).

The distillation process that resulted in the liturgical office can clearly be seen in the selection of features addressed in the aforementioned chants. Whoever put together the office and composed its chants drew from the wealth of details recorded by Aelnoth, and reduced and focussed this narrative into three main points: Kingship, martyrdom, and *imitatio Christi*. From this we can surmise that these three aspects were the most important aspects of Cnut's sanctity as it was understood by the monastic community in Odense. In their communication with Cnut during the liturgical celebration, they did not need the classical references, they did not need the negative counterpoints provided by historical tyrants, and they did not think his chastity and chastisement were sufficiently important to include, at least not judging from the surviving material. Moreover, and with the typical caveat that these conclusions are drawn from

incomplete material, we also see that certain key episodes in the narrative established by *Passio Kanuti* were also omitted. For instance, there is no reference to Cnut being passed over in favour of his older brother. Instead, the first three antiphons and the first responsory describe his rise to the kingship following smoothly from his childhood and adolescence. Similarly, we see that the insurrection is explained as a reaction to Cnut's piety and ascribed to the Danes being untamed by law. Thus, the liturgical office omits any reference to the planned invasion of England. We might understand this omission in part as glossing over a martial aspect of Cnut's kingship that did not fit well with his role as a *rex iustus* and monkish king, or with the ideals of a Benedictine community such as that of St Cnut's Church. We might also understand this to be an omission made so as not to refer to what was essentially a failure on the part of the king, and that might not be useful to bring up when you are pleading for intercession before the throne of God.

It must again be emphasized that these conclusions are drawn from an incompletely surviving office. In particular, the lessons might contain several of those details that have been omitted from the chants. Even so, their omission from the chants is itself a noteworthy point, and we can therefore expect that the surviving chants represent fairly well the way in which the monastic community at St Cnut's Church in Odense viewed, understood, and formulated their patron by the early 1120s.

Concluding remarks

Through the texts of the so-called Odense literature and the liturgical office, we can map the development of how St Cnut Rex, his sanctity, and his patronage were understood by those who were the overseers of his cult. The material in question covers a period of dramatic change: Beginning with the establishment of the cult itself at the translation of Cnut's relics in 1095, continuing with the reformation of the clerical community to the Benedictine rule, and culminating with the performance of a proper liturgical office on the 10th of July from the early 1120s onwards. Within this period, our access to names and dates is limited, so a careful examination of these texts is necessary to provide as many details as possible in our understanding of the history of the cult of St Cnut Rex. Through this examination we see that there are also changes in how Cnut was addressed and formulated, and we see how the interpretation of various key events – such as the election of Harald Hen and the cancellation of the attack on England – changed with time. We see also that as the cult develops, there is a certain tendency towards elaboration: New details are added at the different stages, the image of Cnut Rex becomes more complex, and even in the case of the liturgical office, where the superfluous material is left out, there is, if not an elaboration then at least a crystallization of the most important issues, namely what kind of king Cnut was, what kind of martyr he was, how his life was in imitation of Christ. By leaving out superfluous details, the important features of Cnut's sanctity are emphasized. We see, however, that certain elements are constant throughout the early history of the cult: Cnut as the *rex iustus*, the Christological iconography of his death, the fundamental narrative. Changes and developments build on these features in tune with how Cnut is understood by the leaders of his cult centre, but the features are always retained.

The cult of St Cnut Rex had its most active period in the years leading up to 1130, when the death of Cnut Lavard caused a dynastic rift that opened into civil war, and the eventual canonization of Cnut Dux, appears to have eclipsed the popularity of Cnut Rex to a significant degree throughout Denmark. In Odense, however, the cult appears to have remained stable, but, as far as we can tell, the cult centre itself did not produce new texts or new liturgical material after the twelfth century. It is only with the conversion of the monastic community into a community of secular clerics in the 1400s that the liturgical reper-

toire changes, namely by being reduced to a secular office. This is not to say, however, that the cult of Cnut Rex was not observed elsewhere in Denmark outside the bishopric of Odense. As the late-medieval breviaries testify, the material for the feasts of Cnut was available and performed at the most important ecclesiastical centres in the archbishopric (cf. Ellis Nilsson 2015: 73; 270). Even so, it seems safe to say that the cult of Cnut Rex never again reached its creative height of the period 1095-1130.

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Notes

¹ We do not know for certain when the building of the new stone church commenced. The traditional interpretation is that it was initiated by Cnut Rex himself, which fits with his documented patronage of new church buildings elsewhere in Denmark, such as Lund and Dalby, as well as his devotion to St Alban, both of which are features attested to in the Odense literature. That the building of the church had not advanced further than the building of the crypt by 1095 can be explained by the purported crisis of Olaf Hunger's reign, although the cataclysmic proportions of the period 1086-95 is likely to have been exaggerated by Cnut Rex's saint-biographers. Another interpretation is that it was Olaf Hunger who initiated the building of the new church as a form of expiation for his perceived role in the death of his brother and his unpopularity.

² While Professor Petersen has himself not published anything regarding his challenge of the established chronology beyond his remarks in his contribution in the present volume, Professor Petersen presented his reinterpretation in the course of the research seminar *Life and Cult of Canute the Holy* on which this volume is based. I have received his permission to work with this reinterpretation in the present analysis.

³ For a description of the MS, see http://historischesarchivkoeln.de:8080/actaproweb/archive.jsf?id=Vz+++++90002978PPL-S#Vz_____90002978PPLS I am indebted to Irene Bischoff of Köln Stadtarchiv for this information. While Gertz was writing *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, this manuscript was held in Köln Gymnasialbibliothek, and Gertz dated the manuscript to before 1500 (Gertz 1912: 35-36).

⁴ For a discussion of the dating of these manuscripts and the connection between these Flemish institution and Denmark, see Myking 2019. I am indebted to Dr Synnøve Midtbø Myking for sending me her article.

⁵ See <https://wikihost.uib.no/medieval/index.php/Ailnothus>.

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the exile topos in the legends of royal saints, see Hope 2017: 71; 98; 254. See also a discussion on this topos in the legends of Olaf of Norway and Magnus of Orkney in Antonsson 2004.

⁷ This incunable was previously catalogued as a translation of *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine. In 2017, Dr. Alastair Matthews identified the work more precisely as being *Das leuend der hylghen*, printed by Stephan Arndes.

While the work purports to be a translation of *Legenda Aurea*, and while it certainly is based on it, *Das leuend der hylghen* is not organized in the same way, and it contains a number of added saints' lives. These lives demonstrate the Northern European focus of the book, as they include the Nordic saint-kings Olaf, Erik and Cnut Rex. Such adaptations of *Legenda Aurea* for regional tastes were common in the Middle Ages.

