

King Cnut for the 21st Century

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© November 8, 2021

Abstract

King Cnut (or Canute) was a very important Viking era ruler in the 11th century. He is mostly known today as the vain man who was flattered by his subordinates into believing that he was so awesome that he could control the tides, which is not correct. His unique oceanic legacy is important for us in the 21st century.

The Historical King Cnut

Many of us have heard about the great Viking king who was enticed by his royal underlings to go to the sea shore with his throne, then command the waves and tides to obey his awesome powers. The unspoken covert reason for this challenge was that they were mocking his self-importance, which would make their own importance greater. This version is false, and we will herein learn what the best narrative has for us in the 21st century.

[King Cnut](#) was a Danish Anglophile, and was buried in England upon his death in 1035. Cnut ruled over England between 1016 and 1035, just three decades before an army of Danish/French Vikings conquered the last Viking Anglo-Saxon king at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. That William the Conqueror subsequently changed English history forever, but only after [he starved 100,000 Britons into submission](#).

(That William had quite a life, and he is said to be [an ancestor to a quarter of today's British population](#). My genetic report from [ancestry.com](#) lists most of my past coming from Scotland, from Northeast England (where most of the Danes settled), from lower England, and from the area of France where William's army set sail. My middle name, Mantelle, is rare and local to that area. Does all this make me a descendant, however diluted and distant, of William the Conqueror? If so, that would somehow make me related to Queen Elizabeth II, and to the future King William. History is filled with fun trivial fuel for wild speculation.)

The man we know as King Cnut was the most successful Viking warlord of the early 11th century. The Vikings were actually Danes, Swedish, Norwegians and some others who were only known as Vikings when they raided. At other times they were mostly farmers and traders. These warriors would even attack Viking settlements in wealthy England and France if they thought there was treasure to be seized. A modern parallel is the Mafia wars in the 1940s, as glamorized by the *Godfather*.

The life of Cnut's grandfather resonates today: It is thought that he had lines filed into his teeth enamels, and then stained them with blue dye to impress. King Harald Bluetooth (910–85) united in the 10th century Denmark and Norway. 21st century Bluetooth technology helps unite the telecommunications and computing industries.

King Cnut and the Waves

The popular story about King Cnut and his vanity at the shore has almost no value for us moderns. The more likely correct version – if we substitute Nature for God, AND if we substitute already achieved wisdom for surprise – has real value today. [Here is that earliest version](#):

This story was first recorded by [Henry of Huntingdon](#) in his *Historia Anglorum* in the early twelfth century: When he was at the height of his ascendancy, he ordered his chair to

be placed on the sea-shore as the tide was coming in. Then he said to the rising tide, "You are subject to me, as the land on which I am sitting is mine, and no one has resisted my overlordship with impunity. I command you, therefore, not to rise on to my land, nor to presume to wet the clothing or limbs of your master." But the sea came up as usual, and disrespectfully drenched the king's feet and shins. So jumping back, the king cried, "Let all the world know that the power of kings is empty and worthless, and there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will heaven, earth and the sea obey eternal laws."



King Cnut was a pious Christian, or so he claimed. He lavished gifts on monasteries to keep the Church on his side. However, he also commanded fleets of longships and armies of fierce warriors, so he had full knowledge of the power of the oceans. It is likely that this event (or stunt), if it ever happened, enabled him to display his piety and instant wisdom at the same time. He was able to show the limits of kingly power in the face of God's greatest creations – a perfect way of showing how very powerful you are among men by defining the limits of human powers.

King Cnut and the 21st Century

We are now starting to face relentless inflows of rising ocean levels, waves, and tides. In this willfully blind year of 2021 politicians are content to talk, but not to act. Carbon polluting industries pay off politicians, and advertise to confuse voters,

thereby keeping their profits as high as possible for as long as possible. The time is fast approaching when global warming with really high tides will be *locked in* by sharply increasing CO2 in the air – but few in power really care enough to do more than talk.

In Cnut's day the climate was recently coming out of the great ice ages. People were concerned with heating their homes, not with heating the very atmosphere. The idea of sea levels rapidly rising dozens of feet higher, flooding vast areas of inhabited land, including Denmark itself, was not even conceivable. Furthermore, God was in charge, and we were only here until Heaven comes.

Such "divine fatalism" still exists, and global inaction is rapidly becoming a *self-fulfilling prophecy* in the face of scientific alarms. It is common to invest in companies with quarterly profits, rather than in science that looks at *punctuated geological events* over decades. The word "punctuated" has been used to define sharp evolutionary changes – but it can also apply to sharp changes in the biosphere, generally *unforeseen*, where *human time* collides with adverse punctuated *geological time*.

King Cnut could walk away from the oceanic shoreline without having the sea chase him. Today we are facing a "chasing sea" within later decades of this 21st century, only accelerating over subsequent centuries. The high "equilibrium" will peak several centuries hence when sea levels are more than one hundred feet higher than they are today, and when future oceans are hot and lethal to most of the aquatic species we rely on today.

Moving beyond "passive divine fatalism" requires more than clear wisdom regarding our individual limitations, even if we are king. It requires objective global vision PLUS willpower – two very scarce things in today's hedonistic, myopic, and woefully overpopulated world.