

**Tore Skeie. *The Battle of the North***

*Vol 1: Ethelred, Cnut and Olaf - The Struggle for  
Supremacy Around the North Sea*

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## [pp. 42–47] A Regime Facing Ruin

Across the sea the power struggle between Sweyn and Olaf gave England a few years respite from the attacks. Three years later, however, in the year 997, a great new Danish fleet arrived in England led either by Sweyn himself or by one of his deputies. Throughout the summer his army laid waste to the coasts of Devon, Cornwall and Wales, and when autumn came, they did not sail back east again, but built a fortified camp on an island off the mainland. The ships moored there while the army waited out the winter.

When the spring of 998 arrived, the army continued to terrorise the mainland. With their swift ships the Danes attacked again and again at unexpected places all along the coast. They looted and set settlements ablaze, and by the time Æthelred's soldiers arrived on the scene they had already withdrawn with goods, supplies and captives. They would then rest and make plans before attacking elsewhere.

The Danes stayed at the camp for the following winter, too. They carried out a series of attacks in the summer of 999, before finally leaving and sailing away.

Sweyn's armies were led by highly specialised and single-minded men who knew exactly what they were after and how they would go about accomplishing it. They acted on the age-old logic of premodern war, practised by ancient kings and Roman emperors before them: They issued their enemies a simple ultimatum. The Anglo-Saxons could submit, give the Danes what they wanted, and they would be treated well. Or they could fight and risk the consequences of defeat. This might risk everything: one's estate, one's town, one's property, reserves, livestock and church, one's life and those of one's family members. Æthelred was a powerful king, but he was unable to prevent local leaders and village heads unilaterally entering into agreements with and paying tribute to the Danes in order to save their properties and their lives. Accordingly, his authority in his own kingdom was slowly undermined.

Just as Æthelred had extended the hand of peace to Olaf Tryggvason, Sweyn Forkbeard attempted to lure prominent men in England over to his side, particularly those in the eastern and northern regions of the kingdom where many were of Norse extraction. In the Anglo-Saxon sources we hear of English noblemen who were in illegal contact with the Danes. A grandee such as Æthelric from Bocking in Essex, just north of London, was for example exposed and punished for planning to 'receive Sweyn'.

There is much to suggest that the Danes more or less took over control of the Anglo-Saxon wool trade with the continent. Norse seamen had long played a dominant role in almost all of northern Europe's sea trade, but during the 990s the warlords working either directly or

indirectly for Sweyn Forkbeard achieved to all intents and purposes complete command of the waters surrounding England. It became impossible for the Anglo-Saxons and Frankish merchants to trade without cooperating with them. Either the Danes demanded protection money from the travelling traders, or they quite simply took over proceedings for themselves, sailing woollen goods across the Channel in their own ships and selling them on.

The constant reappearance of the battle fleets reflects an enormous consumption of resources in Sweyn Forkbeard's Danish kingdom, in time and manpower, in wood and iron, in sheep's wool and linen for sailmaking, in materials for the rigging, ropes and tar, and in weapon production. But it paid off, because Sweyn and the thousands of soldiers that were connected to his war machine were rewarded threefold for their efforts. First, by taking control of the sea trade bringing silver to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Then by plundering Æthelred's subjects for food and valuables. And lastly by demanding large sums in tribute from King Æthelred for them to leave again.

As Europe passed into a new millennium, the Danish armies continued to return to England in ever-greater numbers. Æthelred recruited a prominent Norse army chief by the name of Pallig, who was said to be married to one of Sweyn Forkbeard's sisters. But 'in spite of the fact that King Æthelred had given him land, gold and silver', Pallig took part in a large battle expedition for Sweyn in the year 1001 in which the Danes burned and ransacked Sussex, Dorset, Somerset and Devon. Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other English accounts depicting this period, one cannot avoid noticing a steadily darker, more pessimistic tone. They portray with woe a kingdom in chaos and decay, transformed again and again into a mayhem of burning villages and fleeing peasants.

The sombre atmosphere is also reflected in religious texts. In the Dane's devastations Anglo-Saxon monks and clergy saw God's punishment – even if Sweyn Forkbeard himself, and many of his people, were Christian. The comet that had appeared over the country in the year 975 emerged at the turn of the millennium as the great watershed, when the peaceful golden age came to a close and slipped over into darkness and chaos, as God displayed his wrath over the sinful ways and dearth of piety of the Anglo-Saxons. After the appearance of the comet, 'God took revenge on the country', one monk wrote in the annals.

A number of clergymen even saw the chaos around them as a sign that the end times were near. The notion of an imminent Armageddon was widespread among the pious and learned in the years around the turn of the millennium. Even if nobody knew when the time would come, those in God's service believed that his creation was approaching the end of its

existence, for just as God had created the world in seven days, world history was also divided into seven ages. Church scholars had calculated that they were living in the sixth age, and the seventh would be Armageddon, 'the great global conflagration'. The ancient prophets of the Bible foretold that the end of days would begin with a series of catastrophes.

In one of the early years of the new millennium, the Anglo-Saxon church organisation's highest-ranking leader, Archbishop Wulfstan of York, wrote an unparalleled fire-and-brimstone sermon in which he concluded that:

As it is written and has long been prophesied, after a thousand years Satan will be unleashed. A thousand years and also more have now passed since Christ was among people in human form, and now Satan's bonds are very loose, and Antichrist's time is well at hand. And nations will strive and fight among themselves before the time that this will happen. Strife and contention will also arise far and wide, and slander and hatred, plunder and rapine, war and hunger, burning and bloodletting and violent disturbances, plague and pestilence and many other evil events.

King Æthelred was now at the end of his thirties and war and violence had overshadowed everything else during his period of rule. Under increasing pressure, he attempted to enter into an alliance with the Duke of Normandy to stop the Danes receiving help and support from there. In 1002 his English-born queen died, possibly during childbirth, and Æthelred asked for the hand of Emma, sister to the Norman duke. She was extremely young but was sailed over the Channel to the war-torn land. She fell pregnant almost at once.

At the same time Æthelred countered the terror and violence that his people were subjected to with his own brutality, and thus contributed to twisting the spiral of violence a couple of notches further into the abyss. Under the pressure, he was clearly on the verge of becoming a rather paranoid sovereign. As noted, thousands of people of Norse origin resided in his kingdom, descendants of the great wave of immigration from the east that had begun almost two hundred years earlier. They had for the most part lived in peace in England for generations, even if the social and cultural bonds to the lands of their forefathers were strong. In the devastated Anglo-Saxon kingdom at the beginning of the 1000s, their Norse origins sowed suspicion and mistrust. In the autumn of 1002, Æthelred heard rumours of a plot against him among his 'Danish' subjects and was convinced that some of them were planning to kill

him. On 13 November 1002, he therefore issued a decree that 'all Danish men in England' were to be killed.

The massacres have left behind both written and archaeological traces as evidence of the ethnic cleansing. An Anglo-Saxon letter written in 1004, just two years later, gives an account of a group of 'Danes' who were chased by a furious mob through the city of Oxford. To save their own lives they sought refuge in one of the city's churches. 'Then the mob set fire to the church, burning the Danes and the church's valuable books, its ornaments and the building itself', informs the letter writer, before going on to describe why: 'The Danes have dispersed across this island like vermin in the wheat harvest, and on the orders of Æthelred therefore had to be exterminated in a righteous purge.' Around ninety years later the English chronicler Henry of Huntingdon wrote: 'I have heard in my youth some very old persons give an account of this flagrant outrage. They said that the king sent with secrecy into every town letters, according to which the English suddenly rose on the Danes, everywhere on the same day and at the same hour, and either put them to the sword, or, seizing them unawares, burnt them on the spot.'

In recent years, mass graves have been found in England that are assumed to stem from the purges. The corpses of thirty-five men, most of them in their twenties and thirties, were thrown into a pit in Oxford after being executed by blows to the head or neck. The injuries reveal that they were killed by a blow from behind as they kneeled. In addition, many of the bodies show signs of struggle before the men were killed, and many had been burned before they were thrown into the mass grave.

In Dorset in Wessex another grave has been uncovered with the bodies of fifty-four men of Scandinavian origin, all executed by decapitation, apparently from the front.

The purges in all likelihood targeted men of Scandinavian origin and of fighting age living in England. But over the years the memories of what happened would grow into a cloud of ghastly exaggerations. In the 1060s, the Norman monk and chronicler William of Jumièges wrote that Æthelred's detestable offence, one that shocked even the heathens, had stolen England's innocence.

On one day he allowed murdered, in a sudden fit of rage, and without accusing them of any crime, the Danes who were living peacefully in the kingdom and who did not fear for their lives. In addition, he let their wives be buried in the earth up to their chests, and fierce mastiffs were then set upon them to tear the nipples from their breasts. Indeed, he let the suckling babes be dashed against the doorposts, so that their brains ran out.

## **[pp. 49–53] A Regime Facing Ruin**

In the midst of this upheaval in power, Sweyn Forkbeard's army returned to England. It was larger than ever before.

Æthelred gathered his new council and called up large sections of the male population of fighting age from Wessex and Mercia to defend the kingdom. Yet the experienced warriors of the Danish army ravaged southern England on a scale never before seen. Some of Æthelred's armed forces were fought back on the battlefield; others were outflanked and circumvented. The Danish warriors stole horses and advanced further inland than they had ever been.

One day, shocked inhabitants of the inland city of Winchester stood helplessly watching as 'an arrogant and cocksure horde walked past the city gates on their way back to their ships as they carried provisions and bounty they had looted more than fifty miles from the coast'.

'The Danes lit their torches of war as they went,' recounts the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in a poetic rewriting of the sight of burning villages. Flames at night and columns of smoke in the daytime could be seen for miles around in the flat stretches of the English countryside. By Christmas the Danish army had spread such chaos that 'that no man could think or devise how to drive them from the land or hold this territory against them; for they had terribly marked each shire in Wessex with fire and devastation.'

King Æthelred was evacuated in humiliation from his southern English heartland to the north bank of the Thames and escorted northwards to safety. He celebrated Christmas with his court at a royal estate in Shropshire, on the north-western extremities of his kingdom, as far from the devastation of the eastern and southern coasts as one could be. He had no other choice than to negotiate with the Danes' emissaries.

The talks were a new low in his role as king of the Anglo-Saxons. In order to save his subjects and his regime, he agreed to pay Sweyn's army the then unheard-of sum of £36,000 in tribute. This was a staggering amount. If it was paid exclusively in coins, it would have made up around eight and a half million pieces of silver with a combined weight of more than twelve and a half tonnes. A part of the tribute was presumably paid in silver bullion, but the value of the silver was the same.

It is not known how the fundraising was carried out, but the tribute was paid somewhere on the coast, where the Danes' winter camp was located, early in the year 1007. In addition to

the silver, which must have been hauled across the country in a procession of ox- and horse-drawn wagons, enormous quantities of supplies in the form of grain and live animals were also sent; these must have been acquired, one way or another, from the famine-stricken land. The entire Danish army was to have food throughout the winter and spring.

The payment of the tribute bought two years of peace. When the two years were up, Sweyn's army would return. Everything suggested that the next surge would be even more powerful.

At this point in time, Æthelred and the members of his council were painfully aware that the entire kingdom stood in danger of collapsing under a new attack. Facing this existential threat, the king managed to gather his leading circle around a frantic common military and economic effort. Early in the year 1008 he gave the most ambitious orders of his life. Over the course of a single year, his people would equip an army and build a navy that would overcome the Danes.

Æthelred's machinery of power set in motion probably the most intense war mobilisation England had seen since the Roman era. The coordinated effort is an impressive testimony to the Anglo-Saxon Crown's authority and organisational skills. Overseen by ealdormen and bishops, thousands of subjects – men, women and children, the free and the enslaved, peasants and city dwellers – were put to work. Loggers felled and limbed thousands of trees in the forests of England. Men and animals delivered the logs to the coast, where in great haste shipbuilders were constructing a range of large new battle ships and smaller cutters. The Crown's old ship was repaired. Women spun thread. Sailmakers used the thread for their canvas. Peasants planted hemp, which ropemakers used for lines. Oar makers cut and carved out oars. Blacksmiths forged nails and parts for all kinds of equipment, including swords, shield umbos, spearheads, arrowheads, axe heads, helmets and breastplates. Throughout the kingdom, which was still shaken by the famine of a few years previously, huge quantities of butter, grain, bread and dried and salted fish and meat were gathered and stored.

In the spring or the early in the summer of 1009, Æthelred boarded his royal ship in London surrounded by his household of servants and guardsmen. He was in his early forties and had been warring against Sweyn Forkbeard for the better part of twenty years. While the wars had raged, his first and second queens had given him seven surviving true-born sons and five true-born daughters. In addition, were the children he had had with mistresses. Some of his daughters were sent to convents, but most were married to men in his inner circle of highly aristocratic advisors. They were child brides bonding his government with his blood, and now the future of the entire bloodline was at stake.

The ruling men of the realm, many of them close relatives of the king, boarded other warships with their own servants and oath-bound warriors. The ships sailed down the Thames and continued southwards along the coast. The assembly point where the fleet was drawn together was the little port town of Sandwich, which lay on a long, pale, sandy beach between the white chalk cliffs of Kent in a broad bay just south of the Thames estuary. In and of itself Sandwich was an insignificant town, a mere gathering of wooden houses with straw roofs behind intertwined fences and gardens, home to perhaps two hundred people. It was, however, located at the mouth of a river, which created a deep natural harbour and was therefore a suitable place to assemble many ships at once. The Danish armies had previously made land there, and they were expected to show up there again. 'There are more ships to be found in England now than in the reign of any other king, and they were all brought together at Sandwich to defend this country against invasion', wrote one chronicler.

In the Middle Ages there was no clearer manifestation of a king's power than the gathering of a navy. Those who saw Æthelred's armada drawing together were witnesses to an event that must have resembled a strange natural phenomenon, like migrating whales gathering at the same place, apparently bound together and governed by an invisible will. Individually and in groups, the ships slipped into the bay, some from the north, others from the south, and still more came. There they settled, swaying next to each other, slightly off the rhythm of the waves as the fleet grew ever-larger over days, perhaps weeks, eventually dwarfing the little port town on land. Flags and standards flew from the mastheads. The din of orders, hollering, and fragments of conversation and song were carried across the water and could be heard for miles around. When all of the ships were finally gathered, the fleet consisted of around two hundred battle ships crewed by something like nine thousand men, most of them equipped with newly forged breastplates and helmets. There were as many people as the population of a large northern European town.

As the fleet gathered and laid in wait for the enemy's sails to appear over the horizon, Æthelred mustered his leaders. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle narrates that during this meeting two ealdormen began to clash in front of Æthelred. One was named Beortric, brother of Ædric Streona. The other was Wulfnoth. We are not told what the conflict was about, simply that Beortric accused Wulfnoth of committing an offence and demanded that King Æthelred punish him. The argument ended with Wulfnoth storming out of the meeting, gathering his men and leading the twenty ships under his command away from the main fleet. They put out to the south, along the white cliffs of Kent, and vanished.

Reports soon reached the main fleet that Wulfnoth had led his crews to land and set about sacking and torching the coast of the country they were meant to be defending. This was presumably his rival Beortric's home territory. Æthelred gave Beortric his blessing to pursue them in order to stop the devastation and bring Wulfnoth back in chains. Beortric took eighty ships with him, almost half the fleet, and gave chase.

As the eighty ships were sailing southwards, the weather turned and, in the often-fickle English Channel, they ended up in a terrible storm. Some of Beortric's ships capsized and were lost with all hands. Others sought the shelter of the land. In diffuse groups, the seamen and soldiers succeeded in saving their ships by heaving them up onto a beach.

The men they were trailing had also sought shelter on land nearby. They were lying in ambush behind the beach, waiting for their pursuers. As the sea and the wind roared, Beortric's men were unable to regroup. They were massacred. Those who were not cut down or stabbed to death ran for their lives, dispersing into the storm. When the weather subsided, the victors burned the ships on the beach.

As scattered reports on the fate of the men and the ships reached the main fleet, which was still anchored up off Sandwich, a panicked and chaotic disorder arose in the ranks of nervous soldiers and seamen. While Æthelred's military chiefs struggled to impose their authority and keep the fleet together, the solidarity of the highest-ranking circle of leaders unravelled. Apparently in fear for his own safety, King Æthelred hurriedly abandoned the fleet and sailed back to London with his guardsmen. Many members of his war council followed the head of state's example and sailed home to save what was theirs. 'The king, the ealdormen and the most important councilmen all went home, thus abandoning the fleet in the most irresponsible way,' reports the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'and as such they recklessly allowed the whole country's efforts and the entire country's hope to be for nought.' Parts of the fleet remained in place for a short while, crewed by peasants who had been called up and their local leaders. Then it fell apart. Some of the ships were sailed up the Thames to London; the remainder dispersed.

All that was left behind were the cliffs and the pale sandy beaches, exposed and undefended.

And then they came.

## [pp. 151–153] Hvíti Krístr

Cnut left the country with his sixty ships in such haste that he was not even able to take his queen with him. He even left behind the dead body of his father. Sweyn Forkbeard's remains were still somewhere to the north when the Danish army evacuated, presumably in a monastery about to be embalmed before they were to be delivered back to Denmark in line with the dead king's wishes. It was a humiliating and traumatic beginning to a Danish prince's career.

Cnut, however, had brought along something else of value: Aboard the fleet were all of the hostages that the Anglo-Saxon aristocrats had handed over to his father during the voyage of tribute through mid- and southern England the previous autumn. Sweyn had sent them successively northwards to Cnut, and they had been his captives ever since. There were many.

The hostages were young men, sons of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, the inheritors of estates and titles, representatives of the next generation's Anglo-Saxon ruling class. Fears for their lives and well-being were intended to prevent their kin from breaking the promises into which they had entered. The giving and taking of hostages was a completely normal part of the diplomacy and warfare of the age and was the most effective method one had to ensure that commitments were respected. When peace and consensus ruled between the parties, the hostages could expect good, respectful treatment, often a life of luxury in the company of their guards, who were their equals. Hostages were often exchanged in both directions, so that a kind of balance of terror emerged.

But Sweyn and Cnut had not given away any hostages. And the Anglo-Saxons had broken their promises.

As the armies that were now loyal to King Æthelred were slaughtering people that Cnut considered his subjects, the young Danish king's fleet sailed southwards along the coast of East Anglia, while columns of smoke rose skywards above the country to their backs. The sixty ships crossed the mouth of the Thames and continued southwards. When they arrived at Sandwich, they cast anchor. The hostages were led to land on the pale beaches beneath the white cliffs. There, the soldiers in Cnut's service dismembered all the hostages' hands. Then they cut off their ears and noses. It must have been time-consuming work.

Afterwards, they set them free. As Cnut's fleet withdrew beyond the horizon and sailed towards Denmark, they were left behind on the land, alive, but with bleeding stumps where their hands had been, and blackening scabs instead of ears and noses.

Cnut, who was only around fifteen years old, was presumably under the strong influence of the older and more experienced warriors from his father's former war council. But it happened with his blessing and in his name. The treatment was starkly symbolic. The mutilation of limbs, whether the victims were permitted to live or were later executed, was a normal method of punishment practised by kings in Europe at this time for revolt, treason and serious crimes.

Cnut left behind a wound in the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy that would take several generations to heal. The freed hostages would have to be nursed, cared and provided for by their own for the rest of their lives; they were high-born cripples who functioned as permanent visual reminders of what happened when anyone broke an agreement with Cnut. It was a demonstration of fierceness and resolve serving notice that he was not out of this bloody game yet.

But his prospects were wretched. The Danish fleet conveyed him to a Denmark in which there was seen to be no place for him. His younger brother Harald Sweynsson was king, surrounded by the council that Sweyn had left behind in Denmark. The two young brothers were reunited. Cnut and the men around him attempted to broker a dividing of the kingdom. His younger brother – and his cohorts – refused.

Shortly thereafter, Cnut's Anglo-Saxon queen followed. Ælfgifu of Northampton evaded her enemies and sailed across the sea with her household aboard a solitary ship. She had on board Sweyn Forkbeard's embalmed corpse, wrapped in a shroud. The king's two sons allowed their father's body to be laid to rest in a grand Christian ceremony, most likely inside a wooden church in Lund, in modern-day Sweden. During her stay in Denmark, Ælfgifu fell pregnant with Cnut's first child.

The two brothers did not become enemies but set out on an amicable journey together. They travelled to Slavia, Poland, where their mother lived since Sweyn had sent her back to her homeland. Cnut and Harald brought her back to Denmark with them, where she was given a place at the court.

The journey's primary goal, however, was not to reunite with their mother. They were looking for war backing among their father's old network. The brothers were working together to assemble a new army. England would be conquered anew. Sweyn Forkbeard's sons sent messengers to leaders in every direction across the broad swathes of land their father had controlled and dominated, men who were bound to them through allegiance to and old friendships with their father. They offered commitments and enticed with gold, green forests and future positions of power in the wealthy land on the other side of the sea.