

Contextualising the *Knútsdrápur*: Skaldic Praise-Poetry at the Court of Cnut

Matthew Townend

Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, UK

It is generally recognised that during the reign of Cnut the Danish king's court came to represent the focal point for skaldic composition and patronage in the Norse-speaking world. According to the later Icelandic *Skáldatal*, no fewer than eight poets were remembered as having composed for Cnut,¹ and the works of five of them survive (some, admittedly, in fragmentary form): Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*;² Óttarr svarti's *Knútsdrápa*;³ Hallvarðr háreksblei's

¹ For the *Skáldatal* list see *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Sveinbjörn Egilsson et al, 3 vols in 4 (Copenhagen, 1848-87), III, 251-86: 282-3.

² For text see *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, 4 vols (Copenhagen, 1912-15), IB, 232-4. For (almost complete) translation see *English Historical Documents: Volume I c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1955), 310-11 (No. 16, where the poem is titled *Tøgdrápa*).

³ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 272-5; Margaret Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (Cambridge, 1930), 136-9 (text and translation). For translation see *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, 308-9 (No. 15).

Knútsdrápa;⁴ Þórarinn loftunga's *Höfuðlausn*⁵ and *Tøgdrápa*;⁶ and (probably) a fragment by Arnórr jarlaskáld.⁷ Of the other poets cited in *Skáldatal*, no verse in honour of Cnut is extant by Bersi Torfuson, and none at all by Steinn Skaptason and the obscure Óðarkeptr. However, an extant anonymous poem in honour of Cnut is *Liðsmannaflakkr*,⁸ and one is justified in also bringing into general consideration an extant poem in honour of one of Cnut's earls, namely Þórðr Kolbeinsson's *Eiríksdrápa*.⁹ In addition to a number of *lausavísur* believed to have been addressed to Cnut, there is also a good deal of poetry which either mentions Cnut or is, at some remove, composed about him, the most important of which is Sigvatr's *Vestrfararvísur*;¹⁰ but the discussion that follows is concerned only with the poetry composed directly for and in honour of him.

As an initial observation, such an extant collection of skaldic praise-poetry is remarkable in terms of its sheer quantity: Cnut can be ranked alongside Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, Óláfr Haraldsson, and Haraldr harðráði as one of the most prominent of patrons for extant skaldic verse, and without question he is the most important non-Norwegian according to such terms. As has been acknowledged, therefore, skaldic verse associated with Cnut represents a substantial, and reasonably discrete, subject for investigation - a body of poetry which I shall collectively refer to by the shorthand label of 'the *Knútsdrápur*'.¹¹

⁴ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 293-4; Roberta Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. Alexander R. Rumble, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1994), 106-24: 119-21 (text and translation).

⁵ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 298. For translation see Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', 116.

⁶ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 298-9. For translation see *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, 312 (No. 19).

⁷ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 326 (strophe 3); Diana Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld: An Edition and Study*, Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 8 (Turnhout, 1998), 134, 308-10 (text and translation). For the grounds for believing this fragment is from a poem on Cnut see Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, 34-5.

⁸ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 391-3; Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009-1016', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 265-98: 281-3 (text and translation); R.G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative*, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations 8 (Toronto, 1991), 86-90 (text and translation); also Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents*, 140-3 (partial text and translation).

⁹ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 203-6. For (partial) translation see *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, 307 (No. 14).

¹⁰ For text see *Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 226-8; for translation of the stanzas relating to Cnut see *English Historical Documents*, ed. Whitelock, 311 (No. 17).

¹¹ The most important studies are Dietrich Hofmann, *Nordisch-Englische Lehnbeziehungen der Wikingerzeit*, Bibliotheca Arnemagnæana 14 (Copenhagen, 1955), 59-101 (ää52-109); Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History'; and Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds'. See also Alistair Campbell, *Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture (London, 1971); and Matthew Townend, *English Place-Names in Skaldic Verse*, English Place-Name Society Extra Series 1 (Nottingham, 1998).

In what follows I wish to consider in particular the context or contexts in which these poems in honour of Cnut were originally produced and received, and in doing so to explore more generally the role of original context in the generation of literary meaning for skaldic praise-poetry; in particular I shall endeavour to contextualise the poems in terms of their geographical and physical place of delivery.

Cnut was king of all England from 1017 to 1035. With the possible exception of Sigvatr's poem there is no reason to believe that any of the *Knútsdrápur* are *erfidrápur* or memorial lays, and so by the very fact of Cnut's regnal dates one can position these poems within a fairly narrow eighteen-year band. Such ready datability may seem an obvious and fortuitous quality of praise-poetry, but in the study of early medieval vernacular poetry such a quality is all too rare and therefore not at all to be taken for granted. There is unfortunately no space here to engage in an exploration of the more precise dating of the *Knútsdrápur* according to internal and external indicators, but following the opinions of earlier scholars I would propose the following likely chronology for the poems: *Liðsmannaflakkr* c.1016-17; Þórðr's *Eiríksdrápa* c.1016-23; Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa* c.1027; Sigvatr's *Knútsdrápa* c.1027 (probably); Þórarinn's *Höfuðlausn* c.1027-28 and *Tøgdrápa* c.1029; Hallvarðr's *Knútsdrápa* c.1029; and Arnórr's fragment c.1031-35. For a number of these poems - especially, perhaps, Hallvarðr's and Arnórr's - it is the *terminus ante quem* that is lacking or weakly established, with Cnut's death forming the only real end-point. Sir Frank Stenton famously remarked that Cnut's reign in England was 'so successful that contemporaries found little to say about it';¹² and while this may or may not be true for chronicles and other documentary sources, the observation is quite aptly applicable to the genre of praise-poetry. Peaceful times give little cause for celebration in such a competitive and militant literature, and the *Knútsdrápur* mention no event later than the 1028 expedition to Norway: in terms of Cnut's own activities these years are blank too in all manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.¹³ Hence the poets look back to the empire-making battles and wars, either to the most recent campaign or (presumably) the most important: Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa*, perhaps the most militant of all of the praise-poems for Cnut, looks back some ten years to the winning of the English throne.

The literary and cultural implications of this chronology for the *Knútsdrápur* will be discussed in more detail after consideration has been given to the geographical and physical contexts for the poems; but one or two points

¹² F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn, Oxford History of England 2 (Oxford, 1971), 399.

¹³ For ease of reference see M.K. Lawson, *Cnut: the Danes in England in the early eleventh century* (London, 1993), 231-2. The entry for 1031 in MSS 'DE' is very probably misplaced from 1026, though the one event which may be correctly dated to 1031 is the submission of the Scottish kings.

are worth observing at this stage. Above all, it is notable how the poems fall into two groups, with *Liðsmannaflokkur* and *Eiríksdrápa* coming soon after the conquest of England, but the rest of the poems after the battle of Holy River in 1026 and (in some cases) the Norway expedition in 1028. One might also suggest that the two early poems are in some sense by insiders, those who had already thrown in their lot with Cnut's assault on England (especially *Liðsmannaflokkur*), whereas the later poems are by outsiders, those who came seeking Cnut's court at a subsequent point. And chronologically that point is clearly Cnut's establishment of a pan-Scandinavian hegemony, after Holy River (against the Swedes) and the Norway expedition: it is this creation of a wider Scandinavian empire that shifts the centre of skaldic culture to Cnut's court and that makes the Danish king the crucial patron for poets to seek out and cultivate. There is only a tiny amount of Viking Age verse extant for any Danish kings other than Cnut; but the events of 1026 and 1028 re-orientate the axis of skaldic composition, and so lead to the type of chronology proposed above. In or around 1030 it clearly made sense for a poet launching his international career to seek out Cnut first of all as the most important of patrons - as, from Diana Whaley's chronology, Arnórr appears to have done when leaving Iceland for the first time.¹⁴ Cnut's political hegemony in Scandinavia thus led to a poetic one.

In turning to the geographical and physical contexts of the *Knútsdrápur*, the first question is whether one should locate the activities of Cnut's poets to England rather than to Denmark (or even Norway), and the usual ascription to England seems securely based on a number of convergent strands of evidence: above all, on the historical record of Cnut's movements, the centrality of England in his Anglo-Danish empire, and the marked linguistic influence on the poems from Old English. The first two of these factors point to the localisation of Cnut's court, while the third would seem to indicate that such a localisation is correct with regard to the composition of court poetry. Between 1017 and 1035 there is record of Cnut being absent from England on no more than four or five occasions, and each time fairly briefly. What is apparent therefore is the dominant proportion of his reign which Cnut spent in England, and how this would appear to signal England rather than Denmark as the centre of his empire. The linguistic evidence of Old English influence on the Old Norse of poems, catalogued by Dietrich Hofmann,¹⁵ is indeed, as Roberta Frank remarks, the 'most persuasive' indicator that the poems were originally 'addressing Danes resident in England',¹⁶ and it suggests also that the poems should not be ascribed to Cnut's few occasions of campaign in Scandinavia: the

¹⁴ Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld*, 41-7. Arnórr's choice of destination may also have been governed by the earlier career-successes of his father, Þórðr Kolbeinsson.

¹⁵ Hofmann, *Nordisch-Englische Lehnbeziehungen*, 59-100 (ää52-108).

¹⁶ Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', 108.

poems are coming out of an Anglo-Scandinavian milieu, rather than one that is wholly Scandinavian.

More intriguing is the question of whereabouts in England one should locate this culture of courtly patronage. Frank assumes without discussion that London was the prime location of Cnut's court and therefore in Cnut's reign constituted 'the centre in the North for the production and distribution of skaldic poetry'.¹⁷ However, courts of late Anglo-Saxon kings were still to a significant degree itinerant,¹⁸ and during his reign Cnut is variously recorded engaged in legal or political activity in Kingston, Oxford, Abingdon, Cirencester, Ashington, Canterbury, and Shaftesbury.¹⁹ In essence, though, the search for the centre of poetic patronage in Cnut's reign comes down to a straight choice between the two other places where Cnut's presence is recorded, namely London (as Frank assumes) and Winchester - that is, between the emergent economic powerhouse of eleventh-century England and the ancient ceremonial seat of the West Saxon monarchy.

As usual, this is not really a case of either/or, and in fact the two cities appear to have been in what might be termed complementary distribution. Russell Poole has demonstrated persuasively that *Liðsmannaflokkr* 'is what it purports to be, an expression of rank and file jubilation at Knútr's conquest, composed almost contemporaneously with the events it describes',²⁰ and the geographical centre of the poem is London (referred to in stanza 7 in Poole's ordering, as is the Thames in stanzas 3 and 6). *Liðsmannaflokkr*, then, appears to be coming directly out of the newly-occupied city, and the poem's concerns are thus emblematic of London's status under Cnut: on account of its successful resistance in the preceding wars it became a guarded and garrisoned city, the main focus for Cnut's punitive measures in terms of geld-raising and forceful political action. So, for example, it was in London (according to John of Worcester) that Cnut in 1017 executed the dangerous Eadric streona;²¹ it was upon London that Cnut placed the burden of a distinctive geld of £10,500 in

¹⁷ Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, 1985), 157-96: 179.

¹⁸ See for example Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready' 978-1016: A Study in their Use as Historical Evidence*, *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*, 3rd series 13 (Cambridge, 1980), 269-73; David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981), 90-1, 94 (maps 160-3 and 167-9); Martin Biddle, 'Seasonal Festivals and Residence: Winchester, Westminster and Gloucester in the tenth to twelfth centuries', *Anglo-Norman Studies* 8 (1986), 51-72: 56, 69-72.

¹⁹ Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, 91 (map 163); reprinted in David Hill, 'An urban policy for Cnut?', in *The Reign of Cnut*, ed. Rumble, 101-5: 103.

²⁰ Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', 286.

²¹ *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, 3 vols, *Oxford Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1995-), II, 504-5; Lawson, *Cnut*, 83-4.

1018;²² and it was from London that Cnut removed the relics of the martyred Archbishop Ælfheah in 1023.²³ Above all, and quite apart from individual events such as these, London was a city under careful military occupation. It never fell in the Anglo-Danish wars, and its citizens had preferred Edmund Ironside to Cnut in 1016;²⁴ post-1017, therefore, it could not be relied upon to support the new Danish king, and might potentially become the crucible of anti-Danish rebellion. Hence the punitive taxes and political gestures of potency; hence also it appears to have been the base for Cnut's *liðsmenn* or standing fleet,²⁵ one of whom may be commemorated by two of his comrades in the Ringerike-style St Paul's rune-stone,²⁶ while the appearance of strategically-positioned churches dedicated to Scandinavian saints may well indicate that they functioned as garrison chapels.²⁷ The signs therefore are that London was a closely guarded city in the reign of Cnut, and that presumably the king had some sort of base there.²⁸ As early garrison-poetry, *Liðsmannaflakkr* - the *flakkr* of the *liðsmenn* - should clearly be localised there; but it must be doubtful whether London represented the centre of court culture for the Danish king and his followers.

Instead it is to Winchester one should look, and in Winchester, arguably, that one should primarily contextualise the *Knútsdrápur*. David Hill has observed that 'any ... punishment of London would also explain the efforts to embellish Winchester as 'capital', a policy that is certainly discernible in the reign of Cnut'.²⁹ So it was in Winchester at Christmas 1020 or 1021 that Cnut

²² *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS 'CDE' (though MS 'E' states £11,000); Lawson, *Cnut*, 83; Hill, 'An urban policy for Cnut?', 103.

²³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS 'CDE' (with a particularly lengthy account in MS 'D'); Lawson, *Cnut*, 140-2, 180-2; Alexander R. Rumble, 'Textual Appendix: *Translatio Sancti Ælfeigi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi et martyris* (BHL 2519): Osbern's account of the translation of St Ælfheah's relics from London to Canterbury, 8-11 June 1023', in *The Reign of Cnut*, ed. Rumble, 282-315.

²⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS 'CDE'.

²⁵ James Campbell, 'Some Agents and Agencies of the Late Anglo-Saxon State', in *Domesday Studies*, ed. J.C. Holt (Woodbridge, 1987), 201-18: 204-5; Nicholas Hooper, 'Military developments in the reign of Cnut', in *The Reign of Cnut*, ed. Rumble, 89-100: 98-100.

²⁶ The inscription reads (in normalised form) *Ginna lét leggja stein þensi auk Tóki* 'Ginna and Tóki had this stone raised'. See David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (London, 1966), 135-6; Signe Horn Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style: A phase of 11th century Scandinavian art*, *Mediaeval Scandinavia Supplements* 1 (Odense, 1980), 189 (No. 88); *The Vikings in England and in their Danish Homeland*, ed. Else Roesdahl, James Graham-Campbell, Patricia Connor and Kenneth Pearson (London, 1981), 136, 163 (No. I 19); Lawson, *Cnut*, 206-7; Michael Barnes, 'Towards an Edition of the Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of The British Isles - Some Thoughts', in *Twenty-Eight Papers Presented to Hans Bekker-Nielsen on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday 28 April 1993* (Odense, 1993), 21-36: 33 (No. E 2).

²⁷ Pamela Nightingale, 'The Origin of the Court of Husting and Danish Influence on London's Development into a Capital City', *English Historical Review* 102 (1987), 559-78: 566-9.

²⁸ Alan Vince, *Saxon London: An Archaeological Investigation* (London, 1990), 57.

²⁹ Hill, 'An urban policy for Cnut?', 103-4.

promulgated the law-codes now known as I and II Cnut,³⁰ and it was in the Old Minster at Winchester that Cnut was to be buried.³¹ It is also, of course, from Winchester that the supreme image of Cnut derives, in the form of the frontispiece to the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, commemorating his and his wife Emma's donation of a gold cross to be placed on the foundation's altar.³² For Emma herself the evidence is more extensive, in that she held property in Winchester from 1012 up till her death in 1052: there are documentary records of Emma's presence there, and her house in the High Street was still able to be identified in the twelfth century.³³ She too was buried in the Old Minster, as was her and Cnut's only son, Harthacnut,³⁴ so confirming its status as (in Pauline Stafford's phrase) a 'dynastic mausoleum'.³⁵

To this discussion of Cnut (and Emma) in Winchester one should add two other more general factors: the status of Winchester as late West Saxon 'capital', and evidence for a Danish presence in late West Saxon Winchester. Our extensive knowledge of Winchester derives substantially from the programme of excavations conducted there in the 1960s (led by Martin Biddle) and the accompanying publication project.³⁶ Winchester's trajectory involves its development as the ceremonial royal centre of Wessex in the seventh to ninth centuries, its urban renovation in the late ninth-century burghal system, and its confirmation as the royal and cultural centre of the unified kingdom of England in the tenth and eleventh centuries, before it declined in status at the

³⁰ Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle, 1898-1916), I, 278-371; Lawson, *Cnut*, 61-3; M.K. Lawson, 'Archbishop Wulfstan and the homiletic element in the laws of Æthelred II and Cnut', in *The Reign of Cnut*, ed. Rumble, 141-64: 157-61; Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century. Volume I Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), 345-66.

³¹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MS 'E' 1036. See John Crook, '“A worthy antiquity”: the movement of King Cnut's bones in Winchester Cathedral', in *The Reign of Cnut*, ed. Rumble, 165-92.

³² For discussion see Robert Deshman, 'Benedictus Monarcha et Monachus: Early Medieval Ruler Theology and the Anglo-Saxon Reform', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 22 (1988), 204-40: 223-5; Jan Gerchow, 'Prayers for King Cnut: The Liturgical Commemoration of a Conqueror', in *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Carola Hicks, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 2 (Stamford, 1992), 219-38: 222-30; Richard Gameson, *The Role of Art in the Late Anglo-Saxon Church* (Oxford, 1995), 22, 74, 82-3, 230-1, 263; *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster and Hyde Abbey Winchester*, ed. Simon Keynes, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 26 (Copenhagen, 1996), 38-9, 79-80. On the gold cross itself see *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 35-7.

³³ See *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 34; Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford, 1997), esp. 252 (Figure 9); Simon Keynes, 'Introduction to the 1998 Reprint', *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ed. Alistair Campbell, Camden Classic Reprints 4 (Cambridge, 1998), xix, xxvi-xxviii, lxxv.

³⁴ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* MSS 'EF' 1041, MS 'C' 1051.

³⁵ Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 96.

³⁶ See Martin Biddle, 'The Study of Winchester: Archaeology and History in a British Town, 1961-1983', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 69 (1983), 93-135; revised version reprinted in *British Academy Papers on Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. E.G. Stanley (Oxford, 1990), 299-341.

rise of Westminster.³⁷ So for instance Winchester appears to have been the central repository of the king's treasure,³⁸ and upon Cnut's death in 1035 *ealle þa betstan gærsaman þe Cnut cyng ahte* were taken from Emma there by Harold Harefoot.³⁹ The royal palace itself (in which, one may assume, the treasury was located) was positioned directly to the west of the Old Minster and south of the New Minster cemetery, though the form of the buildings themselves is unknown as the area itself has not been excavated;⁴⁰ nonetheless, Biddle and Keene suggest that 'the evidence available for rural palaces, and the illustrations in the Bayeux Tapestry of the Confessor's palace at Westminster, may lead us to suppose a considerable complex of stone structures, probably not out of scale beside the two great churches of the Old and New Minsters'.⁴¹ For of the form of the monasteries abutting the palace, on the other hand, a very great deal is known, and in the Benedictine reforms of the late tenth century, a mere generation before Cnut, both had experienced ambitious building programmes: the tower of the New Minster was completed sometime between 980 and 987, while the Old Minster was wholly rebuilt between 971 and 994, with its westworks in particular being completed in 980.⁴² These were formidably impressive structures: the Old Minster westworks, centred upon the tomb of St Swithun, was probably over thirty-five metres in height, while the New Minster tower comprised six storeys, and its exterior was decorated with different carvings at every level.⁴³

In such an environment it is perhaps surprising to find a variety of forms of evidence for a conspicuous Danish presence in the early eleventh century.⁴⁴ Funeral evidence is supplied in the form of a number of 'essentially

³⁷ Martin Biddle, 'Winchester: the development of an early capital', in *Vor- und Frühformen der europäischen Stadt im Mittelalter*, ed. Herbert Jankuhn, Walter Schlesinger and Heiko Steuer, 2 vols (Göttingen, 1975), I, 229-61.

³⁸ Martin Biddle and D.J. Keene, 'Winchester in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', in Frank Barlow, Martin Biddle, Olof von Feilitzen and D.J. Keene, *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages: An Edition and Discussion of the Winton Domesday*, ed. Martin Biddle, Winchester Studies 1 (Oxford, 1976), 241-448: 290-1; Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 99.

³⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS D*, ed. G.P. Cubbin, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition 6* (Cambridge, 1996), 65 ('all the best treasures which King Cnut owned').

⁴⁰ Martin Biddle, '*Felix Urbs Winthonia*: Winchester in the Age of Monastic Reform', in *Tenth-Century Studies: Essays in Commemoration of the Millennium of the Council of Winchester and Regularis Concordia*, ed. David Parsons (London and Chichester, 1975), 123-40: 132-3.

⁴¹ Biddle and Keene, 'Winchester in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', 292.

⁴² Biddle, '*Felix Urbs Winthonia*', 134-9.

⁴³ R.N. Quirk, 'Winchester New Minster and its Tenth-Century Tower', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series 24 (1961), 16-54; *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 29-30. For artists' reconstructions see *The Vikings in England*, ed. Roesdahl et al, 167, 170 (No. J 14); Tom Beaumont James, *Winchester*, English Heritage (London, 1997), 49 (Figure 25).

⁴⁴ For summaries see Barbara Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the Early History of Britain (London, 1995), 143-5; *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 40 n. 227.

Scandinavian' burials in the New Minster cemetery,⁴⁵ and in the hogback-shaped gravestone from the east of the Old Minster bearing the inscription HER L[I]P G[VN]N[I :] EORLES FEOLAGA 'Here lies Gunni, the earl's [or possibly 'Eorl's'] comrade'.⁴⁶ Beside this stone one can set the rune-stone found at St Maurice's church in Winchester but almost certainly coming originally from the New Minster cemetery.⁴⁷ The stone is only fragmentary, and the inscription correspondingly difficult to read, but it is plainly in Scandinavian runes and enough is extant to indicate that the language of the inscription is Old Norse:⁴⁸ the writing of Old Norse in eleventh-century Winchester would thus seem to presuppose an audience for the reading thereof, and also an Old Norse speech community.

To this epigraphical evidence one may add visual evidence in the form of the controversial frieze sculpture found amongst the rubble resulting from the demolition of the Old Minster in 1093.⁴⁹ This has been interpreted as deriving from a narrative stone frieze depicting episodes from the legend of Sigmundr in the Völsung cycle, and Biddle suggests that 'it was Cnut who had this frieze erected', since 'it celebrate[s] the shared traditions of England and Denmark'.⁵⁰ Less speculative is the so-called Winchester 'weathervane' - now relabelled as a 'decorative casket mount' - which was found beneath the south transept of the present cathedral and exemplifies the Ringerike style of decoration.⁵¹ Half a dozen bone spoons also show influence from the Ringerike style,⁵² while other small Scandinavian-style artefacts include over a dozen combs and an isolated (and possibly pre-Cnut) silver-gilt strap-end in the Jellinge style.⁵³ Finally, and more generally, one may note the unusually high number of Old Norse personal

⁴⁵ Martin Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester 1962-63: Second Interim Report', *The Antiquaries Journal* 44 (1964), 188-219: 211.

⁴⁶ Martin Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester 1965: Fourth Interim Report', *The Antiquaries Journal* 46 (1966), 308-32: 325; Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle and R.I. Page, 'A Scandinavian Rune-Stone from Winchester', *The Antiquaries Journal* 55 (1975), 389-94: 390-2; Elisabeth Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), 126-7 (No. 138).

⁴⁷ Kjølbye-Biddle and Page, 'A Scandinavian Rune-Stone from Winchester', 389.

⁴⁸ Kjølbye-Biddle and Page, 'A Scandinavian Rune-Stone from Winchester', 392-4; Barnes, 'Towards an Edition of the Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions', 33 (No. E 12).

⁴⁹ Martin Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester 1965', 329-32 ('Appendix: a late Saxon frieze sculpture from the Old Minster'); *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art 966-1066*, ed. Janet Backhouse, D.H. Turner and Leslie Webster (London, 1984), 133-5 (No. 140).

⁵⁰ Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester 1965', 331.

⁵¹ Wilson and Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art*, 141; Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style*, 170-1 (No. 54); *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, ed. Backhouse, Turner and Webster, 107 (No. 102).

⁵² *The Vikings in England*, ed. Roesdahl et al, 168 (No. J 5); *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, ed. Backhouse, Turner and Webster, 129 (No. 134).

⁵³ Kjølbye-Biddle and Page, 'A Scandinavian Rune-Stone from Winchester', 390; *The Vikings in England*, ed. Roesdahl et al, 168-9 (Nos. J 6, J 8); *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, ed. Backhouse, Turner and Webster, 106 (No. 101).

names recorded in Winchester: in the surveys of the city made in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, approximately one in twenty of the persons recorded bore Old Norse personal names.⁵⁴ This cumulative collection of evidence therefore leads Barbara Yorke to conclude that in the reign of Cnut ‘Winchester was probably the place in Wessex where the greatest concentration of Danish settlers was to be found’,⁵⁵ and there are indications that in the post-Cnut years also Winchester continued to be regarded as the centre of Danish (or Anglo-Danish) interests.⁵⁶ What all these signs of Scandinavian culture in Winchester have in common, however, is their high or aristocratic status: as Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle observes, ‘[the] finds showing Scandinavian influence do not occur among common household goods, but reflect the upper ranges of the social hierarchy, as might be expected with a Danish king on the throne and his men at court’.⁵⁷

I would suggest therefore that Winchester is the physical location in which one should contextualise the *Knútsdrápur* - in particular, in which one should contextualise the main group of poems from the late 1020s, after Cnut’s establishment of a Scandinavian hegemony. In fact, such a context was proposed long ago by L.M. Larson, who suggested that Sigvatr and Óttarr came to Winchester in 1027, Þórarinn in 1029.⁵⁸ Larson’s dates may need a little fine-tuning (though not much), but he appears to have been correct in believing that it was most probably the court at Winchester that briefly, in the reign of Cnut, came to be the prime centre for skaldic composition in the Norse-speaking world. After Holy River and the Norway expedition, it was to Winchester that the poets came, and so in this respect it is worth briefly recalling Sigvatr’s *Vestrfararvísur*, supplying as they do a contemporary account of a skald’s visit to Cnut’s court: in the course of his report Sigvatr draws particular attention to the processes of etiquette required to gain access to the king (*Útan varðk, áðr Jóta / andspillir fekk stillis, ... / ... húsdýrr fyrir spyrjask*), and to the king’s great generosity (*Knútr ..., mætra / mildr ... / ... hringa*), especially as a benefactor to the poets who seek him (*Knútr hefr okr ... / ... böðum / hendr, es hilmí fundum, / ... skrautliga búnar*).⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Olof von Feilitzen, ‘The Personal Names and Bynames of the Winton Domesday’, in *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Biddle, 143-229: 179-91.

⁵⁵ Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, 144.

⁵⁶ *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 39-40. In Harthacnut’s reign the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* may well have been written at Winchester in the service of precisely such interests: see Keynes, ‘Introduction to the 1998 Reprint’, xxxix-xli, lxx-lxxi.

⁵⁷ Kjølbye-Biddle and Page, ‘A Scandinavian Rune-Stone from Winchester’, 390.

⁵⁸ Laurence Marcellus Larson, *Canute the Great 995 (circ)-1035, and the Rise of Danish Imperialism during the Viking Age, Heroes of the Nations* (London, 1912), 294.

⁵⁹ *Skjaldedigting*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 226 (*Vestrfararvísur* 2.1-2, 4: ‘I had to engage in inquiries outside, before the hall door, before I obtained conversation with the governor of the Jutes’), 227 (7.1-3: ‘Cnut, generous with precious rings’; 5.1-4: ‘Cnut has splendidly adorned the arms of both of us [i.e. Sigvatr and Bersi] when we met the prince’).

We return, therefore, to the role of context in the generation of meaning for praise-poetry. The royal palace at Winchester, right up close to the enclosure and tower of the New Minster, and directly over-shadowed by the Swithun-centred westworks of the Old Minster, seems an astonishing place for the Norse poets to be saying what they do: for Sigvatr to be declaring that ‘Cnut soon killed the sons of Ethelred or drove out every one’ (*Ok senn sonu / sló, hvern ok þó, / Aðalráðs, eða / út flæmði, Knútr*);⁶⁰ for Óttarr to be reminding the king that ‘Lord of the Jutes, you struck the race of Edgar on that expedition’ (*ætt drapt, Jóta dróttinn, / Játgeirs í för þeiri*);⁶¹ for Hallvarðr to be describing him as ‘the Freyr of the noise of weapons’ or ‘the tree of the Midgard serpent’s path’ (*jalm-Freyr ... malma, bör ... / ... holmfjöturs leiðar*).⁶² The precincts of the royal palace are a remarkable location for Sigvatr and Óttarr to be celebrating Cnut’s triumph over named West Saxon kings, the skyline of the monastic complex an unlikely backdrop for Hallvarðr’s mythological kennings. For those who have ears to hear, this is a radically different image of King Cnut: in praise-poetry like this, context is an essential part of meaning.

Naturally, therefore, the question of audience arises: to whom are these poems speaking in such a culturally-charged environment? Roberta Frank suggests that Cnut’s poets were directing their message ‘to one identifiable group at court’ - namely, of course, the king’s Danish followers.⁶³ Localising the poems to Winchester, the presence of such a group is indicated by the archaeological and anthroponymical evidence cited earlier, and one may justifiably employ here the contested term ‘housecarls’. From the work of Nicholas Hooper it has become clear that the housecarls should not, unlike the *liðsmenn*, be conceived of as some kind of bodyguard or standing army, but rather as Cnut’s aristocratic followers and courtiers,⁶⁴ and Hooper observes that ‘[i]f a prince was to maintain fitting dignity and keep around him a retinue he would have to provide food and lodging, entertainment and, by this time, a monetary stipend’:⁶⁵ one may therefore suggest that the *Knútsdrápur* should be ranked among the entertainments for Cnut’s Danish followers at court. Names can be put to some of these followers, as can be readily seen from Simon Keynes’ prosopographical survey of Scandinavians who attest Cnut’s

⁶⁰ Sigvatr, *Knútsdrápa* 2.1-4 (*Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 232). For the reality behind this phrase see Simon Keynes, ‘The Æthelings in Normandy’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 13 (1991), 173-205: 174.

⁶¹ Óttarr, *Knútsdrápa* 3.5-6 (*Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 273).

⁶² Hallvarðr, *Knútsdrápa* 6.6, 4.1-2 (*Skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, IB, 294).

⁶³ Frank, ‘King Cnut in the verse of his skalds’, 110.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Hooper, ‘The Housecarls in England in the Eleventh Century’, *Anglo-Norman Studies* 7 (1985), 161-76; Hooper, ‘Military developments in the reign of Cnut’; see also Campbell, ‘Some Agents and Agencies of the late Anglo-Saxon State’, 203-4.

⁶⁵ Hooper, ‘The Housecarls in England’, 170-1.

charters;⁶⁶ and one may also note the four benefactors entered into the New Minster *Liber Vitae* who each receive the label *Danus*, apparently indicating the perception of a distinctive group at the court in Winchester.⁶⁷

In Cnut's Winchester one should therefore predicate a thriving Scandinavian culture at the higher levels of court society, and this includes verbal culture: the *Knútsdrápur* clearly indicate that the Old Norse language continued to be spoken at Cnut's court, and Old Norse literary traditions to be highly prized, while the writing of Old Norse is demonstrated by the runic inscription cited earlier; however, that none of the manuscript documents from Cnut's reign is in Old Norse is not significant, as there is no evidence that Old Norse was ever written in the Roman alphabet in Viking Age England, and one must therefore imagine the co-existence of written English (and Latin) and spoken Norse (and English).⁶⁸ M.K. Lawson suggests that the law-codes I and II Cnut 'were perhaps read out by Wulfstan at a Christmas court at Winchester';⁶⁹ in such a society, in which two vernaculars were being spoken, and literary works in those two vernaculars being recited, one may reasonably postulate a variety of different audiences, correlating, in some degree, with different court-groupings. The question of the possible intelligibility of skaldic verse to monolingual Anglo-Saxons is an old imponderable,⁷⁰ but even here one may propose a scale of difficulty: Hallvarðr's *Knútsdrápa*, for example, is especially dense in terms of language and allusions,⁷¹ but Sigvatr's verse is much less intractable, and Russell Poole has even suggested with regard to Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa* that '[t]he relative simplicity of the style may indicate a special effort toward intelligibility in a mixed English-Scandinavian milieu'.⁷² If this is so, then the poem's stance and subject would seem to presuppose that any such English audience must have aligned their interests with the Danish perspective of the conquerors.

For the chronology proposed earlier is significant here, in that most of the *Knútsdrápur* are from the latter half of Cnut's reign: except for *Liðsmannaflokkur* and *Eiríksdrápa*, they indicate that skalds came seeking

⁶⁶ Keynes, 'Cnut's earls', 54-66.

⁶⁷ *Liber Vitae: Register and Martyrology of New Minster and Hyde Abbey Winchester*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, Hampshire Record Society (London, 1892), 55 (nos. xlvii-1); *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 40, 94.

⁶⁸ See Matthew Townend, 'Viking Age England as a Bilingual Society', in *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. D.M. Hadley and J.D. Richards, Studies in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout, forthcoming).

⁶⁹ Lawson, 'Archbishop Wulfstan and the homiletic element', 161.

⁷⁰ See Matthew Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry in Viking Age England', *The Review of English Studies* (forthcoming).

⁷¹ See Frank, 'King Cnut in the verse of his skalds', 119-23, who writes of its 'decidedly *ancien régime* iconography' (119).

⁷² Russell Poole, 'Óttarr svarti', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York, 1993), 459-60: 459.

Cnut's court after Holy River and the Norway expedition, and could expect a profitable reception when they arrived. In other words, these poems would seem to indicate that on Cnut's part there was no jettisoning of Norse traditions - whether suddenly or gradually - as his reign in England progressed: on the contrary, Cnut's reputation in the Scandinavian world as a patron of Norse culture appears to have been at its height in the late 1020s. The earliness (or otherwise) of the *Knútsdrápur* is therefore not the issue here, as it would be if one were primarily interested in the poems as historical sources: Alistair Campbell, for instance, had no very high opinion of Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa* as a source since it probably dates from some ten years after the Anglo-Danish wars it describes and may be dependent in some of its details on earlier skaldic verse;⁷³ but if one is concerned, as here, with tracing the continuing literary culture of Cnut's court, then it becomes extremely interesting to see what forms the telling of those wars had assumed at Cnut's court a decade later, and what stories about the gaining of the throne the conqueror was pleased to hear. Much modern historiography on Cnut's reign stresses the care with which an Anglo-Danish *rapprochement* was achieved: it is therefore salutary to note that Óttarr's *Knútsdrápa* is instead concerned with celebrating the Danish military triumph over the English, even ten years after the accession.

Another strand in recent historiography on Cnut emphasises the degree to which the king assumed an English persona, and the rapidity with which he did so: this is especially apparent in his dealings with the church, in which his conspicuous acts of pious patronage earned the famous praise from Fulbert of Chartres that '[Y]ou, whom we had heard to be a pagan prince, we now know to be not only a Christian, but also a most generous donor to churches and God's servants'.⁷⁴ So, for instance, Lawson notes that '[i]n matters of religion he was largely obliged to play an English game, with English men, and by English rules',⁷⁵ and Susan Ridyard has suggested that in his dedication to the cult of St Edith, Cnut appears as 'almost more West Saxon than the West Saxons'.⁷⁶ T.A. Heslop has sought to explain the increase in the number of sumptuous illustrated manuscripts in eleventh-century England by attributing their production to the patronage of Cnut and Emma.⁷⁷ In the light of such an

⁷³ Campbell, *Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History*, 12-14.

⁷⁴ *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres*, ed. and trans. Frederick Behrends, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1976), 66-9 (te quem paganorum principem audieramus, non modo Christianum, uerum etiam erga ecclesias atque Dei seruos benignissimum largitorem agnoscimus). For Cnut's relations with the church see Lawson, Cnut, 117-60.

⁷⁵ Lawson, Cnut, 130.

⁷⁶ Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4th series 9 (Cambridge, 1988), 195.

⁷⁷ T.A. Heslop, 'The production of *de luxe* manuscripts and the patronage of King Cnut and Queen Emma', *Anglo-Saxon England* 19 (1990), 151-95; however, for important reservations see Gameson, *The Role of Art in the Late Anglo-Saxon Church*, 258-9.

ecclesiastical emphasis, the *Knútsdrápur* therefore constitute an invaluable re-assertion of the continuing ‘Norseness’ of Cnut’s court, and of the continuing importance to Cnut of his Scandinavian inheritance: as praise-poems they can ‘imply much about the ways in which [Cnut] wanted to be seen’,⁷⁸ and this was as the gold-giving warrior-king, proud of his Danish origins and by no means metamorphosing into an honorary Englishman. This sense of the continuing importance to Cnut of his Scandinavian inheritance is of course observable in other ways: for example in the way in which Cnut does not choose to give his children English names - which would have been an obvious gesture of *rapprochement* - but rather names his three sons Sveinn, Harald and Harthacnut, following in sequence the names of his father, grandfather and (probably) great-grandfather.⁷⁹ But it is the *Knútsdrápur* that provide the fullest and clearest evidence for this alternative image of a Scandinavian Cnut. It is not that the image of the ‘English Cnut’ is incorrect - clearly it is not - but simply that such a portrait is partial, and privileges one perspective on Cnut’s reign over other possible views. It is therefore interesting to return again to the chronology of the *Knútsdrápur*, and to note that the supreme images of both the Scandinavian and English Cnuts co-exist exactly in time and space: the Norse poems derive from Winchester in the late 1020s or early 1030s, and the frontispiece to the New Minster *Liber Vitae* was produced in Winchester in 1031.⁸⁰

To conclude: in this paper I have not endeavoured to give a close reading or stylistic analysis of the *Knútsdrápur*, not least on account of the excellence of Roberta Frank’s 1994 undertaking to that effect;⁸¹ and nor have I attempted to probe them for historical information, as has been done for some of the poems in Russell Poole’s invaluable studies.⁸² Rather, I have attempted to recover something of the immediate physical context in which these poems were originally delivered, and to sketch out some of the ways in which context and meaning are inseparable in an emphatically social type of literature such as praise-poetry. It is worth closing, therefore, with the observation that the *Knútsdrápur* are remarkable, even unique, in the degree to which one can specify the circumstances of production and reception. For these poems can be dated to particular phases in the reign of the king, and some of them to a particular year or two; they can be localised not just to a region or place, but perhaps even (for the Winchester poems) to a particular, locatable building,

⁷⁸ Lawson, *Cnut*, 75; see also 130, 221-2.

⁷⁹ Lawson, *Cnut*, 114-15; Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 86-7, 233. That Cnut’s great-grandfather Gorm was also called Harthacnut is stated by Adam of Bremen (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum: Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Bernhard Schmeidler, 3rd edn (Hanover, 1917), 56).

⁸⁰ For the date of the *Liber Vitae* see *The Liber Vitae of the New Minster*, ed. Keynes, 37-8.

⁸¹ Frank, ‘King Cnut in the verse of his skalds’.

⁸² Poole, ‘Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History’; Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace*.

surrounded by other identifiable and well-recorded buildings; they can be attributed to named poets, for some of whom we have biographical information and by nearly all of whom we have other works; and their genesis can, of course, be ascribed to a particular patron, whose court-followers can be postulated as the wider audience for the poems' oral delivery.

There is more or less no other vernacular poetry from Anglo-Saxon England - and certainly no other corpus of poetry - that can be contextualised as well as this; and this, as I have tried to suggest, is fortuitously for a type of poetry that is deeply dependent on original context for generating its meaning, and for which we must attend to context if we are to re-capture its effects. The *Knútsdrápur* might thus arguably be ranked amongst the most important of poetic remains from Anglo-Saxon England, and so I would conclude by asserting that these Old Norse poems from Cnut's court are just as much a part of Anglo-Saxon England's literary history as, say, Latin works composed at the time - though one may look in vain for them in the standard handbooks of Anglo-Saxon literature.