

Changing Thegns: Cnut's Conquest and the English Aristocracy*

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England was conquered twice in the eleventh century: first in 1016 by Cnut the Dane and again in 1066 by William Duke of Normandy. The influence of the Norman Conquest has been the subject of scholarly warfare ever since E.A. Freeman published the first volume of his *History of the Norman Conquest of England* in 1867—and indeed, long before.¹ The consequences of Cnut's conquest, on the other hand, have not been subjected to the same scrutiny. Because England was conquered twice in less than fifty years, historians have often succumbed to the temptation of comparing the two events. But since Cnut's reign is poorly documented and was followed quickly by the restoration of the house of Cerdic in the person of Edward the Confessor, such studies have tended to judge 1016 by the standards of 1066. While such comparisons are useful, they have imposed a model on Cnut's reign which has distorted the importance of the Anglo-Scandinavian period.² If, however, Cnut's reign is compared with the Anglo-Saxon past rather than the Anglo-Norman future, the influence of 1016 can be more fairly assessed.

At first sight, there would seem little to debate. Cnut appears to have adopted wholeheartedly the traditional role of Anglo-Saxon kingship. The sources suggest that at every chance, Cnut proclaimed his determination to be a good English king,³ and modern scholarship has confirmed many of

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¹E.A. Freeman, *The History of the Norman Conquest of England*, 6 vols. (London, 1867-1875).

²For example, see Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1971), pp. 415-417 [hereafter cited as ASE].

³For example, see "Cnut's Proclamation of 1020," "Cnut's Proclamation of 1027," Prologue to Cnut's Laws. All references to laws are to *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. Felix Liebermann, 3 vols. (Halle, 1903-1916) [hereafter Anglo-Saxon Laws are cited under the title and chapter assigned by Liebermann]; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. trans. Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1961), s.a. 1016 [hereafter cited as ASC]; Florence of Worcester, *Chronicon ex Chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe, 2 vols. (London, 1848-1849), s.a. 1017 [hereafter cited as Fl. Wig.].

Cnut's claims. The important work of Sir Frank Stenton, H.R. Loyn, and L.M. Larson has demonstrated the continuity of Saxon political, administrative, and religious institutions under the Anglo-Scandinavian kings.⁴ Moreover, by pointing to the fact that Cnut introduced few Danish earls into the highest ranks of the landholding class and endowed only a handful of housecarls with modest estates, these studies have minimized the effects of Cnut's conquest, and emphasized the fact that native Englishmen, rather than imported Danes, were the most prominent figures in English politics between 1016 and the Norman Conquest.⁵ Thus, it appears that the *Encomiast* was as accurate as he was enthusiastic when he wrote that Cnut

diligently defended wards and widows, he supported orphans and strangers, he suppressed unjust laws and those who applied them, he exalted and cherished justice and equity, he built and dignified churches, he loaded priests and clergy with dignities, and he enjoined peace and unanimity upon his people.⁶

Yet, perhaps previous historians have been too hasty in their assessment of Cnut's reign. Although he sought to retain the traditional obligations and institutions of Saxon kingship, Cnut's relationship with his aristocracy—a relationship on which the internal peace and royal administration depended—remains ambiguous. Previous studies have assumed that there was no large scale displacement of the native aristocracy accompanying Cnut's accession.⁷ Moreover, because there is no evidence for even minor rebellions in England against Cnut's authority, historians have taken for granted that the native English aristocracy, like the clergy, prospered under Cnut. But, these conclusions are based on a superficial comparison between the seemingly placid nature of Cnut's rule and the jolting redirection that followed William's invasion. The question of whether Cnut

⁴L.M. Larson, "The Political Policies of Cnut as King of England," *American Historical Review* 15 (1909-1910): 720-743; idem., *Cnut the Great* (New York, 1912), pp. 104-136; Stenton, *ASE*, pp. 320-363; H.R. Loyn, *Anglo Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), pp. 212-219, 235 and passim; idem., *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1984).

⁵S. 969, 1121, 1063, 961 are the only extant grants to known housecarls by Cnut. All references to Anglo-Saxon diplomas are cited according to the number assigned to them by P.H. Sawyer in *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968) [hereafter cited as S.]. Moreover, there are only thirty-three instances of housecarls holding land in 1066 recorded in *Domesday Book*. None of them held large estates, which suggests that housecarls were not introduced as large landholders at the expense of native Englishmen. *Domesday Book*, ed. Abraham Farley and Henry Ellis (London, 1783-1816), 1, Fols. 36, 56, 75, 95, 99, 129, 130, 130b, 136b, 138, 138b, 140, 140b, 147, 149, 152, 152b, 164, 167, 195, 202, 213, 216, 217; DB, 2, fol. 59 [hereafter cited as DB].

⁶*Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ed. Alistar Campbell, Camden Third Series, 72 (1949), Cap. 2, 19 [hereafter cited as *EE*].

⁷Stenton, *ASE*, p. 413; D.J.V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age 400-1042* (London, 1973), pp. 314-341

ruled in the Old English tradition cannot be fully answered without a thorough analysis of the aristocracy under the Anglo-Scandinavian kings.

Because Cnut did not commission a Domesday survey, the influence of the Danish conquest on aristocrats and aristocratic landholding is difficult to gauge. Even so, an examination of the fragmentary and diverse evidence of chronicles, charters, wills, and laws demonstrates that Cnut's reign witnessed major alterations in the composition of the Old English aristocracy, and further that these changes radically altered certain traditional practices of Saxon governance.

Although it is not recorded that Cnut systematically dispossessed the Saxon aristocracy, it is clear that as a direct result of the Viking wars, there was a major upheaval among the landholding class. The usually laconic *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is almost eloquent in the entries from the Battle of Maldon in 991 to Cnut's return from Denmark in 1020. The *Chronicle*, Florence of Worcester, and Simeon of Durham record twenty-nine years of continuous devastation of life and property throughout all of England.⁸ Prior to 1016, five ealdormen—Brihtnoth, Uhtred, AElfric, Godwine and Ulfketel were killed in battle or by treachery.⁹ Between his accession in 1016 and 1019, Cnut killed the ealdormen Northmann, Aethelweard the son of Ealdorman Aethelmaer, Beorhtric the son of AElfheah, and the Aetheling Eadwig.¹⁰ Finally, upon his return from Denmark in 1020, Cnut outlawed Ealdorman Aethelweard and exiled Earl Thorkell the Tall, and Earl Godric disappears from the records altogether.¹¹ This period of battle, treachery, and revenge resulted in the death or permanent exile of all, save Leofwine, of the ealdormen who served under Aethelraed. Thus, within a few years of Cnut's accession the ealdormanly aristocracy was almost entirely dispossessed and replaced.¹²

⁸ASC, s.a. 991-1016; Fl. Wig., s.a. 991-1006; Simeon of Durham, *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae*, ed. T. Arnold, 2 vols. (London, 1882-1885), 2: 134-155 [hereafter cited as *SD*].

⁹Brihtnoth's death at Maldon in 991 is recorded in the *ASC*, s.a. 991, and celebrated in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E.V. Gordon (London, 1937). Earl Uhtred's death is described by Fl. Wig., s.a. 1016, and in *De Obsessione Dunelmi et probitatae Uchtrede Comitatus* in, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*. ed. T. Arnold, Rolls Series, 2 vols. (London, 1882-1885) [hereafter cited as *DOD*], 1:215-217. See also Dorothy Whitelock, "The Dealings of the Kings of England with Northumbria in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. P. Clemoes (London, 1959), pp. 70-88; ealdormen AElfric, Godwine, and Ulfketel died at *Assandum* (Fl. Wig., s.a. 1017).

¹⁰ASC, s.a. 1017 (C,D,E); Fl. Wig., s.a. 1017.

¹¹ASC, s.a. 1020 (C,D,E).

¹²This conclusion is based not only on the narrative sources but also on an examination of the witness lists of royal charters. The two surviving charters of Edmund Ironside (S. 947, 948) do not have witnesses, so it is impossible to know if Cnut retained any of those who served Edmund. It seems likely, however, that he did, in light of the passage quoted below (see note 29).

It is generally recognized that Cnut's institutional reorganization from ealdormen to earls was accompanied by a complete change in the personnel of the administrative aristocracy. Between 1016 and 1031, Cnut appointed earls who were closely connected to him by blood or marriage. Earls Eric, Ulf, and Eadric were Cnut's brothers-in-law. Eglaf was Ulf's brother, Hakon was Eric's son and Thorkell the Tall was likely Cnut's foster father.¹³ By 1031, however, all the Scandinavian earls had disappeared except Siward of Northumbria, who had himself married into an English family.¹⁴ The English comital houses of Godwine and Leofwine would dominate Anglo-Saxon politics for the next generation but, English though they were, neither was connected to the oldest or most powerful native English families. Leofwine's name first occurs in Aethelraed's reign on a charter dated 994, as ealdorman of the Hwicce.¹⁵ And not until Cnut's time does Godwine's name materialize.¹⁶ All the earls, Scandinavian and English alike, represented families new to power in England and owed their exalted positions to Cnut. Yet, they were not men from families bound by ties of kinship to each other or the royal house, as the previous generations of ealdormen had been.¹⁷

Anglo-Saxon governance, however had traditionally rested on the support and participation of thegns as well as greater aristocrats. Here the evidence is frustratingly thin, but what there is suggests that the upheaval in the upper aristocracy, brought on by the Viking wars and Cnut's accession was mirrored in the ranks of the thegns. The narratives of these years are notoriously vague and given to exaggeration. Nevertheless, they preserve a record of the decimation of the thegnly aristocracy. Unlike the ealdormen the thegns who died in battle are rarely and inconsistently recorded in the sources. Yet, while it is impossible to calculate exact numbers, the duration and geographical distribution of Anglo-Scandinavian confrontations suggests widespread destruction among the Saxon thegnly aristocracy. At the Battle of Maldon in 991, along with ealdorman Brihtnoth, sixteen identified "noble thegns" perished, along with "countless good men" whose names are not provided.¹⁸ In 1003, Florence records a fierce battle around Thet-

¹³Thorkell is called Cnut's foster father in the sagas. Although the sagas are not wholly reliable, Larson argues the possibility that they are correct on this point ("The Political Policies of Cnut as King of England," p. 726); *Flateyrbók*, eds. G. Vigfusson and C.R. Unger, 4 vols. (Christiania, 1859-1868), 1: 203.

¹⁴Larson, "The Political Policies of Cnut as King of England," p. 727.

¹⁵S. 880. For a discussion of Leofwine's role during Ethelraed's reign, see Simon D. Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Ethelred "The Unready"* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 197, 213-214.

¹⁶Godwine first signs as "dux" on a charter dated 1018 (S. 951).

¹⁷Robin Fleming, *Royal and Aristocratic Landholding and Alliance 871-1087* (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984), pp. 89-132.

¹⁸*The Battle of Maldon*.

ford, between Swegn and the men of East Anglia under ealdorman Ulfketel, "in which some of the East Anglian nobles fell . . . and there was a great slaughter on both sides."¹⁹ At the Battle of Ringmere in 1010, five important Saxons fell; Aethelstan the son-in-law of King Aethelraed and his son Oswig "a noble thegn," Wulfric son of Leofwine, and Eadwig brother of Aelfic, "along with many other noble thegns and immense numbers of other people."²⁰ In 1015, Morcar "thegn of the Seven Boroughs" and his brother Sigeferth, were killed on the king's orders; both were kinsmen of ealdormen Aelfhelm, who had been killed in 1006.²¹ Likewise, after Earl Uhtred had submitted to Cnut, both Uhtred and his thegn Thurketel Neafnason were killed by Thurbrand the Hold.²² At the Battle of *Assandun* in 1016, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that "all the flower of the English nobility was destroyed there."²³ And Florence laments that "almost all the English nobility, who had never sustained so severe a shock in battle as on that day, perished."²⁴ The narratives make it clear that thegns from all regions of England were affected by the wars. Local fyrds were frequently levied to help neighboring shires. And "the whole nation was called up" in 911, 1006, 1013, 1014, and four times in 1016.²⁵ Similarly, the tales of the devastation of the countryside are not to be taken lightly. The chronicles repeat continuously dramatic phrases such as, "[the Vikings] did just as they were accustomed, ravaged, burnt and slew as they went," when describing Danish armies.²⁶ It is impossible to determine the degree of destruction suffered during these years, and clearly some areas were hit harder than others; but in the twenty-nine year battle for England, nearly every shire suffered at the hands of either the English or the Danes.

The killing did not stop with Cnut's accession. The aristocracy was further depleted as a result of Cnut's fear of potential traitors. Cnut had Edric Streona killed because, in the words of Florence of Worcester, "he feared to be at some time deceived by [Edric's] treachery as his former lords . . . had been so frequently."²⁷ Similarly, after the death of Edmund Ironside, Cnut "called to London all bishops, ealdormen, leading men and nobles of the English people" to discuss the claims to the throne of Edmund's sons and brothers. Florence records that when the men were questioned regar-

¹⁹Fl. Wig., s.a. 1003.

²⁰ASC, s.a. 1010 (C,D,E); Fl. Wig., s.a. 1010.

²¹ASC, s.a. 1015 (C,D,E), 1006 (C,D,E).

²²Fl. Wig., s.a. 1016; *DOD*, p. 216.

²³ASC, s.a. 1016 (C,D,E).

²⁴Fl. Wig. s.a. 1016.

²⁵ASC, s.a. 911, 1006, 1013, 1014, 1016; Fl. Wig., s.a. 911, 1006, 1013, 1014, 1016.

²⁶ASC, s.a. 1001 (E).

²⁷Fl. Wig., s.a. 1017.

ding the agreement made between Cnut and Edmund at Olney the previous year, "in truth they gave false testimony and lied deceitfully imagining both that Cnut would be more gracious to them because of their lying and that they would receive a big reward from him." "Many of these false witnesses," Florence continues, "were put to death afterwards by Cnut [for their deceit]." ²⁸ These were not random murders of the native population by a blood thirsty Viking. Rather, they represented Cnut's desire to avoid the treachery which undermined Aethelraed's reign. In the words of the Encomiast,

It was the case that [Cnut] loved those whom he had heard to have fought previously for Edmund faithfully without deceit, and that he hated those whom he knew to have been deceitful and to have hesitated between the two sides with fraudulent unreliability, and on a certain day, he ordered the execution of many noblemen for deceit of this kind. ²⁹

Thus the narratives record a purge of the thegnly aristocracy between 1010 and 1017 which rivaled the carnage of the Norman Conquest.

While it is clear that the aristocratic population was severely depleted at Cnut's accession, it remains to be determined what impact this had on the traditions and institutions of Saxon governance. An examination of the laws, homilies, wills, and charters dating from this period suggests that as a result of widespread aristocratic death and the fact that Cnut did not systematically introduce a new landholding class, major and permanent alterations occurred in the Saxon social and political structures.

Evidence of a widespread redistribution of aristocratic lands is suggested in the law codes promulgated during and immediately following the period of the Danish invasions. Although the extant laws are arguably incomplete and preserve only those of particular interest to their ecclesiastical compilers, ³⁰ they include a number of provisions concerning the transference of land. Issued by Aethelraed and Cnut under the supervision of Wulfstan of York, these codes drew heavily from earlier Saxon compilations. ³¹ But some laws are clearly new additions, and probably reflect contemporary needs rather than ancient custom. One interesting and perhaps alarming feature of these codes is the increased number of laws concerning widows. Prior to the eleventh century, only five such laws occur, but under

²⁸Fl. Wig., s.a. 1016.

²⁹EE, Cap. 2, 15.

³⁰Patrick Wormald, "Aethelred the Lawmaker," in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. David Hill, *British Archeological Reports*, 59 (1978), pp. 41-80.

³¹Dorothy Whitelock, "Wulfstan and the Laws of Cnut," *English Historical Review* 63 (1948): 433-52.

Æthelraed and Cnut eight new laws concerning widows were issued.³² Previous laws specified the compensation due to widows if their *mund* was violated,³³ their exemption from certain dues,³⁴ and their right to inherit property.³⁵ The later codes of Æthelraed and Cnut placed much emphasis on the specific circumstances surrounding the inheritance and division of property. Widows were forbidden to remarry within one year,³⁶ and prohibited from marrying a close relation of their former husband.³⁷ Finally, "no widow shall be too hastily consecrated as a nun."³⁸ These laws suggest that the problems arising from widowhood were increasing, probably because of an increasing number of aristocratic widows, and the prohibitions against immediate remarriage or consecration prevented others from too quickly acquiring the widow's or her late husband's property. Wulfstan, in his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* confirms this assumption when he lamented that, "widows are forced into marriage and too many are reduced to poverty and greatly humiliated."³⁹

Other new laws in Cnut's code disclosed the precarious state of land tenure during his reign. The heriot of a thegn who fell in battle before his lord was to be remitted, and "the heirs shall succeed to his land and his property and make a very just division of it."⁴⁰ With respect to a widow who married within the first year of her widowhood, she lost her morning-gift "and all the property which she had from her first husband, and his nearest relatives shall take the land and property which she held."⁴¹ These laws suggest a breakdown in the traditional inheritance practices and the declining ability of kin-groups to retain their lands. Another new law spoke of land being *aetfengan*—attached or distrained—by "*swicigende manswican*" (deceiving deceivers), and of men being unjustly oppressed.⁴² The most interesting section of this law reads, "with regard to the practice of bringing forward, after a long silence, claims against an heir which had never been

³²The laws relating to widows promulgated prior to the second wave of Viking attacks are: Æthelberht 75, 76, 78; Ine 38; 6 Æthelstan 2. The new laws which appear in the later codes of Æthelraed and Cnut are: 5 Æthelraed 21, 6 Æthelraed 26, 39, 47; 1 Cnut 7, 2 Cnut 73.

³³Æthelberht 75.

³⁴6 Æthelstan 2.

³⁵Æthelberht 78; Ine 38.

³⁶5 Æthelraed 21.1; 6 Æthelraed 26.1; 2 Cnut 73a.

³⁷6 Æthelraed 12; 1 Cnut 7.

³⁸2 Cnut 73a, 3.

³⁹Wulfstan of York, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London, 1952).

⁴⁰2 Cnut 78.

⁴¹2 Cnut 73a.

⁴²5 Æthelraed 32.1.

made against his predecessor," which suggests a crisis in the legal and traditional means of land transference.

Problems with illegal seizure of land did not end with Cnut's accession. Indeed, they probably increased. In the secular code of Cnut, a new law appears entitled, "*Be Náám*" (concerning distraint), and marks the first appearance of the Scandinavian loanword meaning "distraint" in the Saxon dooms.⁴³ The law discusses the circumstances of such crimes and the legal procedure to be followed. It is significant that a Scandinavian word is used in a novel piece of legislation to describe what had apparently become a chronic problem during the Viking wars. Evidence in Cnut's laws suggests that land tenure had become alarmingly insecure in the years surrounding Cnut's accession.

The history and patterns of aristocratic landholding bears further witness to the revolution in land tenure during the troubled years surrounding the millenium. Although Anglo-Saxon wills record only the disposal of bookland, and not estates which would have been distributed among the kindred according to custom, these written bequests provide a clear idea of how land was transmitted and retained within the family.⁴⁴ An examination of the charters discloses that bookland was carefully guarded by kin-groups—even at the expense of the Church and at the risk of incurring the anathema hurled at those who tamper with the testators' wishes.

Wills which date from this period reveal that land which was held and bequeathed among the kindred of the upper aristocracy, was widely dispersed by 1066. And the families themselves, if they had not receded into economic obscurity, had certainly lost their former wealth and political position. The wills of ealdorman AElfgar and his two daughters, AElthelæd, wife first to King Edmund and then to ealdorman AElthelstan, and AElflæd the wife of ealdorman Brihtnoth, exemplify how much bookland was traditionally kept within the family.⁴⁵ Ealdorman AElfgar left the estate at Cockfield, Suffolk to AElthelæd with reversion after her life to Bury St. Edmunds. Yet, in her will AElthelæd leaves Cockfield to Bury only after the death of her sister AElflæd.⁴⁶ AElfgar left Heybridge to a certain AElfwold in order that he might pay his food rent to St. Paul's, Mersea.⁴⁷ Although St. Paul's held this estate in 1066,⁴⁸ AElflæd had it in her possession c. 951, and bequeathed it with no mention of AElfwold.⁴⁹ Although this is only one exam-

⁴³2 Cnut 19.

⁴⁴H.D. Hazeltine, "General Preface," in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), pp. vii-xl.

⁴⁵Whitelock, *Wills*, nos. 2, 14, 15.

⁴⁶Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 14.

⁴⁷Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 2.

⁴⁸*DB*, 2, fol. 13b.

⁴⁹Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 15.

ple of such a process, there is no reason to think that AElfgar's family was unique in its desire or ability to retain lands.

Further evidence of a kindred's guarding the integrity of their land-holdings comes from a provision which occurs in two wills dating from AElthelraed's reign. The ancient law of Alfred which states that bequeathed land could not be alienated except with the consent of the kin while in the presence of the king and a bishop,⁵⁰ is echoed in the phrase "*innon [th]e gecynde*" (to [remain] in the family), which appears several times in the will of the wealthy thegn Beorhtric and his wife AElfswith (dated 973 X 987),⁵¹ and twice in the will of Archbishop AElfric (dated 1003 X 1004).⁵² These are the unique instances of this phrase in the Saxon wills, thus it is significant that the two wills in which it does occur date from the period of war and Cnut's conquest. The breakdown of this familial ability to retain lands and the resulting rise of a "nouveau" aristocracy is strongly hinted at by AElfric when he comments that,

It is one thing that a man be rich if his parents (*ylðran*) have bequeathed him possessions; another thing if he becomes rich through covetousness.⁵³

The six surviving bequests of thegns from this period disclose a similiar desire to retain land within the kin-group.⁵⁴ An examination of the histories of the bequethed lands suggests that the thegnly families suffered fates equally as depressing as those of the ealdormen. From the heriots described in these wills, it is clear that these six thegns stood at the top of their social rank and probably maintained a close political relationship with the king.⁵⁵ By 1066, however, those lands bequested to kinsmen, often with the stipulation that they were to remain within the kin,⁵⁶ had clearly been alienated from the family. For example, the estates of Hatley and Potton in Bedfordshire which AElfhelm left to his brothers,⁵⁷ were held by earl Tostig in King Edward's day (*T.R.E.*).⁵⁸ The estate at Connington in Cam-

⁵⁰Alfred 41.

⁵¹Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 11.

⁵²Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 18.

⁵³*The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, part 1, Catholic Homilies, ed. B. Thorpe, AElfric Society 2 vols. (London, 1844-1846), 1:256.

⁵⁴Whitelock, *Wills*, nos. 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18.

⁵⁵When the heriots which appear in these wills are compared with 2 Cnut 71, it is clear that these thegns were both wealthy and of the highest standing. They fall into categories of those thegns described as being particularly close to the king. Furthermore, all of these names appear as *ministri* in the witness lists of AElthelraed's charters in years which would be consistent with the dates of the bequests. Although there is no way to prove that the testators are the thegns who subscribe the charters, and indeed all of the names are common, the possibility does exist.

⁵⁶Whitelock, *Wills*, nos. 13, 19.

⁵⁷Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 13.

⁵⁸*DB*, 1, fols. 217b, 218.

bridgeshire, the inheritance of AElfhelm's daughter, was held by a man of earl Waltheof in 1066.⁵⁹ The Suffolk lands left to AElfhelm's brothers were all held by men of no demonstrable consequence,⁶⁰ and the estate at Upton Scudamore in Wiltshire was divided between two thegns of little means and Karl, a wealthy *Domesday Book* thegn.⁶¹

The lands which Wulfgeat of Donnington bequeathed to kinsmen suffered a similar fate.⁶² Wulfgeat left Evenlode in Worcestershire to his wife, with reversion to his kin after her death. In 1066 this estate was held by a man called Hereward of unspecified status, who held it from Evesham.⁶³ Likewise, the Staffordshire land which was held jointly by Wulfgeat and his kinswoman AElfhild, was in the hands of Hunta a freeman who, according to *Domesday Book*, held no other lands *T.R.E.*⁶⁴ And two of the estates Wulfgeat left to his daughters were held by freemen of similar low status.⁶⁵ Other of Wulfgeat's lands, however, fell into more prominent hands. Donnington in Shropshire, from which Wulfgeat took his byname,⁶⁶ was controlled by Earl Eadwine *T.R.E.*⁶⁷ And Tardebige in Worcestershire was part of the *terra regis*.⁶⁸

The histories of the other lands from these thegnly bequests which can be traced in *Domesday Book* are consistent with the examples examined above. The lands once held by wealthy, prominent thegns prior to Cnut's accession were held, for the most part, by members of the royal family, royal officials, and wealthy thegns who are known to have risen under Cnut, or men of no known economic or political significance.⁶⁹ Thus it would seem that during the Viking wars and the early unsettled years of Cnut's reign, important thegnly families were either dispossessed, or if they survived, lost so much of their wealth and position that by 1066 they had fallen into obscurity.

The laws introduced by Cnut, coupled with the evidence from the wills, narratives, and *Domesday Book* testify to a major disruption in traditional

⁵⁹*DB*, 1, fol. 197.

⁶⁰*DB*, 1, fol. 190; *DB*, 2, fols. 299, 330b, 366b, 398b, 405b.

⁶¹*DB*, 1, fol. 70, 71b. A Karl first signs in 1019 (S.955) and is one of the most frequently attesting of Cnut's thegns from that date forward. In 1066, a Karl controlled several estates in Hampshire, Somerset, Surrey, and Wiltshire.

⁶²Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 19.

⁶³*DB*, 1, fol. 173.

⁶⁴*DB*, 1, fol. 279.

⁶⁵*DB*, 1, fols. 186, 257b.

⁶⁶Whitelock, *Wills*, no. 19. The bequest begins "[th]is is Wulfgates gewide aet Donnintune...."

⁶⁷*DB*, 1, fol. 253b.

⁶⁸*DB*, 1, fol. 172b.

⁶⁹*DB*, 1, fols. 5b, 7b, 67, 70, 71b, 136b, 139b, 140b, 142, 190b, 191b, 195, 195b, 196, 197b, 201, 277, 277b, 289b; *DB*, 2, fols. 8, 10, 10b, 11b, 21b, 22b, 31, 53b, 70, 82b, 83, 96b, 339b, 340, 343, 356b, 385b, 402, 406b.

patterns of acquiring and disposing of land. The meteoric rise of the house of Godwine and the slightly less spectacular accomplishments of the Leofrics preserved in *Domesday Book* demonstrate the relative fluidity of land-holding in early eleventh century England.⁷⁰ Likewise, the appearance and immediate prominence of powerful thegns such as Osgod Clapa and Tofi the Proud suggest that the upset in the personnel of the upper aristocracy was accompanied by similar changes among the thegns. This situation was likely prompted by the deaths of the large number of landholders, and exacerbated by the fact that unlike the later Norman settlement, no new men were systematically introduced in their place. The beneficiaries of the Danish Conquest were not, for the most part companions of the conqueror, but native Englishmen who survived the battles and purges of the 1010s. Indeed, the aristocracy of England on the eve of the Norman Conquest could be "new" without being foreign.

Accompanying this change in the aristocracy was an alteration in the aristocracy's political role. Witness lists of royal diplomas disclose the members of the king's *witan*—his chosen counsellors. Ealdormen and prominent thegns from throughout the kingdom traditionally acted as the secular advisors and would, therefore, have been in a position to influence royal decisions and receive royal favors. An examination of royal charters from the later years of Aethelraed's reign and the reign of Cnut reveals a major change in the personnel of the *witan* following Cnut's accession. Twenty-nine authentic royal charters survive from Cnut's reign. Thirteen date from 1016 to 1025, fourteen from 1031 to 1035, and two cannot be assigned to any specific year. Despite this paucity of charters, they tell a consistent tale.

As can be surmised from the narratives, the ealdormen who attested for Aethelraed, with the exception of Leofwine, never subscribed for Cnut after 1017. Their positions in the witness lists were filled by Cnut's newly created earls. More revealing is the fact that none of the thegns who witnessed Aethelraed's charters can be positively identified as attestors of the diplomas of Cnut. There is a minimum of sixty-four thegns who subscribed Aethelraed's diplomas between 1006 and 1016.⁷² Twenty-six thegns attested Cnut's charters between 1016 and 1019.⁷³ Of these ninety

⁷⁰Robin Fleming, "Domesday Estates of the King and the Godwines: A Study in Late Saxon Politics," *Speculum* 58 (1983): 987-1007.

⁷¹The authentic royal charters of Cnut are: S. 950, 951, 952, 955, 956, 958, 959, 960, 961, 962, 963, 964, 966, 967, 968, 969, 970, 971, 972, 973, 974, 975, 976, 977, 978, 979, 980, 983, 984.

⁷²I have adopted this time period because of the changes which occurred in the composition of Aethelraed's *witan* demonstrated by Simon Keynes, *Ethelred*, pp. 209-227. The identification of the individual thegns and the figures for Aethelrad's reign are based on the careful analysis by Keynes presented in tables 7 and 8.

⁷³I have adopted 1019 as the terminal date for two reasons. First, no authentic charters survive from 1020 or 1021, thus providing a break in the evidence. Second Cnut's return from Denmark in 1020 was accompanied by important changes in the personnel of his royal officials.

thegns, only eight bear the same names. Thus, only 12% of those who subscribed as *ministri* for Æthelraed could have done so for Cnut; and less than one-third of those thegns who witnessed for Cnut may have attested for Æthelraed. Moreover, when one examines the period between, when each of these names last appears on a charter of Æthelraed and first appears on a charter of Cnut, further doubt is cast on the possibility that they were the same men.⁷⁴

This change appears to reflect much more than a mere shift in the king's personal preference of counsellors. The few extant non-royal charters from this period reveal a similar change.⁷⁵ This is important because it was not the practice of the Saxon kings to make rapid or drastic alterations in the *witan* upon their accession. Of the twenty-one thegns who attested for Cnut and his sons, for example, all but the four who are presumed to have died before Cnut, subscribe for Edward the Confessor. Indeed, for the first decade of his reign the Confessor made only a few minor changes in the

⁷⁴The inconsistency of Anglo-Saxon naming practices precludes positive identification of those who attested as thegns. For example, the rare and sporadic use of bynames, and the peculiar tendency of the Anglo-Saxons to act according to current fashion when choosing names for their offspring, make it difficult to ascertain kinship connections. Likewise, the lack, or inconsistent applications, of bynames or cognomens to thegns when attesting charters, frustrates attempts to distinguish between attesting thegns. Nevertheless, from the table below, it seems likely that those who attested for Æthelraed were different men than those with the same names who subscribed for Cnut.

Thegns with Same Names Who Attest for Both Æthelraed and Cnut

Name	Last Attestation For Æthelraed	First Attestation For Cnut
	Date(S.#)	Date(S.#)
Leofwine	1015 (934)	1019 (950)
Æthelweard	1015 (934)	1019 (956)
Ælfwine	1013 (931)	1022 (988)
Æthelmaer	1012 (927)	1019 (955)
Ælfmaer	1014 (933)	1018 (951)
Godwine	1016 (935)	1022 (958)
Brictric	1016 (935)	1023 (954)
Odda	1015 (934)	1018 (951)

⁷⁵S. 1222, 1223, 1224, 1225. None of the thegns who attest these charters bear the same name as those who signed as *ministri* on the secular diplomas dating from Æthelraed's reign. Historians must consider both the poor survival rate of non-royal, non-ecclesiastical charters, and the cartularies in which these charters are preserved. Nevertheless, the extant evidence suggests that those thegns who witnessed secular charters during Æthelraed's reign did not continue to do so under Cnut.

thegns of his *witan*.⁷⁶ Likewise, Simon Keynes, in his study of Aethelraed, demonstrated a similar continuity in attesting thegns between the reigns of Aethelraed II and his immediate predecessors.⁷⁷ Thus, the evidence from the witness lists echos the narratives in suggesting a major displacement at the accession of Cnut among the thegns who figured prominently in the political events of the fifty years preceeding the Norman Conquest.

The implications of this shift in the composition of Cnut's *witan* are significant. Although Cnut included thegns among his *witan* they were there not because they were men of long standing influence, but because they were members of an aristocracy who owed its wealth and position to the king and the turbulence which brought him to the throne. Moreover, evidence from *Domesday Book*, a generation later, demonstrates that the majority of the wealthiest thegns had acquired substantial jurisdictional and fiscal privileges on the local level.⁷⁸ And yet, these men were conspicuously absent from the witness lists of royal charters. Local feelings and local interest, therefore, did not play an active role in kingdom-wide politics as they had done in earlier reigns. As a consequence of the redistribution of landholding and influence occurring at this time, the relationship between king and local aristocrats was becoming increasingly distant. By creating a loyal aristocracy, Cnut was able to maintain an effective administration and secure internal peace. The continuation of these policies under a weaker king to whom the greater and lesser aristocrats did not owe their positions, however, could seriously endanger the stability of Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

Eric John has remarked that for Cnut "the simple difficulty of exercising so wide and so unstable an empire made it necessary to practice a delegation of authority against every tradition of English kingship."⁷⁹ This examination of the fate of the thegnly aristocracy has revealed that the events surrounding Cnut's accession and his governing practices brought about dramatic administrative changes which ran far deeper than the creation of earls and earldoms. The disappearance of the aristocratic families which had traditionally played an active role in the governance of the realm, coupled with Cnut's choice of thegnly advisors, put an end to the balanced relationship between monarchy and aristocracy so carefully forged by the West Saxon kings. The first wave of Viking invasions brought about the creation of a unified England under a strong monarchy. The second wave and conquest destroyed this unity and undermined West Saxon authority.

⁷⁶This conclusion is based on an examination of the charters of Cnut and Edward the Confessor, the results of which I presented in a paper entitled "The Great Thengs in Council: Aristocratic Participation in Late Saxon Governance," at the Seventeenth International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan (May, 1982).

⁷⁷Keynes, *Ethelred*, pp. 115-120.

⁷⁸This conclusion is based on an examination of the landholding patterns and jurisdictional privileges of the Domesday Book thegns, and of the charters of Edward the Confessor.

⁷⁹Eric John, *Orbis Britanniae* (Leicester, 1966), p. 61.