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## Aethelred and Cnut: Saxon England and the Vikings

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Never has a single occurrence changed history. While tempting to point to the Norman Conquest of 1066 as the event that caused the fall of the Anglo-Saxons, the change had begun decades before by other events from both within and without England. The rise of the Saxons meant the waning of the Roman British and their relocation into what is now Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany. The Saxons were able to survive numerous Viking raids and internal strife before the end began its journey. In the midst of Viking invasions, both invading Vikings and neighboring Saxons alike absorbed the numerous Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. This struggle for solidified power brought a political unity to the island and laid the foundation for what would become England. While many factors played a role in the eventual fall of the Saxons, one of the pivotal pieces in the evolution of Anglo-Saxon England was the conflict between Aethelred II (978-1016), called the Unready, and Cnut (1016-1035), the son of Aethelred's Viking rival. The failure of Aethelred to repel the Vikings provided an atmosphere in which an emboldened Cnut was able to successfully conquer and consolidate Anglo-Saxon England as well as much of Scandinavia. Cnut strengthened the central authority of the crown and increased the stability of the kingdom while opening a door for the rise of earls to play a larger part in England. In the process of Cnut's conquest, Anglo-Saxon relations with Normandy grew and planted the seeds of future conquest.

A discovery of how Cnut's reign in the aftermath of Aethelred changed the course of Anglo-Saxon England must begin with a glimpse into a previous time. A view of the evolution of England from the time before the invasion at Lindisfarne in 793 and into the centuries of turmoil that followed set the stage for the culmination of unity under Cnut. This stabilization in the face of waves from both Viking raiders and settlers occurred under Saxon kings such as Alfred (871-899) and Aethelstan (924-939). After a period of relative peace, renewed invasions from the north threatened Saxon stability. What would play out between the new invaders and the Saxon kings would set the stage for the penultimate reign of the Saxons. The necessity of foreign allies in the face of Viking incursions would also factor into how Saxon England would meet its fate.

Before the Viking raid of the monastery at Lindisfarne, conflict, both with the Britons as well as each other, characterized Anglo-Saxon history in England.

The Saxons had established multiple kingdoms in England after the fall of Roman Britain early in the fifth century. These kingdoms could be large in territory or as small as a shire is today. The political dynamic of these kingdoms often resulted in the most powerful of the kings becoming an overlord of the others. The Saxons were a mixture of Germanic people from the continent who had enjoyed relations with the Romans and settled along the coast of the North Sea. The British regarded them as barbarians, yet in great Roman tradition had brought many of their warriors in to assist the British against invaders.<sup>1</sup> Originally a pagan people, they slowly converted to Christianity over the following centuries. The small Saxon kingdoms coexisted amongst themselves and their British, Pict, and Scottish neighbors.

Detailed knowledge of the Saxons is limited prior to the Viking raids. Most has come down through the ages via Church fathers and archaeology. The last of the leading kings was Offa of Mercia (757-796). A contemporary and often seen as an equal to Charlemagne (769-814), Offa represented a step towards political unity within the stability of his long reign, an anomaly for its time.<sup>2</sup> Offa reformed the church, led building projects, and continued the struggle against the Britons, who the Saxons began calling the Welsh. An irony of the name Welsh stemmed from it being the Saxon word for foreigner. Another testament to the greatness of Offa was that by the end of his reign the neighboring kingdoms had all but ceased to exist.<sup>3</sup> Saxon England had become a relatively stable region by the end of the eighth century.

The consolidation of Saxon England did not begin with the influence of Offa. The seventh century saw aggression and conflict, which set kings in opposition and saw alliances that brought more unity to England than had been previously enjoyed. That unity however was not intended to have England under one true king. Rather, the kings were choosing sides in efforts to dominate the island and defend against other cultures. The Venerable Bede listed seven kings as being preeminent over their contemporaries. The first four kings of the list were Aelle of Sussex (477-514), Ceawlin of Wessex (560-591), Aethelberht of Kent (560-616), and Raedwald of East Anglia (599-624). Bede's reasons for choosing these kings are unknown. Whatever the reason, there currently exists no proof that their influence extended north of the Humber River.<sup>4</sup> The overlap of rule spoke more to the dynamic of dominance and less to cooperation. As one region waned in prominence, the next could obtain influence.

The remaining three kings in Bede's list dominated the bulk of the seventh century and were all from Northumbria—Edwin (616-633), Oswald (634-642), and Osuiu (642-670). Battle and resistance from unlikely alliances defined all three.

The southern Christian kingdoms, including the Welsh, allied with the pagan Penda of Mercia (632-655) to combat the rise of Northumbria and the northern kings. A factor in this unification became the idea of a common enemy. Alliances and victories brought the prominence of one region over another, while the ambitious kings sought dominion over their peers. Without a familial bond or legacy amongst the kingdoms, it remained that a king under the sway of one powerful crown could assume the mantle of overlord through the death of the leading king. A united England was in its infancy and would experience the growing pains of sibling rivalry before the coming of the ultimate common enemy in the form of the Vikings.

Of great importance to medieval right of rule was the notion of legacy and familial claims. While those on the throne easily ignored facts in favor of the factors supporting their causes, the written word had yet to establish itself as preeminent. The Anglo-Norman chronicler Gaimar presented the idea that the Danes had come to England before the Saxons. Cnut would come to embrace this idea as Danish prior sovereignty validated his right to rule England.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Gaimar utilized the alleged sovereignty of a King Dan in 787.<sup>6</sup> The claim, of course, was only effective when backed by a position of strength. However, in 793 the nature of Saxon England would be forever altered regardless of hereditary claims. This homogenized Saxon stability.

Amidst “immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery, dragons flying across the firmament” the Vikings raided the holy island of Lindisfarne.<sup>7</sup> The Anglo-Saxon world turned upside down as the wealth of the churches was now under attack not by kings but by marauders. Despite the advancements in political unity, the Saxon kingdoms were not prepared for this type of invasion. Claims of jurisdictional dominion before the end of the eleventh century were not forthcoming.<sup>8</sup> The raiding of the British Isles evolved into Viking settlements. It would be under this strain that the Saxon adaptation would begin towards true political unity and set the stage for one England.

The whole region felt the wrath of the Viking invasions. Ireland and the smaller islands surrounding the primary two bore witness to raids and settlers. Viking lords established themselves in makeshift kingdoms. In England, by the late ninth century, the whole of the island save Wessex lived under Viking rule. Viking lands from Dublin to York presented a cohesive opportunity. A strong Viking king could have united a territory in such a way that it would have been impossible for the Saxons to resist. Yet, the early Viking kingdoms of the British Isles were not true monarchies, their kings not military visionaries, and the attractions of assimilation proved greater.<sup>9</sup> The Saxons were not the only culture

who lacked strong central authority of any lasting kind. In fact, it was quite indicative of the period throughout Europe.

The confederation of kingdoms that collectively made up Saxon England had begun to fall. English wealth and resources remained steady, but new leaders emerged. The Saxons and Scandinavians had begun to assimilate culture and place names, practice and polity, and laws and customs in the Viking-held lands. The lone Saxon kingdom of Wessex would fight to defend Saxon liberties and attempt to regain lands lost to the invaders. Saxon life had become so ingrained in England that they dismissed the notion they themselves were the invaders a mere few centuries before. The multi-kingdom Anglo-Saxon system had progressed into a single throne by the end of the tenth century. There were drawbacks. For instance, circumstances occurred in the eleventh century when the candidate options for king become narrow and the choice of individuals was not promising. During this time, the threat from Viking conquest was great. To survive, the Saxons would have to unify and reinvent themselves.<sup>10</sup>

King Alfred, known to history as Alfred the Great, and his immediate successors would stem the advance of the Vikings and renew Saxon advances in England. Alfred reformed battle tactics, added a true Saxon navy, and turned the tide of the Viking conquest. The 878 Peace of Wedmore saw Alfred recognize the Danish occupation of non-Wessex England. The legitimacy of the Viking settlements now in place, the Danelaw, those areas controlled by the Vikings, further solidified the administration of a large section of the island. Despite Alfred's advances, the Vikings were now in England to stay and became assimilated with the Saxon population. Unlike the Saxon conquests centuries before that pushed the Britons west into Wales, the Viking conquest failed to contain the Saxons in Wessex.

The largest gain in political solidarity occurred under Aethelstan during the decades after Alfred. His successes unintentionally laid the foundation for the ease of conquest by Cnut. Aethelstan became the first English monarch by declaration and to large extent conquest. More than solidifying rule over the English, he also reclaimed the Danish lands to the northeast. Historians considered him the first to have hegemony over the whole island of Britain.<sup>11</sup> With political control now established over the entirety of Britain, a usurper or conqueror could easily supplant the ruling authority by force and have the administrative mechanisms in place for ready control.

The benefits of hegemony were substantial. During this time of relative internal peace, the Saxons enjoyed law and church reform as well as building projects. Newfound unity while bringing stability also increased the opportunity

for rapid and total conquest. Missing from the Saxon kingdom that existed centuries prior were the buffer states that create the piecemeal confederation of kingdoms. A unified Saxon kingdom was what Aethelred inherited, albeit accompanied by the significant internal strife that typically associated itself with Saxon successions. Saxon England by the end of the tenth century had become a realm of all or nothing.

The Viking contributions to England and the nature of their influence and intent evolved over the centuries of contact. Vikings brought more than the rapine and slaughter described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. England increased both its trade and trading partners and this included Viking networks. The fortified town or *burh* also arrived on the islands. This positively increased the infrastructure of Saxon life.<sup>12</sup> The Scandinavians lived alongside the Saxons in England for such an extended period that the familiarity would become an advantage for the next wave of Viking invaders. The nature of this wave of invasions witnessed much change from the January raid on Lindisfarne in 793. A key difference between the early and late Viking Ages were that kings led the later raids. Men who failed to be recognized as rulers in their homelands led the early age raiders. In addition, by the end of the tenth century, the riches of Russia were no longer available to plunder.<sup>13</sup> This led the Scandinavians to sail westward to reclaim the lands lost to the Saxons.

The Viking raids resumed in 997 during the reign of Aethelred II, called the Unready. They were milder than those previous but deadly and effective nonetheless. Danish king Svein (986-1014), called Forkbeard, and father of Cnut made efforts not to antagonize potential allies by senseless pillage.<sup>14</sup> The Vikings had already established settlements on the island and had no need to establish further expansion. These raiders sought to gain riches, while Svein Forkbeard contemplated adding England to his domain. Unlike previous Viking rulers seeking to carve a piece of England for themselves and their people, Svein assessed the whole of England as available to conquer.

Historians have portrayed Aethelred as a poor ruler unready for his mantle of kingship or poorly advised in his enterprises. Yet, there are those, such as P.H. Sawyer and Ryan Lavelle, who claim this assessment as unfair. Sawyer contends Aethelred is unfairly blamed and compared unjustly to Alfred. Ryan Lavelle has argued that Aethelred was not entirely to blame for the success of the renewed Viking incursions. Blame may be steered towards the poor defenses that plagued the ealdormen, or nobles, and the succession turmoil surrounding Aethelred and his ascension to the throne. It should be argued that the poor defensive effort derived more from the style of defenses employed rather than circumstance. The tenuous situation between king and country was a series of

compromises between the aims and wishes of the king and his nobles.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Lavelle acknowledged that Scandinavian sources were often complimentary towards Aethelred and viewed him as a worthy and noble ruler. Much of the vilification stemmed from the Anglo-Norman culture following the eleventh century Norman Conquest of England. Yet, the fact remained that under his reign, the Danish kings conquered England in 1013. Shortly after his death, England became part of Cnut's vast North Sea Empire.

Since the nature of the Viking raids of the end of the tenth century was more piratical than strategic, England realized a return to the original days of the Viking threat, only this time, potential Viking allies surrounded the Saxons. Another concern that threatened Saxon security was the lack of direct heirs to the throne at the time of the raids. This ensured internal conflict and a power struggle became inevitable. Aethelred solved the issue of succession by fathering ten children in slightly over twelve years. His choice of wife would play heavily into the future of England. He married Emma of Normandy. Peaceful succession of kingship had not been the norm either in Saxon England nor anywhere else in Europe during the medieval period. Despite a resolution in providing heirs, the ambitions of Svein and his son Cnut would run counter to the initial pillage style of raiding in England.

After the millennium, England became a steady battleground between Saxon and Dane. Svein raided at will leaving devastation in his wake. The cohesion that had grown in England from previous reigns now faded into the mist of war. Because he learned that the Danes planned to deprive him of his life, in 1002 Aethelred ordered all Danes in England put to death.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it was the Danes that were killed in England on Saint Brice's Day. Historian Susan Reynolds argued that the Saint Brice's Day Massacre of 1002 targeted not those of Danish descent but rather those visiting aliens or recent immigrants.<sup>17</sup> If that were the case, it would make sense that the earlier Scandinavian settlers had become so entrenched in England that they were considered more English than Dane.

The situation in England deteriorated after the massacre. One way to view his action would be that it showed a decisive, confident, and active ruler rather than a skulking king fearful of treachery that historians have often made him out to be.<sup>18</sup> Yet, action so decisive in the face of an enemy that had not been defeated and a kingdom near defenseless to their attacks was a gamble that would lead to dire consequences. Svein continued his raids as ealdormen—the magistrates and commanders of shire forces—feared facing the Vikings in combat.<sup>19</sup> Aethelred and his ealdormen were at a loss to fend off the raids and protect the shires. By 1010, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle stated that no shire would stand by another.<sup>20</sup> The

administration remained intact in England. It was not the political structure but the ineptitude of the leaders that caused the Viking successes.

That ineptness was due to the massive changes in leadership occurring during the age. There were great changes in the ranks of the thegns, or king's retainers, under Aethelred and Cnut. Among these were the rise of Godwin and Leofwine. The narratives record lengthy purges between 1010 and 1017 that rivaled the carnage of the Norman Conquest.<sup>21</sup> While a change at the top of the political pyramid often brought some change, the increase of turnover within the ranks of those who handled the day to day operations of the kingdom changed not only the leadership on the islands, but the families which now controlled local administration.

Aethelred lost his kingdom to Svein in 1013. The Saxon royal house fled to the safety of Normandy for the year that Svein ruled England. The legitimate heirs to England would spend a significant portion of life in the Norman court. Upon Svein's death in 1014, the people recalled Aethelred and rebuked Cnut. Cnut did not simply sail home to sulk. Instead, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentioned Cnut sailing to Sandwich before cutting the hands, ears, and noses from the hostages his father had collected.<sup>22</sup> The return of Aethelred was under the condition that he ruled the people better than his first reign. Cnut continued his struggle against Aethelred until the death of the king in 1016. Lavelle called it a testament to effective rule under Aethelred that the English political machinery remained in operation and continued into the following reigns.<sup>23</sup> It would be more accurate to heap that praise on those who preceded Aethelred than the king himself. While history likely viewed him unfairly, the stability of Saxon England's administration had become a staple of daily life.

While Cnut failed to immediately assume the throne in Denmark, he became king in England in 1016. However, he was not the only king. Edmund II (1016)—called Edmund Ironsides—also became the English king. Cnut married Emma of Normandy, widow of Aethelred, seeking to take advantage of the political union. Discussion opened between the two kings to determine the best method to settle the matter of their claims. The tradition of resolving conflict through single combat had become entrenched in England by the eleventh century. Cnut and Edmund were to meet to decide the matter in this manner but opted to divide the island instead.<sup>24</sup> Edmund, however, was unable to survive the year, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle spoke of his burial in Glastonbury next to his grandfather.

Cnut became sole ruler of England by 1017, the year of his marriage to Emma. Although he kept his previous common law wife, Aelgifu, he sent her to

Scandinavia. He divided England into four parts—Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria. Cnut repaired churches destroyed by the Vikings, built new churches, and became patron to monasteries. His being moved to tears by a ballad while his boat neared Ely displayed a more gentle side of Cnut. The view of the church and the singing of the monks prompted him to savor the moment.<sup>25</sup>

Upon his brother's death, Cnut claimed the Danish throne and became king of England, Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden. In Scandinavia, he earned the title, "Cnut the Great." His English rule was one of purges and change. Cnut's changes did not place the Danes in the seats of aristocracy. Rather, the Englishmen who survived the purges and battles assumed leadership roles.<sup>26</sup> This could have been in part due to the non-English holdings of Cnut and the desire to have stability throughout his empire. Historian Katherin Mack also highlighted that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle described five ealdormen killed in battle or by deceit before 1016, but Cnut surpassed that number in just four years.<sup>27</sup> With Cnut's death in 1035, a return to the Saxon line was less than a decade away. His Viking heirs proved inadequate to stem the return of the Saxons.

Cnut's sons became kings of England if only for a few years. The question of which son should follow Cnut remained a topic of debate. Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), son of Aethelred followed Harold I (1035-1040), called Harefoot, and Harthacnut (1040-1042). During the reign of Cnut and his sons, Godwin, Earl of Wessex, grew in power. His strength would cast an ominous shadow over the kingdom until his death, and his sons would be the last leaders of a Saxon England. With the death of the Viking kings, England looked inward for rule. The story of Aelfgifu and her alleged adultery illustrated the further break between England and Scandinavia following the death of Cnut and his sons. The Norwegian rejection of her and her son Swen broke any blood claim to the English throne by the Norwegians.<sup>28</sup> Her story could be the one woven into the Bayeux Tapestry referencing an illegitimate pretender and his line's claim to the throne. It would be the rise of the Godwin and the relationship of Emma to Normandy that would chart England's course.

In the strong English tradition, sons who all saw themselves as rightful heirs contested the succession following the death of Cnut. Cnut's sons divided his empire, with Harthacnut taking Denmark and Harold reigning in England. Norman poet and chronicler Wace described Aethelred's sons Alfred and Edward as believing their claim to the English throne the strongest. They assembled a fleet and invasion force and set sail from Normandy with Norman backing. The English defended Harold from the invaders either due to a fear of Harold or liking him the best according to Wace.<sup>29</sup> Either way, Edward realized that the loss of life



necessary to gain his inheritance would be too great and ended his quest. A strong precedent had now been set and would be reflected upon by future Normans. The conflict between the duchy and the islands had begun.

The nature of England's progression of central authority into a strong kingship in the Saxon years is noteworthy. Chris Wickham wrote of the paradox existent in England; it was a European country, which enjoyed the most complete aristocratic dominance, based on property rights while at the same time being a land in which the king maintained near total control over political structures. He attributed this peculiarity to the combination of the oligarchical compact that allowed Wessex to rise to dominance in the 910s and the crystallization of property rights that occurred in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>30</sup> This paradox led to Godwin and his sons merging the two at the death of Saxon England. While not a cause for the fall of the Saxons, it made for an easier transition of a strong monarch to supplant existing nobility with his own men while resting assured of their ability to maintain property based on tradition and the servitude of the populace.

A strong central authority, in conjunction with a political structure that supported the aristocracy's control over the wealth and resources of England, made for a very attractive realm. In addition, Cnut had established a strong military structure that would provide significant stability to England. He created a standing military force called the *housecarls* and maintained a strong navy as well. To pay for this internal security, Cnut levied a heavy tax known as the *heregeld*.<sup>31</sup> The *housecarls* would survive to fight at Hastings and die alongside the last Saxon king. Because the tradition of a standing army and the taxes to pay for it were already established, the transition to Norman rule was straightforward. The Normans would increase their dominance over the island through castle building and military might. While Cnut increased the infrastructure in England, the stronger aristocracy that began in the wake of the purges and as with the death of most great kings, created an environment wherein his successors struggled to live up to his lineage.

The success enjoyed by Cnut provided him the moniker "the Great" in Scandinavia. However, despite his attachment and success in England, the English did not bestow the title upon him. His empire came about by the subjugation of five kingdoms, Denmark, England, Norway, Scotland, and Wales. He even boasted that by the favor of Christ he had taken the land of the Angles and called himself emperor.<sup>32</sup> Not many in the post-Roman world had dared call themselves emperor, but those that did, had their greatness remembered. Perhaps the fact that Alfred remains the only monarch called "the Great" by the English speaks to the nature of what it was to be considered English. The link between Aethelred, Cnut, and the

eventual Norman rulers was Emma of Normandy. During the ascension of Svein, Emma and her two sons by Aethelred, Edward and Alfred, fled to Normandy for safety. The impact of Edward living in Normandy cannot be understated. Being half Norman, the complexion of England would change drastically under his rule. Emma's children, both by Cnut and Aethelred, would guide England during the last days of the Saxons.

The atmosphere of England at the death of Cnut was one of positioning and struggle. William of Malmesbury argued that the English desired the sons of Aethelred. Earl Godwin, being the greatest stickler for justice, professed himself the defender of the fatherless and having Emma and the royal treasures in his possession, held out against his opponents for some time.<sup>33</sup> No matter the real reasoning behind Godwin's support, the root of his goals was to secure his position as the leading nobleman within England. The rise of the earls defined the remaining decades of the Saxon era. It was the actions of the earls that created the kings and provided them with both security and headache.

The consequence of the purges and violence during Cnut's reign revealed the changes within the political structure of England. Cnut divided the island in order to better rule it. This gave the earls power they had not enjoyed before. The king remained the seat of power, but the aristocrats grew in influence. The subsequent reign of Edward included the incipient political disintegration of the kingdom in the face of the advancing territorial power of the great earls.<sup>34</sup> This situation seemed destined to devolve the kingdom, as Edward remained childless. However, the political hierarchy longed for a powerful figure to unify the realm. The heirs of Cnut and Aethelred were not as strong as the nobles that surrounded them. The eleventh century became a time of great political upheaval in northwestern Europe.

Cnut had been able to utilize his power base and alliances with the aristocracy of the Danelaw to his advantage. Coupled with the selection of favorable ealdormen and the loss of life by Saxon aristocracy in battle, Cnut was able to overcome many of the disadvantages that traditionally faced kings of Wessex.<sup>35</sup> The destruction of the traditional power families and the rise of the new nobility, such as the family of Godwin, played a role in Cnut's ability to administer the kingdom. Consider the division made in ancient Rome to better rule the empire and how it increased the speed and efficiency of administration. Cnut's empire was also vast and divided by a large sea. The restructuring allowed the crown's presence to be felt in more than one region at a time. However, like the division of the Roman Empire, those selected to administer the new earldoms pressed their advantages and sought more control and freedoms. The line between lord and

vassal thinned with the solidification of the earls.

Heavy taxes raised to provide security had been a hallmark of Cnut's reign. The population accepted these only as long as peace endured. Harthacnut had no such luxury. In order to provide for his fleet, he immediately alienated his new subjects with a hefty tax. He also burned Worcester in response to protests of taxation.<sup>36</sup> The stability that his father had enjoyed slipped his grasp. The English rejoiced as he collapsed after a drinking binge at a wedding and died. The earls and administrators of the realm were now in a position of strength. The matter of succession allowed them to play puppeteers once again.

The rise of powerful earls did not create a weakened monarchy. The monarchy remained in full control. However, the influence of men like Godwin of Wessex became greater as time progressed. The system created opportunity for the new earls to place family members in positions of power. These families had previously exercised little power. The ascension of Edward the Confessor brought an additional problem to the throne. In addition to his connection to the Normans, as he himself was half Norman, Edward also had more interest in spiritual matters. Taking as his wife Edith, the daughter of Godwin, Edward refused to create an heir. Moreover, Godwin and his sons would utilize their closeness to the throne to increase their sphere of influence, which Edward resented. He exiled Godwin and his family. Even during his exile, Godwin's strength grew to the level where he was able to return to his earldom with little repercussion.

England had become a melting pot of cultures. The Vikings and Saxons, barbarians of the post-Roman world, had obtained full control of the islands. Although England served one king and followed one banner, the tradition of local leadership survived in the offices of the earls. A new England rose in the wake of Aethelred and Cnut. A stronger monarchical position provided the ability to control government beyond the bounds of ethnicity. The new aristocracy tested the limits of its own power. The subsequent outcome of Danish conquest and the collapse of the regional kingdoms of Saxon England increased the position of those who survived.<sup>37</sup>

Saxon England slowly consolidated from a confederation of smaller kingdoms into a single political unit. While there existed kings who held preeminence over their neighbors, the kingdoms remained separate. The coming of the Vikings altered the political dynamic. While the early raids targeted the spoils of war, the later waves of Viking invasions found settlements and new kings in old kingdoms. The struggle against the Viking invader brought most of the Saxon kingdoms to their knees, but the resurgence of Wessex not only saved Saxon England, it reclaimed the island for the Saxons.

The actions of Aethelred and Cnut led Saxon England into the final phase of the Anglo-Saxons. The unification under Cnut brought with it a change in aristocracy and a rise in the power of the earls. A stronger connection to Normandy through marriage and alliance began the shift to the continent and away from Scandinavia. The Battle of Hastings ended Saxon England, but the conflict between Aethelred and Cnut initiated the decline.

## Notes

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