CHAPTER TWO

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN CNUT’S REIGN: THE ROYAL COURT

The Nature of the Royal Court Immediately Before the Reign of Cnut

The systems of central government and the nature of the royal court which Cnut inherited from his Anglo-Saxon predecessors are only occasionally reported in the extant sources, and have rarely been discussed by modern historians. However, some general features are discernable. The king was the source of all authority in late Anglo-Saxon England. A body of counsellors, the *witan*, advised him and shared the consequences of some of his actions. However, little is known of the composition of this political body or its precise functions. Royal charters seem to offer some indications of its composition, preserving within their witness-lists the names and titles of some of the men who surrounded the king at public assemblies. At the head of the secular entries in the witness-lists are the ealdormen or earls. As well as their obligations in the localities of England, these officials appear to have held significant influence at court. However, I shall only trace the briefest details of their role.

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1 I shall discuss only the secular officials in the royal court here. Clerical members of this political body will be discussed in a subsequent chapter on Cnut’s relations with the Church.


3 For an example of the *witan* sharing in a king’s fate, see Asser’s comments on King Æthelwulf’s renegade son Æthelbald and his *witan*: *Vita Ælfredi Regis*, ch. 12–13, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1904), 9–12.

4 Here I concur with Keynes, *Diplomas*, 14–83, especially 39–79, in his conclusion that similarities in witness-lists surviving from a variety of archives, often geographically distant from each other, indicate that some written record of the pronouncements of the royal court (including the upper echelons of the witness-lists) was made at that court and sent out to the localities.

5 As observed by T. J. Oleson, *The Witenagemot in the Reign of Edward the Confessor: A Study in the Constitutional History of Eleventh-Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 53–4, the frequency of their appearance in the witness-lists of royal diplomas would appear to suggest that their presence at meetings of the witan was compulsory.
Recently, Keynes has expanded Larson’s discussion of Cnut’s ealdormen and earls, to show their influence on Cnut’s administration. He demonstrated that Cnut’s reign in England can be divided into three time-periods, each marked by the ascendancy of a particular earl: the period 1017–21 marked by the primacy of Earl Thorkell, that 1021–3 by the primacy of Earl Eiríkr, and that 1023–35 by the primacy of Earl Godwine. Little remains here but to concur with him.

Below the social level of the earls previous studies have begun by identifying members of the royal household through the occasional inclusion of a title such as discþen, byrle, hreglþegn, or their Latin equivalents, in the witness-lists. As no such figure is identified in any reliable diploma from Cnut’s reign this approach is not possible. The standard title for the majority of secular officials in Cnut’s diplomas is the term minister. The term is indiscriminately used in witness-lists for a variety of officials of both local and national importance, who held a wide range of responsibilities. However, it is apparent that amongst the ministri present in the witness-lists there are both attendant thegns travelling with the royal court, whose names frequently recur and who attest prominently at the head of the lists, and locally powerful men based in the immediate hinterland of the meeting, who are usually found lower down the witness-lists and who usually appear only once or twice. Thus, a careful approach to those names which appear commonly at the head of the lists of ministri can identify some whose influence was beyond that of any individual locality and who probably held responsibilities at court.

As Keynes has shown in his research into King Æthelred’s diplomas, patterns can be discerned in the relative order of the uppermost names in these witness-lists, and the height of individuals in these lists appear to mark (or perhaps only reflect) their prominence at court. It is unclear what practises were used to organise and orchestrate the sliding-scale of prominence within this group, but it is clear that names within the uppermost ministri can be observed appearing consistently in positions of prominence relative to their peers, and that the rising or falling in such a sequence can be connected to increased prestige in the royal court, or falling from the king’s grace.

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7 See Keynes, Diplomas, 158–9, for approaches to Æthelred’s reign in this vein.
8 Keynes, Diplomas, 84–231.