CHAPTER TEN

THE CONQUEST OF NORWAY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPERIAL ASPIRATIONS

There are clear differences between the nature of Cnut’s control over England, Denmark and Norway, and much about the seizure of Norway sets it apart from the other territories. While Cnut appears to have used his wealth to increase his authority in England and Denmark, his seizure of power was costly and brought little actual power. In fact, the use of so much wealth to secure so little power in Norway forces us to consider the apparent wisdom of such an inefficient conquest. The bribery of collaborators, the raising of an invasion fleet and the war of diplomacy fought with Óláfr Haraldsson, must have cost Cnut a fortune. This fortune could never have been collected back from Norway after Cnut came to power. Throughout the medieval period Norway had relatively few useful resources and little wealth, and it seems unlikely that there was much surplus for Cnut or Sveinn to take.\(^1\) Moreover, through Cnut’s actions the already powerful aristocracy grew even more so, and Cnut’s son, Sveinn, cannot have exercised much authority independent of them. Cnut’s authority over Norway seems to have been nominal, and the investment of so much wealth for so little outcome does not seem to fit with his otherwise efficient acquisition of wealth and territory.

We might conclude that Cnut’s invasion of Norway and his imposition of a regent there was motivated by a direct threat which Óláfr Haraldsson posed to Denmark. However, on consideration this appears to be untenable. In the period 1026–8 there was a profound alienation of a large part of the most influential elements of the Norwegian nobility from Óláfr, and immediately before 1028, Cnut cannot have thought that Óláfr presented any greater threat than Anund Jakob did in Sweden. Yet as Cnut’s own letter to the English reveals, in 1027

\(^1\) I do not mean to underestimate the size of Norwegian iron mining or the stockfish trade; for general discussion of these see E. Orrmann, “Rural Conditions”, in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia, Volume 1, Prehistory to 1520*, ed. K. Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 280–4. However, neither of these could produce the amount of wealth required to reimburse Cnut, and much of these industries lay in rural Norway under the control of powerful magnates rather than royal officials.
Cnut settled the Swedish question through a meeting (presumably with appropriate exactions of tribute and hostages), and yet he was simultaneously planning the invasion of Norway. The seizure of the Norwegian kingship seems to have been an expensive redundant act.

We appear to be missing a piece of the puzzle here. Perhaps in order to try and understand this we should reject a ledger-book type of assessment of this conquest, and focus instead on what can be known of the ideological associations of this act. As discussed above, skaldic verse was composed for recital before the patron and his retinue, and those verses which survive usually contain representations of the ruler which were approved of by him and his entourage. Therefore, innovations which entered skaldic verse during Cnut’s reign would appear to reflect changes in the way he thought about the nature of his rule, or at least the way he wished it to be portrayed.

Townend has provided the most recent dating of the surviving poems composed for Cnut. His results can be chronologically presented thus:

\[ \text{Lidsmannaflokkr} \]
1016 × 1017

\[ \text{Eiríksdrápa} \]
1018 × 1023

Öttar svarti’s \text{Knútsdrápa I} and \text{II}
immediately after 1026

Sigvatr Dóðarson’s \text{Togdrápa}
1027 × 1028 (?)

Dórarinn loftunga’s
\text{Hofuðlausn} and
\text{Togdrápa}
1029 × 1030

Hallvarðr
hárekblesi’s
\text{Knútsdrápa}
c. 1029 × 1034

---

2 Townend, “Contextualising”, 151–62. It should be noted that the \text{Eiríksdrápa} was not composed for Cnut, but it does mention him and appears to have been recited before him, and thus, has been included here. Öttar svarti’s compositions probably derive from a single period of service in Cnut’s court, and thus, as the second poem appears to record the battle of Helgeá, this would appear to have been after 1026.