

Thorkell the Tall – a key figure in the story of King Cnut

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Thorkell the Tall was a power player in Anglo-Danish history in the first decades of the eleventh century. He was at the head of the campaign in 1009-1012 that ended with the hitherto unprecedented payment of 48,000 pounds of silver in Danegeld. He then entered Æthelred's service and was apparently loyal to the English king, at least until his flight from England around Christmas 1013. He then became Cnut's trusted earl after the Danish conquest of England in 1016. Doubtless it is these changing loyalties in the course of his career that have led to many historians regarding him as more of a threat to Cnut than a forceful ally during his conquest and subsequent rule of England.

In the following I propose to question this interpretation of Thorkell's life. In reviewing the existing knowledge about him I argue that we might just as easily see his contribution to history from the basic premise that he fully lived up to Cnut's trust. The consequences of this interpretation will affect our judgment of the Scandinavian balance of power in the 1020's.

Thorkell before 1009

The German defeat in Calabria in 982 and the accession of a new emperor, Otto III, in 983 brought a certain calm to the southern Danish border. At the same time the centre of power shifted to the east within Denmark. As the burial place of King Harald, the church at Roskilde became an important symbol of the fact that the focus in foreign policy in the first half of Sveinn Forkbeard's rule is on Wendland and Scandinavia.

Thorkell the Tall was born into a leading East Danish family (from Scania or Zealand). His early life is poorly documented. His father is said to have been Earl Strud-Harald and he had at least two brothers, one of whom was the Sigvalde who as leader of the Jomsvikings is best known from the Norse sources. His other brother was Hemming, who according to the sources was somewhat younger. All the sources for these relationships are unsafe, however.

The lack of Danish sources, together with the fact that the Norse sources are often only interested in the Danes' situation when they affect conditions in the rest of the North, partly explains why Thorkell is rarely mentioned by name. According to the Norse historians he played a secondary role among the Jomsvikings compared to Sigvalde, but on the other hand he is ascribed a significant role at Hjørungavåg. This battle, which has a somewhat mythical character in history, tells us a fair amount about the Norse historians' view of the relationship between the Jomsvikings and the Danish king. On the one hand Snorre and others hint at a certain friction and reserve, partly due to the circumstances surrounding Sveinn's marriage to Gunnhild, the sister of Sigvalde's wife. On the other hand Sveinn himself chooses to hold a wake with Sigvalde and Thorkell after their respective fathers have died at around the same time. This wake is used to plan attack strategies, and even though the atmosphere at the gathering is described as moderately tense, the political outcome – attacks on England and Norway – demonstrates an agreement in the area of foreign policy.

At Svold, where Olav Tryggvason was defeated by a Danish-Norwegian-Swedish coalition, Sigvalde also fights on the Danish side, according to Snorre, but for tactical reasons pretends to be Olav's friend. Thorkell is only mentioned in Oddr's version when he takes part with Earl Eirik, the former opponent from Hjørungavåg, who has now married a daughter of Sveinn. As far as the information goes concerning the earliest part of Thorkell's career, he is thus loyal to the Danish king and quite highly placed in the hierarchy of power.

A remark in the Flatø book supports this impression, stating that Thorkell is Cnut's foster father: *Knútr óx upp, sonr hans, ok var heima upp fæddr; Þorkell inn hávi föstraði hann* (quoted in *Encomium*, App. IV, 92). Where this remark originally appeared in the compilation work has proved impossible to find, and indeed it may not be true; nevertheless it expresses the Icelandic writer's view of the relationship between the two men.

The campaign of 1009-1012

From 1009 onwards our scope for documenting Thorkell's career improves, for that is the year in which he attacks England and enters the stage of foreign politics in earnest. With an 'immense raiding army' (ASC 1009) he threatens East Kent, which immediately pays for its freedom with 3,000 pounds. This, however, is not enough to persuade the fleet to leave England, so it sails south and from the Isle of Wight ravages the rich south. Though Æthelred urges resistance and according to the ASC cuts off the Viking army from its ships, a perhaps decisive battle is prevented 'by ealdorman Eadric, then as it always was,' writes the chronicler bitterly. That autumn the army takes up winter quarters in Kent and harries the English from there.

In the spring of 1010 the English suffer a severe defeat in East Anglia. For the rest of the year the Scandinavians ravage and burn, reaching Northampton in November before they again turn south and by Christmas have returned to their ships. In 1011 they besiege and take Canterbury, where the ASC again speaks of English treachery. Finally Æthelred sues for peace, which is agreed the following year at Easter, after which the Scandinavian army disbands and the majority depart for home. But not Thorkell, who with his forty-five ships enters Æthelred's service.

According to the ASC Thorkell is leader of the army. His departure from Denmark is described by Snorre (Snorre, 216) and can be dated to 1008-9:

'Så seilte kong Olav til Danmark, der møtte han Torkjell Høge, bror til Sigvalde jarl. Torkjell gav seg ifølge med ham, for han hadde alt ferdig til å dra på hærferd'.

The Norwegian Earl Eirik Hákonsson, who was married to Sveinn Forkbeard's daughter, also probably took part in the 1009-1012 campaign. Several writers mention Eirik's battles in England, which included the siege of London and the battle at Ringmere, both of which can be ascribed to Thorkell's campaign. Snorre merely states that Eirik took part in the conquest of England under Cnut. But he is silent on Eirik's participation in Thorkell's expedition.¹

¹ Snorre wants to tell Olav's history, but in doing so he mentions Earl Eirik. The two Norwegians are linked in the poems to the battle at Ringmere and other events connected with Thorkell's campaign. Although Olav leaves in 1008-1009 and soon arrives in England after his Frisian adventure, Snorre states that Sveinn is already king. And Eirik is said to have been

Finally, Florence of Worcester writes that:

Danicus comes Turkillus sua cum classe ad Angliam venit: exinde, mense Augusto, alia classis Danorum innumerabilis, cui præerant duces Hemingus et Eglafus, ad Tenedland insulam applicnit, et prædictæ classi sine dilatione se junxit. (Florence, p. 160)

Hemingus is usually identified as Thorkell's brother, while Eglaf is thought to be the brother of Ulf, an earl married to Swein's daughter Estrid.

The 1009-1012 expeditions were therefore packed with leading warriors who later became Cnut's trusted men after the conquest in 1016. In this light it is interesting to note that in *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, Thorkell is called Swein's 'princeps miliciae' (*Encomium* 10).

The presence of so many leading people in the campaign does not necessarily mean that this was an actual attempt at conquest as such; the peace accord argues against that. The discussion regarding motives stretches back into the middle of the eleventh century. The *Encomium* states that Thorkell, with the King's (= Swein's) permission, had taken a large army of men to England to avenge his brother. This information has been seriously questioned, since as we have seen, Hemming, the only brother mentioned in the attacks on England, does not join Thorkell's army until after the latter's arrival in England. In this connection Snorre's information is useful: the skald Tord, called Sigvaldaskald, is said to have spent a long time with Earl Sigvalde and later with Thorkell the Tall, the earl's brother. After the earl fell, Tord became a merchant, writes Snorre. He met King Olav while he was on a Viking expedition in the west and became his man and followed him thereafter (Snorre 236). The text in my translation can be interpreted to mean that Sigvalde falls and that Tord then joins a trading expedition in Thorkell's retinue. Moreover Snorre has earlier documented Thorkell's arrival in England, giving him the opportunity to meet Olav in Vesterviking. From the above information about Tord we could ask whether the brother that Thorkell is to avenge can be Sigvalde? For we hear no more of him after he has discharged his role in the battle at Svold. However, the possibility remains that he came to England, for example with Swein Forkbeard's fleet in 1003-1004, or on a later occasion and fell in battle or was killed otherwise.

Whatever the motive that persuaded Thorkell to depart in 1009, the campaign was so lengthy that the Scandinavians were able to link up with the forces in English society that opposed Æthelred's rule. We know from the above that on at least two occasions the Scandinavian army received significant help from the local people. And Swein's later conquest meets so little opposition that significant layers in society must have been remarkably cooperative – not least in the north of England. The idea of a regular conquest rather than continuous plundering may well have arisen as a

summoned by Cnut to the conquest of England. Depending on which part of Snorre's information we use as a fixed point, the start of Cnut's expedition varies from 1011 to 1015. These imprecisions in Snorre's chronology for the two Norse heroes deserve deeper analysis elsewhere. Taking Snorre's information at face value means that Olav and Eirik (contrary to the skald's version) did not fight together during Thorkell's campaign but were on opposite sides in England! And Snorre has Eirik conveniently dying ten years too early in the saga of St. Olav. So in principle Eirik is not involved at all in Olav's conquest of Norway. In return, Snorre manages to sow the seeds of the later clash between Cnut and Olav.

consequence of the alliances that could have been made in the years 1009-1012. Thorkell's decision to remain in England may not therefore be inconsistent with Swein's actual plans at this point.

Thorkell in Æthelred's service

The *Encomium Emmae Reginae* states that Thorkell decided to remain in England after the peace agreement in 1012. He acquired land and allied himself with the English, which provoked some grumbling among the King's men, says the monk. But the *Encomium* is largely positive towards Thorkell. Campbell notes that Thorkell's son Harald married a close relative of Cnut, which he thinks may contribute to the *Encomium*'s positive assessment. Harald's wife was Gunhild, a Wendic princess and granddaughter of Swein Forkbeard – and thus the cousin of HardeCnut. In addition to this it may be suggested that the Encomiast has seen the possibility of drawing a parallel between Thorkell's loyalty to Cnut through his time abroad and the men who kept their offices under Harald's rule, 1035-1040.

But precisely how Thorkell lent his services to the English king we know very little about. Johannes Steenstrup (III, 264) tentatively suggests that based on the writings of William of Malmesbury he may have gained land in East Anglia. We do know that he marries at least once during his stay in England. Florence calls his wife Edgitha – a name which earlier in Florence referred to the wife of Eadric Streona – while the Supplement to *Jómsvíkinga saga* calls her Ulfhildr and describes her as the widow of Ulfketil, who fell in the battle at Assandun in 1016. In both cases she is a daughter of Æthelred.

Thorkell enjoyed a certain status at Æthelred's court. He is presumed to have signed one of King Æthelred's charters in 1012 with the words Þurkytil miles, appearing late in the list of secular signatories (Keynes in Rumble, 55). It is therefore not improbable that Thorkell did marry one of Æthelred's daughters, though in principle the marriage could just as well (or perhaps better) have been agreed upon in 1012 as a sealing of the peace agreement. In the later case laid against Thorkell's wife (see below) the charge has to do with the homicide of Thorkell's son by his first marriage. The source can hardly serve as proof of Thorkell's marital status at the time, but it opens up the possibility that he may have made more than one marriage.

Such a marriage would at any rate provide a reasonable explanation as to why Thorkell did not play such an active part in the defence of England against Swein's attack in 1013, but merely tucked himself up with the King in London. And it would also explain why neither the Norse sources nor the *Encomium Emmae* see any discrepancy between Thorkell entering Æthelred's service in 1012 and yet remaining Cnut's trusted earl after Æthelred's fall.

For Thorkell stands at Æthelred's side in London when Swein attacks the city after taking hostages from the Humber and all the way south to London: 'When he came to the borough (= London) the citizens would not yield, but resisted with full battle, because King Æthelred was inside and Thorkell was with him' (ASC 1013). Swein pushes inland and gains further victories, while London, fearing that Swein's successes elsewhere in the country will lead him to destroy the city, surrenders without a fight. Swein demands full payment and winter supplies for his army and Thorkell

demands the same for the army at Greenwich, says the ASC 1013/14. For a while Æthelred stays with the army on the Thames, but at Christmas moves to the Isle of Wight and from there to Normandy, whither Emma has already gone.

In this situation we hear nothing about Thorkell, so we do not know whether he remained loyal to the king after Æthelred's departure or joined his countrymen. The question is interesting, since the answer can reveal something about the later relationship between Cnut and Thorkell. The ASC has a passage stating that when Æthelred returned, he demanded a tribute payment of 21,000 pounds for the fleet at Greenwich, which was precisely the anchorage of *Danica classe*, as Florence calls it (Florence 167), when Æthelred left it at the turn of the year 1013-1014. On the other hand only a few months have passed, and there has been no obvious opportunity to make use of the ships in the intervening period. So the information merely tells us that Æthelred is possibly renewing his agreement with Thorkell. The *Encomium* evades the critical question by claiming that in 1014 Cnut returned home to take counsel with his brother. The writer adds that 'according to some' (*Encomium* p. 17) Thorkell also takes it as read that Cnut will return with renewed forces. In such a situation Thorkell could be a worthwhile associate, since he could either persuade Æthelred to surrender by his words or – if this failed – could stab him in the back.

Cnut's conquest

There are indications that Thorkell was present at the start of Cnut's attempted conquest and already then played a central role in his forces. Two sources mention this, both being closest to the events in question: Thietmar, who calls him Thurgut (Thietmar, 335) and the *Encomium* (*Encomium* 19). The somewhat unreliable *Knýtlinga saga* specifically mentions Thorkell's participation in the conquest of England. And in *Lidsmannaflokkur* Thorkell is similarly found to be by Cnut's side in the siege of London.

For the year 1015 the ASC states that Eadric Streona took 40 ships from the King and went over to Cnut. Florence characterises the 40 ships by saying they were manned by Danes, so it is tempting to equate these 40 ships with Thorkell's forces which he kept in England after the peace accord in 1012. However, there is no other argument for this than that the numbers are almost equally large, which also leads Keynes to hesitate over drawing any conclusion on this point (Keynes, 55).

The attack on England begins in late summer. Cnut sails straight to Sandwich and from there to the south-west of England, where he remains over Christmas. He then moves north as far as Northamptonshire at the same time as Edmund is ravaging the north-eastern corner of England together with Uhtred. When as a result of Cnut's plundering Uhtred returns home and surrenders, he is killed – perhaps on Eadric's advice – after which Earl Eirik is put in charge of Northumbria.

Cnut then turns his attention to London, while Edmund goes to Wessex. After a series of battles the armies move back to London, to Kent and then via Essex to Mercia. The crucial battle is fought at Assandun, exhausting both armies and '... all the nobility of England was there destroyed' (ASC 96). The two kings are reconciled at Alney, where they share the land between them: Edmund gains Wessex and Cnut

takes Mercia. Of the later earls it is only Badric and Eirik who are mentioned in the ASC account of the conquest.

When Cnut assumes total control on the death of Edmund, he divides the country into four parts. He himself takes Wessex, Thorkell gets East Anglia, Mercia becomes Eadric's while Northumbria remains with Eirik. As previously mentioned, Thorkell may have had East Anglia as an earldom even before Cnut's division of England. Some small evidence to this effect could be that from the outset of the conquest Cnut may have been confident of Thorkell's active loyalty since while his own army was conquering the north, south and west, East Anglia was not plundered. The allocation of Mercia and East Anglia to Eadric and Thorkell respectively thus becomes confirmation of the hitherto prevailing power-balance. We can only imagine this if the earls in question have proved loyal during the process of conquest. Cnut must have believed this of Eadric at the time of the division even though he soon eliminated him – perhaps because, as the ASC constantly emphasises, Streona had actually been double-crossing the King. Thorkell apparently had not.

In the period after the conquest and until his exile Thorkell is without doubt Cnut's most trusted man. Analysing the charters from Cnut's time Keynes has found that when Thorkell signs, he is invariably the first earl on the document (Keynes 53). In all he appears as the signatory to seven documents dating from 1018 and 1019. There are no surviving documents from Cnut's time before 1018,² nor are there any from the last one signed by Thorkell up to 1022, by which time according to the ASC he had already been banished.

For the year 1020 Florence notes:

Eodem anno ecclesia, quam rex Canutus et comes Turkillus, in monte qui Assandun dicitur, construxerant, illis præsentibus, a Wlstando Eboracensi archiepiscopo, et multis aliis episcopis, cum magno honore et gloria dedicata est. (Florence 183)

The C and D versions of the ASC also mention Thorkell separately. Keynes considers the possibility that Thorkell is only named separately here because he is the East Anglians' earl (Keynes, 83, n.219). But it remains possible that Thorkell had actually played an important role in the battle on Cnut's side.

Thorkell is also prominent in other contexts, however. He is named separately in the confirmation that Cnut, at Archbishop Lyfing's request, writes to Christ Church, Canterbury concerning previously granted privileges. He appears at the top of the list of Cnut's earls in the brotherhood registry at Thorney Abbey. In St. Edmund's addition in MS Bodley 297 Thorkell, the Queen and Ælfwine are credited with having urged Cnut to restore the abbey in 1020 (Campbell 75). And first and foremost he is named separately in Cnut's letter to his people, which it is thought was sent during his travels in around 1019-1020 and in which Thorkell is issued with special powers as the King's deputy. 'If anyone, ecclesiastic or layman, Dane or Englishman, is so presumptuous as to defy Gods law and my royal authority or the secular law, and he will not make amends and desist according to the direction of my bishops, I then pray and also command Earl Thorkel, if he can, to cause the evil-doer to do right. If he

² Apart from a single charter whose date cannot be fixed more closely than the period 1017-1035. This document, which is also regarded as genuine, is only signed by Queen Ælfgyva and two bishops, Aelfie and Leofsie.

cannot, then it is my will, that with power of us both he shall destroy him in the land or drive him out of the land, whether he be of high or low rank.'

Campbell questions Thorkell's loyalty to Cnut until the conquest is completed. He ends by concluding that Thorkell in all likelihood does not desert the English cause until he automatically becomes Cnut's subject on his seizure of total control in 1017 (Campbell 75). Campbell agrees with Freeman that if we nevertheless feel obliged to believe that Thorkell changed sides already during the conquest, it must have been motivated by his personal loyalty to Æthelred, which is then dissolved with his death. Campbell rejects Napier and Stephenson's explanation, namely that Thorkell changes sides in order to avenge his brother's death as a result of an English clash with Danish thingmen, on the grounds that there is no source evidence for so late a date for his brother's death.

We shall probably never find the conclusive evidence for Thorkell's loyalties. The fact that Cnut appoints him Earl of East Anglia as well as the evidence that until his banishment he appears as the first of Cnut's earls tells in favour of Cnut's trust in him. We can therefore reflect on whether throughout his service to Æthelred Thorkell was secretly supporting the Danes, or whether his loyalty to Æthelred was so well-founded and well-defined that it was not seen by Swein and Cnut as betrayal. This could be the case if Thorkell was already married to one of Æthelred's daughters during Swein's attack in 1013.

Banishment and Cnut's expedition in 1022

Frank Barlow refers (Barlow 273) to a series of events related in the Ramsey Chronicle. Biskop Æthelric of Dorchester brought a case against Thorkell and his wife after a witch had confessed that she had been the wife's accomplice in the murder of Thorkell's son by his first marriage. In the first instance Thorkell ignored three summonses for a meeting with the bishop, after which the bishop approached the King, who then called Thorkell to court. Thorkell rejected the charges on behalf of both himself and his wife. They were requested to clear themselves by taking an oath, each together with 11 peers, at a place chosen by the bishop. He chose the place where the murdered child was buried. The Abbot of Ramsey came with relics for use in the swearing of the oath and Thorkell accordingly swore his innocence. To protect his wife from swearing an oath he even swore by his beard that she too was innocent, but then his beard fell off!³ Thorkell's wife maintained her innocence and broke down only when the archbishop ordered the secret grave to be opened. The case ended with Thorkell being convicted of perjury and his wife of murder. The punishment of banishment was handed down for these sins and Thorkell was also found guilty of insulting the bishop by ignoring his summons, for which he was required to hand over a piece of land to the bishop, who later donated it to Ramsey Abbey.

³ Barlow refers here to Evesham concerning a similar story about a beard that falls off during the swearing of a false oath. The story is found in *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores: Chronicon abbatiæ de Evesham ad annum 1418*, ed. William Dunn Macray, London 1863 in a German reprint p. 41. A man swears (evidently falsely) that he owns a given piece of earth which the abbey is claiming. And no sooner have the words left his mouth than he loses his beard.

This story is only known from the Ramsey Chronicle. Referring to Cnut's Laws, which according to Dorothy Whitelock were issued in their general form before Wulfstan's death in 1023, the offences were sufficient to merit banishment. For '... we earnestly forbid every heathen practice. §5.1 It is heathen practice if one worship idols, namely if one worship heathen gods and the sun or the moon, fire or flood, wells or stones or any kind of forest trees, or if one practises witchcraft or encompasses death by any means, either by sacrifice⁴ or divination, or takes any part in such delusions. § 6. Homicides and perjurers, injurers of the clergy and adulterers, are to submit and make amends or to depart from their native land with their sins.' (Whitelock, 1979, 455)

The only fact we know for sure regarding Thorkell's banishment is the remark for the year 1021 in the ASC (C, D and E-versions): 'In this year, at Martinmas, King Cnut outlawed Earl Thorkel.' Florence adds 'and his wife Edith'.

We hear of Thorkell again in the chronicle for 1023: 'In this year King Cnut came back to England, and Thorkel and he were reconciled, and he entrusted Denmark and his son for Thorkel to maintain and the king took Thorkel's son with him to England.' Only the C-version contains this sequel.⁵ The interpretation of the general sequence of events leading up to this sentence is customarily coloured by a mistrust of Thorkell. Steenstrup writes: 'Til de mange grunde, som hidtil havde måtte fremskynde danskerne til de udholdende angreb paa England, der saa sikkert lovede dem engang at vinde riget, kom nu aabenbart ogsaa dette, at om kong Swein ikke selv vandt landet, ville den danske høvding Jomsvikingen Thorkil, der var trådt i engelsk tjeneste, have god udsigt hertil.' (Steenstrup, III, 274 f). And Lawson writes that 'His (=Thorkell's) expulsion must have been an achievement as well as a relief' (Lawson, 175). Sawyer also expresses it succinctly: 'Endnu mere bemærkelsesværdigt var det at Torkel blev gjort til jarl af East Anglia og til regent under Cnuts første besøg i Danmark, for Torkel havde været en af Cnuts farligste fjender; han havde hjulpet med forsvaret af London i 1013, og det var på Torkels flåde Æthelred havde søgt tilflugt før han gik i eksil.' (Sawyer, 270)

The son that Thorkell was entrusted with must have been Harald or Swein, since the ASC states that HardeCnut was present in Canterbury in 1023. Cnut took a son home with him to foster him – perhaps the Harald who is previously mentioned and whom Florence elsewhere refers to:

Eodem anno nobilis matrona Gunnilda, regis Wyrtegeorni et sororis Canuti regis filia, et comitum Hacuni et post Haroldi morte viduata, cum duobus filiis Hemmingo et Turkillo expellitur de Anglia (Florence, 199).

Two factors call for comment here. In the first place the exchange of sons was a common way of creating a network for oneself and one's children and for educating the children. The foster relationship took on various characters depending on the reasons for it. Legally there were even in certain cases duties and rights between the child and the family, as though it were a blood tie. And emotionally the foster

⁴ It is worth recalling here that the *Encomium Emmae* inserts a little story that Thorkell took omens – not however from casting lots but from his raven banner.

⁵ This is usually ascribed to its origin in Abingdon near Oxford – an area that has not been particularly linked to Thorkell. The C-version stops before William the Conqueror, so it is more or less contemporary with the end of Cnut's reign.

relationships in the sagas reflect an intense bond between foster child and foster father which continues into adult life. So there is not necessarily a question of a 'hostage' being exchanged, which our modern usage might lead us to think.

Secondly, the marriage to which Florence refers must have been contracted after Håkon's death in 1030. Håkon commanded Cnut's great confidence and the stewardship of Norway was intended for him. In that case it would be a remarkable act to have Thorkell's son marry Gunhild. For this would strengthen the hands of precisely the family of that man who had been too strong for Cnut, if the arguments are to be believed.

But if Thorkell did not constitute a threat to Cnut in 1022, certain questions remain: What did Cnut do on his expedition? How did this come to involve a meeting with Thorkell? And why was one of Cnut's sons put in care precisely at this point?

Under the year 1022 the ASC states: 'In this year King Cnut went out with his ships to the Isle of Wight...' Steenstrup rejects the possibility that the ships could have been placed at the Isle of Wight as a fleet demonstration parallel to Edward's one against Magnus at Sandwich in 1046. For we hear the following year that Cnut came back to England, and 'back' would not be used if he were merely coming from the Isle of Wight (Steenstrup, III, 323). Moreover, as we have seen, Cnut has appointed Thorkell for this trip as a support for his son to rule Denmark. Steenstrup suggests that the original expression in the chronicle, *Wiht*, could stand for Witland, a designation known from Wulfstan's travel accounts where it borders on Vendland across the River Weichsel. The name is documented from several later sources, while according to Saxo and others Cnut led expeditions to, and had possessions in, Semland.

There is a conspicuous link in time between the expedition and the fact that the Swedish King Oluf dies in precisely this year. Oluf and Cnut were half-brothers in the Church sense, since Olav's mother married Cnut's father. They had brothers and sisters in common, of whom Estrid is the best described. And Estrid was married to Ulf, who was from a Danish, or more likely a Swedish family. Although Ulf was later given the task of ruling Denmark for Cnut and must thus be counted as extremely influential, he signed only two English documents, both around 1022, and in both cases after Earl Eirik and Godwin. It is therefore presumed that Ulf was not in England in the period 1018-1020, and with his high status in Cnut's eyes it is not unlikely that he was indeed governing Denmark for Cnut at the time. It would be a wise move to ensure Estrid a position, with the convenient side-effect that the arrangement could serve to prevent a possible attack from the Swedish King Oluf.

When Oluf dies and Anund Jakob comes to power, a change takes place in the power relations between the Nordic countries. Anund Jakob supports Olav Digre, to whom he is also related by marriage through his half-sister Astrid. But some time passes before these relationships fall into place in a new equilibrium. Snorre illustrates this by having Olav remain in Viken during this period, even though he had promised to go north. (Snorre, 321)

In this situation it is possible that Cnut might have wished to replace Earl Ulf. Ulf may have had Swedish and/or Danish allies. But it is also quite conceivable that Cnut merely plays a strong card in a critical situation. If it was a question of a serious threat from Thorkell's side, we would assume that Cnut would choose to eliminate Thorkell at this point if he had to, rather than receive one of his sons and hand over

one of his own. It is for the very reason that at this point Thorkell is growing old and serves himself best by promoting his sons in Cnut's kingdoms that he would be a good choice to lead Denmark. And the fact that Cnut sends one of his sons to Denmark to legitimise Thorkell's governing power is evidence of a clear personal positioning of Cnut on the Danish throne.

Thorkell's end

There has been an underlying supposition among many historians that Cnut wished to get rid of Thorkell but that he was too strong a figure in the early part of Cnut's reign for this to happen. But perhaps this supposition is not correct. At any rate it cannot explain why Thorkell occupies such a trusted place in Cnut's England. On the other hand the assumption that he rightly enjoyed Cnut's confidence and was still able to be his support can explain our knowledge about Cnut's expedition in 1022.

We have no reliable accounts of the time or circumstances of Thorkell's death. William of Malmesbury states that Thorkell was killed after he returned to Denmark, and the Supplement to the Jomsviking Saga even says that Cnut was once invited home to Thorkell and met Ulfhild, the daughter of Æthelred, whom Thorkell had married after killing her husband Ulfkell Snilling in revenge for his brother Hemming's death: *ok þótti hann hafa svikit sik i kvennaskipti ok réð Þorkatli fyrir þessa sök bana* (Campbell 93). However, there is no confirmation of these stories from anywhere else and the basic feature of the motive – the wrong girl or 'Rachel and Leah' – is known in various guises from the Nordic conceptual universe and the myths. When and how Thorkell died we shall presumably never know.

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