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Spinning the Revolt. The Assassination and Sanctification of an 11th-Century Danish King

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ABSTRACT

The first recorded social revolt in the history of Denmark took place in the summer of 1086 when peasants and magnates rose against King Knud IV and killed him in a church. A few years after the assassination Knud was declared a martyr saint and a papally approved cult was established at his tomb. As argued by Carsten Breengaard the sanctification of the unpopular king must be understood as an attempt on behalf of the Danish clergy to criminalize the revolt and sacralise royal authority with the aim of protecting the Church against the effects of social and political violence. Building upon Breengaard's work this chapter explores the particular ritual and discursive strategies employed by the clergy in their efforts to promote King Knud's holiness. It also discusses to what extent the Church actually succeeded in 'spinning' the revolt and controlling the ways contemporaries and later generations would interpret the rebellion and its legitimacy.

*Det første dokumenterede sociale oprør i Danmarks historie fandt sted i sommeren 1086, da bønder og stormænd rejste sig mod kong Knud IV og slog ham ihjel i Skt. Albani kirke i Odense. Nogle få år efter drabet blev Knud erklæret martyr og helgen og en paveligt autoriseret kult blev etableret ved hans grav. Som Carsten Breengaard overbevisende har påvist, må sanktifikationen af den upopulære konge forstås som et forsøg fra gejstlighedens side på at kriminalisere oprøret og helliggøre kongedømmets autoritet med henblik på at beskytte Kirken mod virkningerne af social og politisk vold. I forlængelse af Breengaards arbejde undersøges i dette kapitel de specifikke rituelle og diskursive strategier, gejstligheden satte i værk for at promovere Knuds hellighed. Det handler her især om den rituelle ildprøve, man i 1095 underkastede den døde konges lig for at bevise autenciteten af hans helgenstatus, samt det specifikke hagiografiske billede man med inspiration fra Abbo af Fleury's *Vita sancti Eadmundi* skabte af 'Skt. Knud'. I kapitlet diskuteres det videre, i hvilken udstræk-*

ning Kirken faktisk lykkedes med sit forsøg på at lave 'spin' på oprøret og med at kontrollere, hvordan sam- og eftertiden fortolkede oprøret og dets legitimitet.

INTRODUCTION

Rebellions, like all other historical events, are always more than just material occurrences; they are also objects of cultural interpretation. To grasp fully the impact or *Wirkungsgeschichte* of any social or political revolt it is necessary to consider its symbolic dimension: the way it is perceived, interpreted, evaluated, negotiated, framed, represented, remembered, reconstructed and narrated by conflicting agencies. Rulers and rebels, allies and antagonists, contemporaries and later generations all struggle to define the aims, motives and legitimacy of a particular revolt and to impose on society and history a particular and particularist vision of what happened. In this process power (disobeying children, street rallies, guerrilla attacks, killing of kings) is inextricably connected to culture (interpretation, legitimation, narrativization) and any attempt to understand any revolt must necessarily take account of both.

This is probably obvious if one thinks of recent examples – socialist revolutions of the 20th century, the students' rebellion of 1968, the Palestinian intifada, etc. – but the logic is of course the same when it comes to earlier periods even if media, communication structures and legitimation criteria were very different in, say, the Middle Ages than today. In this chapter I hope to illustrate this by going way back in time to have a look at the first recorded social revolt in Denmark and the struggle over its interpretation.

In 1086 a coalition of peasants and magnates rose against the Danish king, Knud IV, and most spectacularly killed him in the church of St Alban in the city of Odense. Knud's controversial rule had caused considerable discontent within large parts of the population and many, if not most, seem to have regarded the assassination of the king as basically justified. Not the clergy, however. To them the act of killing a Christian monarch inside the holy sanctuary of a church represented a serious assault on the social order in general and the safety of the Church in particular. The ecclesiastical community therefore sought to take control of the event by fixing it within a specific religious interpretive framework: in 1095, nine years after the killing, clerics elevated the dead king's body and declared him a martyr saint. In this way they hoped to criminalize the rebellion and the system of social values that had rendered it legitimate. In modern terms we may speak of King Knud's sanctification as an attempt to *spin* the revolt.

How then, did one actually 'spin' in the late 11th century, and to what extent did the particular 'spinning' of the rebellion in 1086 succeed? What sorts of ritual and discursive strategies did the clergy employ to promote their interpretation of the events, and

how far did they manage actually to silence other voices? These are the questions I want to pursue in the following.

SOURCES AND SCHOLARSHIP

The sanctification of King Knud prompted a small corpus of landmark texts composed c. 1095-1120 by the clergy of Odense for use in the cultic liturgy of the royal martyr. These texts, usually referred to as the “Odense literature”, are the earliest pieces of historical discourse written on Danish soil. They constitute the main contemporary source material for the reign of King Knud as well as for his death and sanctification. In terms of genre they mix hagiography and chronicle in ways that made generations of positivistic oriented scholars dismiss them as factually unreliable religious propaganda. Today, however, the ‘cultural turn’ of historical research and the introduction of new cross-disciplinary problematics and approaches has made the Odense literature a most relevant body of material. For the present study, which specifically takes ecclesiastic ritual and discourse as its object, these texts are obviously of great value.

The first text is a short inscription, known as *Tabula Othoniensis*, which was placed alongside the king’s body at the occasion of his sanctification and re-burial in 1095. It relates Knud’s Christ-like death in St Alban’s church and at the same time proclaims his holiness. The second text, *Passio Sancti Canuti Regis et Martiris*, composed most likely in the winter of 1095/96 by an anonymous member of the community at St Alban’s, is longer and describes the reign of King Knud, his martyrdom in St Alban’s church and the subsequent sanctification process, including the rituals and miracles that proved the king’s holiness. Another short inscription (*Epitaphium*) was added at the occasion of a second translation in 1100, when Knud’s cult had been formally approved by the Pope. Finally, around 1120, the themes laid out by the *Passio* were expanded on in the much more comprehensive *Gesta Canuti regis et martyris* written by the priest Ailnoth¹.

As for the actual popular reception of the ecclesiastical claims about King Knud’s martyrdom and the illegitimacy of the rebellion of 1086 it is of course necessary to go beyond the Odense literature. This will be done by looking at the counter-narratives found or hinted at in later chronicle accounts from the 12th and 13th centuries.

The reign of King Knud has been dealt with intensively in modern Danish historiography. The nature of Knud’s rule, his violent death and the process of his sanctification have all been objects of contending views and vehement debate for more than a century. In fact, according to one author, no other king has led Danish historians to oppose each other in such uncompromising ways as Knud IV². It is impossible within the scope of this study to present the relevant scholarship in any depth. Here, I shall therefore confine myself to point out Carsten Breengaard’s pathbreaking dissertation *Muren om*

Israels hus [The Wall around the House of Israel] from 1982 as the decisive source of inspiration for the views expressed in the following.

BACKGROUND: REFORM, REACTION, REBELLION

The reign of King Knud is situated in the midst of a long transitional period (roughly the 10th to the 12th century), which saw an ancient Danish ‘Viking Age’ society evolve into a ‘European’ medieval kingdom³. Knud was born c. 1050 as one of several sons of King Sven Estridson who succeeded their father in turn. He acceded to the throne in 1080, following the death of his brother and predecessor Harald. At this time kingship did not yet possess the kind of sacred aura that – in theory, at least – would place later medieval kings beyond society and the quarrels of ordinary men. Royal power in Denmark in the 11th century was directly dependant on the allegiance of groups of land-owning magnates, who in turn based their position on the allegiance of lesser free men. The king was not a lawmaker but a protector of peace, justice and tradition. A fixed hereditary order of succession did not exist: in principle any descendant of the royal lineage could lay claim to the throne provided he was able to muster sufficient support from powerful elite groups at the provincial *things*. Dynastic strife between claimants from different branches of the royal family (and their aristocratic backers) was therefore not uncommon. In fact, in this period feuding and even revolt against royal authority should be regarded “not as social anomalies but as legitimate consequences of the prevailing institutional structure”⁴.

Following his election in 1080, however, King Knud soon embarked on an ambitious and controversial policy aimed at strengthening and centralizing royal power. His source of inspiration may have been the county of Flanders which in terms of ‘state-building’ ranked among the most advanced in 11th century Europe: Knud was married to Adela, daughter of the renowned Count Robert I of Flanders, a descendant of the Frankish emperor Charles the Great (Charlemagne). That Knud associated himself closely with his wife’s noble lineage is clear from the fact that the couple named their son Karl (Charles). We also know that some of Knud’s most loyal retainers were Flemish knights and that he welcomed exiled monks from the Flemish abbey of St-Trond to Denmark⁵. His political initiatives included promotion of the Peace and laws to protect the weak, orphans, women and foreigners. He interfered with local jurisdiction, and penalized what was hitherto regarded as legitimate feuding. He made increased demands on the hospitality of his subjects, introduced “new and unheard-of” taxes and was accused of monopolizing rights of forestry, pasture and goods from shipwrecks.

King Knud’s reform efforts also extended to the Church, which at this time still occupied a somewhat marginal position in society. Christian missions had been going on in Denmark since the 8th century, official conversion had been declared by the king c. 963, but it took much longer for the Church to become firmly rooted in the social

landscape. By the 11th century the organization of the Danish church was still rudimentary. A permanent diocesan organization was not established until c. 1060 (during the reign of Knud's father King Sven Estridson), while the creation of an independent Danish archbishopric, the introduction of separate ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the surge of monastic foundations, the tithe, and a regular parish structure had to await the 12th century. Moreover, many clerics were foreigners and thus without the protection normally offered by local social networks and bonds of patronage. King Knud, therefore, especially took measures to safeguard the clergy and enhance the social status of the bishops. He also attempted (albeit in vain) to implement the tithe and promote the public observation of Christian feasts. Most importantly, he made substantial grants of land and privileges to the diocesan churches, some of the properties donated being land paid to the king by magnates as fines for violating the Peace.

It is not surprising that King Knud met with opposition among the traditional power-brokers in Danish society, who must have seen his innovatory assertion of royal authority as threatening existing hierarchies. Even among the peasantry many freemen seem to have regarded the king as encroaching on inherited norms and customs.

In 1085, then, King Knud made an attempt to ease the growing dissatisfaction by mustering a large-scale military invasion of England⁶. The campaign was planned in conjunction with Knud's father-in-law, count Robert I of Flanders, but came to nothing and in fact only aggravated Knud's domestic troubles. A great fleet was assembled at the west coast of Jutland, but as the ships lay waiting, King Knud himself was delayed at the southern border and failed to meet his men before they broke up and returned home for the harvest. The king responded by imposing a heavy fine on the deserters and by imprisoning his own younger brother Oluf, who was suspected of pulling strings backstage. Oluf was sent to Flanders to be kept in custody by Knud's brother-in-law. The excesses of the royal bailiffs collecting the fines the following summer may have been the straw that broke the camel's back. A violent popular uprising broke out in northern Jutland and forced King Knud to flee southwards. Unable to find security in the city of Schleswig he crossed the waters to the island of Funen. Here, in the city of Odense, he was finally run down by angry rebels and killed, 10 July, along with his brother Benedict and 17 retainers in front of the altar in the small wooden church of St Alban's. Soon after the murder Oluf was ransomed from his Flemish custody and installed as new king⁷.

SACRILEGE AND SANCTIFICATION

Observers abroad reacted to the regicide in disgust. "So it was in Denmark", wrote the Anglo-Saxon chronicler, "that the Danes, a nation that was formerly accounted the truest of all, were turned aside to the greatest untruth, and to the greatest treachery that ever could be. They chose and bowed to King Knud, and swore him oaths, and afterwards dastardly slew him in a church"⁸. In Denmark the rebellion against the

anti-traditionalist ruler seem to have caused less alarm, except within the ecclesiastical community, where the assassination of the king struck clerics with fear and loathing. What they saw was indeed a *double sacrilege*: by breaking into St Alban's and brutally killing the monarch the rebels had not only physically violated the sacred space of the Church⁹, but also desecrated the very institution of kingship and robbed the clergy of Denmark of their main source of social protection.

A climatic disaster soon added to the sense of insecurity experienced by the clergy in the wake of the revolt. Shortly after the bloody events in Odense a change of weather set in and for almost a decade Denmark (as well as other parts of North-Western Europe¹⁰) was haunted more or less interruptedly by crop failure, famine, and disease – a severe misfortune that previously had seen the desperate population turn to prosecutions of the priesthood¹¹.

In this situation the ecclesiastical response was both quick and original. The idea came up that King Knud had not died an ordinary death at the hands of the rebels; as he was slaughtered in the church of St Alban he had suffered martyrdom and therefore deserved to be honoured as a holy saint. The famine was not to be blamed on the clergy; on the contrary it was God's chastisement of the Danish people for having committed the horrendous crime of murdering their king. Only by admitting to their sin and recognizing Knud's sanctity could the Danes hope to mitigate the Lord's wrath. Thus, the setting up of a saintly cult would effectively stigmatize the revolt of 1086 as religious sacrilege. In a wider perspective, the practice of the cult would express and project a new set of social values and contribute to "a more permanent state of security for the clergy in Danish society"¹² as kingship became sacralized and the authority of the royal protector of the Church, by implication, was strengthened.

Knud's sanctification campaign was initiated by the clergy of St Alban in Odense. These priests were men of Anglo-Saxon origin (perhaps brought to Denmark from England by Knud himself around 1070), who had eye-witnessed the shocking events of 10 July. The idea itself of having a king (or any other lay person) sanctified for being murdered by fellow Christians was indeed an Anglo-Saxon speciality. In the Roman Church sanctity and secular power were normally seen as opposites. Only bishops, abbots and other ecclesiastics received the honour of martyrdom – and they were killed by pagans, not Christians. In England, however, the cult of royal martyrs prospered and seems to have served exactly the function aimed at in Denmark, i.e. "as a means to discouraging royal murders, condemning the killers and thus attempting to limit civic strife which was so potentially harmful to ecclesiastical interests"¹³.

The campaign initiated in Odense was quickly backed by other ecclesiastics. Most notably, bishop Sven of the leading church in Roskilde (where Knud's father Sven Estridson lay buried) issued a warning to the Danish people shortly after the murder: if they did not make amends for the regicide they would suffer God's punishment¹⁴. Bishop

Sven died in 1087 but was succeeded by Arnold, a former chaplain and supporter of King Knud's. Reports of visions, cures and other miracles at the dead king's tomb in St Alban's were circulated across the realm. To convince people of Knud's martyrdom was not an easy task, however. Denmark had no tradition of domestic saints – all the saints venerated in the kingdom (at least those known to us today) were imported from abroad – and the memory of Knud's controversial rule was still very much alive. According to a late tradition King Oluf doggedly denied the sanctity of his dead brother, and threatened whoever participated in his promotion¹⁵.

Nevertheless, persistent propaganda and years of misery and famine gradually made its impact on the minds of the populace. In the spring of 1095 the clergy deemed the mental atmosphere sufficiently prepared for them to make the decisive move of a formal elevation. According to the *Passio*, priests and bishops from Jutland met with the priests of Odense to raise Knud's body. After three days of fasting, almsgiving and prayer they dug up the physical remains of the king from under the church floor of St Alban's. With the express intention of "preventing insipid minds from wasting away in doubt"¹⁶ about the king's saintliness they then subjected the royal body to a *probatio ignis*, an ordeal by fire – at this time a well-established procedure in Latin Christianity for testing the authenticity of saints' relics¹⁷. Unfortunately, the *Passio* does not describe the ritual in much detail, but if we look to the comparative evidence from Europe it is possible to get a fairly adequate impression of the ceremony as it might have proceeded in Odense.

First, the source of fire was prepared, usually glowing coals in a small liturgical censer or thurible; the fire was blessed. Next, selected pieces of bones from the body of the saint were washed and wrapped in linen. Then followed the recitation of a special prayer:

Lord God, Jesus Christ, You who are the king of kings, the ruler of those who rule, the lover of all who believe in You, You who are the rightful judge, mighty and powerful, You who reveal your holy mysteries to your priests, and provided solace to the three boys in the fiery furnace [Daniel 3]; Grant us, your unworthy servants, and hear our prayers, that this cloth or fabric, in which are wrapped the bodies of saints, shall burn by this fire, if they are not true, but prevail to escape if they are true, so that injustice shall not dominate justice but falsehood be placed under truth, since Your truth shall be revealed by You and made evident to all of us who believe in You, so that we shall learn, because You are the blessed God in eternity. Amen¹⁸.

The prayer ended with a *Pater noster* and the antiphone *You have tried me by fire*. Then, finally, came the climactic moment when the supposed relics – in this case, the bones of King Knud – were brought into contact with the sacred fire. At this point verses would be chanted from psalm 16, *Lord, You have tested my heart, You have tried me by night, and You have found no wickedness in me*. As the trial was considered over, the bones were separated from the fire and duly examined. The ceremony ended with a *Gloria patri*.

In Odense the procedure was apparently repeated several times. Thus, according to the *Passio*, the priests four times applied what is described as "fiery blazing fire" (*ignem nimis ardentem*) to the bones of the royal martyr. Every time the fire miraculously went

out “as if it had been extinguished by water, without in any way harming the bones”¹⁹. As his body remained unaffected by the holy fire, Knud’s martyrdom was considered proven. He was then re-buried in the crypt of a new stone church still under construction nearby, dedicated now to “St Knud”.

WORLDLY POWER AND SAINTLY VIRTUE: THE IMAGE OF ST KNUD

Of course, only a limited group of people, mostly ecclesiastics, had actually witnessed the elevation and the miraculous outcome of the ordeal. In order for the ritual to have social effect it had to be communicated to a wider public. The most important way to do this was through hagiographic discourse. In Odense the priests therefore soon sat down to produce the *Passio* text, in which they not only reported the events of the elevation but also explained to the listeners (the text was meant to be read aloud during the cultic office of St Knud) why the unpopular king had been assigned a seat in God’s heavenly court – and why, by implication, the revolt against him had to be condemned.

For this purpose it was necessary to find a powerful model on which to fashion the image of ‘St Knud’. Such a model was found in Abbo of Fleury’s late 10th century *Life of St Edmund*, an East Anglian king who was said to have earned himself the crown of martyrdom at the hands of heathen Danes²⁰. Abbo’s text contains little information of historical value, but it presented a new ideal of the royal martyr, which for the first time combined the values of saintly virtue with those of secular authority and explicitly compared the martyr king to the suffering Christ. Abbo’s pioneering discourse had already been picked up by authors writing about the Norwegian King Olav the Holy (martyred 1030) and it now came to inform the hagiography of St Knud as well.

Thus, in the *Passio* (and in the *Tabula*) King Knud’s holiness is first of all attributed to his *political activities*, his practical measures to strengthen the position of the Church, educate his subjects in the Christian faith, and protect the weaker members of the community against the powerful. Knud, “glorious king and protomartyr of the Danes”, is made a champion of Christianity not so much on account of his personal devotion, but rather because of the way he discharged his royal office as a vigorous, hardline defender of the Church. The *Passio* makes no attempt to pass over the king’s harsh measures:

As [...] the insipient people, which neither feared Hell nor strived for Heaven, clung to worldly desires that conflicted with the soul [...] the king, stirred up by his zeal for God, went on and started to terrify the mightier among them with his royal power and authority and to deprive them of many things of his right²¹.

In the dramatic account of his death in St Alban’s church Knud is depicted as a Christ-like figure, who refuses to take up arms against the invading mob. After having confessed his sins and received the sacrament of the Eucharist, he is pierced to death by a rebel lance in the side while kneeling in front of the altar with his arms stretched out in the shape of a cross (the *Tabula* takes care to mention the day: Friday). It is hard to

imagine a more explicit likeness to the crucified Lord. The miracle of the ordeal by fire, finally, is explained as a sign from God specifically intended to “call the people’s torpid hearts to repentance or urge them to holy religion”²².

The implication of the hagiographic discourse of the *Passio* (and the *Tabula*) is clear: by transforming a *rex tyrannus* into a *rex martyr*, righteous revolt consequently becomes an ungodly crime. In the end the uprising of 1086 is condemned as an assault on both “the Lord and his Anointed” (*dominum et christum eius*)²³ – a point which is accentuated later by Ailnoth, author of the *Gesta Canuti*, who sees Knud as God’s earthly representative with a divine mission to rule the Danes and supports the argument by implicitly invoking Romans 13:2. (“Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement”)²⁴.

Shortly after the elevation in 1095 the morally dethroned King Oluf died. He was succeeded by Erik I, another son of Sven Estridson, who was brought in from Swedish exile. During the revolt Erik had supported Knud, and as king he immediately embraced the incipient cult of his brother, no doubt appreciating its political potential: a saintly king would emphasize the divine aspect of kingship and enhance the social prestige of the royal dynasty as well as the reputation of the newly converted kingdom in the wider world of Christianity. By a happy coincidence Erik’s accession was accompanied by a long awaited change of weather: “as soon as he had assumed command”, says Ailnoth, “the times changed, the abundance of crops smiled upon [the people], everything gushed up in riches...”²⁵

Encouraged by King Erik, the cult of St Knud became firmly consolidated. Hubald, an English canon from the episcopal church of Lund (headed by Erik’s brother-in-law bishop Asser) was appointed bishop of Odense. Together Erik and Hubald called in a team of Benedictine monks from Evesham abbey in Western England, a place known for its expertise in the veneration of royal saints, to found a monastery at St Knud’s church. According to Ailnoth, people who a few years before had persecuted the king now flocked to his shrine to beg forgiveness and ask for intercessory prayer²⁶. Royal envoys were then sent to Rome to obtain an official papal authorisation of Knud’s cult. This was achieved in 1099 when Knud became the first royal saint ever to be canonized with papal involvement. Finally, on 19 April 1100 a solemn translation feast in Odense marked the culmination of the sanctification process. Witnessed by a large crowd of clergy and lay people the body of St Knud was lifted from the crypt, wrapped in precious Byzantine cloth and placed in a golden shrine at the high altar.

King Erik was succeeded in 1104 by his younger brother, Niels. Like his predecessor Niels favoured the cult of St Knud, made donations to the monastery in Odense and even raised it to the status of cathedral priory (yet another Anglo-Saxon speciality). In the preface to the *Gesta Canuti* Ailnoth dedicated his work to King Niels, thus corroborating once again the cultic union of Church and royal power.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

In the course of the 12th century, the fame of St Knud spread as far away as Rome, Jerusalem and Russia²⁷. In Flanders Knud's son proudly designated himself "Karl, son of Holy Knud, King of the Danes" (*Karolus sancti Cnutonis Danorum regis filius*) in official documents²⁸. At home, however, the cult of Knud never really caught the hearts and minds of the Danes²⁹. Ritual, feast, miracle and narrative did not persuade everybody about the sanctity of the king and the illegitimacy of the rebellion in 1086. Ailnoth seems to suggest that when he composed the *Gesta Canuti* twenty years after Knud's canonization the people of Funen had adopted his cult, but the Jutlanders who started the revolt still turned their back on the royal saint³⁰. Ailnoth has nothing to say about the attitude of the people of Sealand or Scania – perhaps they were simply indifferent? Saxo Grammaticus, in his massive *Gesta Danorum*, written around 1200, explicitly reports how those who sympathized with the rebellion denied the claims about Knud's sanctity. And when they were finally persuaded, reluctantly, to accept the stories of miracles performed at the shrine in Odense, they came up with a perfectly consistent counter-narrative according to which the king's saintliness was due exclusively to the contrition and remorse he showed in the moment of death, *not* to his political actions as ruler.

[...] they still persisted in defending the act itself [the regicide]; they assented to his sanctity but ascribed it not so much to the merits of his past life, as to the repentance of his last moments. In that way they both pretended a legal cause for their own deed and conferred honour on him after death. Indeed, they said the king had deserved to die but had departed a pious man on account of his tears, for they considered his incentive to have been greed rather than religion³¹.

According to Saxo this alternative discourse on Knud's saintliness (from which Saxo dissociates himself) was still very much alive more than a century after the events. This is confirmed by another chronicler, Sven Aggeson, who – writing c. 1180 – explicitly says that around his time some people still claimed that the rebellion against King Knud was justified³². An earlier and shorter account of the revolt found in the anonymous Roskilde chronicle from c. 1140 states that Knud died *magna confessione cordis*, "with great contrition of heart". Some scholars have taken this to be a subtle expression of the same counter-narrative, but this remains a matter of scholarly controversy³³.

Also the discourse on the climatic disaster that haunted the reign of King Oluf seems to have been disputed. The official interpretation of the famine as God's punishment of the Danes for having slain their king no doubt contributed in important ways to the success of the sanctification campaign, but it was not accepted uncritically. Thus, according to the English chronicler Ralph Niger, writing c. 1200, it was King Oluf himself, not the rebellious people, who called the wrath of God on the kingdom: when Oluf was released from his Flemish custody he promised to ransom his younger brother, Niels, who was put in his place as hostage, but afterwards Oluf treacherously broke his oath. The famine, then, had nothing to do with the murder at St. Alban's³⁴. Appar-

ently, Ralph Niger's source was a now lost Danish chronicle, composed c. 1180 within the circles of a rival branch of the royal family – yet another indication of the continued existence of alternative discourses in the kingdom³⁵. Curiously, the author of a 13th-century version of the *Passio*, possibly a cleric from the church of Roskilde who knew Ralph Niger's work but who also visited the monks of St. Knud's monastery in Odense, chose to include both interpretations³⁶!

In other words, if the ecclesiastical claim to King Knud's sanctity was basically accepted, it remained impossible for the clerical 'spin doctors' to control the ways people explained the reasons for his holiness as well as the meaning of the supernatural signs that supposedly pointed to the illegality of the uprising. The official hagiographic discourse was countered by an alternative narrative that allowed for King Knud's saintliness *without* denying the oppressive character of his reign and hence the legitimacy of the revolt.

ECHOES

The history of ecclesiastical attempts to influence social values and views on power and authority in medieval Denmark through religious ritual and the cult of saints certainly does not end here³⁷. Neither does the history of competing interpretations of the revolt in 1086. That struggle is still going on. Today the question of King Knud's saintly identity may have lost some of its urgency (except, perhaps, among confessional scholars³⁸) but the underlying issues of authority and oppression, reform and reaction, resistance and rebellion are of course ever relevant. In fact, the rebellion against King Knud seems to have served as a particularly privileged occasion for modern historians to comment upon contemporary conflicts. To take but two examples: in the 1920s professor Erik Arup described the uprising as representing a just resistance on the part of an old Danish free peasantry against the centralising, anti-democratic tendencies of a *voldskonge* [violent king]³⁹. Politically Arup was associated with the pacifist Danish Social Liberal Party, whose electoral base consisted of smallholders, office workers, and teachers, and it is tempting to see in his version of 1086 not only the reflection of current debates on democracy but also quite specifically the experience of the so-called 'Easter crisis' of March-April 1920, when the Danish King Christian X made a failed attempt to suspend the parliament and remove the democratic government of Denmark. Half a century later, in the wake of the upheavals of 1968, professor Niels Skyum-Nielsen published a history of medieval Denmark 'viewed from below', e.g. from the perspective not of Arup's middle-class peasantry but of women and slaves⁴⁰. In Skyum-Nielsen's interpretation the rebels of 1086 were to be found among the class of conservative magnates who saw their privileges threatened by a progressive ruler, determined to reform society and secure the protection of the clergy and other exposed, marginalised groups.

Not only professional historians continue to dispute the memory of 1086. If we turn to literary fiction we find a similar diversity of 'readings' communicated to the general



Fig. 1

Christian Albrecht von Benzon, *The death of Knud the Holy in St Alban's church 1086* (1843). 19th century national conservative romanticist views of King Knud IV were very much reproduced medieval hagiographic narratives, in historiography as well as in art.

audience. In a recently published novel, Maria Helleberg, a well-established best-selling author of historical fiction, almost echoes the medieval hagiographic rendering of the event⁴¹. Helleberg's King Knud is a just hero, her rebels a traitorous mob. In the description of the murder in Odense, she even seems to top the hagiographic account: her rebels not only run their spear through the king, they also split his skull, and urinate on his dead body as well as on the holy altar. Afterwards they drag the bodies of Knud's slain retainers through the streets of the city – a scenario, which probably owe a great deal to the TV-pictures from Somalia 1993, where bodies of US soldiers were dragged around the streets of Mogadishu by local militia and civilians.

Quite another story was told in the early 1980s by the left-wing author, debater and former student of history Ebbe Kløvedal Reich⁴². His king is an arrogant Christian fanatic who denounces his own people as “sluggish, infidel dastards” and whose very

last words, snarled at the invading rebels from the altar of St Alban's, are: "Ungrateful wretches!" The rebels, in contrast, are depicted as honest stout-hearted peasants, common men of common sense who simply refuse to be taxed beyond reason by a ruler who amasses more riches for himself than any other Danish king had done before. In Odense they fight the king's retainers with the tools of the ordinary workingman – spears, sickles, and forks – and by hurling stones like modern youth protesters. What about the sanctity of King Knud, then? "We don't really believe in him", says Reich in the conclusion of his story, underlining in one telling phrase not only the sound scepticism of the people towards religious and political authorities but also the bonds that supposedly unite the rebellious masses of 1086 and the common people of today across time⁴³.

To conclude: if Breengaard is right that "the central concern of the cult of Knud was to pass sentence on the sacrilege of the historical event"⁴⁴, the spinning of the official verdict certainly never succeeded in erasing other testimonies. On the contrary, in the course of time the rebellion against King Knud has grown to become something like a *lieu de mémoire* for popular resistance to oppressive authority in Denmark. A wonderful scene in *Fiskerne* [The Fishermen], a realist novel from 1928 by the communist writer Hans Kirk, which is not about the Middle Ages at all, brilliantly catches the almost emblematic status of the counter-narrative⁴⁵. In a community of poor and simple-minded fishermen in Jutland of the 1920s, an old man, Martinus Povlsen, who had served in Denmark's war against Prussia in 1864, is singled out by the authorities to be honoured with the Cross of Dannebrog. Members of the local community humbly prepare to receive the county prefect, who arrives by car escorted by the local chief constable. The old man is sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, leaning on a stick, almost blind and hardly noticing what is going on around him. Having impressed the assembled locals with an authoritative speech on the flag and the fatherland the prefect turns to Martinus. "You belong to those men who fought for our old mother, our beloved Denmark, in times of need", he says. "Therefore I now present you with this Cross of Dannebrog". The prefect solemnly fastens the cross on the still apathetic old man's worn-out coat. "And I bring you greetings from His Majesty the King", he adds. In that very moment Martinus' wrinkled weather-beaten face suddenly lights up, and with a hollow voice he rasps out: "It was we who killed King Knud!"

NOTES

- ¹ All texts printed with a critical introduction in *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, ed. M.Cl. Gertz, Copenhagen 1908-1912, pp. 27-166.
- ² C. Breengaard, *Muren om Israels hus*, Copenhagen 1982, p. 122. For a brilliant summary of the scholarship and the debate, see B. Wählin, *Oprøret mod Knud den Hellige i 1086. Brydninger under stats- og klassesdannelsen i Danmark*, in A. Bøgh, J.W. Sørensen, L. Tvede-Jensen (eds.), *Til kamp for friheden. Sociale oprør i nordisk middelalder*, Aarhus 1988, pp. 46-71.
- ³ For the following historical overview and its wider context I refer to O. Fenger, *Kirker rejser alle vegne. Gyldeendal og Politikens Danmarkshistorie, IV: 1050-1250*, Copenhagen 1992, pp. 46-112; M.H. Gel-

- ting, *The Kingdom of Denmark*, in N. Berend (ed.), *Christianization and the Rise of Christian monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 73-120.
- ⁴ Breengaard, *Muren* cit., p. 330.
 - ⁵ Fenger, *Kirker* cit., p. 45; *Gesta abbatum Trudonensium*, ed. R. Koepke, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Scriptores X, 1852, pp. 227-272, at p. 239.
 - ⁶ Since 1066 England had been under Norman rule, but King Knud considered her his rightful inheritance: he was the grandnephew of Knud the Great, who until 1035 had been king of Denmark, Norway and England.
 - ⁷ Knud's wife and son Karl fled to Flanders, where the latter ruled as count 1119-1127. Like his father he was assassinated by rebels in a church (in Bruges). See J. Deploige, *Political Assassination and Sanctification. Transforming discursive Customs after the Murder of the Flemish Count Charles the Good (1127)*, in J. Deploige, G. Deneckere (eds.), *Mystifying the Monarch. Studies on Discourse, Power, and History*, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 35-54.
 - ⁸ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/ang11.asp>, accessed on May 2009.
 - ⁹ On violation of sacred space in the Middle Ages, see J. Deploige, *Revolt and the Manipulation of Sacral and Private Space in 12th Century Laon and Bruges*, in P. François, T. Syrjämaa, H. Terho (eds.), *Power and Culture: New Perspectives on Spatiality in European History*, Pisa 2008, pp. 89-108.
 - ¹⁰ England is reported to have suffered from bad weather, bad harvests, and famine in 1086-1087, 1089, 1095-1098, cf. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/ang11.asp>. In Saxony the population experienced hunger and epidemic in 1092-1094, cf. F. Curschmann, *Hungersnöte im Mittelalter*, Leipzig 1900, pp. 123-27.
 - ¹¹ *Diplomatarium Danicum*, eds. C.A. Christensen et al., Copenhagen 1938-2000, 1.2.20 (1080).
 - ¹² Breengaard, *Muren* cit., p. 329.
 - ¹³ D. Rollason, *The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, in "Anglo-Saxon England", 1983, 11, pp. 1-21, at p. 16. In the 11th and 12th centuries the idea of the royal martyr was appropriated by other newly Christianised peoples of the European peripheries (besides Denmark: Norway, Bohemia, Hungary), see G. Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, New York 2002.
 - ¹⁴ *Chronicon Roskildense*, in *Scriptores minores historiae danicae medii aevi*, ed. M.Cl. Gertz, Copenhagen 1917-18, pp. 1-33, at p. 24.
 - ¹⁵ *Knytlinge Saga*, trans. J.P. Ægidius, Copenhagen 1977, pp. 93-94.
 - ¹⁶ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* cit., p. 71: "[...] *ne mens dubitando tabesceret insipidorum* [...]".
 - ¹⁷ T. Head, *Saints, Heretics, and Fire: Finding Meaning Through the Ordeal*, in S. Farmer, B. Rosenwein (eds.), *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts*, London 2000, pp. 220-238; K. Esmark, *Hellige ben i indviet ild. Den rituelle sanktifikation af kong Knud IV, 1095*, in H.J. Orning, L. Hermanson, K. Esmark (eds.), *Gaver, ritualer og konflikter. Et rettsantropologisk perspektiv på nordisk middelalderhistorie*, Oslo (forthcoming).
 - ¹⁸ A. Franz, *Die Kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, Freiburg 1909, vol. 2, p. 348, note 5: "*Domine Iesu Christe, qui es rex regum et dominus dominantium et amator omnium in te credentium, qui es iustus iudex, fortis et patiens; qui sacerdotibus tuis tua sancta mysteria revelasti, et qui tribus pueris flammam ignium mitigasti: concede nobis, indignis famulis tuis, et exaudi preces nostras, ut pannus iste vel filum istud, quibus involuta sunt ista corpora sanctorum, si vera non sint, crementur ab hoc igne, et si vera sint, evadere valeant, ut iustitiae non dominetur iniquitas, subdatur falsitas veritati, quatenus veritas tua ibi declaretur et nobis omnibus in te credentibus manifestetur, ut cognoscamus, quia tu es deus benedictus in saecula saeculorum. Amen*".
 - ¹⁹ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* cit., p. 71: "*Nam ad suggestionem uel petitionem multorum, ne mens dubitando tabesceret insipidorum, super sancta eius ossa quatuor uicibus ignem ardentem misimus, qui in*

momento, quasi aqua infunderetur, extinctus, nichil molestie inferens nec aliquid ledens, nusquam comparuit”.

- ²⁰ Abbo of Fleury, *Passio sancti Eadmundi*, ed. M. Winterbottom, *Three Lives of English Saints*, Toronto 1972, pp. 65-87.
- ²¹ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* cit., p. 66: “*At cum [...] gens insipiens, nec tartara timens nec celestia querens, terrenis desideriis, que militant aduersus animam [...] rex dei zelo permotus adiecit maiores ex eis regaliter ac potenter detertere atque de iure suo aliqua eis subtrahere*”.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 71: “[...] *quatenus hebetes istorum mentes ad penitentiam reuocaret uel ad sanctam religionem incitaret*”.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130: “*Moxque eo ad imperium eucto, utpote conuersis temporibus, copia frugum arridebat, rerum opulentia exuberabat [...]*”.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- ²⁷ P.D. Steidl, *Knud den Hellige. Danmarks vernehelgen*, Copenhagen 1918, pp. 324-25; J.H. Lind, *The Martyria of Odense and a Twelfth-Century Russian Prayer: The Question of Bohemian Influence on Russian Religious Literature*, in “*Slavonic and East European Review*”, 1990, 68, pp. 1-21.
- ²⁸ See, for instance, *Actes des comtes de Flandre 1071-1128*, ed. F. Vercauteren, Brussels 1938, 58 (19 October 1112).
- ²⁹ E. Jørgensen, *Helgendyrkelse i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1909, pp. 57-58; E. Hoffmann, *Die heiligen Könige bei den Angelsachsen und den skandinavischen Völkern*, Neumünster 1975, p. 100, note 45; R. Folz, *Les saints rois du moyen âge en occident (VIe-XIIIe siècles)*, Bruxelles 1984, pp. 186-87; Fenger, *Kirker* cit., p. 94; T. Nyberg, *St Knud and St Knud's church*, in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature – A Symposium*, Odense 1981, pp. 100-110, at p. 107. For a more positive assessment of the popularity of the cult, see however E. Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde og slave*, Copenhagen 1971, pp. 16-17.
- ³⁰ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* cit., pp. 109-110.
- ³¹ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. and trans. K. Friis-Jensen, P. Zeeberg, Copenhagen 2005, 11.15.2: “[...] *in facti tamen defensione persistens sanctitati quidem assensit, sed eam non tam ex prae-teritae uitae meritis quam ultimi temporis poenitentia profectam astruxit. Ita et iustam facto causam praetexuit et uita cassum honore donauit. Siquidem digne regem perisse, sed pium lachrymis euasisse dicebat, intentionem eius auaritia quam religioni propriorem existimans*”.
- ³² Sven Aggeson, *Brevis Historia Regvm Dacie*, in *Scriptores minores historiae danicae medii aevi*, ed. M.Cl. Gertz, Copenhagen 1917-18, pp. 94-141, at p. 126.
- ³³ *Chronicon Roskildense* cit., p. 24; Breengaard, *Muren* cit., 1982, p. 53-54; *Roskildekroniken*, trans. M.H. Gelting, 2nd ed., Højbjerg 2002, pp. 53-55.
- ³⁴ *Radulfi Nigri Chronica*, ed. R. Anstruther, *The Chronicles of Ralph Niger*, London 1851, p. 86-87.
- ³⁵ A.K.G. Kristensen, *Knud Magnussens kronike*, in “*Historisk Tidsskrift*”, 1968-69, 12, 3, pp. 431-452.
- ³⁶ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* cit., p. 556: “*Vnde, ipsius regis Olau'i peccatis exigentibus pariter et vulgi Danie, regem et martirem Kanutum innocenter occidentis, omnibus diebus regni ipsius ager frugibus sterilis [...]*”.
- ³⁷ As regards political violence the ecclesiastical attempt to forbid insurrection against the king by means of religious ritual and the cult of saints did not prevent a new crisis from breaking out in 1131 when rival branches of the royal family started a bloody war of succession. This time the feud went on – on-and-off – for more than 25 years and once again the Church had one of the victims – King Erik I's son Knud Lavard – sanctified. Fenger, *Kirker* cit., pp. 71-76, 126-156.

- ³⁸ See for instance the contributions in J.N. Rasmussen (ed.), *Sankt Knud konge*, Copenhagen 1986.
- ³⁹ E. Arup, *Danmarks historie, I: Land og folk: til 1282*, Copenhagen 1925.
- ⁴⁰ Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde* cit.
- ⁴¹ M. Helleberg, *Den hellige Knud*, Copenhagen 2005.
- ⁴² E.K. Reich, *Ploven og de to sverd: 30 fortællinger fra Danmarks unge dage*, Copenhagen 1982, pp. 39-53. On Ebbe Reich, see the contribution by Anne Stadager in this volume.
- ⁴³ Other literary depictions of King Knud include J. Bomholt's two-volume novel *Guds knægt*, Copenhagen 1966; *Midt i riget*, Copenhagen 1967; A. Espegaard, *Jagten på Knud Konge*, Hjørring 2003; J. Ottesen, *Slægtens offer*, Copenhagen 2009. Bomholt closes his story before the murder in Odense, while Ottesen's takes off around the time of Knud's sanctification and presents a quite lively description of the ordeal by fire in 1095.
- ⁴⁴ Breengard, *Muren* cit., p. 324.
- ⁴⁵ H. Kirk, *Fiskerne*, Copenhagen 1928.

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