

# The Politics of Hegemony and the 'Empires' of Anglo-Saxon England



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*Abstract: The term 'empire' is frequently applied retrospectively by historians to historical trans-cultural political entities that are notable either for their geographic breadth, unprecedented expansionary ambitions, or extensive political hegemony. Yet the use of the terminology of empire in historical studies is often ill-defined, as exemplified by the territorial hegemonies of Æthelstan (r. 924 – 939) and Cnut (r. 1016 – 1035). In their programs of territorial expansion and political consolidation, modern historians have credited both Æthelstan and Cnut as the creators and overlords of trans-cultural European empires. Yet common characteristics that warrant categorisation of the polities they governed as 'empires' are not readily discernible. Not only were the regions each controlled territorially and culturally distinct, but their methods of establishing political dominance and regional governance were equally varied. This raises the question as to whether the term 'empire' can be considered to define a distinct and coherent category of political power when applied to medieval monarchical hegemonies. By analysing the Anglo-Saxon 'empires' of Æthelstan and Cnut within the frameworks of empire set out by modern political theorists, this paper will establish whether the structural commonalities of their domains supersede their inherent diversity, thereby justifying a common categorisation as 'empires'.*

The retrospective appellation of 'empire' to seemingly innumerable trans-cultural political entities has problematised the concept of empire as a category of political power. The idea of empire is inherently complex, and the nature of any political body deemed an empire is dependent on temporal and geographical location, which in turn affect the social milieu from which they arise. This has given rise to debate as to whether the increasing application of the word 'empire' to historical political entities represents a dilution of empire as a cogent conceptualisation of historical

realities.<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1986, Michael Doyle provided a definition of empire at its broadest and most simple: 'empire, then, is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society'.<sup>2</sup> Taken literally, this summation of empire enables historians to find empires wherever they look; a hypothesis evident in scholarship of the political history of Anglo-Saxon England. Over recent decades, it has been asserted that the territorial expansions of King Æthelstan (924/7–939) established a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon empire, while England's Danish conqueror, Cnut the Great (1016–1035), has had the term 'empire' applied to his conquests for over a century.<sup>3</sup> However, the use of the term has proved polarising, and many biographers either refute claims of empire (pointing to distinctive political and social contexts, and military and administrative innovations), or simply declare the possibility of empire as anachronism.<sup>4</sup> Such variant positions within historical studies reflect a wider debate on the nature of empire within political theory. Political scientist Alexander Motyl, for example, decried the uselessness of such 'catch-all categories' in 2006 (aiming that barb at Niall Ferguson, another theorist, who had pushed to maintain the broadest mandate of the term).<sup>5</sup> As historians and political theorists grasp for defining characteristics that will encompass 'empire' in its many historical and geopolitical permutations, it seems clear that we see that which Hannah Arendt has

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Motyl, 'Is Everything Empire? Is Empire Everything?', *Comparative Politics*, 38 (2006), 229–49 (pp. 243–4).

<sup>2</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> For Cnut, see Timothy Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great: Conquest and the Consolidation of Power in Northern Europe in the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 303–7; Laurence Larson, 'Political Policies of Cnut as King of England', *American Historical Review*, 15 (1910), 720–43 (pp. 721, 735). For Æthelstan, see Michael Wood, 'The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: An English Charlemagne?', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish Society*, ed. by Patrick Wormald (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 192–217 (pp. 250–72).

<sup>4</sup> For Æthelstan, see Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). Throughout the biography Foot only uses the term 'empire' in relation to the inheritance of the Roman Empire. For Cnut, see Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great*, pp. 303–4.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 10–11; Motyl, 'Is Everything Empire?', p. 234.

termed the 'wild confusion of modern historical terminology' in action.<sup>6</sup> To attempt to reduce trans-cultural entities, formed out of political and social tensions specific to a time and a place, to a single encompassing category, is to risk losing sight of those very things that make 'empires' unique.

This examination does not intend to add to that 'wild confusion' by proposing a new definition of empire to encompass the hegemonies of Æthelstan and Cnut, nor does it seek to force those disparate kingships into an existing definition of the term. Rather, it simply questions whether it makes sense for historians to use the term 'empire' to denote a distinct and coherent category of political power in the context of Anglo-Saxon monarchical hegemonies. To answer this question, I will first provide a historiographical sketch of the term 'empire' in Anglo-Saxon studies before going on to examine the terminology of empire within political theory, and how it may be applied to the realms of Æthelstan and Cnut (with a focus on territorial expansion). It follows that this section of the paper will have a strong theoretical focus, grounded in modern scholarship. The discussion will then shift to source analysis, scrutinising each king's methodologies of expansion in turn. I will close with a comparative examination of their approaches to administrative governance, thereby establishing whether commonalities exist in the empires of Æthelstan and Cnut that supersede diversity, and warrant their common categorisation as empires. Or indeed, whether these diverse trans-cultural entities in fact resist such reductionism, and the term 'empire' should be rejected as a transient label, open to manipulation and lacking in clear definition within historical discourse.

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edn (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 131.

## ANGLO-SAXON 'EMPIRES' AND ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES

It is not common to find the language of empire applied to Anglo-Saxon kings within modern scholarship, though there is some evidence of its use in contemporary or near-contemporary histories. In his influential study of Bede's characterisation of early Anglo-Saxon kingship, Nicholas Higham highlights Bede's use of terminology that implies an Anglo-Saxon imperial hegemony extending over the Britons and Picts.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Bede does describe various sixth- and seventh-century kings as holding *imperium* (a term which I will more closely define shortly), and even describes Edwin of Northumbria (616–633) as holding authority over Britain akin to that claimed by Æthelstan in the tenth century.<sup>8</sup> Higham, however, demonstrates this as politicised rhetoric from the Northumbrian historian, informed by a desire to promote the orthodoxy of the Anglo-Saxon church and Northumbrian political supremacy.<sup>9</sup> It is a convincing hypothesis and, as such, there is no consensus among historians that the early Anglo-Saxon kings held claim to an 'Anglo-British empire' as implied by Bede.

In contrast, historians have been more open to accepting that the hegemony of Æthelstan may fit some definition of empire. This likely reflects Æthelstan's perceived use of the rhetoric of empire in the documents and artefacts of his own reign, as opposed to Bede's *ex post facto* claims of Anglo-Saxon *imperium*. The diplomas of Æthelstan's reign provide examples of the Anglo-Saxon king being referred to as *rex totius Britanniae*, *imperator*, and even *basileus* (the title of the Eastern Roman emperor).<sup>10</sup> However, interest in Æthelstan's reign as a nexus in England's

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<sup>7</sup> N.J. Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the Early Anglo-Saxon Kings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 5–6, 9–12.

<sup>8</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ii.5, v.19, ed. by B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, reprint, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991 (1969)), pp. 148–51, 516–17.

<sup>9</sup> Higham, *An English Empire*, 12–7.

<sup>10</sup> See for example: S 407, *ego Eþelstanus rex Anglorum per omnipatrantis dexteram, que Christus est, totius Britannie regni solo sublimatus*; S 441–442, *basileus industrius Anglorum cunctarumque gentium in circuitu*

transition from a collection of independent and inter-dependent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to a single Anglo-Saxon kingdom ruled by a centralised monarchy is a relatively recent phenomenon. As such, any assertion of Æthelstan's claim to empire in scholarship is relatively late, with Michael Wood the first to comprehensively argue the case in his 1983 article, 'The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: an English Charlemagne?'.<sup>11</sup> In it, Wood argues that Æthelstan and his advisors actively modelled his kingship on Charlemagne's imperial court. In this, Æthelstan's claims to empire rest not only on imperial language in diplomas and ordinances, but on his military prowess; his practical use of wealth and patronage; his support of art, of learning, and of Christianity; and a posthumous reputation that extended beyond England's borders.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent uptake on this concept has been varied. As George Molyneaux notes in his 2010 article examining tenth-century English kingship, simply because the scribes of Æthelstan's court used 'imperial' terminology, it need not imply they associated it with 'imperial' ideology.<sup>13</sup> It is useful to keep this ambiguity in mind as part of the milieu that informs historians' use of the term 'empire'; however, our key issue here is not what historians were doing with empire *then* but what they are doing *now*. Which is to say, our interest here is in how power over subordinate polities manifested and was formulated, and to what degree the function of these hegemonies fit within modern theories of empire. It is this that R.R Davies considers in positing that England's first empire was, in fact formed under the Norman and Angevin kings. He argues that, while Æthelstan's powers and pretensions were formidable, our knowledge of how that

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*persistentium*; P. H. Sawyer, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, rev. S. E. Kelly and R. Rushforth et al. <<http://www.esawyer.org.uk/>> [Accessed 11 July 2018]. Æthelstan is termed *imperator* in S 392, S 404, and S 406, yet all have spurious elements, George Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 21 (2011), 59–91 (p. 16, n. 14).

<sup>11</sup> Wood, 'The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire: An English Charlemagne?', (n.3 above).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 251–52, 259–62, 271–72.

<sup>13</sup> Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', pp. 63–4.

power was defined and executed is limited, and that such medieval hegemonies suffered from 'political frailty' at their centre.<sup>14</sup> It is a frailty most evident in the fact that Æthelstan's hegemony quickly fell apart after his death. While this certainly brings into question the extent of Æthelstan's regional control, it also speaks to a key component of 'empire' as defined herein (below) – the presence of a single centralising leader.

Cnut is an excellent example of the centrality of the ruler to medieval monarchical hegemonies. While his hegemony suffered a similar fate to that of Æthelstan after his death, there is significant evidence of Cnut cultivating his public image among his disparate peoples throughout his reign, with letters to the English in 1019 and 1027 of particular note. In the first of these, written on campaign to obtain the Danish throne, Cnut greets his English subjects in friendship and justifies the Danish campaign as a proactive defence of England.<sup>15</sup> In the second, he identifies himself as *rex totius Anglie et Denemarcie et Norreganorum et partis Suanorum* – a hegemony remarkable for its extent and cross-cultural boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Cnut's use of propaganda, his overseas conquests, and the territorial extent of his kingships makes for a more readily recognisable 'empire', and the identification of Cnut's collective kingships as such has been with us for over a century; since Laurence Larson asserted that England was central to Cnut's empire in an article of 1910.<sup>17</sup> However, the debate as to whether the Danish ruler can rightly be considered an emperor and, moreover, whether he considered himself to be an emperor in the mould of the German emperors, is ongoing. In his foundational history of Anglo-Saxon England,

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<sup>14</sup> R. R. Davies, *The First British Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles, 1093–1343* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 8–10.

<sup>15</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1019*, in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by F. Liebermann (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1903), pp. 273–75.

<sup>16</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1027*, in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by F. Liebermann (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1903), pp. 276–77.

<sup>17</sup> Larson, 'Political Policies of Cnut as King of England', pp. 721, 735.

Frank Stenton questioned whether Cnut's North Sea hegemony, as a loose coalition of territories with little more than the king himself in common, could claim the title 'empire', a sentiment more recently echoed by Alexander Rumble.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, in a 1994 essay entitled 'Cnut's Scandinavian Empire', Peter Sawyer did not even engage with the debate, asserting as fact that Cnut's hegemony was an empire.<sup>19</sup> It is one of Cnut's most recent biographers however, Timothy Bolton, who has most actively entered the defence of the empire and, further, asserted that Cnut consciously conceptualised his hegemony as an empire in the mould of the Roman Empire under Conrad II (1027 – 1039).<sup>20</sup> Seemingly at odds with their common assertion that Cnut reigned over a single, if culturally varied, empire, Bolton castigated Sawyer for his emphasis on the personal allegiances to Cnut that comprised the basis of political authority.<sup>21</sup> Yet the decline of the empire upon Cnut's death would seem to support Sawyer's argument: the loss of the person of Cnut equated to the loss of centralised political legitimacy. Nonetheless, it remains that historians seem far more comfortable using the term 'empire' to describe Cnut's territories than for any other pre-Conquest king.

## MODERN AND MEDIEVAL THEORIES AND TERMINOLOGIES OF EMPIRE

With some historiographical context thus established, it is next to discuss the core terminologies and theories I will use throughout this paper, and most particularly

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander R. Rumble, 'Introduction: Cnut in Context', in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. by Alexander R. Rumble (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), pp. 1–9 (p. 6); Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford, 1971), p. 406. See also Angelo Forte, Richard Oram and Frederik Pedersen, *Viking Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 193–96.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Sawyer, 'Cnut's Scandinavian Empire', in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. by Alexander R. Rumble (London, 1994), pp. 10–22.

<sup>20</sup> Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great*, pp. 303–7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

identify the theoretical definitions of the terms 'empire' and 'hegemony' that will inform the analysis. Among political theorists there is an ongoing debate, represented within Motyl and Ferguson's exchange, that seeks to identify 'hegemony' as a category of political power distinct from 'empire', and it is a useful distinction for this examination.<sup>22</sup> Though Motyl — a professor of political science who has written extensively on theories of empire — may object to 'catch-all' categories, he does assert that a degree of defined categorisation has analytical utility to political theory. In the case of 'empire' and 'hegemony', Motyl maintains the fundamental distinction between the two lies in the relationship between the 'centre' state and 'periphery' states that fall under its influence.<sup>23</sup> The terminology here has been adopted by Motyl from the influential 'Structural Theory of Imperialism', of noted sociologist Johan Galtung.<sup>24</sup> In it, Galtung asserts that 'empire' is at its core a relationship where a 'centre' polity holds power over a 'periphery' polity, exercised to the benefit of the centre and detriment of the periphery.<sup>25</sup> He does not, however, define or use the term 'hegemony'. Motyl asserts that this is a subtler relationship than empire, defining it as a state in which one political entity 'exerts substantial influence on the foreign relations of another'.<sup>26</sup> This is a condition necessarily present in empire as one aspect of regional control exerted from the centre, yet hegemony is less restrictive than empire, as those states that fall under hegemonic rule retain an internal governmental autonomy. Nonetheless, it remains that both 'empire' and 'hegemony' entail an uneven relationship between two states, and the structural elements of the 'centre' and 'periphery' are integral to defining either term.

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<sup>22</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, pp. 39–45; Niall Ferguson, 'Hegemony or Empire?', *Foreign Affairs*, 82 (2003), 154–61; Johan Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', *Journal of Peace Research*, 8 (1971), 81–117 (pp. 83–5); Alexander Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 18–20.

<sup>23</sup> Motyl, 'Is Everything Empire?', p. 234.

<sup>24</sup> Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', pp. 81–117; Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>25</sup> Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', pp. 83–4.

<sup>26</sup> Motyl, 'Is Everything Empire?', p. 234.



Whether defined as an empire or a hegemony, centre-periphery relationships invariably form through a process of territorial expansion – both the initial acquisition of regional control, and the ongoing process of maintenance and governance. Whether achieved by military, political, or economic means, the advancement of territorial hegemony necessitates that the 'centre' establish a system of governance or influence for radial provinces, thereby embedding the centre-periphery relationship.<sup>27</sup> This does require the introduction of one further theoretical structure: 'direct' and 'indirect' rule. In the former, representatives of the centre take control of the governance of the periphery, in the latter, the centre sponsors a regional administration to govern on its behalf.<sup>28</sup> Though George Steinmetz, another sociologist, has argued that the former method of governance is the defining attribute of a 'territorial empire' and the latter of a 'non-territorial empire', it is necessary to tailor the terminology and theories of empire to our understanding of the medieval world.<sup>29</sup> Steinmetz' labels are unconvincing if the kingdoms of Æthelstan and Cnut are to be considered empires. Both kings undertook a blended approach to governance in peripheral territories, alternatively establishing systems of direct rule, indirect rule, and hegemony in regions under their control. Further, as Steinmetz acknowledges, even if direct territorial control is not maintained, the periphery is still governed or influenced from the centre by the medium of a regional agent maintaining a territorial hegemony.<sup>30</sup> Once more we are approaching Arendt's 'wild confusion of modern historical terminology'. The tension of terminology within theories of empire the overlapping terms like 'direct rule' and 'territorial', 'indirect rule' and 'non-territorial', and 'hegemony' – demonstrates the ambiguity of

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<sup>27</sup> Bradley J. Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire: Assyria's Imprint on Southeastern Anatolia', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 107 (2003), 525–57 (pp. 525–26).

<sup>28</sup> Motyl, 'Is Everything Empire?', p. 234.

<sup>29</sup> George Steinmetz, 'Return to Empire: The New U.S. Imperialism in Comparative Historical Perspective', *Sociological Theory*, 23 (2005), 339–67 (pp. 340–41, 349–50).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 349–50.

‘empire’ as a term to delineate a category of historical conglomerate polities.<sup>31</sup> As such, many historians avoid semantic pedantry, opting instead, as Doyle and Galtung have attempted, to seek broad formulas that encompass all expressions of empire.<sup>32</sup>

With this understood, I intend to use the term ‘hegemony’ throughout this article to refer to the political entities under discussion, alongside the somewhat circumlocutory ‘trans-cultural polities’. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, as defined by Motyl, ‘hegemony’ is a functional term describing an uneven relationship that may or may not entail empire, and thus it can be used here to describe the ‘empires’ under examination without prejudicing a conclusion. Secondly, terms such as ‘nation’, ‘country’, and even ‘state’ (a term I will now cease to use) must be eschewed as fundamentally anachronistic, implying as they do concepts of territorial borders and culturally demarcated people that are conceptually alien to the ‘trans-cultural polities’ of Æthelstan and Cnut. Lastly however, and most importantly, within this discussion of the utility of the term ‘empire’, it is imperative that that word be reserved for use within an analytical framework. In his excellent article, ‘Archaeological Manifestations of Empire: Assyria’s Imprint on Southeastern Anatolia’, professor of archaeology, Bradley Parker, puts forth just such a framework.<sup>33</sup> Parker’s formulation of empire identifies three core traits of imperial governance: rapid and directed territorial expansion, the presence of a central elite as the primary beneficiaries of imperial resources, and the consolidation of administrative structures.<sup>34</sup> Being neither so narrow as to immediately preclude the hegemonies of Æthelstan and Cnut from any consideration of being ‘empires’, nor so broad as to lose any functional use as a

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<sup>31</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 30; Motyl, ‘Is Everything Empire?’, p. 234.

<sup>32</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 30; Galtung, ‘A Structural Theory of Imperialism’, pp. 83–4.

<sup>33</sup> Parker, ‘Archaeological Manifestations of Empire’, pp. 525–57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

category of political power, it is Parker's threefold framework of empire that will inform the following analysis of expansion and governance.

At this point, it is important to make a terminological note regarding the word *imperium*, a Latin term which, as Dorine van Espelo notes, represents 'a very flexible and ambiguous notion'.<sup>35</sup> Translations vary from 'command', to 'empire', to 'supreme power' and, etymologically, the Latin term need not imply notions of imperial power wielded by an autocratic executive as it was used of numerous types of authority in imperial Rome.<sup>36</sup> Though English terms such as 'empire' and 'imperial', derived from *imperium* as an etymological antecedent, do carry the implication of 'rule by an emperor', it is anachronism to apply this to medieval notions of *imperium*. As Susan Reynolds notes in her article on medieval empires, after the fall of the Western Empire, any European kings who claimed authority over other kingdoms (such as Æthelstan or Cnut) could claim *imperium*.<sup>37</sup> Yet such *imperium* rarely impinged on the sovereignty of supposedly subordinate kingdoms in a way we would recognise today as empire. As such, Reynolds argues that, by modern perceptions, only the Roman Empire of the Germans would be categorised as such, highlighting the disconnect between the medieval *imperium* and the modern category of 'empire'.<sup>38</sup> For our purposes, the least problematic definition of *imperium* is put forward by Lewis and Short as, 'the right or power of commanding', and in this context, any claim by Æthelstan or Cnut to hold *imperium* is synonymous with

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<sup>35</sup> Dorine van Espelo, 'A Testimony of Carolingian Rule? The *Codex epistolaris carolinus*, its Historical Context, and the Meaning of *imperium*', *Early Medieval Europe*, 32 (2013), 254–83 (p. 270).

<sup>36</sup> '*imperium*', *Oxford Latin Desk Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 89; Steven Fanning, 'Bede, *Imperium* and the Bretwaldas', *Speculum*, 66 (1991), 1–26 (pp. 6–9); Susan Reynolds, 'Empires: a Problem of Comparative History', *Historical Research*, 79 (2006), 151–65 (p. 153).

<sup>37</sup> Reynolds, 'Empires', p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

the pursuit of legitimacy.<sup>39</sup> While this may entail claims to empire, this is not necessarily so.

Finally, before we can go on to examine the processes of expansion and governance in the hegemonies of Æthelstan and Cnut within our source texts, some consideration must be given to the concept of *translatio imperii*. As defined by Jacques Le Goff in his seminal book *Medieval Civilisation, translatio imperii* – the transfer of power – was the ‘succession of empires’, or the idea that there was a legitimate inheritor of the knowledge, culture, and *imperium* of Rome and its predecessors.<sup>40</sup> The primary inheritors of this *imperium* within Western Europe, as medieval historiography delimits it, can be considered to be the Roman Empire and the papacy.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as the idea of *translatio imperii* disseminated more widely and gained greater acceptance as a political philosophy, regional historians began to adapt it to include regional powers, with *imperium* of empire being ascribed to the kings of France and, more importantly to this discussion, to the kings of England by the early fourteenth century.<sup>42</sup> This explanation of *translatio imperii*, and its identification within medieval historiography, premised as it is on the ‘succession of empires’ delineated by Le Goff, can be somewhat limiting. Brendan Bradshaw has put forward an enticing alternative that *translatio imperii* be understood as an origin myth bestowing legitimate *imperium*, or power, upon a recipient.<sup>43</sup> The refocusing of

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<sup>39</sup> ‘*imperium*’, C.T. Lewis and C. Short (eds.), *A Latin Dictionary*, reprint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879 (1984)), pp. 900–1.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization, 400 – 1500*, trans. by Julia Barrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 171.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171–172; Le Goff makes particular note of a passage from Richard de Bury in which Minerva, as a personification of civilisation, has abandoned Egypt, Greece, Rome, and even Paris, arriving in Britain, *insularum insignissimam quin potius microcosmum*, Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon*, ed. by E.C. Thomas and Michael Maclagan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p. 106.

<sup>43</sup> Brendan Bradshaw, ‘Geoffrey Keating: Apologist of Irish Ireland’, in *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534 – 1660*, ed. by Brendan Bradshaw, Andrew Hadfield, and Willy Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 166–90 (p. 174).

*translatio imperii* on the person of the king rather than the entity of the kingdom, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the transmission of *imperium*.

Accepting Bradshaw's definition of *translatio imperii*, it is possible to identify fundamental elements of a *translatio imperii* mythos legitimating the succession to kingship for both Æthelstan and Cnut, indicating that the underlying concept was permeating English historiographical thought as early as the ninth-century. A genealogy commissioned by Æthelstan's grandfather, Alfred the Great (871–899), traces Alfred's lineage through various known Anglo-Saxon kings, back to heroes and god-like figures of legend, ending with his descent from 'Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam'.<sup>44</sup> Thus Æthelstan could claim descent and right to *imperium* from the man to whom God gave dominion over the earth.<sup>45</sup> Though not so detailed as Alfred's genealogy, the praise narrative *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, commissioned by Cnut's wife shortly after his death, seeks to establish the legitimacy of Cnut's *imperium*. Speaking of Cnut's father, Sveinn, the text declares he 'derived his descent from a most noble source', that he achieved 'great worldly honour', and was the recipient of divine favour.<sup>46</sup> Of particular interest is the use of the word *imperium* to refer collectively to the realms which Sveinn administered, thus not only establishing the provenance of Cnut's own *imperium* [authority], but the provenance of their Anglo-Scandinavian territories as *imperium* [empire].<sup>47</sup> It is notable that both Asser and the anonymous encomiast assert that their monarch was the rightful successor to *imperium*, both writers had the benefit of contemporaneity, and thus likely reflect the philosophical position of the royal court on the matter of

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<sup>44</sup> '...qui fuit Cainan; qui fuit Enos; qui fuit Seth; qui fuit Adam'. Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, ed. by W.H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Genesis 1:26–30.

<sup>46</sup> *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, i.1, ed. and trans. by Alistair Campbell, reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (1949)), pp. 8–9.

<sup>47</sup> 'Hic denique a nobilissimis, quod primum est inter homines, duxit originem, magnumque sibi decus secundum seculum peperit imperii quod amminstrabat regiment'. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

succession. Molyneaux argues that we should not understand words such as *imperator* or *basileus* as having any particular underlying political ideals, being more-or-less synonymous with *rex*.<sup>48</sup> It is true that reference to either Æthelstan or Cnut as *imperator* within the diplomas of their reigns is far from ubiquitous, with variants of the title *rex* most commonly used. However, no matter the word used to define their position, claims to overlordship are pervasive and demonstrable.<sup>49</sup> When considered alongside the propagandist genealogies of Asser and the encomiast, such claims do imply that the Anglo-Saxon kings understood the importance of *imperium* and legitimising their claim to hold that power, adapting elements of *translatio imperii* to establish their right to rule.

#### COMPARING THE HEGEMONIES OF ÆTHELSTAN AND CNUT

Æthelstan and Cnut operated within political landscapes that fostered the evolution of two distinct hegemonies that may not immediately seem comparable. However, both kings can be characterised as ambitious men who sought to expand the sphere of their political influence and territorial control. Of expansion specifically, Parker asserts as a core element of his framework that 'empires are characterized by rapid growth, often under the direction of a single charismatic leader'.<sup>50</sup> That Æthelstan and Cnut were remembered as charismatic leaders is evident. The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury declared of Æthelstan that 'there is a vigorous tradition in England that he was the most law-abiding and best educated ruler they ever had'.<sup>51</sup> Upon Æthelstan's death, the Irish *Annals of Ulster* decried the loss of the

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<sup>48</sup> Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> See for example S 409 (Æthelstan) and *Cnut's letter of 1027*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire', p. 525.

<sup>51</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii.132.1, ed. and trans. by R.A.B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thomson and Michael Winterbottom, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), vol. 1, I 320–21.

'pillar of dignity of the western world'.<sup>52</sup> Though somewhat more critical, William was similarly hortatory in his introduction to Cnut, stating that 'there was no justice in his succession to the throne, but he arranged his life with great statesmanship and courage'.<sup>53</sup> John of Worcester and Adam of Bremen both ensured that in reporting the death of Cnut, the extent of his conquests were noted as their epitaphs for him, while the *Encomium* describes him as 'emperor of five kingdoms'.<sup>54</sup> Yet while their legacies and deeds are recorded by both native and foreign historians, so too are the rapid declines of their hegemonies after their deaths, a trend Parker assigns to the loss of that magnetising figure.<sup>55</sup> The very presence of such charismatic and politically dominant monarchs seems to provide parallels within the political polities that validate the utility of empire as a category of political power. Yet equally it can be argued that localised authoritarian leadership is a common feature of medieval kingship and that, in this, the realms of Æthelstan and Cnut are not unique.<sup>56</sup> It is rather in their territorial extent and the degree to which they were able to affect a centralised autocracy that they are remarkable. Further, it can be seen that charisma and legacy were based within different spheres of political influence, dependent upon the character of each king. While the presence of a monarch with ostensibly autocratic power seems to unite the kingdoms of Æthelstan and Cnut within the broad definition of empire, this unity is belied by the nuanced character of each

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<sup>52</sup> *The Annals of Ulster (To AD 1131)* 939.6, ed. by S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), p. 387.

<sup>53</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii.181.1.

<sup>54</sup> *The Chronicle of John of Worcester: The Annals from 450–1066, 1028–1029, 1035*, ed. by R. R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), II 510–11, 520–21; Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, ii.71, trans. by Francis Tschan, 2nd edn., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 106. 'quinque regnorum ... imperator extitit'. *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ii.19.

<sup>55</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire', p. 525.

<sup>56</sup> Davies, *The First English Empire*, pp. 8–9, 12–13; Alaric A. Trousdale, 'Being Everywhere at Once: Delegation and Royal Authority in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 275–95 (pp. 275–276).

leader and the methodological variations in their programs of conquest and governance.

Of course, a further variable with the hegemonies of the two English kings is their geographical extent; while both fulfilled a role as 'King of England', Cnut's lands encompassed vast areas of Scandinavia while Æthelstan's hegemony was restricted to the island of Britain. Thus, it is only in Britain that both kings held common periphery regions of territorial control such as Cornwall, Strathclyde/Cumbria, Wales, and the kingdom this discussion will use as its case-study, Scotland.<sup>57</sup> As an expression of expansion of hegemony, Anglo-Scottish political relations in the reigns of Æthelstan and Cnut are uniquely comparable. By the time Cnut claimed the throne, Cornwall had been largely absorbed by the English, while Strathclyde/Cumbria fell to English shortly after Æthelstan's reign, and thereafter held little true independence, variously falling under English or Scottish dominance.<sup>58</sup> In their turn, the Welsh kings seem to have been personally loyal to Æthelstan and Cnut specifically, perhaps even initiating diplomatic contact to counter the influence of Mercian earls.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, both Æthelstan and Cnut faced a determinedly independent Scottish kingdom. Direct military intervention was required to ensure the submission of both Constantine II (900–952) and Malcolm II (1005–1034); however, in an apparent recognition of the infeasibility of direct territorial control, the Kings of Alba were subsequently afforded a respect and granted an autonomy that set them apart from other *subreguli*.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>57</sup> I will be using the term 'Scotland' throughout this article to refer to the Kingdom of Alba, the forerunner to the Kingdom of Scotland, though lacking its full territorial extent. I will refer to the kings as 'King of Alba'. For an explanation of this terminology, see Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 125–26.

<sup>58</sup> Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 45, 141–42; Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 182–85.

<sup>59</sup> Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 128–29; Simon Keynes, 'Welsh Kings at Anglo-Saxon Royal Assemblies (928–55)', *Haskins Society Journal*, 26 (2015), 69–122 (pp. 92–4).

<sup>60</sup> For Æthelstan see S 426 in which the King of Alba is listed as the first witnessing *subregulus*. For Cnut, see *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC)*, D–F 1031. All references to the ASC will be by manuscript (A–F) and year, drawn from Charles Plummer, ed., *Two of the Saxons Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford:



Æthelstan and Cnut were each able to dominate the political relationship with Scotland by virtue of their wide territorial holdings and centralised governmental apparatus that enabled them to draw upon resources with which the Scots could not compete. As Molyneaux has argued, in this context the submission of the Kings of Alba was purely pragmatic – there is little reason to believe that the Scots did not understand the military superiority of the English in the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>61</sup> Submission recognised that dominance within a hierarchical framework of Insular kingship, while allowing Scotland to maintain a large degree of political autonomy. Nonetheless, English political and military dominance, drew Scotland into the territorial hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon kings, and how Æthelstan and Cnut initially exerted that hegemony is illustrative of the role of expansion as a distinctive component of empire.

Territorial conquest and territorial control are the outcomes of independent processes, and the mechanisms for the establishment of hegemony from the centre and the mechanisms for ongoing control of periphery regions are frequently functionally autonomous, though equally integral, in the expansion of empires. Æthelstan and Cnut initially established dominance over the Scottish kingdom via direct threat of military force.<sup>62</sup> In the subsequent process of consolidating English hegemony over Scotland, Æthelstan and Cnut each engaged in political displays of power as performative tools demonstrating their dominance, while taking little direct action in Scottish governance.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, it is evident that both kings took a twofold approach in bringing Scotland into the English sphere of influence:

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Clarendon Press, 1892), with translations taken from Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965).

<sup>61</sup> Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', p. 71.

<sup>62</sup> ASC A–F 934; D–F 1031.

<sup>63</sup> *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 934; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, 223, in *Heimskringla*, trans. by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulks, 3. vols, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2014), II 148–49.

expansion was achieved through the threat or realisation of military confrontation, while consolidation of that expansion was achieved through subsequent treaty or commensurate political pressure. In this, the English hegemony each king established over Scotland exemplifies Parker's assertion that the creation of an empire is typified by rapid expansion, and a subsequent process of political consolidation over those territorial acquisitions.<sup>64</sup> However, despite the seeming specificity of Parker's formulation of empire when compared with more general definitions, such as that suggested by Doyle, the tools that facilitate the expansion of the centre and the control of the periphery are multifaceted, and so varied as to resist summary definition. For example, Anthony Pagden begins his short anthology of empire in Western Europe with Ancient Greece, crediting the Athenians with the sophisticated colonisation more familiar within the context of modern European empires.<sup>65</sup> For Pagden, colonisation is evidently key to empire and falls equally within the expansion and consolidation phases of establishing hegemony. Yet, while both of our medieval English 'empires' held a clear hegemony over Scotland, none were notable for deliberate programs of large-scale colonisation in the north. As Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have noted, empire is not dependent upon the establishment of radial colonies, with population transfer being only one method of establishing control from the centre.<sup>66</sup>

## ESTABLISHING A BRITISH 'EMPIRE' — KING ÆTHELSTAN

Sources for Æthelstan's reign can be problematic. William of Malmesbury provides the most extended treatment of Æthelstan's kingship, however he wrote two

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<sup>64</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire', p. 525.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Pagden, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration and Conquest, from Greece to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 1–2.

<sup>66</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 6–7.

centuries after the king's death, in an abbey that was bequeathed its lands by the Anglo-Saxon king, and held his remains.<sup>67</sup> While it is true that William's narrative may reflect local traditions and lost sources, there is some suspicion of authorial invention.<sup>68</sup> Though the contemporary records of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provide some corroboration for William's narrative, it is unusually silent, recording the king's activities directly for only six years of his fifteen-year reign.<sup>69</sup> Yet these six entries are interesting in that they record a program of expansion, commensurate with Parker's definition of empire. Succeeding to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Mercia and Wessex in 924, by 927 Æthelstan had annexed Scandinavian Northumbria and the Kingdom of York; in 934 he ravaged Scotland; and in 937 at Brunanburh, Æthelstan defeated the combined forces of the Scots, Norse-Irish, and Brythonic sub-kings.<sup>70</sup> The chronicler declares of Brunanburh that 'never yet in this island ... was a greater slaughter of a host made by the edge of the sword', and places the Scots at the forefront of the defeated armies.<sup>71</sup> That, three years after Æthelstan asserted his overlordship through military intervention, the Scots were willing to partake in a violent insurrection rejecting that submission, demonstrates the difficulty of entrenching a hegemony established through force.

Æthelstan's subjugation of the Scots in 934 was a military endeavour unprecedented in its scope and decisive nature. The *Chronicle* records that the King of Alba, Constantin II, had in fact submitted to Æthelstan in 927, as had the kings of Wales and, according to William of Malmesbury, the King of Strathclyde.<sup>72</sup> From this

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<sup>67</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii.131–140; of Æthelstan's three extant charters granting lands to Malmesbury it is likely all are forgeries, though based on regional tradition: S 415, 434, 435; Susan Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 214–18, 220–22, 224.

<sup>68</sup> For a full discussion of the sparse nature of sources for Æthelstan's reign, see Clare Downham, 'The Chronology of the Last Scandinavian Kings of York, AD 937–954', *Northern History*, 40 (2003), 28–33.

<sup>69</sup> ASC, A-F 924, 934, 937, 940, D 926, 927.

<sup>70</sup> ASC, A-F 924, 934, 937, D 926.

<sup>71</sup> ASC, C 937.

<sup>72</sup> ASC, D 927; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii.134.2.

time, the Welsh kings regularly witness Æthelstan's charters, yet there is no extant record of Constantin doing so prior to 934.<sup>73</sup> Simon Keynes suggests that Constantin's absence, though potentially reflecting the comparative difficulty of his attending the Anglo-Saxon court, was likely an act of insubordination.<sup>74</sup> It is a hypothesis that finds support in the twelfth-century *Chronicon* of John of Worcester, which indicates that this was a retaliatory attack in response to the King of Alba's infringement of his submission to Æthelstan. Borrowing from the *Chronicle* – John narrates a combined naval and land assault, an account that also finds support in the eleventh-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*.<sup>75</sup> It is after this campaign and its apparent success that Constantin can be found as a witness on a charter dated 13 September 934. Thus, Constantin's apparent defeat in 934 saw a formal affirmation of his submission. Constantin may be recorded as first *subregulus* among *multi aliis*, thus being accorded a status greater than other Insular rulers, yet the act of taking the King of Alba into English territory and having him ratify a diploma as *subregulus* to the Anglo-Saxon king is highly symbolic of English political dominance.<sup>76</sup>

However, Æthelstan's assertion of Anglo-Saxon hegemony of Constantin's Scotland may not have been limited to this one event. John of Worcester also makes the uncorrelated, yet plausible, assertion that Constantin was forced to provide his son as hostage, a common medieval practice to establish peace and demonstrate one polity's hegemony over another.<sup>77</sup> The benefits of hostage taking were threefold: it was a symbolic representation of Constantine's submission to Æthelstan; Æthelstan could educate the prince as an English noble, ensuring a compliant heir to the

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<sup>73</sup> See for example S 413 (which includes the King of Strathclyde alongside Welsh rulers), S 416, S 417, S 418.

<sup>74</sup> Keynes, 'Welsh Kings at Anglo-Saxon Royal Assemblies', p. 90.

<sup>75</sup> *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 934; ASC, A-F 934; *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto*, 26, ed. by Ted Johnson South (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), p. 65.

<sup>76</sup> S 426

<sup>77</sup> *Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 934.

Scottish throne; and, the metaphorical noose around the young prince's neck was a guarantee of the Scottish king's complicity in future policy.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, John's brief narrative of the event is not a concise record enabling a clear view of Æthelstan's strategic thinking in the use of a royal hostage to establish hegemony over Scotland. In the case that a subject monarch, having provided hostages, revolted, it was not without precedent for a king to mutilate or, less frequently, execute said hostages.<sup>79</sup> Yet in his 937 entry recording the Battle of Brunanburh, John makes no record of Æthelstan's retribution upon Constantine's son, nor is there any record of the prince's return to the Scottish court in the years 934–937 to explain his exemption from Æthelstan's vengeance. Further, John does not specify that this son was indeed the heir to the Scottish throne. Accepting a younger son of Constantine as hostage would deny Æthelstan control over the future king, though this does not negate the utility of having a son of the royal family representing English interests in the Scottish court. It is also worth noting that Æthelstan's reputation and the reputation of his court was such that a number of royal sons were fostered in his court, including the future King Hákon góði of Norway (also known as Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri), and King Louis IV of West Francia.<sup>80</sup> In both these cases, the young royal heirs were sent to the Anglo-Saxon court not simply for their education, but for their protection from domestic dynastic instability. Constantine's son may likewise have been sent to the comparatively stable Anglo-Saxon court for education and protection from internal unrest in Alba. Or, I must concede, the entire account could be authorial invention. Despite these complexities, what is evident in John's account

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<sup>78</sup> Ryan Lavelle, 'The Use and Abuse of Hostages in Later Anglo-Saxon England', *Early Medieval Europe*, 14 (2006), 269–96 (pp. 269–73), on the nature of the political relationships implicit in hostage taking.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292–95

<sup>80</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, 143–146, in *Heimskringla*, trans. by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulks, 3 vols. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), I 84–5; Richer of Saint-Rémi, *Histoires 2.2*, ed. and trans. by J. Lake (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 162–63

is an understanding that a medieval king necessarily had to look beyond the mechanisms of military power to establish functional hegemony.

## ESTABLISHING AN ANGLO-SCANDINAVIAN 'EMPIRE' — KING CNUT

Cnut took a different approach to overlordship of Scotland though, like Æthelstan, he ultimately found that the enforcement of submission required some degree of military intervention. M. K. Lawson, one of Cnut's biographers, argues that, despite varying approaches to the attainment and governance of Scotland as an English hegemony, the very idea of an English claim to overlordship was one Cnut derived from Æthelstan.<sup>81</sup> While Cnut made no claims to be attempting to re-establish the 'Empire of Æthelstan', the idea that Anglo-Saxon hegemony over Scotland had become an asserted political privilege within England by the time Cnut took the throne cannot be rejected without some consideration. It is theoretically plausible that Cnut understood himself to be operating within an Anglo-Saxon tradition of formal hegemony over his northern neighbours. After Æthelstan became the first Anglo-Saxon king to establish overlordship of Scotland in 934, the English political dominance over the Scots was emphatically reasserted by Edgar I (r. 957/9–975) in his coronation ceremony of 973. Here Edgar was reputedly rowed up the River Dee by six (or eight) sub-kings who all pledged to support him 'on sea and on land'.<sup>82</sup> It is an event that has been heavily studied with assertions ranging from the pageantry implying equality among the kings, to cooperation among the kings, to Edgar

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<sup>81</sup> M. K. Lawson, *Cnut: England's Viking King, 1016–1035*, 3rd edn. (London: The History Press, 2011), pp. 103–4.

<sup>82</sup> ASC, D, E 973; *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 973.

asserting *imperium* over his *subreguli*.<sup>83</sup> The latter interpretation is the least problematic, and that suggested by Molyneaux, who also notes that simply because neighbouring kingdoms may have cooperated with the Anglo-Saxon kings, this need not imply equality.<sup>84</sup> Nor need it imply all six kings were held as equals by Edgar, as evidenced by the pre-eminence Æthelstan granted Constantine over other *subreguli*, the Anglo-Saxon hegemony was fundamentally hierarchical. Edgar died shortly after this event in 975, and the subsequent years to Cnut's conquest in 1016 were characterised by political instability and military conflict, for this very reason it may be that Cnut looked to kings such as Edgar and Æthelstan as paradigms of Anglo-Saxon kingship. As such, Cnut would have deemed the reassertion of English hegemony over Scotland as necessary to balancing the political landscape of his new kingdom.

However, Cnut's campaign in 1031 is late in his reign to be the action of a king legitimising his claim to the throne via appeal to inherited *imperium* over Britain. Bolton rightly questions whether Cnut actively sought to maintain an *imperium* inherited from his Anglo-Saxon predecessors and asserts that Cnut may have been reacting to events, perhaps perceived hostility from the Scots or the Insular Norse that impinged on his own *imperium*.<sup>85</sup> Of the 1031 campaign, the *Chronicle* states only that Cnut 'went to Scotland, and the king of the Scots surrendered to him', with the E-text identifying the King of Scots as Malcolm II (and noting the submission of two other kings); while William of Malmesbury notes that this was at the head of an army which was able easily to subdue the Scots.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See for example, Julia Barrow, 'Chester's Earliest Regatta? Edgar's Dee Rowing Revisited', *Early Medieval Europe*, 10 (2001), 81–93 (pp. 91–3); Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', 67–72; Ann Williams, 'An Outing on the Dee: King Edgar at Chester, A.D. 973', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 14 (2004), 229–43 (pp. 240–43).

<sup>84</sup> Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', pp. 67–9, 74.

<sup>85</sup> Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 138–42.

<sup>86</sup> 'Scotta cyng him to beah Mælcōlm', *ASC*, E 1031; see also Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* vi.16, ed. and trans. by Diana Greenway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 364–67.

Importantly, Snorri Sturluson in *Óláfs saga Helga* adds the further detail that peace was established when these kings attended Cnut in his own court, granting Cnut the chance to display his magnanimity and dominance by forgiving them and gifting them back their own lands.<sup>87</sup> Whatever his motivation for heading north in the fifteenth year of his reign, in the aftermath of the campaign Cnut displays a more subtle way of establishing hegemony than that undertaken by Æthelstan. While a demonstration of military dominance still formed a part of Cnut's strategy, he displayed his overlordship in his evident power to give and take the lands of the Scottish lords.

That Æthelstan and Cnut each employed different strategies in establishing overlordship of Scotland reflects the fact that there is no evidence that allows explicit correlation between policies of expansion from the centre undertaken by Æthelstan and Cnut as they related to English hegemony over Scotland. Cnut's methods of territorial expansion and consolidation are more easily accessible than those of Æthelstan. In part due to his closer temporal proximity to the Anglo-Norman chroniclers, in part due to the geographical breadth of his territories, Cnut's reign does not suffer from the same paucity of documentation as that of Æthelstan. The Danish king's rule is recorded by twelfth-century chroniclers and historians from Denmark and the Roman Empire, as well as England and, though administrative documents do remain sparse, a varied array of contemporary records of Cnut's English kingship are extant. Of particular interest are Cnut's letters to his English kingdom in 1019 and 1027, which display a desire to control his public image amongst his disparate peoples.<sup>88</sup> In this, more so than Æthelstan, Cnut provides an exemplar of the charismatic leader undertaking imperial expansion, one of those

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<sup>87</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, p. 223.

<sup>88</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1019 & 1027*.



features of empire identified by Parker.<sup>89</sup> Cnut's letters were public declarations of the king's authority and agenda that were intended to be read from England's pulpits and thus disseminated to the widest possible audience.<sup>90</sup> As such, they are artefacts of a political agenda and clear examples of propaganda that must be read with due scepticism. Yet within their clauses there can be found the key aspects of Cnut's program of public persona. Each letter opens by highlighting his benevolent kingship, his piety and his commitment to judicial procedure, and makes explicit the divine source of his kingship.<sup>91</sup> The letters then go on to justify his campaigns of territorial expansion and conquest throughout Scandinavia, portraying them as personal sacrifices undertaken to protect the interests of his English people.<sup>92</sup> For the Danish king, territorial expansion was in part predicated on tying culturally-diverse dominions to himself and leveraging a cultivated public persona to establish a veneer of universal authority.

The legacy of Cnut's constructed persona is attested by later chroniclers. The praises of the Anglo-Norman chroniclers John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury have been noted, as have those of the German Adam of Bremen, while the Dane, Saxo Grammaticus, decried the loss of a man who had rivalled the 'radiance' of the Roman Emperor, 'a ruler whom none of our kings surpassed in brilliance, even though others won more dazzling victories'.<sup>93</sup> Of particular interest is the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* — a praise narrative contemporary with Cnut's reign and commissioned by his wife, Emma — which declared him to have been emperor of 'Denmark, England, Wales, Scotland and Norway' (a hegemony affirmed by Saxo,

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<sup>89</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire', p. 525.

<sup>90</sup> Lawson, *Cnut*, pp. 65–6; Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 28–31.

<sup>91</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1019*, 1; *Cnut's letter of 1027*, 1–3.

<sup>92</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1019*, 3–5; *Cnut's letter of 1027*, 6–7.

<sup>93</sup> Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, ii.71; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, ii.181.1; *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 1028–1029; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, x.20.3, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014), pp. 772–73.

Henry of Huntingdon, John of Worcester and Snorri Sturluson).<sup>94</sup> Yet in his letter of 1027, Cnut declared himself only *rex totius Anglie et Denemarcie et Norreganorum et partis Suanorum*, and in this was laying claim to kingship he did not yet hold.<sup>95</sup> Norway did not fall fully under Cnut's sway until 1028. Yet Cnut's identification as only *rex totius Anglie* — in contrast to the claim to be *rex totius Britanniae* made by Æthelstan after his successful Scottish campaigns — is of more interest.<sup>96</sup> Both kings left a Scottish monarch on the throne over whom they held political overlordship, yet while Æthelstan declared kingship over Scotland, Cnut did not make this explicit claim.<sup>97</sup> Were Cnut indeed deliberately operating in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon hegemony over Scotland, it could be expected he would seek to retain the title of *rex totius Britanniae*, thereby creating the effect of a formal hegemony that would fit within modern conceptions of empire.

## KINGSHIP, GOVERNANCE, AND THE UTILITY OF THE TERM 'EMPIRE'

That Æthelstan and Cnut took different approaches to extending their hegemony does not preclude a definition of both entities as empires. Indeed, despite different methods of subjugation, they both left Scotland's administrative functions intact, rather than engage in colonisation, large-scale military occupation or deposition. Parker's observation that empires engage in expansion under the guidance of a magnetising personality seems true of the empires of Æthelstan and Cnut, and empire as a category of political power seems a homogeneous and logical

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<sup>94</sup> *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 1028–1029, 1035; *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, ii.19; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, x.17.1; Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, vi.17; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, p. 223.

<sup>95</sup> *Cnut's letter of 1027*, 1; Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 248–49.

<sup>96</sup> C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Athelstan, 924–939: A Survey', *British Numismatic Journal*, 44 (1974), 35–158 (p. 48); Davies, *The First English Empire*, pp. 36–7.

<sup>97</sup> ASC, C 934, 937, D 1031 (1027).

categorisation.<sup>98</sup> Yet in turning to administrative governance, this homogeneity fractures, raising the question as to whether the disparate definitions of empire put forward by political theorists are so disparate because they represent futile attempts to theorise a single category for diverse trans-cultural entities that, by nature, defy such reductionism.

On the topic of governance, Parker makes two assertions. Firstly 'that imperial systems are largely concerned with channelling resources from subject territories to the imperial core for the economic benefit and political perpetuation of a limited segment of the population'.<sup>99</sup> Secondly, that '[an empire] must embark on a process of consolidation to create an overarching political and economic structure to unite otherwise autonomous regions under the imperial umbrella'.<sup>100</sup> On this latter point, Parker notes that this is a process fledgling empires must undertake as a coda to a program of expansion, in order to ensure the entrenchment of newly established hegemonies and the retention of territorial gains. Thus, despite this being the third of Parker's three core traits of imperial governance, it is only a trait of empires which *successfully* establish stable political and administrative dominance throughout their periphery, however brief. In contrast, the former relates to fundamental principles of self-interest underlying the administration imperial systems from the centre, and must be considered as ubiquitous to any polity that may be defined as an empire. In Parker's formulation, administrative governance involves a degree of economic and political centralisation for the benefit of an elite, which is in line with Galtung's idea of the control of the centre over the periphery, though he also posits this involves denying individual peripheral territories the ability to form independent

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<sup>98</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations of Empire', p. 525.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

partnership.<sup>101</sup> This is true of the kings' administrative programs across their territories which retained the autonomous character of each territory, tacitly acknowledging the social mores of the societies they governed, while ensuring the only commonality between the peripheries was the power base of the centre. In terms of administration, it is worth noting that the paucity of contemporary documentation for Æthelstan's reign also holds true for English sources of Cnut's reign. While the *Chronicle* entry for 1016 relates Cnut's conquest in some detail, the remainder of his reign is poorly-served and, of the forty-six extant charters from Cnut's reign, only twenty-three appear authentic.<sup>102</sup> In the case of both kings, their greatest literary legacy is their law codes.

It is likely that Æthelstan's laws applied only to Wessex and Mercia, allowing the Scandinavian inhabitants of north-eastern England to continue self-governance after the conquest of 927, despite Æthelstan's clear hegemony and nominal kingship over the region.<sup>103</sup> His willingness to assert military power had been on display in his conquest of York, and was even more definitively demonstrated in his victory at Brunanburh in 937.<sup>104</sup> Æthelstan's biographer, Sarah Foot, declares that '[e]xaggerating the importance of this victory is difficult', for the battle not only consolidated the Anglo-Saxon king's earlier annexation of Northumbria, but demonstrated Æthelstan's regional military pre-eminence over territories within his hegemony.<sup>105</sup> Yet Æthelstan was dead within two years of Brunanburh and the hegemony he had established immediately splintered with, for example, York

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<sup>101</sup> Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', pp. 83–4.

<sup>102</sup> *ES*, S 949–992, S 1463, S 1642–1643. A full discussion of sources for Cnut's reign can be found in Lawson, *Cnut*, pp. 53–80, especially pp. 53–57 for the *ASC*, and pp. 66–71 for charters and writs.

<sup>103</sup> *II Æthelstan* 14.2, in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann (Halle: Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1903), p. 158, in legislating where moneying can occur, all locations noted in this ordinance are in the south (Kent, Wessex, or Dumnonia), though moneying is known to have been occurring elsewhere in England at the time. Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), I 304–8.

<sup>104</sup> *ASC*, D 925, 926.

<sup>105</sup> Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 171, 179–180.

rapidly returning to Scandinavian rule. The dissolution of this newly established 'empire' is demonstrative not only of the loss of that centralising figure who had driven the expansion of the centre polity, but the lack of 'overarching political and economic structure' deemed by Parker to be so important to the success of an empire. Æthelstan promulgated no law code that sought to centralise legislation, and the native laws of York were allowed to continue independent of Anglo-Saxon influence.<sup>106</sup> Neither is there evidence he imposed Anglo-Saxon law on peripheral territories within his hegemony, but outside his direct rule, such as Scotland. This dispersal of regional governance was an approach to territorial administration similarly followed by Cnut, and it is notable that Cnut's empire too fractured into independent polities upon his death. Cnut had not sought to tamper with law in the peripheral territories of Scotland, Wales, or Sweden, though his innovative English law codes — *I & II Cnut* — did apply to the Anglo-Scandinavians and are in the tradition of the laws of his Anglo-Saxon predecessors.<sup>107</sup> Yet these were laws for England only: there is no written evidence of law codes for the other areas under Cnut's direct control, Denmark and Norway, regions with little cultural tradition of literacy at this time.<sup>108</sup> Cnut's innovations in England also altered the political landscape as he divided his new kingdom into four territories and gifted control of each to key supporters. Ultimately this represented little functional change for, as Cnut secured the kingship, Anglo-Saxon thegns were returned to positions of autonomous power.<sup>109</sup> Not unlike his approach in Scotland, Cnut allowed all his

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129–31, 153–54.

<sup>107</sup> *I Cnut* (prologue), *II Cnut* (prologue), in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann (Halle: Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1903), pp. 278, 308. 'Þis is seo woruldcunde geraednes, þe ic wylle mid minan witanan raede, þæt man healde ofer eall Englalund' [This is now the worldly ordinance that I, with the council of my advisers, wish to be kept all over England], *II Cnut*.

<sup>108</sup> Treharne, *Living Through Conquest*, pp. 80–1.

<sup>109</sup> ASC, 1017; Lawson, *Cnut*, pp. 169–72.

territories — even those under his direct control — to be governed by traditional, native elites.

As such, the very idea of empire becomes problematic when applied to Cnut's hegemony: it was not a homogeneous entity so much as it was a collection of overlordships governed through a system of deputised authority.<sup>110</sup> This is also clearly true of Æthelstan's governance. Further problematising the idea of these 'Anglo-Saxon empires' is how that deputised authority manifested and whether the English kings wielded any authority within the periphery. As previously noted, the structure of Anglo-Saxon hegemony in Britain was fundamentally hierarchical with different degrees of autonomy granted to client kings. Which brings us back to Galtung's framework of empire and the idea that, by maintaining independent societal identities, the only thing the periphery polities had in common was the power base of the centre.<sup>111</sup> For both of the kings under examination, it is possible to assert the existence of a region that fulfils the role of the imperial 'centre', and to some extent a primary seat of governance within the centre territory, ambiguously defined by Galtung as the 'Centre centre'.<sup>112</sup> For Cnut this was Wessex and Winchester, for Æthelstan this is a little more problematic, though he derived much of his legitimacy from Mercia. Yet 'centre' as defined within a conceptual framework of empire, and 'centralisation' as a process of consolidating regional governance, must be considered as independent theories. While the former is necessarily reliant upon the latter, the latter does not necessarily result in the former and the establishment of an empire. The courts of Æthelstan and Cnut were typical of early medieval kingship and thus both kings were notably peripatetic and the centre of governance travelled with the king. Political power resided in the person of the king

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<sup>110</sup> Rumble, 'Cnut in Context', p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', p. 84.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

and, though each monarch undertook to impose some degree of administrative centralisation, the centre itself was dependent upon the presence of the king and his court, notwithstanding their physical location. Therefore, if an imperial 'centre' is understood to be defined as a territorial location, it is conceptually flawed when applied to such mobile seats of power and negates the definition of Æthelstan or Cnut's territorial hegemony as 'empire'.

The mobile nature of early medieval courts meant that, while the governmental centre of a medieval monarchical hegemony could be located within the centre territory, it could equally move into a peripheral territory for a time, or accompany the king on campaign in regions entirely outside the control of the centre. Æthelstan's court is known to have sat in his newly acquired northern territories for a time between 927 and 930, and again in 936, in both cases receiving foreign diplomats and undertaking the governance of the realm from a base in York.<sup>113</sup> That the authority of Cnut's court travelled with the king is seen in his letters of 1019 and 1027, each of which set out a desired legislative program for his English kingdom.<sup>114</sup> Yet the first of these was issued from Denmark as Cnut campaigned to add that kingdom to his hegemony, while the latter was issued from Rome where Cnut attended the coronation of the Roman Emperor, Conrad II (r. 1027–1039).<sup>115</sup> The hegemonies assembled by Æthelstan and Cnut derived their authority from the person of the king, and therefore the political centre similarly derived from the person of the king. While it is possible to identify centre and periphery territories within these Anglo-Saxon 'empires', such identifications are complicated by the nature of medieval kingship.

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<sup>113</sup> Richer of Saint-Rémi, *Histories*, 2.2; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ii.135; Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 90.

<sup>114</sup> *Cnut's Letter of 1019*, 9–20; *Cnut's Letter of 1027*, 11–17.

<sup>115</sup> *ASC*, C 1019; *Cnut's Letter of 1019*, 5–6; *Cnut's Letter of 1027*, 1–5.

The peripatetic courts that characterised medieval English 'empires' do not fit easily within the frameworks of empire expounded by modern political theorists. It is in these mobile seats of power that Galtung's conception of an imperial centre as one founded upon the relational status of established seats of power within physical and locatable territories (centre and periphery 'nations') becomes most problematic to a definition of a medieval hegemony as an empire.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, Parker's criteria is flexible enough to allow for the centre to be defined by the physical presence of the elites for whose benefit the empire operated.<sup>117</sup> Yet it cannot be argued that this is Parker's intent in defining an 'imperial core' that benefits from the resources of the empire they control. Parker's study ultimately focuses upon the edges of the hegemonies he analyses and thus, of his threefold definition of empire, it is upon territorial expansion, not the seat of imperial power, that he remains focused. That territory is fundamental to either empire or hegemony is clear, exemplified by the claims to overlordship over Scotland put forth by Æthelstan and Cnut, and their subsequent political manoeuvring in maintaining that control. As such, whether a modern or medieval 'empire' or hegemony, political theorists place much emphasis upon territorial expansion and the interrelation of territories. Yet it is only in such broad definitions of empire as Doyle's designation of 'one state control[ing] the effective political sovereignty of another political society', that the peripatetic courts of medieval England can be clearly included as 'empires'.<sup>118</sup> However, in seeking a definition of 'empire' that encompasses the geographically, temporally and culturally varied polities of Æthelstan and Cnut, the problems in applying modern theories of empire to the medieval hegemonies of England become evident. Historians are approaching similar topics wielding different and often opposing

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<sup>116</sup> Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', pp. 83–4.

<sup>117</sup> Parker, 'Archaeological Manifestations', p. 525.

<sup>118</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 45.



conceptualisations of what comprises an empire thereby limiting scholarship to the definition rather than the phenomenon of empires as a trans-cultural and trans-historical category of political power.

## CONCLUSION

The hegemonies of Æthelstan and Cnut differed greatly in their methods of expansion and governance. Both certainly sought to establish both direct and indirect control of periphery regions from the centre, and even had some methodological commonalities in relation to Scotland; yet this only validates the term 'hegemony', not 'empire'. Indeed, as a term to describe a conglomerate network of principalities under the control of a single monarch, 'hegemony' is a functional term less burdened with political and theoretical implications than 'empire', and one easily applicable to the territorial ambitions of medieval kings. If 'empire' is to be understood as indicating a homogeneous entity dominated from the centre, it is not a term that can be easily used of medieval kingship — Æthelstan and Cnut both reigned over territories containing independent overlordships with differing rights, customs, and governmental apparatus. Yet assuming that, in the context of English medieval monarchy, empires do exist as a functional category of political power, it is in the nature of a complex political relationship between a centre and a periphery polity, irrespective of how the periphery entered into the hegemony of the centre, or how the periphery is governed. This is a broad mandate and, as such, it is of little surprise that scholars have argued for the kingdoms examined herein to be enrolled in the society of empire. However, the term has been used as a transient label, altered to fit the needs of each scholar's argument with the result that the increasing application of the word 'empire' to historical political entities has indeed diluted the idea of 'empire' as a cogent conceptualisation of historical realities. That the term, as

applied to Æthelstan and Cnut, has come under suspicion in recent biographies, displays 'empire' not as a distinct and coherent category of political power, but as a categorisation that is divisive and fraught.

Thus the debate as to the nature of empire is ongoing, and it is one unlikely to be resolved into a single accepted definition of the term. No one theory of empire can neatly encompass the inherent complexities of medieval monarchical hegemonies, dependent in their development upon their unique temporal and geographical location, their social milieux, methodologies of conquest and governance, and the personal character of their charismatic leaders. To attempt to reduce trans-cultural entities, formed out of political and social tensions specific to a time and a place, to a single encompassing category, is to risk losing sight of those very things that make 'empires' unique.



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