

## Canute the Great

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*Canute the Great ("Canute" is the English name for the Scandinavian name "Knut") was ruler over Denmark and England from 1016 to 1035. During all these years under the Danish king there was relative peace and prosperity in England.*

The Anglo-Saxon descendants of Alfred the Great (king of England from 878-899) ruled until the year 1016 when the Dane *Canute*, with the help of his father Sweyn Forkbeard, took over power in England. This overtaking started with the battle of Assandun in 1016 where Canute defeated Edmund Ironside who was then the king.

**(Historical note:** Edmund Ironside was the son of Ethelred the Unready. Ethelred was the son of Edgar who in turn was the great grandson of Alfred the Great. So when Edmund Ironside was defeated by Canute, it marked the end of Alfred's realm and the beginning of a Danish dynasty. By the way, Edgar, grandfather of Edmund, was the first ruler ever to be crowned king of *all* England, Danes included.)



After the battle Canute and Edmund got together on an island in the river Severn where they decided that Edmund was to keep control over Southern and Western England while Canute was to be in charge of Mercia and Northumberland (Northern England). But just a few weeks after this meeting Edmund died under mysterious circumstances. It is unclear whether Canute had anything to do with his death, but anyway the result was that Canute later that year (1016) was crowned king of all England (and thereby excluded all the sons of Ethelred and Edmund).

So far Canute had acted much like a true Viking: he had stranded on the shore of a foreign coast, fought the natives and then conquered. Now, after he had become king, he changed his style completely. He married Ethelreds widow Emma and sent his army back to Denmark. Then he started to rebuild the country that he himself had contributed to ravage. He began enforcing the

law and strengthen the courts and he was also generous towards the churches and the monasteries. He made the people respect the holy days and in return the Church helped him execute his many laws and commands.

Canute had been a heathen when he first came to England, but he had quickly converted to Christianity. In 1027 he also made a pilgrimage to Rome where he witnessed the coronation of Emperor Conrad. Canute died in 1035. He was buried in the old Cathedral of Winchester.

**Questions**

- 1. Who won and who was defeated in the battle of Assandun? In what year was this battle?**

- 2. What was decided on an island in the river Severn after the battle?**

- 3. What happened just after the meeting and what was the result of this?**

- 4. What did Canute do after he had got the power?**

- 5. Why do you think Canute converted to Christianity?**

## Answers

1. **Who won and who was defeated in the battle of Assandun? In what year was this battle?**

*In the battle of Assandun in 1016 the Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard and his son Canute defeated the English king Edmund Ironside.*

2. **What was decided on an island in the river Severn after the battle?**

*Edmund was to keep control over Southern and Western England while Canute was to be in charge of Mercia and Northumberland (in Northern England).*

3. **What happened just after the meeting and what was the result of this?**

*Edmund was killed and as a result Canute became king.*

4. **What did Canute do after he had got the power?**

*He started to rebuild the country. He enforced the law and strengthened the courts and he was generous towards the churches and monasteries.*

5. **Why do you think Canute converted to Christianity?**

*Well, there's no simple answer to that, but we might guess that he quickly understood that being king in this country would be very much easier if he played along with the already established religion. Of course it is also possible that he at some point experienced a Christian revelation and therefore wanted to convert. Anyhow we should bear in mind that religion and politics were mixed-up completely in those days so it was not at all possible for a politician to not take the church and the religious faith into consideration.*