

# Life and cult of Cnut the Holy

The first royal saint of Denmark

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# Danish Coinage under the Reign of Cnut IV, 1080-1086

*By Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen*

This article is based on a research project on Denmark's early medieval coinage titled 'De danske udmøntninger under Svend Estridsens sønner' (Danish Coinage During the Reign of Svend II Estridsen's Sons). The aim of the project was to thoroughly revise the coin issue from the period 1074-1134, as well as to gather all previously published material into a single article. The results of the project were published in *Årbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* (Yearbooks of Scandinavian Antiquarianism) (Poulsen 2016). As is evident from the title, the project covered the reign of Svend II Estridsen's five sons, i.e. from Harald III Hen (1074/76) to Niels (1104-34). This article will exclusively focus on the coinage from the time of Cnut IV.

## Danish coinage before the reign of Cnut IV

The first Danish coins were issued as far back as the eighth century in Ribe. In the ninth century, coins were issued from Hedeby as well. Both were, however, local coins and almost exclusively used in the town. In the rest of the country, weighed silver was still used as payment. Tell-tale signs of this weight-based economy are clearly evident in the hoards from the past, consisting of a mixture of silver ingots, cut jewellery, and foreign coins (Fig. 1). The first coin type that seems to have been used throughout the country was Harald Bluetooth's cross coins from Hedeby (Moesgaard 2015: 235-241). The success of the cross coin was however short-lived, as



Fig. 1: Silver hoard dating from the tenth century found by metal detectorists south-east of the town of Randers in the late summer of 2018. The hoard contains mostly silver ingots, cut jewellery, and a few coins. Photo: Museum Østjylland.



Fig. 2: Svend Forkbeard's coin with the inscription ZVEN REX AD DENER. Photo: National Museum of Denmark.

production ceased after Harald was overthrown by his son Svend I Forkbeard.

Svend I Forkbeard was the first Danish king to add his name to the coins and utilise stylised portraits of himself. Only a single Danish coin is known from his reign. The inscription on it reads: ZVEN REX AD DENER (Bendixen 1967: 18) (Fig. 2). At the same time, large amounts of imitations of English coins were produced. The individual coin types mix front and back motifs with each other, and often the inscriptions are just a collection of letters without meaning. These coins were probably minted in Lund and Sigtuna (Malmer 2010). The coins have a high content of silver and thus fit well with the weight-based economy. Production of these coins continued until the end of the 1020s. During the reign of Cnut I the Great the names of several Danish towns begin to appear on the coins. Towns like Lund, Ringsted, Roskilde and possibly Ribe. Most of these towns remained important places of coin production during the first part of the Middle Ages. There are also signs that Cnut tried to reform the Danish coin system by introducing a regulated weight for the coins, and new motifs that were not just imitations of English coins (Malmer 2003). Judging from the composition of the hoards, the coins were still used according to weight. Consequently, coins were still cut, and there are frequent signs of the silver content of the coins being assayed by pecking. Moreover, by far the greater part of the coins found in hoards were foreign. There are, however, signs from a number of finds from the 1030s and 1040s indicating a tendency towards a monopoly of Danish coins. This is most evident in the single find material from the most important towns, i.e. Lund, Roskilde and Odense (Moesgaard 2018b: 191).

Signs indicating that coinage was evolving from the weight-based economy of the Viking Age into one of regulated coinage governed by a stringent framework and royal monopoly are evident solely from the coin finds themselves, since no descripti-

on of this has been found in any written sources that have survived so far. As mentioned above, this process seems to have started in the 1030s. The coins are still fragmented, but for the larger part in halves or quarters indicating a usage based on numbers and not weight (Malmer 2003). This process appears to have picked up pace in Denmark in the second half of the eleventh century during the reign of Svend Estridsen. Prior to *c.* 1050, we hardly see any Danish coins in the hoards, except in hoards from the above-mentioned towns. Furthermore, the coinage seems to have been spontaneous, without any kind of central organisation. Many different types of coin and motifs were used, and coins were issued from many different mints. Towards the end of Svend Estridsen's reign, however, this had changed. Danish coins now constitute over 80% of the coins found in hoards (Moesgaard 2018b: 208). The various coin types were now centred more permanently on specific mint towns and there were more moneyers per coin type than had previously been the case. That is to say, the various types were minted in larger quantities by greater numbers of moneyers, suggesting a more structured coinage. From the reign of Magnus I the Good, 45 moneyers can be identified from the inscriptions on the coins. Between them, they issued 38 different types of coin. During the reign of Svend Estridsen, 202 moneyers issued 77 types of coin. The development is very conspicuous during the reign of Harald Hen, since there are 33 known moneyers is-



Fig 3: The two types of coin issued during the reign of Harald Hen. The type featuring a saint on the obverse and a clavate cross on the reverse was minted in the Scanian provinces and in Jutland, and the one featuring a crowned bust in profile on the obverse and a small central cross on the reverse was minted on Zealand. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen.

suing only six types of coin (Ljungkvist 1986: 263). Moreover, the minting is concentrated in far fewer towns, with Lund as the most important mint town followed by Roskilde, and only two types of coin were minted (Fig. 3). Furthermore, the silver content became regulated and harmonised in the country as a whole.

Formerly, numismatists entertained the belief that these developments reflected the fact that an actual coin reform had been implemented by Harald Hen. However, the belief generally held today is one of a gradual shift, begun in the first quarter of the eleventh century and more or less completed during the reign of Svend Estridsen. It has been suggested that part of this process could be connected with Svend Estridsen's runic coins. Arguably, the new runic coins were intended to render Danish coins easier to recognise compared to foreign ones (Jensen 1995: 19-20 and 82-84) (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: One of Svend Estridsen's runic coins from Lund. On the obverse, a figure of a saint. On the reverse, a cross with runic inscription along the edge. Photo: National Museum of Denmark.

## Coins minted during the reign of Cnut IV

Thus, by the time of Cnut IV's accession to the throne, Danish coinage was a regulated monetary economy.

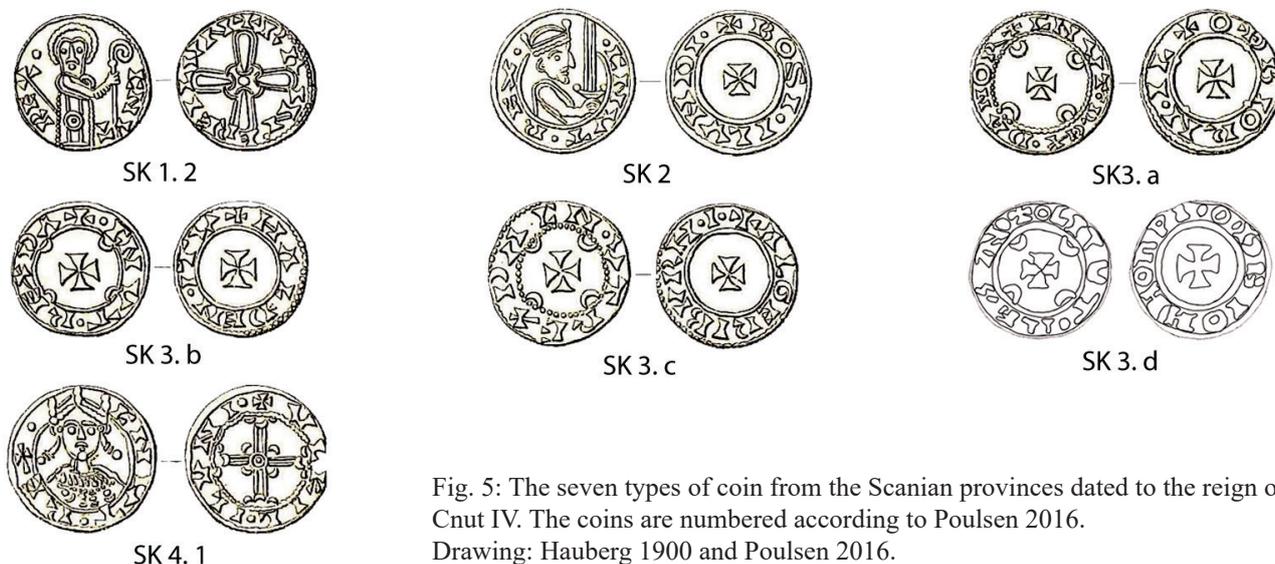


Fig. 5: The seven types of coin from the Scanian provinces dated to the reign of Cnut IV. The coins are numbered according to Poulsen 2016. Drawing: Hauberg 1900 and Poulsen 2016.

This development was part of a general expansion of the powers of the king and the country's development towards a modern Western European medieval society. The Danish coin was distributed in three regions, each of which constituted the legal entity for the minting of coins. Choice of motif, weight, and dimensions were governed as much by the regional origin of the coins as by the reigning monarch. The administrative units at the time were based on a regional subdivision of Denmark which, from ancient times, had been divided into a number of *lands*, each with their regional assemblies or *landsting*. The most important of these were Lund, Ringsted, and Viborg. The regions covered by the coinage were the Scanian provinces, Zealand, and Jutland. Recent studies have also proposed that part of southern Jutland centred on Slesvig functioned as an independent region. As a rule, any given coin was only legal tender in the region where it had been minted, so travellers had to exchange their coins at royal exchange booths.

The coins from the Scanian provinces tended to be of the highest quality and this region was also the most highly developed in terms of coinage (Fig. 5). This is clearly evident at each royal succession until, and including, Erik I Ejegod, as there was an overlap of type, so that the first coin of the newly crowned king was always identical to that of his predecessor. From the efficient Scanian mints, it was possible to issue coin bearing the name of the new king without the need for a major coin exchange procedure. Coin exchange, or *renovatio monetae*, as it was known, was an important source of income for the king, since a fee was levied for exchanging the coins, while at the same time rendering the old ones invalid. There is evidence to suggest that Cnut IV made frequent use



Fig. 6: Cnut IV's simple coin type from the Scanian provinces. This specimen is from Lund.  
Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick. Drawing: Hauberg 1900.

of this right in the Scanian provinces, since he was the one of Svend Estridsen's five sons who had the most coin types minted in this region. Cnut IV also had a specimen of the very popular Zealandic coin type featuring a crowned bust on the obverse minted in Lund. This should presumably be interpreted as an attempt at unifying the Zealandic and Scanian coin. Moreover, Cnut IV had a coin minted in the Scanian provinces that was unique to his reign: a very simple type featuring a central cross on both the obverse and reverse surrounded by an inscription (Fig. 6). This coin type was minted at several locations, including Lund, Thumatorp, Borgby and Nordby. Where the first three are well known towns in Scania, the name Nordby is actually only known from a single coin in the collection of the British Museum. No known town in Scania carries this name, but judging from the motif the coin is clearly from Scania (Jensen 1986). By far the majority of the coins originate

from Lund, and, judging from the number of known moneyers linked to this type of coin, it was minted in great quantities.

On Zealand, the above-mentioned coin type featuring the crowned bust was predominant (Fig. 7). It was universal during the reigns of Harald Hen, Cnut IV, and Oluf I Hunger. Formerly, this coin type was believed to have been minted in Odense, too. Funen is considered part of the Jutlandish regional coin, and the idea inferred by this interpretation was significant, therefore, since it meant that this coin type would have been minted in all three regions during the reign of Cnut IV. Thus, Cnut would have succeeded, albeit only for a brief time, in introducing a single coin type for the whole country. The assessment of this coin had originally been made by Peter Hauberg in his major work about Denmark's medieval coins *Myntforhold og Udmyntninger i Danmark indtil 1146* (Coinage and Coin Issue in Denmark Before 1146) (Hauberg 1900). However, the assessment rested on a misreading of the reverse inscription as IN ODE instead of I ROSE. Hauberg reused an old drawing from *Museum Regium* from the end of the seventeenth century, and had presumably never seen the actual coin (Poulsen and Moesgaard 2015: 26). The preposition IN was not used in Danish, which is why it could never be deciphered as IN ODE. Moreover, the letter N on the coin is rather damaged and may equally read as an R and the letter D is clearly an S. This makes it I ?OSE, which presumably reads I ROSE, meaning in Roskilde. The moneyer is ULKIL, familiar from other coins originating from Roskilde (Fig. 8).

From the reign of Cnut IV a very particular coin from Zealand stands out, not just from the regional coins but from the coins of the nation, generally. Peter Hauberg attributed the coin to Svend Estridsen because of the appearance of the name SVEIN on the



Fig. 7: The five types of coin from Zealand attributed to the reign of Cnut IV. The coins are numbered according to Poulsen 2016. Drawing: Hauberg 1900.



Fig. 8: The reverse of the coin which had incorrectly been attributed to Odense. The name of the moneyer ULKIL is visible on the right half. On the left half, the reference to the mint town I (R)OSE.

Drawing: Poulsen 2016.

obverse. He was convinced that this name could only refer to a king, since he did not believe that the Church had been involved in issuing coins at this early stage (Fig. 9). The provenance of this coin is the subject of heated discussion. Only one specimen of it is known to exist, kept in the Royal Collection of Coins and Medals of the National Museum of Denmark. It was purchased in London at Sotheby's in 1855, but is known to have been in the collection of Gerhard Schønning, professor at Sorø, in 1771, possibly originating from the extensive, but scattered, Holsteinborg hoard (Jensen *et al.* 1992: no. 30). Stylistically, the coin bears close resemblance to the coins issued by Harald Hen and Cnut IV. This is true of the figure on



Fig. 9: Svend Norbagge's coin from Roskilde. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen. Drawing: Hauberg 1900.

the obverse as well as the central cross on the reverse, which clearly shows a type first put into use during the reign of Harald Hen. The preposition I is used instead of ON for the place name I ROSC, which is characteristic for the period after Svend Estridsen. As for the figure on the obverse, it is essential to pay attention to the pallium he is wearing. This vestment conclusively identifies the figure as a bishop, contrary to the crozier, which is also, in some cases, used for royal figures during the eleventh century. Consequently, the name Svein cannot refer to Svend Estridsen, but to a bishop. This bishop can only be Svend Norbagge, the chaplain of Svend Estridsen, later bishop of Roskilde in 1074, who died in 1088. The moneyer SIBBE mentioned on the reverse is also well known from other of Cnut IV's coins from Roskilde. During his time as bishop, Svend Norbagge completed the construction of the cathedral in stone (Poulsen 2016: 147-148). Cnut IV very likely granted Svend Norbagge the rights to issue coin in Roskilde on a temporary basis, thus enabling him to finance the building of his church. This became customary later in the Middle Ages until, by the High Middle Ages, it had become common practice. However, the case of Svend Norbagge is the earliest example of such practice in Denmark (Galster 1978: 81-86; Posselt 1985; Jensen 1995: 116).

Recent coin hoard finds from Zealand have shown that the coin exchange system or *renovatio monetae* known from Scania and Jutland had not yet been introduced on Zealand at this time. Older coins were apparently still in circulation, and a large part of the coins in the hoards are from other Danish regions, mainly the Scanian providences. Not until around 1100, do the coin hoards show clear evidence of systemised *renovatio monetae* (Moesgaard 2018a).

Compared to the coins from Scania and Zealand, all of which are well-organised with clear general features, the coins from Jutland appear very unstructured (Fig. 10). There is a distinct lack of the regional character distinguishing coins from Scania and Zealand. Although different series of coin were issued from various towns in Jutland under each king, there are no continuous types issued under several kings. In contrast to the coinage in Scania and on Zealand, no major mint town existed in Jutland comparable to Lund and Roskilde in Scania and on Zealand, respectively. There is no doubt that the king also controlled the coinage in Jutland, but the production here appears to have been much more decentralised. Until recently, the role of the southern part of Jutland in relation to the rest of Jutland was also unclear. Excavations

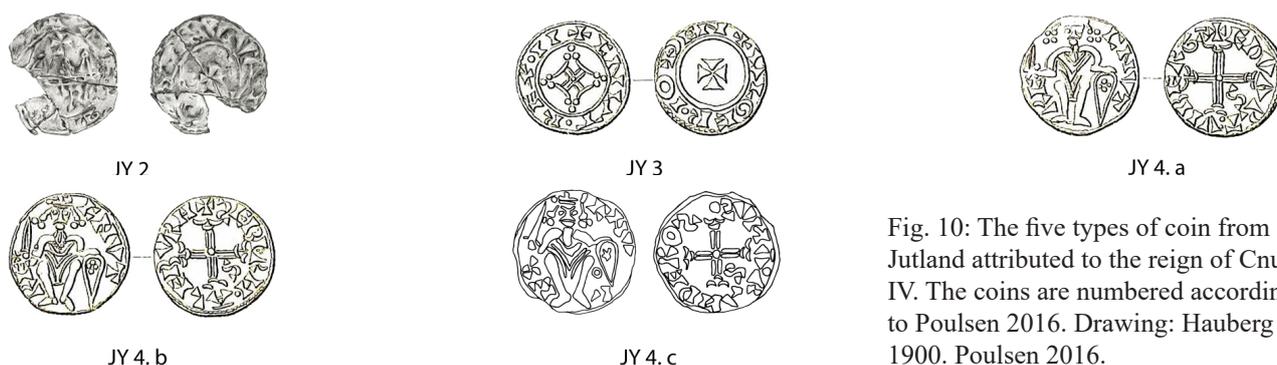


Fig. 10: The five types of coin from Jutland attributed to the reign of Cnut IV. The coins are numbered according to Poulsen 2016. Drawing: Hauberg 1900. Poulsen 2016.

from Slesvig have now revealed a continuous line of new coin types, that all seems to have been minted in Slesvig and used primarily in this part of the country, among which are two from the reign of Cnut IV (Moesgaard, Hilberg & Schimmer 2016). This indicates that Jutland was split in at least two separate coin regions. The relation of Ribe to the rest of Jutland is still unclear. Such decentralised administration was not limited to coinage. Jutland was the only region in Denmark which was subdivided into administrative units called *syster*. Whether this subdivision was due to the size of Jutland or merely traditional is difficult to say, but it indicates that Jutland was governed differently from the rest of the country at several levels, including coinage. A common problem with regard to coins from Jutland is the fact that the kings did not consistently put their names on them. Hence, there is a handful of coins which cannot, with any degree of certainty, be attributed to either Harald Hen or Cnut IV (Fig. 11).

For example, at Lindholm near Aalborg, a very special coin was found. The obverse motif is unique in Denmark, and takes its inspiration from German coins where the columnar church with pointed gables featuring a cross was a frequently used motif as far back as Charlemagne (768-814). The type featuring the two flanking towers is known from Cologne and is attributed to Archbishop Anno II, who was archbishop from 1057-1075 (Hävernick, 1935: no. 354). The motif on the reverse was commonly used during the period 1074-1095, especially during the reign of Cnut IV. Also, the moneyer EDVVARD was well-known under Harald Hen and Cnut IV. The central cross on the reverse of the coin is formed by four triangles combined. This feature is characteristic of the central crosses found on Cnut IV's and Oluf Hunger's coins, while none of the crosses on Harald Hen's coins taper towards the centre in the same way. This specific type, therefore, is attributed to the reign of Harald Hen or Cnut IV with evidence favouring Cnut. The coin was presumably minted in Viborg .



Fig. 11: By Danish standards, a unique coin after German model. This coin has been found on two occasions, both times at Lindholm near Aalborg. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen. Drawing: Nedim Gruhonjic.



Fig. 12: Cnut IV coin from Odense. The obverse motif is copied from one of his father's Lund coins. Presumably to signal that it was a fine quality coin. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen. Drawing: Hauberg 1900.

EDVVARÐ was moneyer in Viborg under both Harald and Cnut, and the coin has only been found in the northern part of the Jutland Peninsula (Poulsen 2016: 131-132) (Fig. 12).

Cnut also had coins minted in Odense, which, in this case, is easily decipherable in the form of the inscriptions I ODEN, ODE, or OI. The obverse motif was copied from Svend Estridsen's late coins from Lund (Hauberg 1900: Svend Estridsen Lund, Hbg. 26, 28, 30, 31). In the Middle Ages, all regional coins were issued based on the unit weight of one mark, corresponding to 218 g. The difference in the individual weight of the coins is due to the fact that varying quantities of coin were struck from a mark of silver in the three regions. In the Scanian provinces, 240 coins were struck from one mark, which means an average weight of 0.91 g per coin. On Zealand, either 240 or 288 coins were struck from one mark. In case of the latter, this averages out at 0.76 g per coin. In Jutland, either 288 or 384 coins were struck per mark. In case of the latter, this would result in an average weight of 0.56 g per coin (Hauberg 1900: 149-150). Thus, there was a substantial difference in the weight of coins and hence in the content of silver they represented in each region, but also, at times, within the same region. In the case of Cnut IV's coin from Odense it is very heavy for a Jutlandish coin, and there is possibly a connection between the choice of motif and the weight. As mentioned earlier, the Scanian provinces typically issued heavy coins. By using a motif from an earlier coin from Lund, the aim might have been to inform the population that this was a good coin (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13: One of Cnut IV's much-maligned debased coins. This specimen is from Randers. Photo and drawing: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen.



Fig. 14: Erik Ejegod's coin from Aalborg, the Jutland Peninsula, whose obverse motif was a reuse of Cnut IV's much-maligned debased coins. This is the only known specimen of the coin. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen. Drawing: Nedim Gruhonjic.

The last of Cnut IV's Jutlandish coins is also one of the more interesting in Danish medieval numismatics. The coin is primarily known from two hoards found at Jegstrup near Viborg and Øster Bjerregrav close to Randers (Jensen *et al.* 1992: no. 31 and no. 32). The obverse motif shows a seated king with his sword and shield while the reverse motif is a double cross with trefoils at the terminals. The obverse motif is original and not based on any recognisable example. From the inscription on the reverse, it appears that the coin was minted in Aalborg, Viborg, and Randers. The dies seem wholly identical and must have been made by the same die-cutter. From a central place they were distributed among the three provincial towns in the Jutland Peninsula. The coins are highly debased compared to those in the rest of the country, weighing only 0.5 g. Assays made on coins from the Øster Bjerregrav hoard show the silver content of the coins to be only 550 ‰ compared to the standard silver fineness of 90 ‰ (Galster 1934: 130-131). The coins have been linked to the campaign against England planned by Cnut IV and the subsequent grievances about Cnut's reign described in Aelnoth's chronicle, *Gesta Swenomagni*. Here it was pointed out that royal provosts and bailiffs assigned a higher weight to the mark, leaving the øre hardly worth an ørtug while the medieval coinage ørtug was usually worth three øre (Albrechtsen, E. (ed.) 1984: *Ælnoths Krønike*. Odense.). A debasement such as this lowering of the value would provide income for the king, as he could economise on the silver.



Fig. 15: Erik Ejegod's coin from Lund featuring two persons on the reverse. Presumably Cnut IV and his brother, Benedikt. Photo: Thomas Guntzelnick Poulsen. Drawing: Hauberg 1900.

According to this hypothesis, the coins can be dated fairly accurately to 1085, the year prior to the rebellion against Cnut IV and his subsequent murder. Assuming this to be the case, it would be the earliest documented attempt in Denmark to raise money for the state by deliberate devaluation.

An interesting anecdote about the story of Cnut's last Jutlandish coin is the fact that the enthroned royal motif from the obverse, as the only Jutlandish motif, was not limited to one king, but was also used by Erik Ejegod (Fig. 14). It is intriguing to note that this particular motif was reused under Erik, since the original type was specified in Aelnoth's chronicle as being one of the grievances about Cnut's reign and thus a contributing factor to the rebellion. The explanation for this might be that the type is linked to the king's wish to have Cnut canonised. A similar example is known from three contemporary coins from Lund, where the reverse is assumed to be depictions of Cnut and his brother, Benedict, who was killed with him in St Alban's Church (Fig. 15). From a Danish point of view, the Scanian types have been interpreted as a political promotion towards having Cnut canonised, and similar ideas may have been behind the motif of its Jutlandish counterpart (Jensen 1995: 124). Nevertheless, it is interesting that Erik Ejegod selected a motif from the very coin that enraged the people of Jutland to such an extent (Poulsen 2016: 135-136) (Fig. 16).

A relatively recent find from Danelund near Ribe indicates that Cnut IV may have minted additional

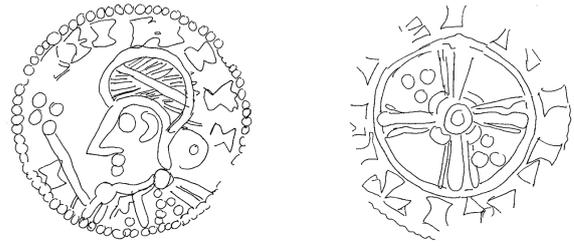


Fig. 16: Cnut IV's copy of Edward the Confessor's coin featuring the expanding cross from the Danelund hoard. Drawing: Jens Christian Moesgaard.

coins to finance his planned campaign against England. In 2002, a hoard consisting of 72 medieval coins was discovered by a metal detectorist. The youngest coins in the hoard were three of Cnut's debased coins from the Jutland Peninsula described above. A total of 63 coins in this hoard were copies of the English expanding cross type from Edward the Confessor minted during the period 1050-1053. These coins are inferior in quality and the inscriptions are illegible and nonsensical. They are clearly not English coins. Low in weight, they resemble Cnut IV's debased coins from the Jutland Peninsula. There is no indication on the coins to suggest where they were minted, but judging by where they are found, they are attributed to Slesvig. It must still be regarded as a working hypothesis that these coins could be linked to Cnut's plans for a campaign against England, but the coincidental dating combined with the debasement of both types of coin is nevertheless striking. The reason for using an English example for Slesvig coins remains unknown. Having said that, Edward the Confessor's coin was actually copied by Svend Estridsen, meaning that a close precedent did exist (Moesgaard 2007).

## Cnut IV's coinage policy

As is hopefully evident from the above review of Cnut IV's coin, a clear trend can be traced in all three Danish regions of a king who was strongly engaged in coinage and the scope for making money from it. In the Scanian provinces, he was responsible for a higher output of coin than any of his brothers while making a brief attempt at uniting the Scanian and Zealand coin type. On Zealand, he distinguished himself by being the first Danish king to grant the Church minting rights, presumably to help finance the bishop's cathedral-building in Roskilde. The most interesting aspect, in my opinion, is the attempt by Cnut IV to deliberately devalue the Jutlandish coin in order to finance a planned attack against Eng-

land. Providing that the coins from the Danelund hoard also turn out to be part of Cnut's endeavours to finance his campaign against England, this means that the entire mint-issuing area of Jutland was included in this devaluation. Judging from the number of die variations on the Danelund coin hoard, the production of these was very substantial (Moesgaard 2007: 115). A similar analysis has not been carried out on Cnut IV's coin from the Jutland Peninsula bearing the enthroned king. If we look at the quantity of known moneymakers, no less than 20 different people have signed their name on the reverse, indicating that the production of this type was equally extensive. Hence Cnut appears to have begun a very extensive coin issue from Jutland prior to the invasion.

Cnut IV was a modern Western European medieval king, who wanted to do away with aristocratic government and the system of chieftains and, instead, extend royal powers to include all levels of society. It is far more likely that he was killed for this reason than by the conscripted *leding* peasants, fed up with waiting for their king by Limfjorden while their crops were rotting in the fields. Coinage was an important part of the 'toolkit' available to medieval European kings. At the time of Cnut's accession to the throne, this was a wholly new economic tool in Denmark. It had not been an option until the latter years of his father's reign, when the king gradually assumed the monopoly of the coin and, as such, was able to enforce the exclusive use of its own coin in the country. Judging from the impression left by his coinage policies in the form of preserved coin types, Cnut IV appears to have made active use of this new economic tool.

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