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**Cnut’s skalds and the War of the Words**

It’s easy to forget that the technologically and strategically interesting battles that fill this magazine’s pages were organized and fought by kings who spent most of their lives far from the battlefield and who, like those of us whose jobs require more familiarity with compact cars than catapults, also had to attend to less glamorous tasks like filling out the forms for accounts payable. For our impression that kinging was all crowns and heroic speeches before cavalry charges, Hollywood owns some of the blame, but a portion remains for the kings themselves. Among their less camera-friendly chores, we may also list the maintenance of their kingly reputations.

This issue’s subject, Cnut the Great, was expert at this. Like William, who ruled England soon after, Cnut made sure history conjoined his name with a suitable epithet by spending his vast pillaged loot employing a team of admen to make it so.

Don’t blush at the anachronism. Sure, Cnut would’ve said ‘skalds’, but there is little functional difference between a court poet and a dedicated public relations campaign manager. How else to nudge the public to embrace one’s legend, when the horses are munching oats and the armour and weapons are out for oiling? More horses and more swords aside, those cost even more than a skald, and the guys in accounts payable would demand extra forms.

Even in the early eleventh century, a sharp sword or formidable longship could only fight one battle at a time. Convince the crown wearer on the other side — or, better still, the men who swing swords and pilot longships for him — that your swords are sharper and your longships faster, sleeker, and more manoeuvrable, and you may not have to fight at all.

The poetry Cnut commissioned was full of the tricks found today in effective ad copy. His celebrated dreki, the dragonships that look so impressive cutting through CGI waves in modern film, benefited in their own day from skalds wielding words (rather than electrons) to give the same impression of grandeur. Why else spend so many heiti and kennings bragging that the long profiles and narrow, knife-like keels of Cnut’s newest ships could outspeed even the “slender sea-animals” that slip beneath the waves? The obsequious skalds were merely helping to launch Cnut’s new line of models for the year 1017. Though many of the skalds’ best ad lines lose something in translation, ships praised as “the long-planked reindeer of the sea-king” convey even now the whiff of a manager micro-managing the message: “That bit about the reindeer is great, guys”, Cnut scrawls on the fair copy. “Really, really poetic, but make sure you mention how long those planks on the 1017’s are!”

How effective was Cnut’s propaganda? Alas, the only record remaining is in the replies of competing skalds, who insist that, actually, their lord’s ships are the fastest, the most manoeuvrable, and the nicest smelling. All part of the perennial game of one-upmanship that they had been playing for centuries.

Perhaps, instead, the case of poor Alfred the Great a century earlier might show the value of a skald’s ad campaign. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells that Alfred had a fleet of longships built to combat the dragonship menace of his day, that had been much hyped in skaldic verse. When he heard that the Danish ships boasted 35 oars, he ordered his shipwrights to aim for 60, as if to say: “That’ll show’em! And while we’re at it, build the ships twice as long as those swimming Danish reindeer!”

We might suspect that these fancy new ships appeared in the Chronicle because Alfred ordered his homegrown substitute skalds to tout them as a response ad, if only the Chroniclers had not gone on to report that, while those ships looked right impressive on the open sea, even without the help of CGI, the new 60-oared models fared abysmally in the tight confines of the rivers and estuaries where ships of the day actually had to fight. Turns out that it’s hard to get all 60 oars going when you’re bumping into the banks. Blame those Danish skalds and their clever jingles.

**Carl Pyrdum’s column** On the margins appears every two months in each issue of Medieval Warfare magazine. He also maintains a blog, Got Medieval, at www.gotmedieval.com.

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**Question**

Dear editor,

I have a question related to the illustration of the Berber warrior in the article of Alberto Raul published in *Medieval Warfare* I-3.

In the caption, the illustrator mentions that “Their conversion to Islam seems to have had an impact on their dress code, because they started covering themselves with several layers of cloth”

This statement, however, seems rather unlikely to me. The Quran mentions that humans have to ‘cover their nudity’, but nowhere is it stated exactly to what extent. In normative Islam, besides the other widely varying Islamic views on matters such as these, men are believed to have to cover their body from their navel to their knees. Thus, a nude upper body, suggested in the text to be the custom of the pre-Islamic Berber men, shouldn’t be a problem and so I don’t see how their conversion to Islam should have resulted in different ways of dressing than before.

On the other hand, the rock carvings portraying Berber warriors might not show the complete picture. Maybe these were heroic depictions of their warriors and thus the clothing of the average warrior might have been much less nude than is often conceived. It is not unthinkable that a little bit more clothing was appropriate for the climate (cold winters, or in more desert like places protection against the sun) in the mountainous areas in which the Berbers lived. Thus, isn’t it possible that clothing traditions have more to do with climate and other cultural factors than with belief in this case. Even the traditional dressed Berber women until today rather dress themselves in a certain way due to other cultural factors, like the henna tattoos, colourful clothing, head scarfs and very Romanesque fibulae. Are there any Roman and Greek texts available about the clothing of the Berbers/Libicoi from this time that might complement our fragmentary rock carved material of Berbers? And if so, what do they tell us?