

*The Multifunctionality of a Medieval Hagiography:
A Historical Case Study of the “Gesta et Passio” and
the Making of the Danish Royal Saint Cnut (c. 1100)*
by Fiona Fritz

2024. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag. pp 250. No price quoted.

ISBN 978-3-515-13597

Graham Duncan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2583-1914>

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Graham.duncan@up.ac.za

This is a valuable contribution to the historiography of the medieval Church. It focuses on the work “Gesta et Passio” (*Achievements and Passion [Suffering]*) by the Anglo-Saxon monk Aelnoth of Canterbury, who acts in the role of a praise singer for the Danish King St. Cnut (Kanutus, Canute). This is one way of looking at hagiographical texts, which can also be insightful, as here with aspects of church polity, monarchy, and succession debates, as well as the relationship between church and state.

Aelnoth, writing in the 12th century (possibly 1111/1112), adopted a view of history as salvation history where Cnut’s narrative is fashioned as the history of a royal saint, lending legitimacy to his consolidating role of the monarchy in society. Further, he employs various techniques to achieve his objective: developing an ideology of kingship, enhancing the validity of the dynasty, promoting ecclesiastical interests, and providing entertainment. In the manner of medieval legendary narrative employing linguistic studies, Aelnoth combines these into a unified document signifying distance and otherness both in a geographical and spiritual sense, as Denmark was far from the centre of the Roman church. This also included the process of Europeanism of Denmark. This process involved three phases: “infiltration” by missionaries (c888—mid 10th century); “organisation” by indigenous clergy; and “consolidation” with the establishment of the archbishopric of Lund (1104), which demonstrated the local processes of political and ecclesiastical consolidation throughout Scandinavia and lasted until c1300. Within this process, we note the area of research has focused on the construction of sanctity, the functions of hagiographical texts, and how concepts of sanctity were transferred using a variety of sources: miracle stories, legends, sagas,

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

2025 | #17986 | 2 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/17986>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

© The Author(s) 2025



Published by the Church History Society of Southern Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

translatio reports, lives of saints, liturgical texts, calendars, legal documents and chronicles, and oral tradition, not to mention non-textual sources: relics and reliquaries, images, music etc. Considering the different functionalities of all of these sources, research has proceeded within the context of identity formation.

“Gesta et passio” may be considered in three parts. The first contains a letter to King Niels; the second focuses on King Sweyn and his sons; the third and most substantial part, with a brief epilogue, describes Cnut’s kingship and his violent death. The use of Latin also formed a barrier to wider communication. Aelnoth’s historiographical approach may be described as salvation history, which heightened its impact with Cnut, the ideal king, portrayed as *imitatio Christi*. So, Cnut is the *rex iustus*, called, chosen, and installed as king by God. This is the God who cares for the poor, honours clergy, and endows churches. In his use of ideological discourse, Aelnoth established the standards by which future monarchs may be judged. By this means, he aligns the interests of church and state against the traditional powers of the landed interests, resulting in church development and the edification of God’s people in Denmark.

Therefore, this work offers some information regarding the context of “Gesta et passio” and identifies the sources for the work and reconstructs them through a process of multifunctionality. This work’s impact is not just restricted to the medieval period. It offers tools and a means to expand our historiographical method in other periods too.