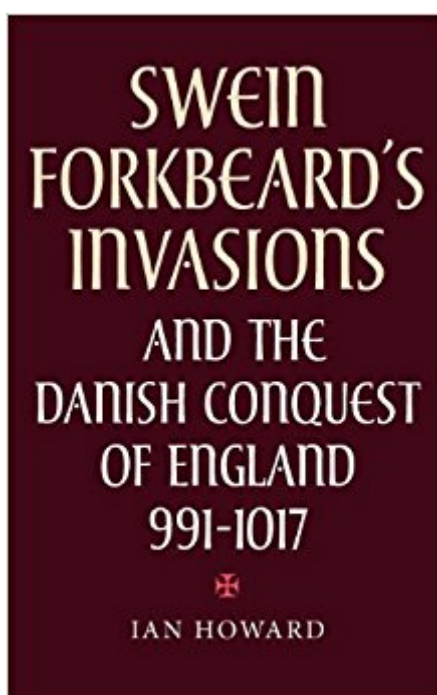


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# Swein Forkbeard's Invasions And The Danish Conquest Of England, 991-1017 (Warfare In History)



## Synopsis

From the battle of Maldon in 991 during the reign of Æthelred (the Unready), England was invaded by Scandinavian armies of increasing size and ferocity. Swein Forkbeard, king of Denmark, played a significant part in these invasions, which culminated in the domination of England and the long reign of his son, Cnut. This analysis of the invasions demonstrates beyond doubt that Æthelred was no indolent and worthless king who bribed invading Vikings to go away: his relationship with the Scandinavian armies was more complex and more interesting than has been supposed. It is equally apparent that Swein was more than a marauding Viking adventurer: he was a sophisticated politician who laid the foundations for a great northern empire which was ruled by his descendents for many years after his death. New insight into this exciting period of English history is gained by focusing on the activities of Swein Forkbeard and, after his death in 1014, the Danish warlord Thorkell the Tall, both outstanding warriors and political leaders of what is sometimes called 'the Second Viking Age'. Many factors leading to the invasions and conquest are investigated through a critical analysis of the chronology of events, an explanation of the economic background, plotting the itineraries of the Scandinavian armies, and a fresh examination of the sources, including the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Encomium, and John of Worcester's Chronicle. IAN HOWARD has a PhD from Manchester University and is a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. After a career in industry and commerce, he has returned to full-time research and has produced several papers covering a variety of aspects of early medieval history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ian Howard has returned to medieval history after a professional career spent elsewhere. He has produced research papers on several aspects of 10th-11th century history.

Ian Howard's thesis on Forkbeards invasions and eventual conquest of England was exactly what I have been looking for in regards to Viking activity in the Middle Ages. I have read almost every Viking book offered today and even some older texts like Gyn Jones' "Vikings". I have also enjoyed Marc Morris' account of the Norman Conquest because these two books give the reader some great un-biased accounts of the three 11th century conquests of England, Forkbeard-Cnut the Great-William the Conqueror. Almost all other Viking books are just regurgitated facts and sagas of these Scandinavian adventurers/pirates/Conquerors to ad-nauseum lengths. I do not want to throw Proff Sawyer and M K Lawson into this fray of historians because they have written excellent books too. There are other great historians to learn from besides these great ones like Proffessor Lund and Else Rosedahl and of course Laurence M Larson. Overall it's a very detailed book because it is Howard's Thesis you are reading. If you are looking for more details on this great Viking King then look no further.

For a brief time England had a king whose name for over two decades was synonymous with fear for the island's Anglo-Saxon inhabitants. His name was Swein Forkbeard. In the course of 1013 he eventually gained control of England against King Aethelred and, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, "all the nation recognized him as full king." Aethelred went into exile in Normandy but, just as Swein was consolidating his power at the beginning of 1014 and preparing his consecration, he died on February 2 of that year. The actual consecration occurred after his death. Aethelred then returned and, with Swein gone, temporarily drove the Danes from most of England. But Aethelred's success was short-lived. After Aethelred's own death in 1016, Swein's son, Cnut, returned in strength and eventually ruled the country from 1017 to 1035. This book by Ian Howard is the story of Swein Forkbeard's multiple invasions of England starting in the early 990's and ending with the triumph of his son Cnut. It is the best account available of the first Danish king of England and the overthrow of the Anglo-Saxon kingship. The book is an extended and rewritten version of Ian Howard's doctoral thesis. Sometimes this fact shows. There is extensive documentation noted within each chapter with many pages being 75% text and 25% notes. Sometimes, in academic

fashion, Howard makes a point of referencing in the text something cited elsewhere in the book by chapter and page (for example, "In Chapter 4, p. 54 and n.3") and in a few places (not many) the writing is a bit stilted. He also could have defined a few more terms for the reader prior to their use in the text, terms which would already be familiar to those reading a thesis. But the book has many strengths which far outweigh these limitations for the general reader. For the most part Howard's writing is clear and easy to follow. He provides nine maps on the appropriate pages in the text showing the routes taken by the armies or ships in the various invasions from 990 through 1013. On the maps he has numbers corresponding to the sequence of events with an explanation of each number beneath the map. These are enormously helpful to the reader. It makes it so much easier to visualize the flow of what happened. Howard also supplies family trees for Swein and Aethelred. But I think the best thing about this book is that it fills in for the general public a critical but largely hidden time in English history which set the stage in many ways for the later Norman invasion. Given the limitations of the medieval resources available and the fact that it is based on an academic thesis, this is an excellent book. Few people have heard of Swein Forkbeard. The name sounds like something from a Monte Python sketch. But to the English people of the late 10th and early 11th centuries his name would come to mean civil war, enormous suffering, and the eventual change in the government of the country. This book documents the downfall of the people who took over Britain from the Romans and the rise of the Danish monarchy. I recommend it.

I was somewhat surprised to discover that this book about the "Danish" conquests of England (or more correctly the Scandinavian conquests, given the composition of their armies), by Swein Forkbeard King of Denmark and then, a couple of years later, by his son Knut, had not attracted more reviews. One possible reason is that, unlike the Norman Conquest, the successful conquest of Anglo-Saxon England by the Danes is perhaps less well known. Another somewhat related reason is that this book tells the story of these events from a Scandinavian point of view, and relies heavily on Scandinavian sources to supplement (and discuss) the rather biased Anglo-Saxon sources. A third reason might be that many potential readers assume that this book is mostly about Danish plundering and warfare in England, whereas it has much more to offer and makes for a remarkable read, if at times a difficult one. There are many features that make this book attractive. The first, and perhaps one of the most important ones, is to present a more balanced view of the "doggedness of Anglo-Saxon resistance" (to quote Matthew Bennett who prefaced this book) to the Danish King's invasions, and to the Danish attacks that came before. Although the book is not explicitly centred on the long reign of Aethelred II, the author does show time and again that the "Unready" slur given to

him by posterity, and by hostile propaganda seeking, in part, to blame him for others' failures, was largely undeserved. It also shows the wide range of tactics and strategies used during his reign against the invaders, including (but not only) Fabian delaying tactics and divide and rule tactics that involved paying so-called "Danegeld" and hiring the invaders to fight as mercenaries for the King. Another tactic, which initially worked, was paying back treachery (the breaking of treaties by some of these mercenaries) in kind by having hundreds of them massacred. If anything, this book shows that the Danish Kings, although successful, had a hard time in conquering England: it was no walk over! A second valuable feature is the attempt to explain the invasions and the final conquest in "hindsight", as the author puts it. Here, I found the book to be a bit more mixed. The piece on Anglo-Saxon wealth at the time is good (even if not entirely original). It shows how such wealth, and the huge, various and increasing tributes paid to the invaders were perhaps a mixed blessing to the extent that they encouraged the Scandinavians to stay as settlers and/or as mercenaries. Invading armies were repeatedly bought off but also hired to fight against newcomers, just as happened during King Alfred's reign and just like happened across the Channel when a band of Vikings had been settled around Rouen. The author also shows how such huge cash payments could have had a significant effect on economic growth and trade, including by drawing out resources that has previously been hoarded by magnates, the church or the King. I was, however, much less convinced by the piece on "English Military Weakness". The author mainly attributes this weakness with the Anglo-Saxons' inability to develop highly trained and heavily equipped forces of horsemen during the 10th century, as was happening across the Channel. There are at least two problems with this. One is that the Carolingian monarchs on the continent already had heavy cavalry by the second half of the 8th century, if not before. The second is that the absence of such cavalry did not prevent King Alfred and his successors from successfully resisting the Scandinavian invaders and then conquering and unifying the whole of England. More than a lack of a specific type of "technology", it seems that it was the Kingdom's political divisions (and perhaps the King's relative political weakness) and the lack of charismatic and competent warlords on the Anglo-Saxon side which accounts for this "military weakness". The book has other interesting features. One is the care and trouble taken by the author to untangle the events from the conflicting and rather biased. While this is done methodically, it also leads to a number of repetitions and source discussion that some readers might find tedious at times. Another is that his careful analysis allows Ian Howard to reconstitute the itineraries of the Scandinavian armies and their complex relationships with the English establishment. These were not all necessarily hostile to the invaders and they sided at times with them out of personal interest against their rivals. The same applies to the Scandinavians

themselves with the author showing that these Scandinavian armies were, as during the times of King Alfred, made up of a number of war bands following different leaders. Some of these could be (and were successfully) enticed to change sides, including those lead by Olaf Tryggvason and Thorkell the Tall, both of which would become rivals to the Danish Kings, father and son. If anything, and in addition to the strictly military aspects of these raids and invasions, this is perhaps the main merit of this book for me was to show that the events leading to the successful Scandinavian conquest of England were far more complex than generally thought.

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