Poor old king Canute has been depicted as some kind of arrogant foolish man for centuries. After all, he sat on the sea-shore and commanded the sea not to come in. Or, did he? No, the truth is seemingly more godly (maybe)!

Knutr inn riki, or Cnut the Great... Canute, was king of Denmark, and also of England, Norway and some of Sweden (called the North Sea Empire), approximately 985 to 1035. His father, Sweyn Forkbeard, was king of Denmark before him. (Note that the town of Swansea is said to be Sweyne’s Eye, named after a Viking marauder named Swayne). From Sweyen comes the patronym Svenson, a modern Nordic surname.

Cnut won England in 1016, and came to his native Danish throne two years later, thus joining both nations. His method of unification was said not to be brutality, but sharing of wealth, custom and opportunity. His claim to the crown of Norway succeeded in 1028, while his claim on Sweden seems to have consisted only of holding one town, Sigtuna. By way of his hold on England, Cnut had strong trading links with Ireland. This is how both sides of the Irish channel have two towns with the same name – Dublin and Blackpool, both named after the dark discolouring of the sea caused by the running of peat-water into the harbour.

Like most kings of his time, Cnut had special favour from the popes, because of his strategic position. Hence he was able to travel to Rome to receive the kingship from the popes. Of Cnut the man, he was said to be very tall and strong, handsome, with keen eyesight (Knytlinga Saga).

Very little is known of this king, but information really began when his father sent him with a force to take England, following decades of sporadic Viking raids around the coast of Britain. The breakthrough came when his force attacked the Humber region, after which England fell quickly. (Note: only England, not Scotland or Wales, both of which were separate kingdoms led by fierce clans and tribes). However, there was keen and savage opposition from Harald, who succeeded Cnut’s father as king of Denmark, and from Ethelred, who was preferred by English nobility.

As with rulership of those early days, taking and maintaining of countries was filled with bloodshed and fighting. The list of Cnut’s battles is long, but he was successful in that as a Viking ruler he could guarantee safety from other Vikings, so England enjoyed a longish period
of prosperity. However, as was usual in those times, Cnut eliminated all English noblemen he thought could challenge his authority. In 1018 Cnut paid off most of his army with levies put on England and London, keeping a standing force of 40 ships with men. He brought the smaller shires into just four administrative units, making their Nordic chiefs ‘earls’.

In a letter to the sub-rulers of England, Cnut said that he would be “a faithful observer of God’s rights and just secular law” (Cnut’s Letter, 1019). But, he also expressed severe warnings to those who continued to resist his rule. He promised complete protection from Nordic soldiers, if England supported and obeyed his rule. To this end he took an army to Denmark to deal with resistance to his rule.

Cnut was generally treated as a ‘religious man’, and wise, even though he had two wives and dealt harshly with Christian opponents. Yet, he travelled to the accession of a pope, to ‘repent of his sins and to pray for redemption’. Because his two wives put him at odds with church leaders, Cnut rebuilt their churches and refilled their money coffers! Historians are unsure if his religious beliefs were genuine or just a way of controlling the people. The legend about Cnut sitting on a throne on a seashore commanding the waves of the sea to stop coming in may be just that – a legend. The real story of this tends to imply that his beliefs, after all, were genuine. (faculty.history.wisc.ed)... but we have no final word on this being authentic.

The legend began in Henry of Huntingdon’s ‘Chronicle’ (12th century), which, rather than speak of vainglory, actually spoke of Cnut’s ‘Christian’ humility. We even have a saying used today, but a little misused: “Paddle your own Canute”. The ‘real’ story is that Cnut “... commanded that his chair should be set on the shore, when the tide began to rise. And then he spoke to the rising sea saying “You are part of my dominion, and the ground that I am seated upon is mine, nor has anyone disobeyed my orders with impunity. Therefore, I order you not to rise onto my land, nor to wet the clothes or body of your Lord”. But the sea carried on rising as usual without any reverence for his person, and soaked his feet and legs. Then he moving away said: “All the inhabitants of the world should know that the power of kings is vain and trivial, and that none is worthy the name of king but He whose command the heaven, earth and sea obey by eternal laws”. Therefore King Cnut never afterwards placed the crown on his head, but above a picture of the Lord nailed to the cross, turning it forever into a means to praise God, the great king. By whose mercy may the soul of King Cnut enjoy peace.” (From Huntingdon’s Latin text: Historia Anglorum, ‘The History of the English people’).

So, to say that Cnut was a megalomaniac who thought he could rule the tides, is plainly (?) untrue. He was, rather, showing that not even a successful earthly king has precedence over the King of kings. His command to the waves was, then, used as a vivid illustration, showing
that God alone, not he, had control over all things. This intention is proposed by Prof Simon Keynes, University of Cambridge (quoted in BBC News magazine, 26th May, 2011).

On the other hand, Prof Malcolm Godden of Oxford University says that 12th century writers were always making up stories about Anglo-Saxon kings and that Cnut would not have admitted his own inability. So there you have it – I think... maybe!!

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