

# Medieval Wales

Presented at Pennsic 43

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“It is not possible to write a history of early medieval Wales that will stand up to the requirements of modern scholarship.” - Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*

“There will be very few Dates in this History.” - Jane Austen, *The History of England*



Maps of early-medieval Britain and Wales

## Map of Doggerland



"The island was then called Albion, and was inhabited by none but a few giants.... At last Brutus called the island after his own name Britain, and his companions Britons.... From whence afterwards the language of the nation, which at first bore the name of Trojan...was called British."

- Bk I, Ch.16

"Locrin, the eldest [of Brutus's sons], possessed the middle part of the island, called...Loegria. Kamber had that part which lies beyond the river Severn, now called Wales, but which was for a long time named Kambria; and hence that people still call themselves in their British tongue Kambri. Albanact, the younger brother, possessed the country he called Albania, now Scotland."

- Bk II, Ch.1, *Historia Regum Britanniae*  
Geoffrey of Monmouth

## Loss of Independence

On the shore stood the opposing army with its dense array of armed warriors, while between the ranks dashed women, in black attire like the Furies, with hair dishevelled, waving brands. All around, the Druids, lifting up their hands to heaven, and pouring forth dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers by the unfamiliar sight, so that, as if their limbs were paralysed, they stood motionless, and exposed to wounds. Then urged by their general's appeals and mutual encouragements not to quail before a troop of frenzied women, they bore the standards onwards, smote down all resistance, and wrapped the foe in the flames of his own brands.

— Tacitus, Annals 14.30, Conquest of Mona in 60 AD

...king Hemeid, with all the inhabitation of the region of Demetia, compelled by the violence of the six sons of Rotri, had submitted to the dominion of the king. Howel also, son of Ris, king of Gleguising, and Brocmail and Fernmail, sons of Mouric, kings of Gwent, compelled by the violence and tyranny of earl Ethered and of the Mercians, of their own accord sought king Alfred, that they might enjoy his government and protection from him against their enemies. Helised, also, son of Tendyr, king of Brecon, compelled by the force of the same sons of Rotri, of his own accord sought the government of the aforesaid king; and Anarawd, son of Rotri, with his brother, at length abandoning the friendship of the Northumbrians, from which he received no good but harm, came into king Alfred's presence and eagerly sought his friendship.

— Asser's Life of Alfred, for 884

If we have disseised or removed Welshmen from lands or liberties, or other things, without the legal judgment of their peers in England or in Wales, they shall be immediately restored to them; and if a dispute arise over this, then let it be decided in the marches by the judgment of their peers; for the tenements in England according to the law of England, for tenements in Wales according to the law of Wales, and for tenements in the marches according to the law of the marches. Welshmen shall do the same to us and ours.

— Magna Carta 56, 1215 AD

In this yere aboute the feste of Natyvyte of Seynt John Baptiste, David the brother of Thlewelyn was taken and holden in prison at Rothelan, unto the fest of seynt Mighell, and thane lad to Schrovesbury, and there he was dampned to be ded; and first he was drawn thorough the citee with horse unto the galowes, thane hanged, and afterward beheded; and thane his bowels brent, and the laste his bodye quarterd in iiij quarters, whiche were sent to be sett up in iiij parties in Engeland; and be the kyng comaunded that his hede schude be seete on the tour of London. And fro that tyme forth the kyng occupied alle the lond of Walys.

— The Chronicle of London, for 1283 AD

Albeit the Dominion Principality and Country of Wales justly and righteously is, and ever hath been incorporated annexed united and subject to and under the Imperial Crown of this Realm...yet notwithstanding, because in that same Country Principality and Dominion divers Rights Usages Laws and Customs be far discrepant from the Laws and Customs of this Realm, and also because that the People of the same Dominion have and do daily use a Speech nothing like, ne consonant to the natural Mother Tongue used within this Realm...

— The Laws in Wales Act of 1535

## Welsh Life

Almost all the people live upon the produce of their herds, with oats, milk, cheese, and butter; eating flesh in larger proportions than bread. They pay no attention to commerce, shipping, or manufactures.

...they inhabit neither towns, villages, nor castles, but lead a solitary life in the woods, on the borders of which they...content themselves with small huts made of the boughs of trees twisted together, constructed with little labour and expense, and sufficient to endure throughout the year.

The house is not furnished with tables, cloths, or napkins. They study nature more than splendour, for which reason, the guests being seated in threes, instead of couples as elsewhere, they place the dishes before them all at once upon rushes and fresh grass, in large platters or trenchers. They also make use of a thin and broad cake of bread, baked every day, such as in old writings was called *lagana*, and they sometimes add chopped meat, with broth...A bed made of rushes, and covered with a coarse kind of cloth manufactured in the country, called *brychan*, is then placed along the side of the room, and they all in common lie down to sleep; nor is their dress at night different from that by day, for at all seasons they defend themselves from the cold only by a thin cloak and tunic.

Both sexes exceed any other nation in attention to their teeth, which they render like ivory, by constantly rubbing them with green hazel and wiping with a woolen cloth.

In their musical concerts they do not sing in unison like the inhabitants of other countries, but in many different parts....

This nation is, above all others, addicted to the digging up of boundary ditches, removing the limits, transgressing landmarks, and extending their territory by every possible means.

The crime of incest hath so much prevailed...they are not ashamed of intermarrying with their relations, even in the third degree of consanguinity.

— snippets from Giraldus, *Itinerary through Wales*, 1191, *Description of Wales*, 1194

Thus in Tegeingl, the only *cantref* to be surveyed in detail, we learn that, of the population recorded for 1086, no less than 17 per cent were slaves (*servi*) and oxmen (*bovarii*), and a further 34 per cent were cottagers (*bordarii*) probably of servile origin.

— *The Agrarian History of England and Wales I.II* pp.299-300

“God knows,” said Manwydan “we can’t go on like this. Let us make for England where we can find a craft and make a living.”

— Manawydan fab Llŷr, *Mabinogion*, 1400 or earlier

Three free sons of the bond: a clerk; a bard; and a smith.

Three bond sons of the free: the sons of the above.

- triads from *Ancient Laws and Institutes*

“The worth of the king’s gwestwa is one pound: six score pence for his bread; three score for his enllyn; and three more for his liquor; and that if his gwestwa be not timely supplied. The amount of the king’s gwestwa is a horse-load of wheat flour; the carcase of an ox; seven thraves [of twenty-four sheaves] of oats, of one band; and a store of honey in one tub, the height of the tub to be nine hand-breadths, when measured diagonally from the further bottom groove to the hither rim; and twenty-four pence, unless the privilege of the payer frees him. The worth of a vat of mead supplied to the king is six score pence; and it ought to be sufficiently capacious for the king and his elder to bathe therein...”

- Ancient Laws and Institutes, ch. 19

Three modes by which the king supports his household and retinue: first, from the property of his own maer-trev, and his mensal land; the second is from his lawful due from his land and his own men; the third mode is, from the penalties for illegalities done in his land, where they are due to him.

- triad from *Ancient Laws and Institutes*

“By the year 1200, the old concept of *galanas*, it is known, had been replaced by an entirely different attitude towards crime, serious homicide being then punished by death and total confiscation of property at the hands of the state.”

- The Age of Princes, in *Medieval Welsh Society*

“The ebediw of a maer cangbellor, one pound. The ebediw of a maer, six score pence. The ebediw of a cangbellor, six score pence. The ebediw of an uchelwr, six score pence. The ebediw of an aillt, if there be a church upon his land, six score pence and, if not, four score pence. The ebediw of an alltud, twenty-four pence. The ebediw of a female cottar, sixteen pence, to be paid to the owner of the land.

- Anomalous Laws (in *Ancient Laws and Institutes*, v.2), p.13

## Welsh Law

“There are three maxims, according to the law of Howel the good, to complete the law and its practice perfectly, so that they cannot be condemned for omission, or for superfluity, or for any thing unworthy: the first is, in similarities, a similar judgment is to be given; the second is, of two written laws, one contrary to the other, explanatory of the same thing, that which is more reasonable than the other is to be maintained; the third is, every kind of written law, to which there is nothing written in opposition, is to be preserved: until the sovereign and his country agree to abrogate it, and establish another, more perfect, in its place.”

- Dimetian Code

The chief of kindred 189 cows; The uchelwyr 126 cows; Man with a family without office 84 cows; The innate boneddig 63 cows; The alltud of the brenhin 63 cows; The alltud of the uchelwyr 31-1/2 cows; The bondman (caeth) of this island, one pound of silver (4 cows); The bondman from beyond the sea 1-1/2 pound (6 cows).

- Venedotian Code (partial summary of *galanas*)

“In three ways saraad occurs to every person in the world: by striking; assaulting; and taking by violence from him: and if it be a man, if his wife be violated, it is saraad to him: if it be a

woman, if she find another woman with her husband, it is saraad to her: and so nobody escapes without being subject to saraad...

“The saraad of the king’s daughter is half the saarad of her brother until she shall marry; after her marriage her saraad is a third of her husband’s saraad: and in like manner every female’s.”

- Venedotian Code, from Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales, v.1, p.237

Three persons who are to pay galanas, and who are not to have a share of galanas: a woman; a clerk; and a man who shall pay a spear penny.

“Is there any murderer who is not to pay galanas? There is: If a bondman kill a boneddig, there is to be no galanas, other than the life of that bondman ; and there is the murder for which galanas is not paid, since the worth of the criminal is not equal to the galanas of the boneddig.”

- Dimetian Code

“Whoever shall deny galanas, with its accessories, without acknowledging aught, is to give the oaths of fifty men: and he is to give the same if any one of them is to be denied.”

- Dimetian Code

“The first erw belongs to the ploughman; the second to the irons; the third to the exterior sod ox; the fourth to the exterior sward ox, lest the yoke should be broken; and the fifth to the driver: and so the erws are appropriated, from best to best, to the oxen, thence onward, unless the yoke be stopped between them, unto the last; and after that the plough erw...and that once in the year.”

- Venedotian Code ch.24B

Whoever commits the theft, if it be found under the same lock, and the same roof, as a man, unless he can account for it lawfully, or have an arddelw to take it from his hand, it is a halogdy.

A fugitive, when found after being sought after three nights in hi usual abode, and captured against his will, is to lose his life; and to be despoiled likewise.

Guests can only be cleared for night theft.

Thus sharing is to be: first, sharing is to take place between brothers, and the youngest son is to choose his tyddyn; he is to choose, if he be an uchelwr, the homested in which his father resided, and the building thereon, and eight legal erws around it; and then the youngest son is to share, and from eldest to eldest choose a tyddyn and the buildings thereon, and eight erws.... Second cousins are to re-share land, but no one is to move from his tyddn...

— Ancient Law and Institutes (in ch.29-31)

Whoever shall kill a cat that guards a house or a barn of the King or shall take it stealthily; it is to be held with its head to the ground and its tail up, the ground being swept and then clean wheat is to be poured about it until the tip of its tail be hidden: and that is its worth. Another cat is four legal pence in value.

- Gwentian Code

## Glossary

Alltud. A man of foreign blood living in Wales.

Amobyrr. A marriage fine – payable once. Might also be paid in case of rape or elopement.

Boneddig. A free man. In ascending order of status, a boneddig might be an unmarried free man, a married one, or an uchelwyr.

Brenhin. King.

Caeth. A slave.

The Codes. There are three groups of Welsh legal manuscripts – the Gwentian, Dimetian, and Venedotian codes are associated with Gwent, Dyfed (Dimetia), and Gwynedd, respectively. They are also known as the Cyfnerth, Blegywryd, and Iorwerth redactions, after jurists with whom they are associated.

Camlwrw. A fine of three cows for various offenses against the law.

Ebidu. A fee paid when a son succeeds to his father's position.

Erw. The Welsh equivalent of an acre.

Galanas. Death price.

Gwestwa. The food due for the entertainment of the king (on circuit). Each free tref (maenor?) owed food worth one pound per year. This could be commuted to a cash payment (the tunc-pound). The levy, or the cost of the levy, was borne by the inhabitants in proportion to the number of erwes each held.

Maer. Seneschal, reeve.

Priodawr. The proprietor of land that has been held for at least four generations.

Priodolder. Inalienable proprietorship.

Saraad. Honor price.

Taeog (or aillt). An unfree Welshman.

Teulu. Literally family. A prince's men-at-arms - canonically 120 retainers equipped with shields and lances (or javelins).

Tref. A village, approximately. Ideally, there were twelve trefs – eight free, four bond – in a maenor, and four maenorau in a cwmwd, or commote. A cantref (one hundred trefs) ideally consisted of two cwmwd and four maerdrefs.

Uchelwyr. A man of local high standing.

Welsh mortgage. A perpetually renewable transfer of land that may be revoked at any time.

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