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Hywel [*called* Hywel Fychan]

(d. 825)

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Hywel [*called* Hywel Fychan] (d. 825), king of Gwynedd, ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd in north Wales perhaps from as early as 798 but most certainly from 816 until his death in 825. He was one of two protagonists in a struggle for the kingship of Gwynedd witnessed in the chronicles between the years 813 and 816. Whereas his rival, Cynan, has been identified as Cynan Dindaethwy of the main ruling line of Gwynedd whose father, Rhodri Molwynog ab Idwal, had died in 754, Hywel's genealogical affiliations and political origins are more enigmatic. Two chronicles represent Hywel as a brother of Cynan and their rivalry would thus be seen as a fraternal struggle for their father's kingdom. This was the view taken by early modern antiquaries and inspired Hywel's cognomen Bychan (lenited Fychan), meaning 'little' and thus 'junior'. Alternatively Hywel has been regarded as Hywel Farf-fehinog of the related dynasty of Rhos. This Hywel's father, Caradog ap Meirion, had ruled Gwynedd in the second half of the eighth century, possibly succeeding Rhodri Molwynog in 754, and had died in 798. Hywel Farf-fehinog would thus have sought to retain his father's hold of the kingship in the face of the traditional dynasty represented by Cynan. A third possibility is that Hywel was the mysterious Hywel ap Cadwal mentioned in the prophetic poem *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd* which lists the 'Kings of the Britons', mostly those of Gwynedd.

The first recorded encounter between Hywel and Cynan Dindaethwy occurred in 813, when Hywel was victor (though one account has Cynan). In the following year they fought on Anglesey, where again Hywel was victorious, expelling Cynan from that island. As Anglesey was the traditional base of Cynan's dynasty as kings of Gwynedd, this was no doubt an important victory for Hywel. He possibly maintained himself for a further two years until 816, when Cynan in turn is said to have expelled him from Anglesey. Cynan was recognized as king at this point (the Irish chronicles call him 'rex Brittonum'—'king of the Welsh'—the traditional title of the kings of Gwynedd) but he was unable to capitalize on this success for he died in the same year. That Hywel was now unchallenged king of Gwynedd is probable, though the battle at Llan-faes (perhaps that on Anglesey) fought in 817 may have been an attempt by Cynan's kinsmen to unseat him. If so, they failed for Hywel survived for a further nine years. However, records of his death in 825 do not credit him with a title, except one case as 'king of Manaw' (that is

Man), no doubt an error for Môn, or Anglesey. On his death the kingship passed to Merfyn Frych, the maternal grandson of Hywel's erstwhile rival Cynan Dindaethwy.

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