Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Hywel Dda [Hywel Dda ap Cadell]

(d. 949/50)

David E. Thornton

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13968>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Hywel Dda [Hywel Dda ap Cadell] (d. 949/50), king in Wales, was son of Cadell ap Rhodri Mawr (d. 910). He ruled the kingdom of Deheubarth in south-west Wales from 903 or 904 and, in addition, Gwynedd and other parts of north Wales from 942 or 943 until his death in 949 or 950. The gradual extension of his power over most of Wales, with the exception of the kingdoms of the south-east, was achieved through a combination of marriage alliance, fortuitous deaths of rivals, and, no doubt, a certain amount of violence. He is most famous as the king who supposedly first codified and promulgated Welsh customary law. It was perhaps because of this attribute, rather than due to any notably moral personal conduct, that he came to be known as Da, lenited as Dda (the Good).

Hywel's father, Cadell, may have ruled the kingdom of Ceredigion from 878 until 910. Hywel was himself married to Elen (d. 929), the daughter of Llywarch ap Hyfaidd, king of Dyfed from 892 or 893 until his death in 903. Hywel may have inherited Llywarch's kingdom in 903 on account of his marriage to Elen. However, the fact that one Rhodri (less correctly Rhydderch), brother of Llywarch, is said to have been decapitated in the region of Arwystli in the following year may indicate that Hywel also used more violent means to achieve this end. That he also succeeded his father to Ceredigion is by no means certain: the list of Welsh kings who submitted to Edward the Elder at Tamworth in 918 mentions Hywel but also includes his brother Clydog. The location of Clydog's kingdom is not known, but if it was Ceredigion he lost it in 920 when he was slain by a third brother, Meurig. This was not the end of Hywel's dynastic rivals: Clydog's son Hyfaidd (not called king) and a Meurig (possibly Hywel's brother) both lived until 938, and a Gwriad (whose genealogical affiliations are unknown) witnessed Anglo-Saxon charters in 928 and 932. It is therefore possible that Hywel's power in south-west and west Wales was not free from threat until the late 930s. Finally, in 942 on the death of Idwal Foel, king of Gwynedd and the dependent parts of north Wales, Hywel seems to have annexed these areas to his rule, expelling Idwal's sons Iago and Ieuaf. That this point marked a significant upturn in his fortunes is possibly implied in the English charters witnessed by him, which from now on distinguish Hywel from his fellow Welsh royal witnesses as (*rex*) or (*regulus*) rather than mere (*subregulus*).

Hywel's relations with contemporary English kings have been a point of some controversy. Mention has already been made of his submission, along with Clydog and Idwal Foel, to Edward the Elder at Tamworth in 918. However, it is with Edward's son and heir Æthelstan that Hywel is most frequently linked. In 926, when Æthelstan annexed Northumbria, he is said to have received the submission of all the kings in the island of Britain. Hywel and the other Welsh rulers possibly made their submissions, not at Eamont Bridge, but at Hereford, where Æthelstan is said to have exacted an annual tribute from them. For the remainder of his reign Hywel regularly attended this English king and later his brother Eadred: at Exeter in 928, Worthy (in modern Hampshire) and Luton in 931, 'Middleton' in 932, Winchester and Nottingham in 934, and Dorchester twice in 935. The 'Topsham charter' of 937 may be spurious, though there is no reason to suppose Hywel took part in the anti-English coalition at 'Brunanburh' in that year. There is then a gap (perhaps reflecting the decline in English fortunes after Æthelstan's death rather than a deterioration in Anglo-Welsh relations) until 946 when Hywel witnessed Eadred's charter at Kingston, and again at 'Chetwode' and Bourton three years later, not long before his death. The later tradition that one (*Lolinus*), or (*Loelinus*), king of Dyfed (possibly the name Llywelyn, but probably an error for Hoel or Hywel), accompanied King Edmund on a raid into Cumbria in 946 is of uncertain reliability. Hywel's frequent visits to England, combined with other factors such as the naming of one son Edwin, led to the view that Hywel was, in the words of the historian J. E. Lloyd, 'a warm admirer' of things English; more recently this alleged Anglophilia has been questioned, some historians suggesting rather that Hywel and his fellow Welsh rulers were sufficiently astute politicians to recognize the greater authority of the English kings such as Æthelstan, and visited England more out of political expediency than out of enthusiasm for that more powerful neighbour.

One of Hywel's supposed pro-English acts was the introduction of elements of English law into those of Wales. This was not impossible, since according to the prologues to the Welsh law books of the thirteenth and later centuries, he was responsible for the first codification and promulgation of Welsh law, known consequently as *cyfraith Hywel* ('the law of Hywel'). He is said to have convened an assembly of ecclesiastics from throughout Wales at Whitland (in Dyfed) and after forty days and nights of deliberation the laws were amended and redacted. In some accounts Hywel journeyed to Rome with three bishops to obtain papal approval for these laws. The authenticity of the prologues has come under increasing scholarly criticism and the whole account may owe more to the extent of Hywel's power over much of Wales than to historical fact. He did indeed travel to Rome, probably on pilgrimage, in 929 (thus thirteen years before he would have been in a position to impose any legal reforms upon the north Welsh), and it may be significant that his wife, Elen, died in the same year.

Hywel Dda is also notable as possibly the only early medieval Welsh ruler to have issued coinage. However, the single example, bearing the legend 'Howæl Rex', may have had more a ceremonial than a monetary function, and was a product of the English mint at Chester.

Hywel's Welsh 'empire' was short-lived, and on his death in 949 or 950 his southern territories were ruled by his sons, while those in the north were contended for successfully by the sons of Idwal Foel. Hywel's sons were called Edwin (Gwyn), Owain, Rhain (Rhun), and Rhodri; and late sources add Hywel Fychan and Einion, both probably dubious.

Sources

J. Williams ab Ithel, ed., *Annales Cambriae*, Rolls Series, 20 (1860)

T. Jones, ed. and trans., *Brenhinedd y Saesson, or, The kings of the Saxons* (1971) [another version of *Brut y tywysogyon*]

T. Jones, ed. and trans., *Brut y tywysogyon, or, The chronicle of the princes: Peniarth MS 20* (1952)

T. Jones, ed. and trans., *Brut y tywysogyon, or, The chronicle of the princes: Red Book of Hergest* (1955)

P. C. Bartrum, ed., *Early Welsh genealogical tracts* (1966)

ASC, s.a. 921, 926 [texts A, D]

AS chart., S 400, 407, 413, 416, 417, 425, 433, 434, 435, 520, 544, 550, 1497

Paris, *Chron.*, 1.455

H. R. Luard, ed., *Flores historiarum*, 3 vols., Rolls Series, 95 (1890)

D. P. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda: Anglophil?', *Welsh History Review / Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru*, 8 (1976-7), 1-13

H. R. Loyn, 'Wales and England in the tenth century: the context of the Athelstan charters', *Welsh History Review / Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru*, 10 (1980-81), 283-301

J. E. Lloyd, *A history of Wales from the earliest times to the Edwardian conquest*, 3rd edn, 2 vols. (1939); repr. (1988)

H. Pryce, 'The prologues to the Welsh lawbooks', *BBCS*, 33 (1986), 151-87

A. D. Carr and D. Jenkins, *A look at Hywel's law* (1985)