Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Idwal Foel [Idwal Foel ab Anarawd]

(d. 942)

David E. Thornton

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/14355>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Idwal Foel [Idwal Foel ab Anarawd] (d. 942), king of Gwynedd, was the son of Anarawd ap Rhodri Mawr (d. 916) of Gwynedd. Idwal ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd in north Wales from the death of his father in 916 until his own demise in 942. Knowledge of his reign is limited almost entirely to his relations with contemporary English rulers. It should not be assumed that Idwal was significantly less powerful than his more famous kinsman Hywel Dda ap Cadell, who ruled Deheubarth in south Wales during the same period and annexed Gwynedd on Idwal's death.

In 918 Idwal Foel (the epithet means 'the Bald'), along with Hywel and Hywel's brother Clydog, submitted to Edward the Elder at Tamworth, probably late in the summer of that year. Edward reinforced his position in north Wales in 921 with the building of a fortification at the mouth of the River Clwyd, probably the *burh* ('fortified settlement') at Rhuddlan. While this was perhaps primarily a defence against vikings active in the Irish Sea, it no doubt restricted Idwal's actions considerably. However, according to William of Malmesbury, Idwal may not have been totally submissive in his dealings with the English: Malmesbury puts Edward at Chester in 924, a few days before his death at Farndon-on-Dee, in order to put down a rebellion by the men of that city in alliance with the Welsh. Idwal would seem the most likely Welsh ruler to have been implicated in this rebellion, if it did take place.

Relations with Edward's son and successor, Æthelstan, were more peaceful, though this is perhaps on account of the extent of his power rather than any pro-English policy on the part of Idwal and the other Welsh kings. Thus in 926, when Æthelstan annexed Northumbria, he is said to have received the submission of all the kings in the island of Britain. The Welsh kings, no doubt including Idwal, possibly made their submissions not at Eamont Bridge, but at Hereford, where Æthelstan is said to have exacted an annual tribute from them. Again William of Malmesbury states that Æthelstan deprived Idwal 'king of all the Welsh' and Constantine, king of Scots, of their thrones at this time, but subsequently re-established them ('Idwal' here may of course be an error for Hywel). Æthelstan's dominant position in relations with Idwal Foel and the other Welsh kings is also reflected in their frequent visits to England where they witnessed royal charters. Idwal did so at Exeter in 928, at Worthy, Hampshire, and Luton in 931, 'Middleton' in 932, Winchester and

Nottingham in 934, and finally Dorchester twice in 935. His relations with Æthelstan probably continued in a similar vein for the remaining four years of the English king's life, and there is no reason to assume Idwal took part in the anti-English coalition at 'Brunanburh' in 937. The decline in English fortunes after Æthelstan's death in 939 may have encouraged Idwal to withhold submission to his brother and successor, Edmund, or even to take more offensive action against this English king. Either way, Idwal and his brother Elise are said to have met their deaths at English hands in 942. That Edmund reconquered Mercia in this year is perhaps not coincidental. On Idwal's death, his kingdom did not pass directly to his sons Iago and Ieufaf but was annexed by Hywel Dda. Idwal's other sons included Meurig, Cynan, and Idwal Fychan; a less reliable source would add Anarawd, probably an error for his father.

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]

William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum / The history of the English kings*, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols., OMT (1998-9)

AS chart., S 400, 407, 413, 416, 417, 425, 434, 435

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

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

D. N. Dumville, 'Brittany and "Armes Prydein Vawr"', *Études Celtiques*, 20 (1983), 145-59