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Maelgwn Gwynedd

(d. 547/549)

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Maelgwn Gwynedd (d. 547/549), king of Gwynedd, was the son of Cadwallon Lawhir ab Einion Yrth of the Gwynedd dynasty of Cunedda Wledig and, according to late genealogies, of Meddyf ferch Maeldaf from Nant Conwy. Maelgwn ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd in north-west Wales in the first half of the sixth century until his death, allegedly of plague, in 547. A certain amount of information about Maelgwn and his reign can be gleaned from the contemporary but brief account by Gildas, who wrote to chastise five kings, of whom Maelgwn was the most notable, for their sinful ways and in order to save Britannia from the Anglo-Saxon threat. This Gildasian account concentrates almost exclusively on the king's sins, which, it relates, were as great as his height—later Welsh tradition knew him as Hir ('the Tall').

There is a problem in dating the beginning of Maelgwn's reign. Robert de Torigni's abstract of the annals of Redon states that a 'Cauallonus, most powerful king of Great Britain' (*Patrologia Latina*, 146, no. 202, col. 1323) died in 534: he has been identified as Maelgwn's father, and this has suggested that Maelgwn himself could not have ruled until after 534. However, the date is probably an error for 634, when the later Cadwallon ap Cadfan is said to have died. It is not clear that Maelgwn's father, Cadwallon, had necessarily ruled as king, for according to Gildas, Maelgwn acquired the kingship having killed his uncle, entitled king, in battle. This uncle may have been Owain Danwyn ab Einion Yrth of Rhos, but alternatively may remain anonymous. The reference to Maelgwn as 'Island Dragon' may imply that he was based on Anglesey, the traditional seat of the kings of Gwynedd. Afterwards, perhaps regretting the murder of his kinsman, Maelgwn is said, following a period of serious deliberation, to have resolved to become a monk. However, this proved only to be a temporary situation and he soon returned to the kingship and his old ways of kin slaying. Gildas claims that Maelgwn slew his wife (whom he had married before his monastic phase) and his brother's son, in the latter case with the collusion of this nephew's own wife. He was thus able to marry this woman and justified the union on the grounds that she was a widow! The later genealogies do indeed name two wives for Maelgwn, called Sanan ferch Cyngen (of the ruling line of Powys) and Gwall(t)wen ferch Afallach (described as his mistress), though their historical authenticity is not beyond doubt. Of course, Maelgwn's nepoticide

may have had as much to do with politics as with affairs of the heart, since it is to be assumed that a kinsman must have ruled in his stead during his brief spell as a monk. On rejecting this vocation Maelgwn would have perhaps needed to expel this relative by force. The identity of the nephew (whether king or not) is impossible to determine.

Other notable elements in the Gildasian account of Maelgwn include his alleged preference for the panegyric poems of his bards, particularly those addressed to himself, over the more morally uplifting music of the church. Furthermore, Gildas seems to imply that Maelgwn had been educated in Latin by a secular *rhetor*, probably independently of his monastic training. His ecclesiastical relations were certainly not faultless, but the frequent references to his attacks on monastic sites recorded in lives of the saints probably reflect hagiographical convention and Maelgwn's later reputation rather than genuine historical events. Maelgwn died, according to the Welsh chronicles, in 547 of plague, probably, therefore, the so-called 'Justinian plague'. Some would date his death to 549, because of the mortality mentioned in the Irish annals. Later accounts would add the detail that he died in a church at Rhos attempting to avoid the disease. Maelgwn Gwynedd was certainly regarded as the most important early king of Gwynedd by the ninth century, and the main ruling dynasty claimed descent from him through his son Rhun. He is also credited with a daughter called Eurgain.

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