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Merfyn Frych

(d. 844)

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Merfyn Frych (d. 844), king of Gwynedd, was the son of Gwriad ab Elidir and Epyllt ferch Gynan. Merfyn ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd in north-west Wales from 825 until his death in 844. He was the first member of the so-called 'second dynasty of Gwynedd', which through the descendants of his son Rhodri Mawr came to rule most of Wales in the tenth and later centuries. Merfyn's connection with the earlier kings of Gwynedd was not through his father, Gwriad, but through his mother, Epyllt (though some genealogies represent her as his wife). Epyllt's father, Cynan Dindaethwy, had died in 816 when fighting his dynastic rival Hywel Fychan. On Hywel's death in 825 Merfyn assumed the kingship though, as far as can be established, he was not a direct agnatic relative of the earlier rulers. His father's origins and therefore the precise nature of Merfyn's claim to the kingship are difficult to determine, and attempts to do so have been coloured by later medieval dynastic legend and early modern speculation. A connection with 'Manaw' has been interpreted as being either the Isle of Man or the (by then extinct) kingdom of Manaw of Gododdin in north Britain (Lothian, Scotland); other locations such as Ireland, Galloway in Scotland, and Powys in north-east Wales have also been posited. Merfyn's only known genealogical connection with Powys is his union with Nest, the sister of Cyngen ap Cadell, king of Powys (r. 808–54/5).

Little is known of Merfyn's nineteen-year reign. He was probably one of the Welsh kings who were defeated by Ecgberrht of Wessex in 830, but the implications of this defeat for his rule are unknown. Merfyn's court, perhaps on Anglesey, appears to have fostered Latin and (to a lesser extent) Greek learning, judging from the few hints that survive. The anonymous *Historia Brittonum* was composed in Merfyn's fourth year and probably in Gwynedd. It drew on a variety of sources, including Welsh, Irish, Anglo-Saxon, continental and classical history and pseudo-history. The so-called 'Bamberg Cryptogram' of Dubthach reveals a similar variety of contacts. It seems that Dubthach, an Irishman at Merfyn's court, posed the cryptogram to visiting Irish scholars *en route* for the continent. It took the form of a brief greeting from Merfyn to his brother-in-law Cyngen ap Cadell, and had been translated into Greek by one Suadbarr. Merfyn Frych (the epithet means 'the Freckled') died in

844: that year also witnessed the battle of 'Cedyll', but attempts to link this battle with Merfyn's death are unwarranted. The kingship of Gwynedd then passed to his famous son Rhodri Mawr.

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