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Rhodri Mawr

(*b.* before 844, *d.* 878)

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Rhodri Mawr (*b.* before 844, *d.* 878), king of Gwynedd, was son of Merfyn Frych, king of Gwynedd, and Nest ferch Cadell of the Powysian ruling line. Rhodri ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd in north-west Wales from 844 until his death in 878. Furthermore, it is possible that he brought Powys in north-east Wales under his control in 855 or at some point after that date, and also annexed Ceredigion in west Wales in 872. He is credited with a number of sons with his various wives, including Angharad ferch Meurig of Ceredigion, and these sons, most notably Anarawd and Cadell, continued his expansionist policy, culminating in the extensive power of his grandson Hywel Dda ap Cadell. Despite the claims of later writers, Rhodri himself never ruled all of Wales, but even so he was relatively well known to contemporaries and is perhaps mentioned in a poem by Sedulius Scottus, an Irishman working on the continent. A majority of Welsh rulers in the tenth and later centuries claimed descent from him and it is probably on account of his contemporary political and later genealogical importance that Rhodri came to be known as 'the Great'. The lists of his sons include Anarawd, Cadell, Gwriad, and Merfyn; others, less historically certain, include Aeddan, Gwyddelig, Meurig, Morgan, and Tudwal Gloff.

Rhodri succeeded to the kingdom of Gwynedd and its dependent regions in 844 on the death of his father, Merfyn Frych. In spite of his importance very little is known about his deeds within Wales, and most of that must be surmised from later, brief accounts. More is known of his dealings with the English and Hiberno-Scandinavians. The expansion of Rhodri's authority in Wales seems to have been achieved by a combination of marriage alliance and, no doubt, a certain amount of violence. Rhodri's acquisition of neighbouring Powys is normally dated to 855, when its last known independent ruler, Cyngen ap Cadell, died in Rome. Rhodri is thought to have annexed the kingdom on account of being the son of Cyngen's sister Nest, and the fact that no member of Cyngen's family is mentioned after 855 might support this view. However, Cyngen is known to have had sons, and the suggestion that Powys was controlled by Rhodri's dynasty this early is not certain. The suggestion of the similar acquisition of Ceredigion on the drowning of its last king, Gwgon ap Meurig, has perhaps more to recommend it, though again

there is no explicit statement to substantiate this. Rhodri's wife Angharad was the sister of Gwgon; and the violent nature of Gwgon's death may be suggestive.

Whereas Rhodri Mawr's relations with neighbouring Welsh kingdoms tended to be beneficial to himself, his external relations proved not to be always so. In 853 the combined forces of Burgred of Mercia and Æthelwulf of Wessex entered Wales and acquired Welsh submission; which Welsh ruler or rulers were party to this is not known, but possibly Rhodri was among their number. Two years later he faced trouble from the opposite direction when the vikings known as Dub Gaill ('the Black Host') raided Anglesey. Since Anglesey was the traditional seat of the kings of Gwynedd, such a raid on the island could well have posed a threat. However Rhodri was clearly not intimidated and in 856, a year after this raid, he slew Orm (or Gorm), a viking leader active in Ireland in the early 850s. The site of the encounter is not known. It was possibly this victory over vikings that was celebrated in the poem by Sedulius Scottus. In 865 the English appear to have attacked Rhodri on Anglesey: the Irish annals state that they drove the Welsh from their lands and placed them in bondage on 'Maen Chonáin', possibly Môn (Anglesey). The last years of Rhodri's reign witnessed a number of encounters that were not successful for him. In 877 the so-called 'Sunday battle' was fought on Anglesey. This was possibly against the Dub Gaill for in that year they are said to have driven Rhodri to Ireland. He was back within a year for he was slain, alongside his son Gwriad, by the English in 878. The English in question appear to have been the Mercians if the 'Edryd Long Hair' fought by Rhodri's sons in 881 (in a battle known as the 'avenging of Rhodri') was Æthelred, ealdorman of Mercia.

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