Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Urien Rheged [Urien *ap* Cynfarch]

(*fl.* c. 560–c. 580)

David E. Thornton

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28016>

Published in print: 23 September 2004

Published online: 23 September 2004

Urien Rheged [Urien *ap* Cynfarch] (*fl.* c. 560–c. 580), king of Rheged, was the son of Cynfarch Oer ap Meirchion Gul, a descendant of Coel Hen ('Old King Cole') and also, according to later Welsh genealogies, of Nyfain, daughter of Brychan of Brycheiniog in south Wales. Urien ruled the north British kingdom of Rheged in the second half of the sixth century. The exact extent of Rheged is unknown, though it seems to have straddled either side of the Solway Firth, as far west as Stranraer in Galloway on the (modern) Scottish side and incorporating Carlisle on the (modern) English side. In addition, it had possibly extended further south-east along the Eden valley and over the Pennines to Catterick in what is now Yorkshire. Details of Urien's life and rule are limited to a handful of brief notices and some allusions in early Welsh poetry. Much incidental information, such as the identification of his wife as Modron ferch Afallach and the name of his bard Tristfardd, is without doubt unreliable.

Urien Rheged appears to have been the foremost of the northern British rulers who fought, ultimately unsuccessfully, against the expanding Northumbrian kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira. In one later Welsh poem Urien is called 'lord of Christendom', no doubt owing to his opposition to these pagan English. His allies against the Northumbrians included Rhydderch Hen, king of Strathclyde, Gwallog ap Llinog (whom some today would locate in Elfed in Yorkshire), and a Morgan (possibly Morgan Mwynfawr). Relations between these British rulers were not always amicable, despite the common threat. Urien's sons Owain and Pasgen seem to have fought Dunod ap Pabo (another northern ruler), and another son, Elffin, fought Gwallog. Indeed, Urien's eventual death was not at English hands but at the instigation of his erstwhile ally Morgan. According to the *Historia Brittonum* Urien and his allies fought the Bernician successors of King Ida, most notably Theodoric (*supp. r.* 572–9) and Hussa (*supp. r.* 585–92). There are some problems with the chronology of these events as Urien's death is placed in Theodoric's reign which would mean he could not have fought Hussa, at least after he had succeeded to the kingship. The fortunes of Urien and his sons against Theodoric fluctuated, but they eventually were able to besiege him on Lindisfarne for three days and nights. At this point, however, Morgan, jealous of Urien's predominant position among the British kings, arranged for the assassination of his rival.

Later Welsh tradition named Urien's killer as one Llofen Llaw Ddifro ('Llofen of the Exiled Hand') and located the deed at a site which has been identified with Ross Law, on the mainland opposite Lindisfarne. It is possible that the encounters between Urien's sons and the other British rulers date from after this treacherous deed. Urien was probably succeeded by his son Owain. Another son, Rhun, was remembered in Welsh tradition for having baptized King Edwin of Northumbria and his daughter Eanflæd.

Sources

T. Mommsen, ed., 'Historia Brittonum', *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII.*, 3, MGH Auctores Antiquissimi, 13 (Berlin, 1898), 111–222

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

R. Bromwich, ed. and trans., *Trioedd ynys Prydein: the Welsh triads*, 2nd edn (1978)

The poems of Taliesin, ed. I. Williams, trans. J. E. Caerwyn-Williams (1968)

I. Williams, ed., *Canu Llywarch Hen* (1935); pbk edn (1978)

A. P. Smyth, *Warlords and holy men: Scotland, ad 80–1000* (1984)