

# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Owain *ap* Hywel

(*b.* before 929, *d.* 988)

David E. Thornton

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/51404>

**Published in print:** 23 September 2004

**Published online:** 23 September 2004

**Owain *ap* Hywel** (*b.* before 929, *d.* 988), king of Deheubarth, was the son of Hywel Dda, descendant of Rhodri Mawr of Gwynedd, and Elen ferch Llywarch (*d.* 929) of Dyfed. Owain ruled the kingdom of Deheubarth, in south Wales, jointly from 950 and singly from about 954 until his death in 988. His father Hywel had possibly annexed Dyfed on account of his marriage into the ruling dynasty, and, on the death of his cousin Idwal Foel in 942, had added Gwynedd and other parts of north Wales to his kingdom. On Hywel's own death in 949 or 950 the southern portion of this kingdom fell under the collective rule of his sons, including no doubt Owain, while the northern portion was contested by the sons of Idwal Foel, Iago and Ieuaf. The two groups fought at Nant Carno (in Arwystli) in 950, which was a victory for the sons of Idwal and perhaps thus secured their position in the north. The latter were sufficiently strong in 952 to take the fight into Dyfed twice. In 954 Owain and his brothers retaliated and the two groups met at Llanrwst (in the Conwy valley, Gwynedd). The sons of Idwal were the victors; they slew Owain's brother Edwin, and afterwards raided Ceredigion.

It is not wholly clear at what point Owain came to dominate Deheubarth as opposed to sharing power with his brothers. Indeed, he may have achieved this position through default, for the other sons of Hywel do not appear to have lived beyond the mid-950s. In 952 or 953 one Dyfnwal (or Dyfnwallon), possibly a son of Hywel, was slain by vikings (or by the sons of Idwal); Rhodri *ap* Hywel died in 953 or 954; and Edwin *ap* Hywel in 954. There may have been only two sons of Hywel left alive by the end of 954: Owain and in addition Rhain, who is never noticed at all in the chronicles. Owain was probably sole ruler of Deheubarth by this point and it was in this capacity that he witnessed the Eamont agreement of King Eadred of England in 955.

However, having thus achieved power, Owain did not make much of an impact in the chronicles, and it is his sons, Einion (*r.* 970–84) and then Maredudd *ab* Owain, who are most frequently mentioned, though whether as his representatives or independently is uncertain. In 960 Owain raided the cantref of Gorfynydd in the neighbouring kingdom of Morgannwg then ruled by Morgan Hen *ab* Owain. This is the last notice of Owain until that of his death twenty-eight years later. Einion attacked Gower in 970 and again in 977: this region

may have been under the authority of Morgannwg at this point, otherwise Einion would have been attacking lands ruled by his own father. As such he was continuing Owain's hostility to the kings of south-east Wales, and it is perhaps significant that Einion met his death in 984 at the hands of the men of Gwent. He may have held some political power independently of Owain, for the chronicles recount that in 983 Hywel ab Idwal and Ælfhere, ealdorman of Mercia, raided 'Brycheiniog and all the territory of Einion ab Owain'. Maredudd ab Owain emerged after the death of Einion, but appears to have concentrated his efforts against the traditional rivals in the north, where he achieved a considerable amount of success, again independently of his father. Other sons of Owain might include a Llywarch (blinded in 987); late unreliable genealogies add the names Gronwy and Iestyn.

Owain ap Hywel appears to have been a patron of the literary arts. Thus it was during his reign that the scriptorium at St David's in Dyfed drew up the earliest surviving recension of the *Annales Cambriae*, compiled a collection of genealogies which commences with Owain's agnatic and maternal pedigrees, and incorporated both texts into a copy of the *Historia Brittonum*. Owain's interest in these scholarly endeavours is reflected in his importance for the genealogical collection and perhaps also by the fact that the annals were drawn up c.954, when he achieved sole power in Deheubarth. He died in 988, after a reign spanning over three decades. There is no indication that he was slain, and he probably died of natural causes. The kingship of Deheubarth was then added to the territories of his son Maredudd.

## 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)

*AS chart.*, S 566

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. E. Thornton, 'Maredudd ab Owain (d.999): the most famous king of the Welsh', *Welsh History Review / Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru*, 18 (1996-7), 567-91