

Reviews: *Medieval Wales, c. 1050–1332:
Centuries of Ambiguity and Medieval Powys:
Kingdom, Principality and Lordships,
1132–1293* (Stephenson)



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should probably be expanded to *pridit* rather than *prydit* as in the transcription here (compare *p'wieith* on fol. 52v). Some inconsistencies in the notes are an inevitable result of an edition compiled over a period of time. On p. 66 *trig-ant* is described (perhaps questionably) simply as a 'hapax' but on p. 68 the term is again used and here defined: 'The form *guernor* is a hapax legomenon (a form which occurs only once) in the Welsh language.' Another possible interpretation of *Ymddidan Arthur a'r Eryr*, l. 23 (p. 174) would be to emend *lit* to *llit* and translate 'anger is no deliverance', which would cohere with the focus on the inevitability of death found in the final four *englynion* extant in later manuscripts and would represent a smaller emendation than those suggested, although the line is still short. It is perhaps worth noting in this context the use of <l> to represent /h/ in Old Welsh orthography. Although there are again metrical difficulties, *ar ben meint* (*Dialogue between Melwas and Gwenhwyfar*, *englyn* 7, p. 195) works well semantically as a mocking reference by Gwenhwyfar to Melwas's diminutive stature. The images of Llanstephan MS 122 on pp. 199–200 appear to be in the wrong order. The volume contains a number of intriguing suggestions that could be pursued further, such as the possibility that Geoffrey may have sourced Arthur's patronym from a collocation of 'Arthur' and the Welsh adjective *uthr* (p. 16, n. 40).

The aim of this book is not to provide a synthesis of how Arthur was presented in early Welsh poetry and how this compares with other traditions. Rather, the detailed textual work and notes here will enable Arthurianists to push such research further. In its admirable detail, the book also provides a useful and current introduction to the manuscripts of early Welsh poetry and how the scribes organized the material we have surviving. Future scholars will thus find themselves deeply in Nerys Ann Jones's debt.

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Medieval Wales, c. 1050–1332: Centuries of Ambiguity. David Stephenson. Rethinking the History of Wales series. Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2019. pp. xxx + 210. £16.99. ISBN 978-1-78683-386-0.

Medieval Powys: Kingdom, Principality and Lordships, 1132–1293. David Stephenson. Studies in Celtic History, 35. Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2016. pp. xxii + 339. €70. ISBN 978-1-78327-140-5.

David Stephenson is perhaps the most prolific historian currently working on medieval Welsh history. He is the undisputed master of narrative history, but 'kings and battles' do not exhaust his repertoire, for one of his seminal early works was a monograph on the administration of the kingdom of Gwynedd in the thirteenth century (recently updated and reissued as Stephenson 2014), while in recent years he has also done fundamental work on source-criticism (the Welsh chronicles) and is not afraid to venture into the field of material

objects, both large (castles) and small (the Meifod cross-slab). Of the two works under review here, one is a major exercise in rebalancing medieval Welsh history away from an excessive focus on Gwynedd and towards a less-studied part of the country, the kingdom of Powys, while the other is an extended essay and survey, evidently aimed at a general audience as well as professional historians. Both chart dramatic moves away from the view of Welsh history that was propagated in the pioneering work of J. E. Lloyd in the early twentieth century (Lloyd 1911).

Medieval Wales c. 1050–1332: Centuries of Ambiguity seems to be the first volume in a new series by UWP, 'Rethinking Welsh History', aiming for 'concise and selective surveys that highlight areas of debate rather than attempting to achieve comprehensive coverage' (p. ii). It is suitably short and succinct, and the chapters are of very manageable size. Furthermore, the 'rethinking' promised in the series title is delivered. Stephenson has provided an excellent brief account of how medieval Welsh historiography has gradually diverged from the model based on the work of J. E. Lloyd that dominated early and mid-twentieth-century writing. Lloyd, following the natural preoccupations of his time and place, wrote an account that maximized the importance – not to mention the degree – of state-formation. That naturally led him to a focus on Gwynedd and on the development of the thirteenth-century Principality of Wales, which was seen as a nation-state in embryo, but one that was cruelly destroyed by the overwhelming power of the English crown. Forces and individuals whose contribution seemed to further that state-formation received positive coverage, while these that tended in a centrifugal direction met with disapproval. More recently this model has been nuanced or indeed challenged. Much more sympathetic analysis has been given to people and institutions that were not in sympathy with Gwynedd's aggrandizement. This includes other Welsh dynasties, especially the rulers of the neighbouring lands of Powys, whose disinclination to be absorbed into a Gwynedd-focused polity was a major factor in the ultimate failure of that polity, as well as people within Gwynedd who resisted the pressures of princely power and taxation. The parts of Wales under Anglo-Norman dominion, the so-called 'March', have also received far more attention in recent decades (here the work of Rees Davies comes to mind). The result is a more complex story in which individual actors are understood to respond to the various pressures and opportunities that they faced, rather than being heroes or villains in a national story. Stephenson's subtitle, 'centuries of ambiguity', sums up the new understanding nicely. Gaining and retaining any kind of power in medieval Wales meant engaging in a constant balancing act between competing loyalties. The period covered in the book has been chosen in order to emphasize this issue, as it covers both the last years of pre-Norman Wales and the first couple of generations after the final conquest. Thus we are presented with Welsh people making a range of political choices in very different circumstances.

Stephenson presents his case without engaging in long arguments with older scholarship, rightly so as these have been conducted elsewhere and the brevity of the book excludes them anyway. This book partakes of two natures.

On the one hand, it is an extended essay putting forward a particular argument on a particular theme, but on the other, its title suggests that it is also to serve as a broader survey of its field. Inevitably this causes tensions. Not all aspects could be covered fully, and some are subordinated to others. The book strongly reflects Stephenson's concern with Welsh princely politics and power structures. Economic, social, religious and cultural history are discussed largely within the framework of the questions, 'who governed?', 'how did they do so?' and 'how successful were they?', so that they appear as factors influencing the development of the political narrative rather than narrative threads in their own right. This tilts the book towards the category of essay and away from that of survey. Furthermore it is written from a strongly Welsh perspective. The March receives less coverage than the Wales of the princes, and – in an interesting experiment – is seen primarily from the viewpoint of Welsh rulers looking at it from the outside, rather than that of the marcher lords or the inhabitants of the lordships themselves. Throughout the book, the emphasis is on choices made by Welsh rulers and the higher ranks of society. Little is said about the less powerful, though admittedly the sources make it very difficult to deal with them before the late Middle Ages.

These points apart, this is a very valuable contribution to the range of introductory books on medieval Welsh history. Much value is added by the annotated bibliography at the end of the book and the recommendations for further reading in the notes. Both these provisions enlarge the book's coverage beyond the aspects on which the author has focused. There are also some helpful maps (though Map 3, showing diocesan boundaries, might have labelled the dioceses) and genealogical tables. For such a short book, the density of notes is rather high. UWP sticks doggedly to its policy of insisting on endnotes, however exasperating they are; I suppose nothing any reviewer can say will persuade them to switch to footnotes. In particular, the endnotes attached to the maps could, with little effort, have been included on the same pages. Nevertheless, this is an excellent short summary of the *status quaestionis* in medieval Welsh history and instantly becomes the first book to recommend to students, historians of other regions or periods, and the general public.

Medieval Powys is a much longer work aimed at a specialist audience, but its perspective is recognizably similar to that of the shorter book. This is a detailed study of the rulers of Powys in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that emphasizes that they were autonomous political actors who made choices from among the range of options open to them and within the constraints imposed upon them. The idea that Powys or its ruling families ought to have subordinated their interests to the supposed nation-building programme of the Gwynedd rulers is dismissed as anachronistic nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking. Medieval people did not think in such terms, and such ideas are absent from the sources of the time, except sources from Gwynedd (and then only sporadically). From both a contemporary perspective, and even from a modern point of view, Gwynedd's expansion could be seen as aggressive imperialism rather than the natural consolidation of a nation that already existed in embryo. This is an important corrective.

The book is divided into a narrative half (really two-thirds) and an analytical half. In spite of the date-range in the title, coverage begins with the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the time of the 're-emergence of Powys' after a supposed hiatus of nearly three centuries in which its territory was ruled by Gwynedd. The subsequent chapters cover Madog ap Maredudd (d. 1160), the later twelfth-century rulers, the age of Gwenwynwyn (d. 1216), the supremacy of Gwynedd under Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (d. 1240), and the separate trajectories of northern and southern Powys as far as the fall of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd of Gwynedd in 1282. The final narrative chapter covers the generation after the conquest, when Owain ap Gruffudd of southern Powys was among the few Welsh rulers left in control of a substantial patrimony. These narrative chapters are the culmination of years, in fact decades, of previous work by Stephenson. Most of the material has been the subject of his series of formidably documented articles on the political history of Powys, beginning with his survey of Powys Wenwynwyn in the thirteenth century, published in 1984. The articles are not wholly superseded by this book. Some detailed arguments are presented more succinctly here, and some views have changed, and Stephenson himself refers the reader to the articles on occasion. Readers interested in a particular topic will therefore need to compare the treatments.

The 're-emergence' of Powys is worth some reconsideration ('resurgence' is the term which Stephenson chose in the corresponding article; I am not sure if the change has any significance). The absence of rulers of Powys from tenth- and eleventh-century records has led to the view that there were none because the kingdom fell under the dominance of Gwynedd late in the ninth century. It is implausible, given all that we know of the fragility and lack of institutional underpinning of early medieval Welsh kingships, that the lands of the Dee, Vyrnwy and Severn basins were left without rulers on the spot even if they did acknowledge Gwynedd's supremacy, which is not certain. Nor is it plausible that these areas remained supine whenever the kingship of Gwynedd was weak or disputed, which was often. That is not the picture that emerges in the better documented twelfth century, so why should it have been true earlier? Poor chronicle evidence for Powys is the likeliest explanation for the apparent political vacuum. It seems, therefore, unnecessary to doubt the evidence of the *Vita Griffini filii Conani* that rulers of Powys were operating in the 1070s and could be powerful enough to intervene within a debilitated Gwynedd (p. 24). Geographical indefiniteness is a characteristic of eleventh-century Welsh political units, and the indefiniteness of early Powys is perhaps only different in degree from that of Gwynedd or Deheubarth, reflecting its nature as a border region consisting of a series of river valleys aligned east-west and divided by difficult terrain from the rest of Wales and from each other. The tenth- and eleventh-century evidence is simply not detailed enough to let us know who ruled here, but somebody did.

The second, analytical part of the book could not avoid a certain degree of repetition since much of the raw material had already been presented in chronological order in the narrative section. This makes for some demanding reading, which could have been made a bit easier by the provision of subtitles,

the use of which varies a lot between chapters. More subdivisions would have been especially useful in the long chapter 10 on internal politics. These minor points aside, this section of the book is crucial to its impact, for it brings together ideas that are scattered through the narrative section. I suspect that readers will find themselves revisiting these chapters repeatedly for precisely that reason.

In this section, Stephenson discusses governance, secular politics, the church and finally, in an innovative turn, ‘perspectives’, ‘fears’ and ‘aspirations’ – Powysian identity, in other words, a difficult but interesting subject. A question that is addressed from time to time in the book is where exactly Powys was. This is not straightforward at all. There are two famous maximalist definitions, one by the poet Gwalchmai and the other in the tale, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Both relate to the time of Madog ap Maredudd, but only one is contemporary, and it is far from clear that these definitions were universally accepted or even commonly so, let alone that they held any weight over time. Areas such as Iâl and Maelor are particularly difficult. What was ‘Powysian’ about them in, say, the later thirteenth century? Later medieval poets, looking back from a fifteenth-century perspective, regularly use ‘Powys’ of Swydd y Waun, but it is difficult if not impossible to find unambiguous examples of Iâl or Maelor being so described, while Penllyn and Edeirnion appear if anything to have been seen as part of Gwynedd by that time (Lewis 2013). When were such perspectives crystallized? Do they reflect political loyalties in the last generation or so of native rule? It is conceivable that the idea of medieval Powys may need to be dissected in the way that the idea of medieval Wales already has been, and that local loyalties may have been more important than any ‘Powysian’ identity, especially in outlying areas; there is good material on this in Chapter 10.

Chapter 11, on the church, is a particularly interesting contribution, as studies of the medieval Welsh church have generally been ‘national’ rather than regional in their focus, and very few have taken a political unit as their parameter. True to Stephenson’s emphasis on secular rulers, there is more here about the relationships of Powysian rulers to individual churches than on those churches themselves as political actors, though Stephenson does acknowledge that churches could be powerful enough to have their own interests and policies. The sources are not really detailed enough to allow us to measure this balance in the period in question, and there is even more uncertainty regarding what went before. It cannot be doubted that changing patterns of secular lordship were important in the fortunes of churches, but were they of exclusive importance or could major churches pursue their own longer-term interests across boundaries? It is hard to think of a political framework that would account for the geography of the cult of St Beuno, for instance, or St Tysilio, both of whom have dedications across Powys and Gwynedd and even further afield, and there are other peculiar supra-regional distributions (Padarn, Cybi). It seems to have been a common assumption among high-medieval hagiographers that churches dedicated to a saint formed some kind of institutional association, and they must have had some grounds for thinking

this, though the nature of these networks is hard to pin down. Observing the immense complexity of the political affiliations of churches in early medieval Ireland, where the evidence is much fuller, should instill a sense that there are many possibilities. We do not know anything like enough about the power of pre-Norman Welsh churches, but if the claims made in hagiography approximate in any way to reality, they would suggest that the largest ones were political players in their own right.

Another issue is the relationship between the entrenched mother churches and the new religious orders who arrived late in the twelfth century. It is worth asking how much direct evidence there actually is for an antagonistic relationship between the established churches and the incoming Cistercians. The answer must be, 'not much if any', and a lot of argument has been based on an assumption that there ought to have been such antagonism. Stephenson regards the lack of grants made to Strata Marcella within the region of Mechain as a sign that the mother-church of Meifod successfully manoeuvred to keep the monks out of its backyard. This may be correct but it need not imply hostility so much as the establishment of a *modus vivendi*. The foundation charter of the abbey was, after all, witnessed by Meifod's archdeacon, Sulien ap Caradog. The appropriation of churches by the Cistercian abbeys was a slow and piecemeal development, part of a reorientation of ecclesiastical patronage over several generations, not a sudden, sharp confrontation between different interest groups. If power did pass from one to the other it is likely that the powerful went with it: it is quite plausible that some of the Cistercians' recruits came from the entrenched ecclesiastical families, families like that of Sulien ap Caradog (whose father had the job of archdeacon before him). I do not know whether the evidence survives to pursue this idea, but some such explanation could lie behind the obvious Welshness of the cultural orientation of the Cistercians in Gwynedd, Powys and Deheubarth alike. Cynddelw's great poem in honour of St Tysilio and Meifod was preserved in a Cistercian manuscript, the Hendregadredd collection (it is damaged there but the complete copy in the Red Book of Hergest likely derives from the Strata Florida archive anyway). Incidentally, the view of Nerys Ann Jones and Morfydd Owen that this poem represents a Gwynedd perspective after the death of Madog ap Maredudd, a view which is accepted by Stephenson (pp. 66–7), should now be compared with Ann Parry Owen's response on the www.seintiaucymru.ac.uk website, reasserting the traditional date and place of composition in the time of Madog ap Maredudd (d. 1160), and in Powys, intuitively a much easier proposal. In general, though, the full and intelligent use of the poetic evidence is a great strength of this book and a model for future Welsh historians to follow.

Apart from a major body of poetry, medieval Powys also produced one of the narrative tales conventionally gathered together as the 'Mabinogi', *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, and there is an appendix (pp. 306–10) in which Stephenson ventures into the vexed territory of the date and meaning of this tale. It must be admitted frankly that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is so strange and enigmatic that it may be impossible to date or contextualize, but Stephenson

makes some good points in favour of a date towards the very end of the thirteenth century, though none of them are really decisive: the tale's pointed references to the borders of Powys and (possible) implicit criticism of Powys's rulers are not precise enough to rule out other contexts. Moreover, if the tale were so critical of the ruling elite, that raises the question of who its intended audience was, a consideration that needs to be addressed in any solution to the problem of the tale's context.

Many other points for debate could be picked out from a book as rich as this one, but the overall achievement is huge. As a native of southern Powys, this reviewer is bound to sympathize with David Stephenson's rehabilitation of Powys as a land with its own identity. The place of Powys in the medieval Welsh world has now been triumphantly asserted.

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Gerald of Wales: New Perspectives on a Medieval Writer and Critic. Edited by Georgia A. Henley and A. Joseph McMullen. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2018. Hardback ISBN 978-1-78683-163-7. £90. Paperback ISBN 978-1-78683-164-4. £29.99.

For such a well-known writer, Gerald of Wales is surprisingly underrepresented in scholarship. The re-editing of his works has been so sporadic that most of them, including some of the most famous ones, still have to be read in the antiquated and unwieldy Rolls volumes. Translations have been quite scarce too. The Welsh works, *Itinerarium Cambriae* and *Descriptio Cambriae*, can be read in Lewis Thorpe's Penguin translation, though for readers who know Welsh, Thomas Jones's *Gerallt Gymro* (Cardiff, 1938) is a good alternative. For the *Topographia Hibernica* J. J. O'Meara's translation is still in use. Of Gerald's Welsh and Irish works, only the *Expugnatio Hibernica* has a modern edition and translation. The state of his less-well-known works is correspondingly worse, though the *Speculum Duorum*, *Vita S. Hugonis* and, very recently, the *De principis instructione*, have been made available. Editing and translating are specialist and time-consuming tasks, and there are many other medieval Latin texts deserving of attention, so the slow progress here is not