

Cedweli, March 1136

The battle of Cedweli is the first conflict mentioned that appears in no contemporary source and only in one source where the writer, Giraldus Cambrensis (1146-1223), was not even born at the time of the event he relates. Therefore, as a battle this should be regarded with some suspicion, especially as the author was writing of his near relatives.

In these parts [of Cedweli], after King Henry the first had been removed from human affairs, whilst Gruffydd ap Rhys, then prince of South Wales, had gone to North Wales to gather help, his wife Gwendolen (*Guendoloena*), like an Amazonian queen and a second Penthesilea (*Pentesilea*^{*265}), led an army into these parts; but by Maurice London, then the lord of this place, and that excellent man, Geoffrey the bishop's constable, warlikely prepared for battle, killed in that place her son Morgan, and captured another called Maelgwn, which boys she had arrogantly brought with her in her expedition, with many others she herself was finally run through by a sword and decapitated.^{*266}

The story told by Giraldus is quite clear. In the aftermath of the battle of Loughor, Gruffydd ap Rhys (Giraldus' granduncle) left Deheubarth to seek military aid, presumably from Gruffydd's father-in-law, Gruffydd ap Cynan of Gwynedd. It is to be assumed that his intention was an insurrection against the Normans. Whilst he was away his wife, Gwenllian, the daughter of the same King Gruffydd of Gwynedd, invaded the commote of Cedweli, apparently intending to capitalise on the disarray of the Normans after their defeat at Lougher. Somewhere in Cedweli commote Giraldus wrote she was met by a local army commanded by Maurice London of Ogmere and Oystermouth and Geoffrey, the constable of Bishop Roger of Salisbury, who was then lord of Kidwelly^{*267}. Notice that Giraldus names Maurice lord of Cedweli although Geoffrey was the bishop's constable there. In this Giraldus is almost certainly in error. Maurice was lord of Cedweli and its castle by 1166^{*268}, but when he acquired the lordship is uncertain. Bishop Roger died on 11 December 1139, but he had lost control of his castles late that June^{*269}. Presumably Kidwelly castle passed to the Crown during late 1139 and to Maurice London some time afterwards. Whether he acquired the castle by fair means or foul is another matter, but certainly Henry II did not reopen the issue after 1154. It should also be remembered that Giraldus was writing in the 1190s and was only born ten years after the story he was relating. It would seem likely that the course of events was related to Giraldus on this part of his journey, or that he knew of the fight from birth, as Morgan and Maelgwn - who are otherwise unknown to history - would have been his first half-cousins. However, it is odd that Maelgwn is nowhere else mentioned and that his fate after his alleged capture is not recorded. The same is true of Morgan before his alleged death

^{*265} Penthesilea was the queen of the Amazons who came to the aid of Troy after the death of Hector and was killed in her first day of battle by Achilles. Pottery dating back to 460BC records this. It is interesting to note that her story was still retained in twelfth century Wales, where they claimed descent from the Trojans.

^{*266} Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera* VI, 78-9.

^{*267} For the Londons of Ogmere and Oystermouth see Remfry, PM., *Oystermouth Castle, 1066 to 1326 and Ogmere Castle, 1066 to 1283*.

^{*268} *Episcopal Acts and cognate documents relating to Welsh Dioceses, 1066 - 1272*, ed. J.C. Davies, [2 vols., Historical Society of the Church in Wales, 1946] I, 275.

^{*269} Malmesbury, William of; *Historia Novella Gesta Regum Anglia*, ed. J. Sharpe [1854] II, 548; 'Gesta Stephani', *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I* III, ed. R. Howlett [1889], 49-52; *Florentii Wigornensis Monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis*, ed. B. Thorpe [2 vols., English Historical Society, 1848-9] II, 108; Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Forester, T [4 vols, 1853-56] IV, 210-11, only mention the fall of the castles of Devizes, Sherborne, Salisbury, and Malmesbury.

at Cedweli. It is also odd that Giraldus names his third cousin once removed as Gwendolen in his third manuscript, written a little before 1220, but Gwenllian in the first two accounts from 1191 onwards. She also appears as Gwenllian (*Guenlliant*) in the Life of her father, Gruffydd ap Cynan^{*270}.

From Giraldus' terminology there can be no doubt that he thought his great-uncle's wife, Gwenllian, died fighting as a warrior before she was beheaded. The taking of the head to denote victory was a relatively common affair and can be seen happening to Gruffydd ap Llywelyn (1064), Robert Rhuddlan (1093), Earl Simon Montfort (1265) and Llywelyn ap Gruffydd (1282). Unfortunately this is all we reliably know of Gwenllian. That her two alleged sons were old enough to engage in attacking Cedweli in 1136 would suggest that they were born before 1122. It would appear unlikely that Gwenllian was married to Gruffydd before 1115 due to the actions of Gruffydd ap Cynan against him that year^{*271}. It would therefore seem likely that the marriage occurred after Gruffydd's return from Ireland sometime after 1117 when he made his peace with King Henry I. This had obviously happened a considerable time before 1127 when Gruffydd was lord of a part of Cantref Mawr^{*272}. Indeed, the apparent birth of at least two children before 1122, to allow them fight in Cedweli in 1136, would suggest the marriage was before 1120. The couple would appear to have had nine children before their union was terminated by Gwenllian's death in March 1136^{*273}.

The Battlefield

It is possible that the site of this battle is currently remembered in the field name Maes Gwenllian (SN.425088), unless this is a relatively modern designation made to give veracity to Giraldus' story. As to numbers involved in such a hypothetical battle there can be little idea. Gwenllian's attack, if it were such, was probably opportunistic, while the forces available to Maurice London and Geoffrey were probably limited. The field lies next to the Gwendraeth Fach and less than two miles north-east from the castle (Fig.52). Maes Gwenllian marks a good position for a camp with the land gently sloping down to a westward running stream which joins the Gwendraeth Fach just at the foot of the rise. The Gwendraeth then runs down to the Tywi estuary past Kidwelly castle, which is on the opposite side of the river. The ground from the stream up to the ridge to the north is a plain about 1,000 yards across, though the slope up from the stream is nowhere steep and would have presented no real obstacle to cavalry, although the small stream may have been boggy. Whatever the case, Maurice would appear to have pushed home his attack and routed the Welsh either while they were on the ridge or camped before the stream. It would appear that Morgan at least might have put up a fight as did his mother. Perhaps after their deaths Maelgwn surrendered the rest of the Welsh host. Interestingly, this major defeat, which is said to have caused the loss of three members of the royal house of Deheubarth, was not recorded in any of the surviving Bruts or Annales which have come down to us. Perhaps it was the unfortunate outcome of this venture or the fact that the Anglophile monks of St David's did not like the nearby house of Deheubarth that caused the apparent ignoring of this event. It is a pity that the chronicle

^{*270} *A Mediaeval Prince of Wales: The Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan*, trans D. Simon Evans [Llanerch, 1990], 43.

^{*271} *Peniarth*, 39-40.

^{*272} *Peniarth*, 50. That he slew Gruffydd ap Sulhaearn in 1123 would suggest that he was back in Deheubarth by that year, *Idem*, 49.

^{*273} Morgan (d.1136), Nest (the wife of Ifor Bach), Anarawd (d.1143), Maelgwn (d.1136), Cadell (d.1175), Maredudd (d.1155), Rhys (d.1197), Gwladus (the wife of Caradog ab Iestyn, still living in 1175) and another unnamed daughter who married Trahaearn Fychan of Brecon who was killed in 1197.

probably made for the princes of Deheubarth (*Annales Cambriae. A Translation...* D (Hopton Commission?), Exeter MS. 3514) in the late thirteenth century did not extend this far back into the past.



Figure 52, The field of Maes Gwenllian (M) two miles from Kidwelly castle (K) along the Gwendraeth Fach (G).

It may be relevant that there is yet another ‘battle cairn’ at this purported battle site. There is a low, crescent-shaped earthwork, some eighty feet in length and about three feet high, on the north side of the field. This is traditionally said to mark the burial place of Gwenllian and her son and no doubt also any fallen from the battle^{*274}.

^{*274} RCAHMW Carmarthenshire Inventory [1917], 56, No.156