

The Castle of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth in Meirionydd

Once again, before proceeding, it is worth looking at early thirteenth century castles in North Wales when considering Harlech. Evidence about castles built in North Wales under Prince Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (1172-1240) is undeniably thin. Again and again the words ‘probably’ and ‘may have been’ rightly litter historical works on this subject. Elsewhere Llywelyn is described as a ‘prolific and innovative castle builder’ or that he ‘required his castles to reflect his status and meet the expectations of his new-found peer group’^{*37}. The question must therefore be broached as to what has the historical Llywelyn done to deserve such a military deification which appears more and more in print? The answer to such a question should be looked for in original sources. As such the search should begin in the Bruts. Here under 1221 we are informed:

The following year strife was bred between Llywelyn ab Iorwerth and Gruffydd his son, because of the cantref of Meirionydd, which Gruffydd had subdued because of the injuries which that cantref had done to him and to his men... And then Llywelyn took from Gruffydd the cantref of Meirionydd and the commote of Ardudwy. And he began to build a castle there for himself.^{*38}

...however Llywelyn took from Gruffydd his son, the cantref of Meirionydd, of which he had gained possession, and the adjoining commote of Ardudwy. And he began to build a castle in it.^{*39}

Another source thought the event so unimportant that it was not even mentioned in this rendition of the Brut:

There was strife between Llywelyn and Gruffydd his son because of the cantref of Meirionydd which Gruffydd had conquered because of the injuries he had received from those people.... And then Llywelyn took for himself the cantref of Meirionydd and all Ardudwy.^{*40}

Unfortunately for modern perceptions that is it. According to one modern work, Llywelyn was responsible for ‘the first sophisticated stone castles in Wales; his castles at Criccieth, Degannwy, Dolbadarn, Dolwyddelan and Castell y Bere being among the best examples’^{*41}. Similarly, ‘Like Criccieth, Castell y Bere was a foundation of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth’^{*42}. Where then, is the evidence for the grand claims of Llywelyn’s ability as a fortress designer? Unfortunately there is not a single line of contemporary evidence that Llywelyn built a single stone of any one of these fortresses. All we actually know is that Llywelyn used Criccieth as a prison in 1239, he lost and regained control of Degannwy castle in 1210-13 and that he may have founded Castell y Bere, or one of several other castles around Meirionydd in 1221, as is seen in the quote at the beginning of this paragraph. The rest is wishful thinking through the attaching of buildings to well-known names without evidence - hardly a basis for sound scholarship. Indeed the only other castle Llywelyn is recorded as ‘rebuilding’ is Aberystwyth castle in 1208^{*43}. It is certain that he held various castles in South Wales and undoubtedly repaired some in North Wales, but this is hardly evidence of his being a great military engineer. Indeed the evidence of Llywelyn being a castle destroyer is far more powerful, viz Mold in 1199; Degannwy in 1210; Montgomery, Cymaron, Carmarthen, Llanstephan, St Clears,

^{*37} Davis, P.R., *Castles of the Welsh Princes* [1988], 38; Butler, L., ‘The Castles of the Princes of Gwynedd’, *The Impact of the Edwardian Castles in Wales* [Oxford, 2010], 32.

^{*38} *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Red Book of Hergest version*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1955], 221

^{*39} *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Peniarth Ms. 20 version*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1952], 98.

^{*40} *Brenhinedd y Saeson or The Kings of the Saxons*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1971], 223.

^{*41} Lynch, F. *Gwynedd, A Guide to Ancient and Historic Wales* [1995], 135.

^{*42} Taylor, A.J., *The Welsh Castles of Edward I* [1986], 75.

^{*43} *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Peniarth Ms. 20 version*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1952], 83.

Laugharne, New Castle Emlyn, Newport, Cardigan, Cilgerran, Swansea and Kidwelly in 1215; Cardigan and Wiston in 1220; Whittington, Alberbury and Kinnerly in 1223; Builth Wells in 1230; Radnor, Neath and Kidwelly in 1231 and finally Neath, Bryn Amllwg, Abergavenny, Pencelli, Blaenllyfni and Bwlch y Dinas in 1233. That leaves us with a certain score of one castle built in North Wales against 29 destroyed in his military career. There are of course a number of castles in Wales that Llywelyn may have been responsible for building, but these are hardly legion^{*44}. What is certain is that without proper historical research any conclusions are simply illusory.

What then can we say about the castle that Llywelyn did build in Meirionydd or Ardudwy. Firstly, the statement of the Bruts - the passage does not appear in *Annales Cambriae* - is ambiguous. Quite plainly the castle built was within either Meirionydd or Ardudwy and there is a chance, maybe even a probability, that this was Castell y Bere. However, it should also be recognised that this almost throw away statement, could have implied Castell Prysor, Tomen y Mur, Harlech or even another site that has been washed away by the sea or a change of river course. We simply cannot be certain and pretending otherwise is both pointless and disingenuous.

Harlech Castle in the War of Dafydd ap Gruffydd, 1283

Early in the twentieth century it was decided that Harlech castle was founded by Otto Grandison (c.1238-1328), a captain of Edward I (1272-1307), who led 560 infantry led to the virgin site in April 1283. This assertion has been fostered to the extent that it is now claimed that 'recognition of the strategic importance of the site must be credited to Sir Otto Grandison, marching north from his capture of Castell y Bere'^{*45}. April 1283 was a time when war was being waged against the Welsh princes who still opposed King Edward I (1272-1307) and when Earl William Valance of Pembroke and Roger Lestrangle had combined their armies to besiege Castell y Bere^{*46}. The assumption that the militarily unimportant Otto and his relatives of Savoy then dominated military developments in Wales is important and to this extent needs examining before we consider what actually happened at Harlech and why.

The idea that the Welsh war somehow went away or lost intensity with the death of Prince Llywelyn should instantly be dispelled. It continued with the same savagery and there is no evidence that its outcome or course was in any way changed by the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. If Llywelyn had not been killed in his Buellt expedition of December 1282 there is nothing at all to suggest that he too would not have fallen with his brother six months later in the fastnesses of Eryri, just as Gruffydd ap Llywelyn had fallen 200 years earlier. Gruffydd's death in 1064 had not ended the principality of Gwynedd and the deaths of Llywelyn and Dafydd did not necessarily mean the end of it in the 1280s. No one in 1283 could have known that Edward would continue to hold much of Wales for the next 25 years, or that his subjugation of Snowdonia would have been such a success. Great castles had been built in Wales before, but no one had had the political will to see through a conquest on the scale that Edward managed. It should further be remembered that the princes who continued to support the revolt against Edward were no motley crew. Dafydd himself was no less equipped to rule Wales than his elder brothers, while many of the other princes of Wales continued the fight: Rhys Fychan ap Rhys of Ceredigion, Rhys Wyndod and Hywel ap Rhys Gryg of Deheubarth, Llywelyn and Owain of Bromfield, Morgan ap Maredudd of Gwynllwg and Goronwy ap Heilyn, one of the several descendants of Ednyfed Fychan (d.1246). It was still possible for Edward to lose the war, right up to the capture of Dafydd - unlikely, but possible. Indeed it was only the fall of Dafydd that inclined Rhys Wyndod to finally surrender where he was still fighting in Deheubarth.

^{*44} I have recently proposed that the few fragments of contemporary documentation suggest that the castles of Cefnllys and Knucklas in Maelienydd were in fact built by Prince Llywelyn in the period 1215 to 1233, 'Three Thirteenth Century Castles in Maelienydd', *The Mortimer Journal*, volumes 1 and 2.

^{*45} Lynch, F. *Gwynedd, A Guide to Ancient and Historic Wales* [1995], 169.

^{*46} Roger Lestrangle was the captain of Montgomery and his army is examined in Remfry, P.M., *Montgomery Castle and the families of...* [Malvern, 2005]. The campaign of Valence is examined in 'The Welsh War of 1282-83', *Medieval Battles* [Malvern, 2010], 288-317.