Archaeology and History Society

(Ammanford and District)

RHYS AP GRUFFUDD

(THE LORD RHYS)
(1131/2–1197)

On 18th September 2006 Ammanford Archaeology and History Society was treated to a talk on the medieval Rhys ap Gruffydd, Lord of Deheubarth, by Dr Roger Turvey, Head of History at Amman Valley School. Dr Turvey, who has written on the Lord Rhys, spoke fluently on the subject without the aid of notes, and so the following summary of this great Welsh figure's life has been written by the secretary of the Society from sources which include Dr Turvey's book on the Lord Rhys. The shortcomings of this article therefore belong to its author and not in any way to Dr Turvey.

Introduction

One of the greatest figures to have come from west Wales was the medieval warrior-prince Rhys ap Gruffudd, or the lord Rhys, as he is usually called. Born in Carmarthenshire around 1132, by the late twelfth century he was the most powerful of the several native princes ruling the Welsh-speaking area west of Offa's dyke, and he was responsible for the building of Dinefwr Castle high on a crag above the river Tywi at Llandeilo. It is possible also that he built the motte and bailey castle whose remains can still be seen today in Ammanford. The castle's location in a Welsh-held area bordering on the Norman lordships of Gower and Kidwelly make it more likely to have been of strategic use to the Welsh, and not the Anglo-Normans.

Lord Rhys was the founder of the first National Eisteddfod in 1176 and this idealised sculpture was made for the National Eisteddfod when it came to Llandeilo in 1996. It now resides in the offices of Carmarthenshire County Council in Llandeilo.

His rule extended over the Princedom of Deheubarth, the area of south-west Wales approximating to modern Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire, over which he was the last native prince to exercise unitary rule. Wales was never unified under one Welsh King for more than a few years but was divided into several warring principalities whose various rulers vied with each other for supremacy. Not even the threat of the Normans after 1066, or the English before that, could ever unite these quarrelsome Welsh magnates against a common enemy,

making the Normans' task of conquest eventually much easier. Still, it took the successors of William the Conqueror over two hundred years to finally overrun and subdue the whole of Wales.

By the twelfth century much of southern Wales had already been conquered and colonised by the Normans but Rhys was one of the very few native princes to recover land from them after 1155. It's common to call these invaders the English, but the anonymous scribes who wrote the series of medieval Welsh histories known as *Brut y Tywysogion* (*The Chronicles of the Princes*) usually referred to them as the French, which is exactly what they were. It wouldn't be until 1399 that an English King, Henry IV, would swear his oath of allegiance in English, and all the early so-called English kings after the Conquest never spoke that language at all.

Such was the chaotic political situation in medieval Wales that Rhys ap Gruffudd was to spend much of his reign fighting other Welsh princes (including his own relatives) as well as the Anglo-Normans. A world in which Rhys was imprisoned by his own sons (and imprisoned them in turn) was considered quite normal for the time, as was Rhys's excommunication for an assault on the Bishop of St David's. Rhys even fought on the side of the English King Henry II in a world where all allegiances were temporary, all allies untrustworthy, and where expediency and self-survival were the only virtues that counted for anything.

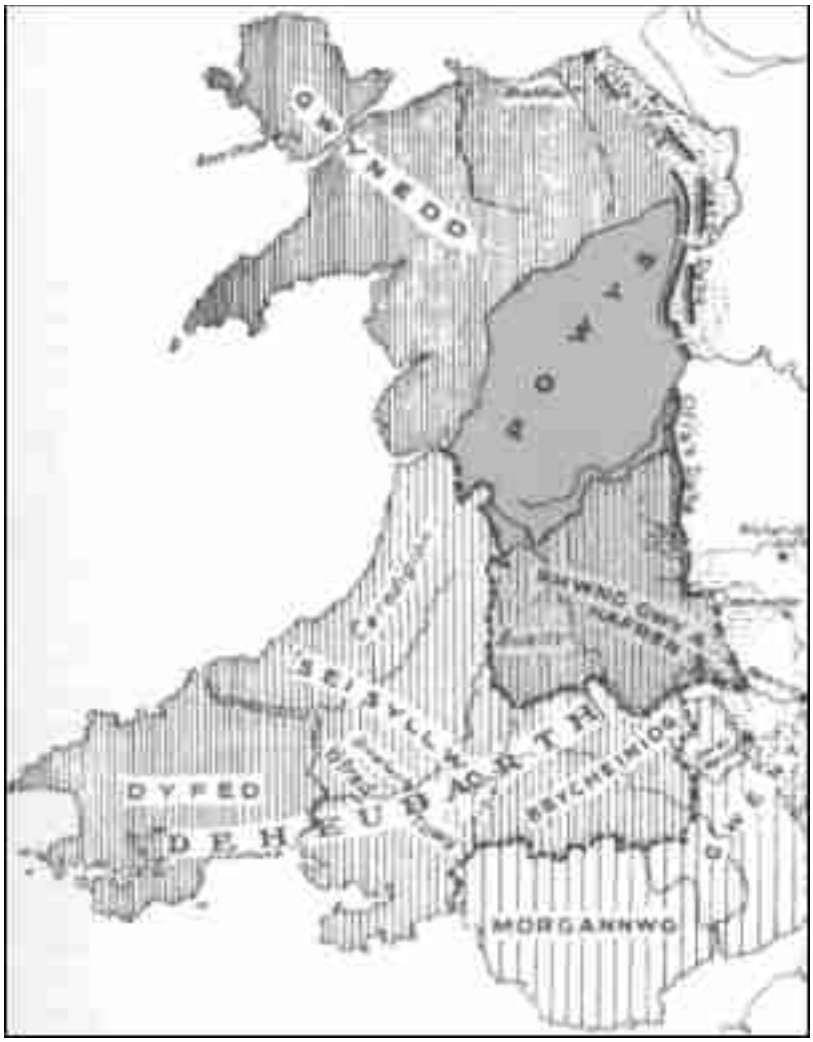
This disunity and constant in-fighting amongst the native Welsh rulers would eventually contribute to the final defeat of Wales by Edward I in 1284, after which colonisation followed with an inevitability that was as brutal as it was swift. Here, then, is a brief history of the Lord Rhys in which the confused world of medieval politics is revealed in all its murky and tangled glory.

Early Career

Rhys ap Gruffudd, prince of Deheubarth, was the fourth and youngest son of Gruffudd ap Rhys (died 1137) and Gwenllian (died 1136), daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan.

Rhys became sole ruler of Deheubarth in 1155 but before this he and his elder brothers Cadell and Maredudd had already made their mark in warfare against both the Normans in Dyfed and their own kinsman Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd in Ceredigion (modern Cardiganshire). In 1146 the three brothers captured Llansteffan castle and then in 1150/51 Rhys participated in campaigns that saw the recovery of almost the whole of Ceredigion from the Anglo-Norman occupiers. In 1153 Rhys and Maredudd completed the conquest of Ceredigion and even attacked the Normans at Aberavon, and Cyfeiliog in Powys. When Maredudd died aged 25 in 1155 Rhys succeeded to a kingdom that consisted of Ceredigion (Cardiganshire), the Tywi valley and Dyfed (modern Pembrokeshire). The maintenance and consolidation of this restored kingdom of Deheubarth was the principal objective of his long reign. Deheurbarth had been at its greatest extent in 1093 under the rule of Rhys ap Tewdwr before the

Anglo-Normans invaded and colonised most of these lands, killing Rhys ap Tewdwr in 1093. The Lord Rhys, by his death in 1197, had recovered most of his ancestor's territory. Under Rhys ap Tewdwr (the Lord Rhys's grandfather) Deheubarth had consisted of the modern counties of Pembrokeshire, Cardiganshire, Carmarthenshire and Breconshire. Only the recovery of Brycheiniog (Breconshire) had eluded the Lord Rhys by his death in 1197.



Wales and the Deheubarth of Rhys ap Tewdwr c. 1193,
most of which would soon be lost the Anglo-Normans.
By 1197 Rhys had recaptured all of the territories
except for Brycheiniog (Breconshire).
Map: *The Lord Rhys*, Roger Turvey, 1997, page 18

Relations with Henry II (1156–1171)

To demonstrate that warfare in medieval Wales wasn't just about the Welsh versus the English, in 1156 Rhys built a castle at Aberdyfi to defend the northern border of Ceredigion against his own uncle Owain Gwynedd (died 1170). But the real threat that year was the accession of a new King, Henry II, to the throne of England. Henry was determined to support the marcher (ie Norman) lords who'd lost their lands in Deheubarth to Rhys. Rhys's initial response was a show of defiance against Henry in 1157 but he was forced to submit to the new King the next year, giving

homage for Cantref Mawr with its castle of Dinefwr and even surrendering Ceredigion, and Cantref Bach with its *caput* of Llandovery. Dinefwr, according to late-12th century sources, was the 'principal seat' of the kingdom of Deheubarth.

Some lands were temporarily won back by Rhys, including Llandovery castle in 1158, but Henry II led a further expedition to south Wales to secure Rhys's submission once more, before departing for the continent in August 1158. Llandovery again fell to Rhys in 1162, but the prince submitted to the king at Pencader and was taken as a prisoner to England where, together with Owain Gwynedd and Malcolm IV of Scotland, he formally submitted to Henry at Woodstock on 1 July 1163.

Rhys was not one to give up, however, and this setback was overturned when Rhys recovered nearly all of Ceredigion in 1164 in revenge for the killing the previous year of his nephew Einion ab Anarawd. Then, in the words of the Welsh chronicle Brut y Tywysogyon, 'all the Welsh made a pact to drive out the garrisons of the French' (Brut: Hergest, 145). In 1165 Rhys joined other Welsh princes to resist Henry II's last campaign against them, which ended in disaster for the king who was forced to retreat to England. Later the same year Rhys completed his conquest of Ceredigion, capturing Cardigan and Cilgerran castles and the prince kept Ceredigion for the rest of his reign. Rhys's military activities were not confined to Deheubarth, though, and in 1166–7 he joined Owain Gwynedd in campaigns that led to the conquest of territories in north-east Wales.

Cordial relations with Henry II (1171–1189)

Until 1171 Rhys's relations with Henry II were marked by defiance and warfare, punctuated by short periods of reluctant submission brought about by threatened or actual military force. But from 1171 Henry's policy changed and he recognised Rhys instead who by now had become the most powerful native Welsh ruler. Rhys's position had been further strengthened when the marcher lords and their knights left the region for Ireland in 1169-1170 to assist Diarmid mac Murchada in the recovery of his kingdom of Leinster. Where military power had failed, Henry's policy of detente succeeded, and the stability it brought lasted for the rest of his reign. On his way to assert his authority over the Anglo-Normans in Ireland in October 1171 Henry met Rhys at Pembroke, confirmed him in possession of Ceredigion and the rest of Deheubarth, and released his son, Hywel Sais, whom he had held hostage. On his return from Ireland after Easter 1172 the king met Rhys again, at Laugharne, and according to Brut y Tywysogyon appointed him 'justice in all south Wales' (*iustus yn holl deheubarth*; Brut: Hergest, 158), thereby probably delegating all authority to Rhys.

As a result of the agreements of 1171–2 it appears that Henry committed himself to uphold Rhys's territorial gains in return for a recognition of his overlordship. This did not come without a price however, as Rhys was expected to defend English royal and marcher lands from Welsh rulers to his east. Rhys appears to have been a willing collaborator, even sending his son, Hywel Sais (Hywel the English-speaker), to assist the king in France during the revolt of 1173–4, and by Rhys leading a force of his

own on behalf of Henry at Tutbury in 1174. On other occasions Rhys appeared at the head of delegations of other Welsh princes to pledge their allegiance to the English king, and was awarded Meirionydd by Henry for this loyalty.

But if this period was one of largely uninterrupted peace with the English crown and the marcher lords of south Wales which lasted for almost twenty years, the other Welsh princes weren't so compliant. In 1184 Rhys sought peace for himself at Worcester and later at Gloucester following two years of Welsh attacks on royal lands — including a revolt in 1183 led by the prince's nephew, Morgan ap Caradog, native ruler of upland Glamorgan, and Ranulf de Glanville was sent to restore peace between Rhys (and other Welsh rulers) and the people of Herefordshire and Cheshire late in 1186. The *détente* with Henry II held despite these tensions, and in Lent 1188 Rhys met Glanville together with Baldwin, archbishop of Canterbury, at Radnor at the start of the latter's journey round Wales to persuade the Welsh to join the third crusade, and later welcomed the archbishop again at Cardigan.

Interestingly for us today, sexual values in the middle ages appear to have been radically different from those today, at least among the upper classes. As the Dictionary of National Biography notes:

> Gerald of Wales reports that Rhys would himself have taken the cross in 1188 had he not been dissuaded by his wife and first cousin Gwenllian, who, according to later medieval genealogical tracts, was the mother of three of his sons and two of his daughters. The prince is also recorded by the same sources as having had as many as thirteen other children with other partners, including his own niece, the daughter of his brother Maredudd.

After Henry (1189-1197)

The peace between the English crown and Rhys all changed, and changed utterly, after the death of Henry II in 1189. Rhys immediately renewed his attacks on marcher and royal lands in south Wales, possibly prompted by the ambitions of Rhys's sons, whose struggles with each other and with their father are the other main theme of this period. It appears that Rhys considered his agreement with Henry II to be a personal one that was not transferable to the next king, Richard I (the Lionheart). Rhys and Richard had already crossed swords, quite literally, while Henry II was still alive. In 1173/4 Henry's sons had risen up against their own father and plunged England into Civil war and Rhys had come to the aid of Henry, as he was to do again in 1183. Richard was unlikely to have forgotten – or forgiven – this, which might explain why Rhys launched a full-scale attack on the Anglo-Norman lords of south and south-west Wales with Henry barely laid in his grave in Anjou, France, on July 6th 1189.

By September 1189 Rhys's attacks had caused the king's brother, John, to lead a military expedition against him. A truce was agreed and John escorted Rhys to Oxford to meet with the King. When Richard refused to even see Rhys he returned to south Wales and renewed his attacks on the

English, not forgetting members of his own family in the process. The complexities of this rambunctious period are well described, though not necessarily comprehended, by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*:

> … the prince returned to Wales to continue his assaults on marcher lordships in Dyfed, capturing St Clears by Christmas 1189. In the same year Rhys imprisoned his eldest but illegitimate son, Maelgwn ap Rhys (d. 1231), afterwards transferring him to the custody of William (II) de Briouze whose prisoner he remained until 1192. Further attacks followed: for example, Rhys took Nevern Castle from his son-in-law William fitz Martin in 1191, and the castles of Llawhaden (belonging to the bishop of St David's), Swansea, and Wiston fell to him the following year. In 1194 the prince rebuilt the castle of Rhaeadr (which he had first erected in 1177), but later in the year was himself captured by his sons Maelgwn and Hywel Sais, and briefly imprisoned in Nevern Castle. In 1195 Rhys suffered further setbacks, as Roger Mortimer of Wigmore conquered Maelienydd, the Flemings recaptured Wiston Castle, and William de Briouze took St Clears. However, the prince succeeded in capturing his sons, Hywel and Maredudd, who had established themselves at Dinefwr and Llandovery respectively, and in 1196 led his last major campaign, in which he burnt Carmarthen, defeated Roger Mortimer, and captured Briouze's castle at Painscastle. Rhys died, aged sixty-five, on 28 April 1197. He was buried in St David's Cathedral after penance had been administered on his corpse to absolve him from a sentence of excommunication incurred for his complicity in an assault on Peter de Leia, bishop of St David's, shortly before his death. (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004)

As in life, Rhys's death was not an ordinary event, as the fate suffered by his mortal remains was to demonstrate. A warrior's death in battle was denied him when he expired – excommunicated – from the plague. Being excommunicated at the time of his death meant his body had to be scourged, that is, flayed with whips, in post-mortem penance for his sins on earth. These weren't the usual sins either, but involved an assault on the bishop of St David's, compounded by the theft of the bishop's horses! According to the church's doctrinal beliefs at that time, only after this bizarre penance was made could his soul enter heaven. The same bishop of St David's who had been assaulted by Rhys administered the penance, though history does not record whether the bishop took any pleasure in this scourging of his assailant's corpse.

Religious endowments and historical reputation

Despite his physical assault on Bishop Peter during the last years of his life Rhys's relations with the church were largely amicable, and the prince patronized a wide variety of religious houses in Deheubarth. He was almost certainly the first native Welsh ruler to patronize the Cistercians and played a crucial role in encouraging the spread of the order in native Welsh society. In 1165 he acquired the patronage of Strata Florida Abbey

and endowed it generously. He likewise made benefactions to Whitland Abbey, and established a Cistercian nunnery at Llanllŷr. In addition the prince founded the Premonstratensian abbey of Talley in 1184–9. Rhys was also generous to poets, and Brut y Tywysogyon describes a festival of music and poetry, often regarded as the first recorded eisteddfod, held by the prince in 1176 at Cardigan Castle, which he had rebuilt in stone in 1171. Naturally, his military successes throughout his life made a favourable assessment of him inevitable – winners get all the accolades after all, while history tends to forget the losers:

> ”Surviving contemporary opinion of Rhys is almost entirely favourable: Gerald of Wales praised him for his generosity, energy, and wit, and his skill and success in warfare were hailed in both the Welsh and the Latin poetry composed in his honour — a Latin elegy on Rhys calls him the ‘glory of Wales’ and a second Alexander, no less. A Latin prose lament of the later thirteenth-century likewise praises his martial exploits as ‘the unconquered head of Wales’. From the early modern period onwards historians have stressed Rhys's pivotal role in restoring and defending the kingdom of Deheubarth, over which he was the last native prince to exercise unitary rule. In addition twentieth-century scholars have suggested, on the basis of later evidence, that the prince organized an administrative reform of his lands and have highlighted his readiness to imitate Anglo-Norman fashions in castle building and religious patronage.” (*Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.)

Conclusion

Tomb effigy in St Davids Cathedral said to be Rhys ap Gruffudd

The passage of 800 years makes it quite easy to arrive at a generous judgement of an important historical figure like Rhys ap Gruffudd, but we shouldn’t allow time (or nationalism) to obscure the fact that neither the Welsh nor English nobility of the middle ages were in any way noble except in name. They lived solely for power and often died for it too; they waded through blood and trampled on corpses to secure the source of all power and wealth at that time – land. Qualities we are taught to admire today like patriotism and loyalty were alien concepts which they seldom, if ever, allowed to get in the way of their objectives.

Dinefwr castle in Llandeilo is one of Rhys’s creations which has survived down to our times, allowing us to stand there today and imagine, if we wish, the hordes of stonemasons and labourers who raised its formidable ramparts on a crag three hundred feet above the Towy flood plain. And possibly imagine, too, the groans and screams of those unfortunate souls, Welsh and English alike, who got in the way of his relentless march to supreme power in the kingdom of Deheubarth. A man who was

enlightened in many ways for his times, his medieval mind-set yet remains essentially unfathomable to us 800 years later.

Note on Welsh surnames

Until the sixteenth century the Welsh never used the method of surnames practised by the English. Instead, they employed a system of patronymics (from the Latin 'pater', father) whereby a son would carry his father's Christian name after his own, with the word 'ab' or 'ap' (from the Welsh 'mab', son). Thus Rhys ap Gruffudd means Rhys, son of Gruffudd. Rhys confuses matters for the modern reader, however, by calling one of his own sons Gruffudd, who was thus Gruffudd ap Rhys, the same name as the Lord Rhys's father. Medieval Welsh history is thus littered with people of the same, or reversed, names, often making the study of the subject even more confusing than usual. And the Lord Rhys muddied the genealogical waters for the unwary modern reader further still by calling three of his sons Maredudd!

The children and grandchildren of the Lord Rhys

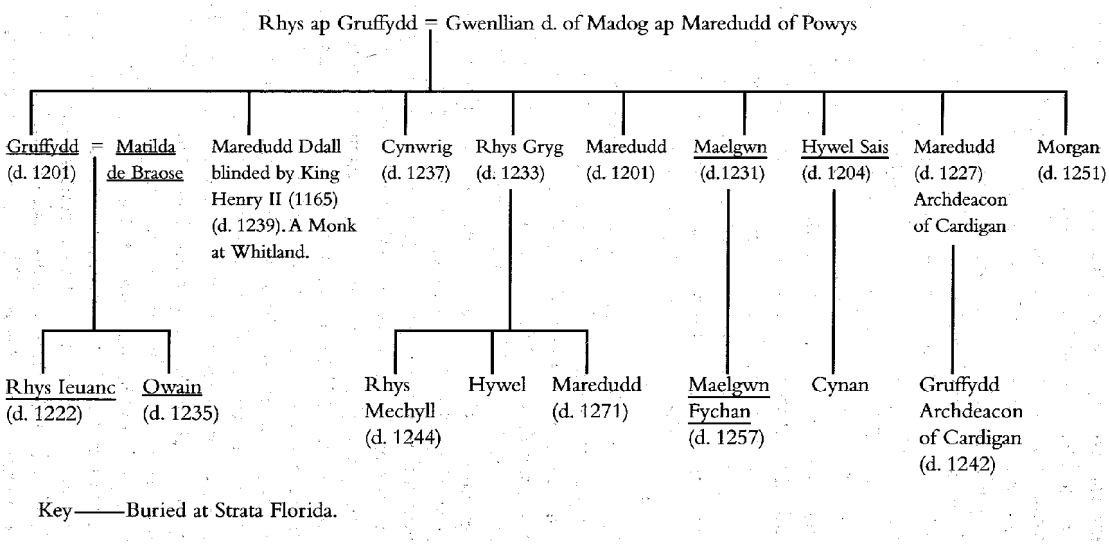


Diagram: *The Lord Rhys*, Roger Turvey, 1997, page 79

With the accession of the Welsh Tudors to the throne of England in 1485, many status-seeking Welshmen anglicised their patronymics into English-style surnames which have come down to us today. Thus ab Owen (son of Owen) became Bowen; ab Evan, Bevan; ab Einon, Beynon; ap Harry, Parry; ap Huw, Pugh; ap Rhys, Preece and Price; ap Richard, Prichard; ap Henry, Penry; and ap Robert, Probert. Others in time adopted the English style of surnames, giving rise to the bewildering number of people in Wales named Jones, Evans, Davies, Williams, Thomas, Griffiths, Rees, Jenkins and the rest.

Sources:

- *The Lord Rhys, Prince of Deheubarth (Rhys ap Gruffydd*), Dr. Roger Turvey, Gomer Press, 1997.
- *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* 2004.

Note on Roger Turvey

Dr Turvey from Ammanford is recognised as an authority on the Lord Rhys, and among his publications are:

- Wales and Britain in the early modern world C1500–C1760 (Published 1995)
- Cymru a Phrydain yn y Byd modern cynnar tua 1500 tua 1760 (Published 1995)
- Wales and Britain, 1906–1951 (Published 1997)
- Cymru a Phrydain, 1906–1951 (Published 1997)
- The Lord Rhys, Prince of Deheubarth (Rhys ap Gruffydd) (Published 1997)
- The Welsh Princes, 1063–1283 (Published 2002)
- Wales in an Age of Change, 1815–1918 (Published 2002)
- Cymru Mewn Oes o Newidiadau, 1815–1918 (Published 2002)
- The Treason and Trial of John Perrot (Published 2005)

[Terry Norman, Amman Valley Archaeological and History Society, 2006]