Gruffydd ap Llywelyn

The early eleventh century saw more of the twin evils which had plagued Wales for the previous fifty years: civil war inland, and Viking and Irish raids on the coastal regions. Somewhere in the midst of this chaos, Maradudd's daughter Angharadd was betrothed to a certain Llywelyn ap Seissyl, an obscure but powerful British warlord. This man had taken control of Gwynedd in 1018, and in 1022 he had driven the Irish-backed pretender-king Rhain from Deheubarth (Rhian had been passing himself off as an illegitimate son of Maradudd). However, Llywelyn died some two years later, leaving his wife and young son Gruffydd to live out a precarious existence amongst the households of the North.

Gruffydd ap Llywelyn was the first and last individual to reign as an independent king over the entirety of Wales. He is perhaps best known as the inveterate enemy of Harold Godwinsson (later King Harold of England) in the immediate pre-conquest years. His achievements were certainly not inconsiderable, but like many successful kings of his age, his ruthlessness was absolute, as was his willingness to eliminate any potential rival within the Welsh royal tribe – blood-relationships notwithstanding. Walter Map, the thirteenth-century chronicler of the Welsh Marches, reports Gruffydd explaining to an onlooker that rather than killing he was *'merely blunting the horns of the progeny of Wales, lest they wound their mother'*.[66] Beneath this mock-pastoral analogy, Gruffydd was spelling out the brutal imperatives underlying his mode of survival within the gore-stained world of medieval Welsh dynastic politics.

Gruffydd's strategy of extreme ruthlessness was sometimes combined with crude gestures of attempted diplomacy. This can be seen, for example, in his marriage of 1042 (probably by force) to the wife of a man he had recently killed – Hywel ap Edwin – who evidently had considerable support among the people of the South. While this dual strategy of violence and dynastic machination might not have achieved the long-term goal of a single, unified nation, Gruffydd was nonetheless able to lead a successful Welsh army across the border into England, a feat that had not been realised since the glorious victories of Cadwallon four centuries earlier. He was also active on the western front, parading his Viking-style fleet across the Irish Sea and causing considerable disquiet in London and Dublin alike.

Like many of history's great agents of change, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn was a complex man. There are signs that his desire for control went beyond simple political expedience and may have been the expression of some form of psychopathic illness. His behaviour in another anecdote, again relayed by Walter Map, hints at what can only be described as a far-reaching case of delusional jealousy. Here Gruffydd is described as hearing rumours that a young man in his kingdom had enjoyed erotic dreams about the king's beautiful young wife. Bizarrely, the old king then became 'as enraged as if the thing had been real', and seized the young man and would have had him tortured to death had the hapless dreamer's kinsmen not abruptly intervened. The judgement of a local wise man prevented further escalation. The young man's kinsmen were instructed to bring a thousand oxen to the bank of a river, with the affronted king looking on. The reflections of the oxen in the water were deemed sufficient compensation for the king 'inasmuch as a dream is a reflection of the truth'.[67]

Whether or not this incident ever occurred in quite this way, it is further evidence of Gruffydd's tyrannical reputation, which endured long after his death. The memory of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn was to cast a long shadow over the collective psyche of the Welsh Royal Tribe, whom he had terrorised into a unified submission over the course of his twenty-five year reign. Following his eventual and inevitable demise at the hands of his own people while campaigning against Harold Earl of Wessex, no Welsh ruler would ever again achieve quiet the same stature, either within Wales or beyond its borders. After 1064, the royal houses of Powys, Gwynedd and Deheubarth, while continuing to feud, intermarry and forge political alliances, tended not to pursue the goal of total unification. Most likely, this was through necessity rather than choice. 'Plenty of people had power in Medieval Wales,' remarks the historian Wendy Davies, 'but no-one ever seemed to have enough'.[68]

66 *De Nugis* ed. & trans. M.R. James p.191
67 ibid p.187
68 Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Wales Oxford*: Oxford University Press (1990) p. 82
69 *cantref* = a territorial/administrative unit See n85 below