

Life in Native Wales: Society and Culture

The King and the Royal Tribe

We have already quoted historian D. A. Binchy, whose description of the society of Early Medieval Ireland as ‘rural, hierarchical, tribal and familiar’ is equally applicable to Iron Age Britain, where a closely-related social system seems to have prevailed. The same might be said of life in Medieval Wales – both in the ‘Welshries’ of the South and the East and more especially in *Pura Wallia* itself, beyond the borders of the Anglo-Norman March. Here, urban life was virtually non-existent. Society was divided into the free and the unfree, an arable serf-caste and a pastoral aristocracy. And at the apex of this rustic community was the king and his extended family kin, the group we might refer to in this work as ‘the Royal Tribe’ or ‘the Royal Kindred’.

Celtic societies were traditionally agnatic, that is to say the primary unit was not the individual nor even the nuclear family as it might be considered in the modern world. Instead, the conception of ‘the household’ encompassed the larger extended family, including nephews and nieces, first and second cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles – the descendants of a common ancestor sometimes four or more generations removed. But, as we can see from the foregoing analysis of the descendants of the Rhodri Mawr (the dominant kindred in Wales from the ninth century onwards) harmonious relations *within* these kindreds were by no means a given; and the tendency toward segmentation and factionalism was an ever present threat to the stability of intra-familial life – particularly where questions of power, property and inheritance were involved.

The escalating bloodshed and rivalry within the royal tribe from the tenth century onwards might be seen in part as a symptom of the emerging personal profile of the figure of the king, and the scope of his effective sphere of influence: the power of which had been significantly enhanced by the time of Hywel Dda. Still imbued with the sacral aura of the ancient Celtic Iron Age kingship (see p. 35 above, and p. 120-122 below) a king of Gwynedd or Deheubarth would have also benefited from the process of centralisation which had taken place in the early part of Middle Ages. Being king of one of these larger over-kingdoms gave access to considerable resources: economic, military, cultural and political. Each of the cantrefs⁸⁵ or districts under his sway would have had at least one *llys* or court set aside for royal use which would be stocked with food for the royal household, fodder for their animals and plentiful woodlands for hunting and sport. The strongest and fiercest youths from these cantrefs would aspire to join the *teulu*, the elite personal warband of the king. The household of the king would have included not only his family and other dependants but also numerous retainers with official roles including the *dysteyn* (steward), the *penteu* (captain of the host), the *brawdwr llys* (court judge), the *penhebogyd* (chief hawksman) and last but not least, the *bard teulu*, the court poet or the bard of the household, about whom we will have more to say below.

The Welsh law codes, from which much of our understanding of medieval Welsh society is derived, invariably open with a highly formulaic description of the royal court and its personnel, even including a detailed seating plan. Following this is an inventory of the annual allowances for each of these officials alongside a description of the accompanying duties to be undertaken. Only then do the law tracts move on to the wider juridical concerns of land-holding, compensation and

84 Gerald of Wales frequently refers to the ‘the time of King Henry I’ as a period of English control over Wales. Gerald and others still remembered (c. 1197) that shortly after the death of Henry in 1136 ‘the English were forcibly driven out’ (*Itinerarium* BK II Ch.4)

family law. The description of the king and his household which prefaces these tractates might be seen as a *statement of ideology* rather than a practical guide to due legal process. The royal household was seen as standing at the centre of the ordered society – the very reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven itself, a microcosm of the world in its idealised form. In this world, every being literally knew his or her place, and each receives his just reward. At the heart of this scheme sits the king, god-like on his throne, the final guarantor of temporal justice. In stark contrast to this image of social order are the messy realities of medieval Welsh political life, as represented in chronicles such as *Brut y Tywysogion* – in which civil war, brigandry, factionalism and the segmentation of kindred groups would seem to be the norm rather than the exception. But these formulaic representations of the royal court nonetheless tell us something of how the medieval Welsh mind understood and idealised the institution, the magico-legal embodiment of the natural order they knew as *brenhiniaeth* ‘sovereignty’. A mixture of Celtic, Germanic and Judeo-Christian traditions of regal power, this notion of the king as the bringer and upholder of order remained a powerful inspiration and one that is explored in considerable depth throughout the Mabinogi.

But in the real world of medieval Wales, what really mattered for a king was the ability to maintain influence and respect among the warrior elite and the broader tribal community. A traceable descent from the arwyr or kings and heroes of the mythical past was important but not indispensable. Good lineage, without the political affiliations or martial strength to back it up, was more of a liability than a boon, as demonstrated by the careers of tyrants such as Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, littered as they were with the royal corpses of potential rivals. Whatever the protestations of the jurists to the contrary, medieval Welsh kingship was more often than not the prerogative of ruthless and violent men with an eye for strategy and opportunistic advantage. The halo of justice and majesty – attractive though it might have been to many at the time – was little more than medieval fantasy. Society was, in reality, what it always had been in this part of the world: decentralised, tribal and prone to outbursts of sporadic brutality as patterns of power were reinforced or replaced. The power of the king was always limited by the degree to which he was accepted by his peers: whether in the royal kindred itself, or the wider stratum of the warrior aristocracy – the noble (freeborn) men of the tribe. This process of building up support within one’s clan, then within the kingdom, and finally beyond – uniting the nation as a whole – was the basic end and dynamic of tribal politics as a whole in Medieval Wales.

85 *Cantref* (pl. *cantrefi*) lit. ‘one hundred homesteads’. This was the an important unit of division in the medieval Welsh countryside, similar in conception to the Anglo-Saxon *hundred* – i.e. a district large enough to support the provision of a hundred armed men into the local militia. Historically, the cantrefs of medieval Wales may well have been based on old district kingdoms (cf. n.86 *brogo-rix* below), which had become amalgamated into the large units of Gwynedd, Powys, Ceredigion etc by the end of the Sub-Roman period. Indeed, there are signs of individual cantrefs exhibiting signs of partial autonomy in the annalistic records. It is likely that the relationship between the *breyr* of some cantrefs, particularly those in the border regions, was a fluid and negotiable arrangement – based on a renewable bond of *clientship* with the regional king(s) involved. Cantrefs were subdivided into commotes – a unit nominally consisting of 38 ‘townlands’ (a townland being a small cluster of farm holdings – typically owned by the one extended family).