Rise and Fall of the House of Mathrafal

Having played a leading role in the routing of the Normans in the 1090s, it was Cadwgan ap Bleddyn and the other members of the House of Mathrafal who were to be the primary beneficiaries of the subsequent change in the political landscape. The dominance of Mathrafal seems to have extended throughout Powys into Ceredigion, Meirionydd and possibly beyond during the early years of the twelfth century. It is likely that the House of Mathrafal in general and Cadwgan in particular were positioning themselves in some kind of hegemonistic overlordship over the native warlords and petty-kings of Wales. Not only had he led the successful anti-Norman rebellions of 1094 and 1098, this warlord was also the nephew of the great Gruffydd ap Llywelyn himself, whose ability to impose unity on the Welsh nation (albeit by force) and wage successful campaigns east of the border would have still been remembered. Cadwgan was also the son of the only native ruler – Bleddyn ap Cynfyn – to have exercised any kind of effective overlordship beynd his own tribal districts in the immediate post-Norman years. Furthermore, Bleddyn had been blessed with numerous male offspring (at least five are mentioned in the *Brutiau*), many of whom had children of their own that were reaching adulthood around this time. This made the House of Mathrafal a formidable fighting force, with a wide range of contacts and allegiances across of a large number of important households in the warrior aristocracy of early-twelfth century Wales.[77]

But this abundance of male offspring brought problems as well as advantages to the House of Mathrafal. Young men are universally over-represented among the most violent elements of society – and this was certainly the case in Medieval Wales. The next twenty years in many respects paint a depressing picture of some of the worst excesses of the medieval Celtic warrior society, with the numerous sons, nephews and male cousins of the House of Mathrafal most often involved. All too frequently as well, the violence was between the various branches of this sprawling royal kindred. And when they were not fighting with each other they were ravaging the territories of the neighbouring warlords of native Wales. This total inability of the Welsh polity – and the House of Mathrafal in particular – to display any semblance of unity made it all the easier for outside interests (notably the Anglo-Norman kings) to pursue interests of their own within Native Wales, insinuating a kind of hegemony over these feuding tribal factions.

The inability of Cadwgan to control the House of the Mathrafal, the intemperate violence and impulsiveness of some its younger members, and the ability of the English king to play one tribal faction off against another are all evident factors in a notorious incident that took place in 1109. The events of these years illustrate a number of the problems that were besetting the Welsh polity during these troubled years, as well as having relevance to certain specific incidents within the Mabinogi. For both of these reasons they are worth examining in some detail.

The problems apparently began at the start of the year, when Cadwgan ap Bleddyn decided to hold a feast for all 'the chieftains of the land' (a gesture which strongly suggests pretensions of pan-Welsh overlordship). While at that feast, Cadwgan's son Owain ap Cadwgan heard that Nest, daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr[78] (his own second cousin), was now living in a castle belonging to the marcher lord Gerald of Windsor, who was the guardian of a small Marcher enclave of Pembrokeshire which had been annexed by the English king. On the pretext of visiting her 'as a kinswoman',

75 The sources merely name a certain *Grithfridus rex Gualorum* as the killer of Robert of Rhuddlun, but as Moore (1996, p 36-39) and C. P. Lewis (1996, p 64) both conclude, there is little reason to doubt this was Gruffydd ap Cynan.

76 J. Davies (1990) p.114

77 The institution of *fosterage* (see p.55-56) was a common way of cementing such allegiances in Medieval Celtic societies.

it would seem he seduced her and made her an accessory in a plan to carry her away and ransack Gerald's castle at the same time. This was achieved some nights later, with Gerald having to make a humiliating exit through the castle latrine (see p.206 n.363).

We are told that when he heard about this event, Cadwgan 'was indignantly grieved' – not only because of his son's unacceptable behaviour, but (more imminently) because of the certainty of revenge from the Gerald and his liege, the English king. This revenge came surely enough, but the form it took testifies to the lack of cohesion within the Welsh polity – even within the House of Mathrafal itself. For the instrument of Gerald's revenge was none other than Owain's own first cousins: Ithel and Madog, sons of Rhirid ap Bleddyn, who were apparently won over with the following promise '*…[King Henry] will raise you and exalt you over and above any of your fellow land-holders, and he will make you the envy of those among your kinsmen whose lands march with yours.'* This was evidently good enough for Madog and Ithel, who immediately set about executing Henry's request that their cousin should either be captured or driven from the land. The English king also managed to bring on side Llywarch ap Trahearn and Uchdrydd ap Edwin, representatives of two minor dynasties based in Arlwystli and Meirionydd respectively. Between them these four gathered a host and made for Owain's homeland (evidently located somewhere in Ceredigion). The inhabitants of these lands were scattered in all directions, some receiving asylum in the neighbouring districts while others (notably those who attempted to take refuge with Gerald in Dyfed) were simply killed. Owain and Cadwgan were forced to flee to Ireland.

Ithel and Madog set about looting and destroying – despite some attempt by Uchdrydd ab Edwin to moderate their behaviour. When they found a group of refugees taking sanctuary in a church they sent 'an evil spirited company' who desecrated the church and massacred those sheltering therein. After that, these two brothers seized territories in Powys (which evidently included most of central and western Wales in this period) belonging to Cadwgan and Owain and 'ruled them infamously'. Cadwgan, meanwhile, returned from Ireland and made peace with the English king: who, for a payment of one hundred pounds, agreed to recognise Cadwgan as the rightful ruler of Ceredigion. Owain returned some time later and, bizarrely, formed an alliance with his previous enemy Madog ap Rhirid, whose lands were now under attack from 'the French and the Saxons'. After swearing 'on relics' that neither would betray the other to the English king they 'set about journeying where their fate would lead them', burning and looting the house of 'a certain leading man' before settling down to a life of raiding and banditry across the English border.[79]

While it was possibly an extreme example, the almost uncontrollable violence and lawlessness exhibited by these members of the House of Mathrafal, as well as their wide-ranging destructive presence throughout central and western Wales is epitomised by the events of 1109. Any hopes Cadwgan might have had of re-establishling his position as head of a pan-Welsh resistance against the Anglo-Norman invader must have been well and truly extinguished in this year. Henry I, for his part, was increasingly asserting his own claims of nominal overlordship over the squabbling factions of Native Wales. His interventions on behalf of Gerald of Windsor demonstrated how easily clients could be bought and controlled, even within the Royal Tribe itself. While his own military forays into Native Wales not always met with lasting success, his position as judge and guarantor amongst the tribal warlords was beginning to look like an established political fact.

78 Nest was one of the prominent figures of the Welsh royal tribe, whose rather colourful life is described more fully on pp.188 below. There are convincing suggestion she may have inspired elements of the myth of Rhiannon

1125 marked a low-point for The House of Mathrafal and the Welsh *membra regis* as a whole. In that year, we are told:

Gruffydd ap Maredudd ap Bleddyn slew Ithel ap Rhirid ap Bledyn, his first cousin in the presence of Maredudd, his father. And a short while after that, Cadwallon ap Gruffudd ap Cynan slew his three uncles, namely, Goronwy and Rhirid and Meilyr, sons of Owain ap Edwin… That year strife was bred between Morgan and Maredudd, sons of Cadwgan ap Bleddyn, and in that strife Morgan slew with his own hand Maredudd, his brother.[80]

The historian C. P. Lewis matter-of-factly described this incident as another 'one of those family massacres which punctuate the history of Wales'.[81] However this particular dynastic bloodbath seems to have been an extreme case, even by the standards of the time. The House of Mathrafal remained a recognised presence in Wales for the next three hundred years, but for the remainder of the twelfth century at least, its influence was on the decline, with the massacre of 1125 undoubtedly marking something of a turning point. From here on, power started to return to the two other main Welsh Royal Houses: Aberffraw in the North and Dinefwr in the South. Both had experienced lean times during the ascendancy of the House of Mathrafal, but by the middle of the twelfth century they represented, between them, a powerful new challenge, not just to the Powysian tribe of Mathrafal, but also to the Anglo-Norman authority itself. This curious bi-polar revival of native power in Wales, involving Gwynedd and Deheubarth, is an important factor in the historical and political context of the Mabinogi, which we shall examine in due course. But in order to understand this, we need to understand the events that immediately preceded it: the return of Gruffydd ap Cynan to the Native Welsh political scene.

The later career of Gruffydd ap Cynan; Welsh Independence from 1136

Despite playing a significant role in the anti-Norman uprising of 1093-1098, Gruffydd ap Cynan of the House of Aberffraw wasted no time in retreating back over the Irish Sea once this rebellion was over. The reasons for this strategic withdrawal to the place of his childhood exile are not entirely clear. But fear of Norman retribution (he was, it might be remembered, implicated in the killing of Robert of Rhuddlan in 1093) as well as the rising power of the House of Mathrafal might have been among the dangers he was seeking to avoid.

When he did return to Gwynedd in the following year, it was as a client of the Normans. Gruffydd ap Cynan, throughout his career, had never had qualms about accepting support from non-Welsh parties: whether these were Hiberno-Norse mercenaries from Dublin or footsoldiers and knights from the English king. Indeed, it was with the help of such agencies that he had established his initial control of Arfon and Anglesey at the start of his career in 1075. This would not stop him carrying out the traditional imperatives of a Venedotian king:[82] exercising a hegemonistic interest in the north-eastern cantrefs of Wales (the area now know as Clwyd or Denbighshire) and even raiding over the English border. But this was to be expected of a warlord of the Welsh, and it may well have been considered more of an inevitable local difficulty between the Marcher Lordship of Chester and the Venedotian king, rather than grounds for enmity with the English crown. Indeed, there is every sign that, relative to some of the other warlords active at the time, Gruffydd ap Cynan was essentially seen as a man with whom the Henry I could do business.

79 ByT 1105=1109
80 ByT 1122=1125
81 C. P. Lewis (1996) p.76