

The Killing of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn

At harvest-time in 1064, a small group of men rode eastwards out of the mountains of Snowdonia, through a landscape that had been ravished and burnt after a season of warfare. With them they bore the severed head of an aged man, their erstwhile king Gruffydd ap Llywelyn (pp. 43-44). At a certain point on their journey, they were met by one Harold Godwinsson, Earl of Wessex and future King of England. The severed head was then handed to the Anglo-Norse warlord. Harold began the long journey to London, bearing in triumph the head of the old Welsh king which was presented in state to the reigning monarch, Edward the Confessor.

We do not know the precise circumstances of the killing of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, but there is an important body of evidence to suggest that it was *at the hands of his own men* that the old Welsh tyrant met his untimely end. Somewhere up in the mountains of Snowdonia, certain individuals from his dwindling war-band appear to have surrounded and killed the grizzled king. The man who struck the fatal blow is sometimes named as *Cynan ap Iago*, whose father had been one of the early casualties of Gruffydd's twenty-year reign of terror. It is not known whether anyone came to Gruffydd's defence. All the evidence we have would suggest that this act of regicide was committed with the tacit approval of a much wider circle, including some of the most powerful people in England, Wales and Ireland at the time.⁶⁴⁹

The immediate beneficiaries were Gruffydd's own half-brothers, Rhiwallon and Bleddyn ap Cynfyn, whom Edward the Confessor immediately acknowledged as the joint kings of Wales. Harold, for his part, found his influence enhanced by this Welsh adventure, setting in motion the chain of events that led to his occupation of the English throne in the fateful year of 1066.

It seems unlikely that the royal households of twelfth-century Wales could have heard about the story of the Assembly of the Wondrous Head without recalling in some way the events of 1064. The parallels were simply too pronounced, and the victim too well-known. Both Bendigeidfran and Gruffydd were epoch-making kings, who were eventually decapitated by their own men (albeit under very different circumstances). Both kings had their heads ceremoniously carried across the British mainland, to the town of London.⁶⁵⁰ Within a text in which typological references of this kind are evident elsewhere, these similarities cannot be explained as morbid coincidence. Something deliberate was being stated about the death of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn and his legacy, through the medium of this twelfth century *chwedl*.

Of all the correspondences that exist between events portrayed in the Mabinogi and those that actually took place in the royal houses of Medieval Wales – this is undoubtedly one of the strangest. Most striking of all is that the descendants of many of those complicit in the events of 1064 were still very much in power when the Mabinogi was commissioned and composed in the following century. The House of Aberffraw had been founded by Gruffydd ap Cynan (re. pp. 45 and 51-52 ff.), son of the man apparently named in Irish sources as the murderer of old Welsh King himself. The Houses of Mathrafal were descended from Bleddyn ap Cynfyn: one of the major beneficiaries of this regicide, if not one of its primary instigators. Lord Rhys of the House of Dinefwr would have been

able to number both Cynan ap Iago and Rhiwallon ap Cynfyn among his ancestral forebears. The oblique similarities between the regicide of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn and the story of the 'Assembly of the Wondrous Head' demands explanation, not least as they would appear to offer a leading clue as to the nature of the relationship between mythical narratives in the Mabinogi, and some of the less palatable realities in the political and social life of the Welsh Royal tribe.

It was Sigmund Freud who first suggested how totemistic myths owe their origins to the patricidal guilt of 'the primal horde'.⁶⁵¹ According to Freud, this hypothetical band of primeval ancestors, after collaborating in the deposition and murder of the dominant male, fetishise the victim and erstwhile ruler by evolving a complex set of rituals and taboos. According to Freud, it is through just such attempts by the primal horde to sublimate its ambivalent feelings towards its patricidal crime that the earliest forms of religious expression are born.

On the surface at least, a similar mythogenic reflex would appear to be at work in the generations following what was in essence the patricidal seizure of power in 1064. Gruffydd ap Llywelyn had been a notorious tyrant. Anecdotes relating to his murderous ambition and paranoid jealousy were still being relayed in the Welsh marches more than a century after his death (see above, pp. 44-45). By collaborating with the termination of his twenty-five year reign of terror, those members of the Welsh Royal caste involved in his assassination were enacting the perennial deed of the primal horde: the destruction of the oppressive alpha-male whose monopoly of both the sexual and the political prerogative made him ultimately more hated than feared.

But Gruffydd ap Llywelyn had not only been the archetypal dominant male of the Welsh Royal tribe. He had also been the most successful king of Wales since Rhodri Mawr. In destroying Gruffydd ap Llywelyn, the Welsh royal tribe had also killed their most effective leader in living memory – and possibly their best hope of resistance against foreign domination. It is unsurprising therefore, that Gruffydd ap Llywelyn would remain a significant figure in the collective memory of medieval Wales for some generations after his death. The removal of such a powerful leader must have occasioned a variety of emotions, not least of which was a kind of patricidal guilt.

This visceral remorse can only have been compounded by the extraordinary events that took place almost immediately after the death of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn. The most dramatic downfall was that of Harold Godwinsson, the Anglo-Saxon warlord who was perhaps the most instrumental agent of the old king's demise. Of all the conspirators, it was Harold whose ascent following the events of 1064 had been the most vertiginous: a rise that was followed by a spectacular fall. In 1065, he had married Gruffydd's widow – the Mercian princess Ealdgyth, grand-daughter of the legendry Lady Godiva. This had enhanced his political influence, propelling his ascension onto the English throne following the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066. The subsequent events of that year are only too

649 K. Maund, 'Cynan ab Iago and the killing of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 10 (1985). Maund notes that although Cynan ap Iago features among the list probable suspect, the precise identity of the killer remains an open question.

650 Strictly speaking, we only know that Gruffydd's head was taken to King Edward, though, since the latter had his chief court at the palace of Westminster, it is reasonable to infer that (like Bendigeidfran) Gruffydd's head had been taken to London.

well known. A rival claimant for the English throne was William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, subsequently known as William the Conqueror. Harold, alongside with his household warriors and the flower of the Anglo-Saxon nobility met a violent death at what was later known as the Battle of Hastings in the autumn of the same year and the Norman Duke effected a comprehensive seizure of the English polity.

And neither did the Welsh ruling elite manage to wholly avoid what must have seemed like divine retribution for their complicity in the events of 1064. While Bleddyn ap Cynfyn would rule with some effectiveness until his violent death in 1075, no native king would ever succeed in uniting the entirety of Wales again. Power devolved to the feuding branches of the Welsh Royal Tribe, and the price for this fragmentation was significant territorial loss. The Norman invasion of Wales, a seemingly unstoppable force in the later decades of the eleventh century, permanently altered the political geography of the region and effectively removed the notion of Welsh kings as autonomous rulers, independent of the English crown.

The notion of disaster and loss following an outbreak of moral decline had been embedded in British Celtic consciousness since the tirades of the Dark Age cleric Gildas, a generation or two after the Anglo-Saxon uprising (and shortly before the plagues of the mid-sixth century). In this context, it is hard to entirely disassociate this sense of collective guilt or moral catharsis from the curiously muted, ritualistic ending of Second Branch. This might be seen as the context in which that extraordinary tale, the Assembly of the Wondrous Head, seems to have initially taken shape.⁶⁵²

651 Sigmund Freud *Totem and Taboo* (London, 1919) p. 226 ff. Freud, quoting Atkinson, explains this paradigm (derived from zoological models) as follows (pp234-235): ‘The Darwinian concept of the primal horde [requires] a violent jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his growing sons ... one day the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde ... (p.242) the brother clan has taken the place of the father horde and was guaranteed by the blood bond. Society is now based on complicity in the common crime, religion on the sense of guilt and consequent remorse.’ Freud notes that the mythical ancestor-victim often comes to be symbolised by a sacred totem animal, which is killed and eaten only on sacred feast days, being taboo the rest of the year (p.226): ‘the killing of a sacrificial animal originally belonged to those acts which were forbidden to the individual and were only justified if the whole kin assumed responsibility.’ Communal feasting (of the totem animal, representing the murdered patriarch) thus forms an important part of this magico-religious complex. Feasting features prominently in the Assembly of the Wondrous Head, as well as in that most famous of theophagic myths: the Christian Last Supper.