

Forgotten ruins?

The Castles of the Welsh Princes

Of all the ancient monuments that survive from the Middle Ages, none, perhaps, fire our imagination as much as the castles of that era. Unlike the dusty, abstruse documents that have survived from the period, we will all almost certainly have seen if not visited a castle at some time or another. In the British Isles, and particularly in Wales, the landscape is dotted with castles of all shapes and sizes, some made of stone, others of earthwork. And in view of the fact that over 400 castles were built in Wales between the arrival of the Normans in 1066 and the 'Acts of Union' of Henry VIII (1536–43), it is easy to see why Wales was often referred to as 'the land of castles'. According to the results of a survey published in 2011 by Visit Britain, the tourism agency of the Westminster government, a tour of the castles of Wales was more popular among foreign tourists than watching a football match at Old Trafford, shopping at Harrods, and

even a visit to Buckingham Palace. So what is the attraction? As we marvel at magnificent castles such as Caernarfon, Caerphilly and Pembroke, we find ourselves transported back to a world of romance and of raw power, to a world of people under siege and of attackers subjected to a shower of arrows and boiling oil. These buildings have done so much to embed popular ideas about the period, and are responsible to some extent for the tendency to portray the Middle Ages (perhaps unfairly) as an uncivilized and cruel age. As someone who used to travel to school along a road affording magnificent views of Rhuddlan castle, I must admit that I hardly took any notice of the castle, despite the fact that it stands head and shoulders above most of the modern buildings in the area. I later came to realize that the castle has a very rich history, as do the remains of Wales' other castles. In the case of Rhuddlan castle, it was one link in a chain of fortified stone castles



Rhuddlan castle was built by Edward I between 1277 and 1282 near the site of a motte and bailey castle built by the Normans sometime during the 1070s.

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built from Aberystwyth in the west to Flint in the north-east by Edward I (d. 1307), king of England and conqueror of Wales, during the last decades of the thirteenth century. Edward invested heavily in establishing castles on his new lands, spending over £9,500 on fortifications at Rhuddlan alone, not to mention a further estimated £60,000 on castles at Beaumaris, Caernarfon, Conwy and Harlech. In view of the sums paid for some footballers today, a few tens of thousands of pounds may not seem like a vast amount of money, but we must not forget that this expenditure must be multiplied many times over in order to arrive at an estimate of the actual cost (£1 today would be closer to £500 in 1280!). Fortunately, many of the accounts detailing the costs of the castles have survived, and, if studied carefully, historians are able to use them to form an outline of the building work undertaken and the background of the builders.

The ruins of the castles of Edward I, and the records kept by the English exchequer, are a reminder of the costly efforts to keep the Welsh under the control of the Crown in the Middle Ages. There is therefore a strange tension relating to the royal and Anglo-Norman castles built in Wales. Guto'r Glyn (d. c.1493), one of the most prominent of the medieval Welsh poets, considered Caernarfon castle to be one of '[c]aerau Edwart Gwncwerwr' ('the forts of Edward the Conqueror')¹. And later, the antiquary Thomas Pennant (d. 1798) described Caernarfon castle bluntly as 'the most magnificent badge of our subjection'.² The magnificent castles of Edward I were therefore symbols of oppression to some, and one can well imagine that creating this feeling of intimidation was one of the primary reasons for building them in the first place. But we must not forget that it is their dignity, rather than their sense of terror, that accounts for the castles of Edward I being designated World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 1986, as well as the fact that they attract so many tourists and visitors in the twenty first century.

Despite the attention given to the robust, splendid castles of Edward I, little attention has been given to the castles built by the Welsh princes themselves. On the whole, eighteenth century artists and tourists were more interested in them than the scholars of the twentieth century. In contrast to the travellers of the past who were enchanted by the wild, impressive settings of castles such as Dolbadarn and Carreg Cennen, the scholarly debates of recent decades have tended to focus on their defensive shortcomings, and on their irregular structures and restrictive locations in particular. This article therefore aims to give an insight into the castles of the Welsh princes, and to place them in the context of their time and of the latest ideas about their place and purpose in medieval societies. The castles of the

Welsh princes provide an opportunity for us to look at several historical sites, which were overshadowed by the castles of the English Crown, and also encourage us to challenge some of the ways in which modern scholars have been inclined to deal with the castles of the Middle Ages more generally.

What is a 'castle'?

Before we turn our attention to the castles themselves, let us first try to answer two fundamental questions: what is a 'castle' and what was its purpose? The English word 'castle' comes from the Latin *castellum*, as do *castell* in Welsh and *château* in French. The original meaning of the *castellum* to the Romans was probably a 'military camp', but by the Middle Ages it had become a more general word to describe a defensive structure or fortified dwelling. The original 'military' meaning of the term 'castle' later influenced the way in which historians thought of them. According to the classical definition of historian R. Allen Brown, a castle was 'a fortified residence of the lord' – primarily a symbol of military authority. In recent decades, scholars have taken a much more multi-faceted approach to castles, and the rather narrow tendency to interpret them in purely military terms has been somewhat undermined. There has been much greater focus during recent decades on the symbolic and decorative characteristics of the castles of this period, and perhaps the best definition of a castle is now a dwelling built by a lord in a fortified *style*, rather than for purely military reasons. This change of attitude has also prompted a re-evaluation of the various functions of the castles of this period, from their practical use as administrative centres, prisons and for storage purposes, to their symbolic function as strongholds built to perpetuate old traditions or as an expression of new values and relationships.

The castles of the Welsh

The Welsh built fewer than one in ten of the castles that are known to us in Wales. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it was the Normans who first introduced the castle to Wales, in order to maintain and extend their power following their famous victory in 1066. The Welsh and Normans also had very different approaches to warfare. The Welsh relied to a great extent on their ability to attack their enemies quickly and without warning, making the most of their light-footed warriors and the country's rough terrain. The military tactics of the Normans relied on the heavy arms of their knights and their ability to maintain their hold on strategic locations by building castles and the towns around them. Although the Welsh had started to build their own earthwork castles within less than half a century of

¹ A quotation from the new online edition <<http://www.gutorglyn.net>> of the poet's elegy to Robert Trefor ab Edward, Bryncunallt edited by A. Parry Owen (line 3, poem 105 in the online edition).

² Thomas Pennant, *Tours in Wales 1770-73*, edited by J. Rhys, 3 volumes (Caernarfon, 1883), 2:404.

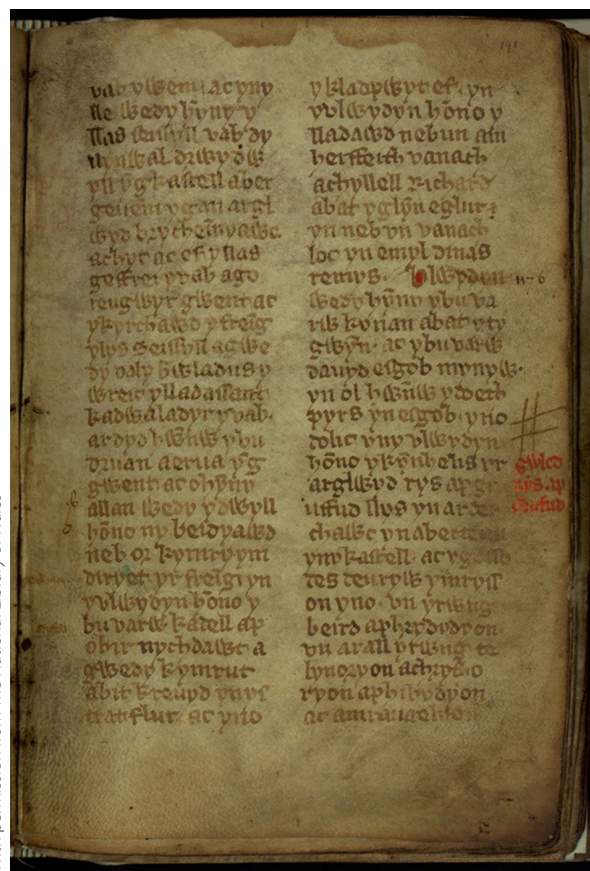
the Norman invasion, they would tend to retreat to the safe shelter and sanctuary of the mountains and woods of the countryside rather than to the man-made walls of a castle. The Welsh princes also already had a series of important political and administrative centres by the Norman period – the courts. The princes' courts were halls without strong fortifications. But the decision of Edward I to incorporate some of these courts in his new castles is testament to their symbolic and practical significance. This was a clear statement that the Welsh princes of the old order had been eliminated.

Nevertheless, by the end of the twelfth century several stone castles had been built on the lands of the Welsh princes. One of the earliest was Cardigan castle, a stone castle built by Rhys ap Gruffudd (d. 1197), or Lord Rhys as he is called, in 1171 (Rhys was also something of an expert at capturing castles, as demonstrated by his use of machines of warfare). Lord Rhys was Prince of Deheubarth, or Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion today, one of the most prominent Welsh princes during the twelfth century. By the turn of the thirteenth century the most important chronicles of Welsh history of the time (*Brut y Tywysogyon* [The Chronicle of the Princes]) referred to Cardigan castle as 'allwedd holl Kymry' ('the key to all Wales').³ It is, however, hard to believe that the first known

'eisteddfod' was held not in a huge (pink!) pavilion but in this grey castle, under the patronage of Lord Rhys in 1176. Partly by borrowing and emulating the ideas of his Norman neighbours, Lord Rhys succeeded in retaining and strengthening his hold on the kingdom of his forefathers. Stone castles such as Cardigan were a practical and symbolic expression of the prosperity of Deheubarth under the prince.

The stone castles of Llywelyn the Great (d. 1240)

In order to see the best and most complete examples of the stone castles of the Welsh princes we must leave Deheubarth in the south and turn our attention to thirteenth century Gwynedd. It is fair to say that the most splendid castles built by any Welsh prince were those built by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, or Llywelyn the Great as he is often known, prince of Gwynedd and overlord of the Welsh during the first half of the thirteenth century. In the remainder of this article I wish to turn my attention to the castles of Llywelyn the Great. I will attempt, perhaps, in particular, to persuade you that Llywelyn's castles should not be interpreted primarily as part of a defensive system – a kind of medieval Maginot Line – but as part of his wider efforts to consolidate and express his authority. And as such, they were as much a part of the prince's symbolic armoury as they were of his approach to warfare. Of course, as with other symbols of authority at that time, the castles demonstrated the authority of the prince in military terms. However, compared to other visual symbols of the period that reflect military values, such as the wax seals bearing the images of noble knights, the castles and their garrisons cast a much wider shadow over the lands of the princes. This was, perhaps, a



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According to *Brut y Tywysogyon* (The Chronicles of the Princes) Lord Rhys invited competitors to a famous feast at Cardigan castle in 1176 – *tihis* is the earliest reference to a festival resembling an 'eisteddfod'.



With thanks to Shaun McGuinness

The Latin name for Degannwy castle was *Castrum de Gannoc*, and although very little remains today the old name has survived on a street near the castle.

³ T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogyon, or, The Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version* (Cardiff, 1973), p. 182.

clear way of demonstrating the prince's power in his own territory, and therefore of emphasising his wealth and connections with the Anglo-French world. The castles of the Welsh princes deserve attention for more than their significance in purely military terms; they convey the ideological as well as the practical aspect of the princes' efforts to consolidate and extend their authority.

Unlike the castles of Edward I, there is very little documentary evidence of the building work carried out on the castles of Llywelyn the Great. We are therefore unable to say with any degree of certainty which castles were built by him, but the general consensus is that Castell-y-Bere, Cricieth, Dolbadarn and Dolwyddelan castles were all built during the reign of Llywelyn. Although little remains of it, we know that Llywelyn had a castle at Degannwy, and it is possible that Carndochan and Ewloe castles were also built during his reign. In order to fully understand Llywelyn's ambitious construction plans, we must rely as much on archaeological evidence as on written evidence. This is especially true in the case of Carndochan castle near Bala. The remains of Carndochan castle are found on a craggy hilltop more than a thousand feet above sea level, looking out over the Lliw valley and the village of Llanuwchllyn on the southern shores of Llyn Tegid

(Bala Lake). The scarce remains are scattered and there are very few contemporary historical records regarding this mysterious castle. There is no evidence of intricate stonework and no remaining architectural features such as entrances or windows. The only key to the mystery of Carndochan castle is the existence of the foundations of an apsidal or D-shaped tower, at the south-western end of the castle. These towers are characteristic of many of the castles of the Welsh princes, and more substantial examples are to be seen at Castell-y-Bere and Ewloe. This is the only piece of evidence that enables us to date it to the thirteenth century, but it is difficult to know when and why it was built. The two most likely dates are some time soon after 1202 when Penllyn (the area where the castle stood) fell into the hands of Llywelyn the Great, or soon after the Treaty of Aberconwy in 1277, which resulted in the humiliation of Llywelyn the Last (d. 1282) when his authority was confined to his lands in Gwynedd Uwch Conwy. Despite these problems, we can say with some confidence that Llywelyn the Great was primarily responsible for the construction of Castell-y-Bere, Cricieth, Dolbadarn and Dolwyddelan castles. There are also some remains of his castle at Degannwy, although the remains found there today are mainly those of the castle that was rebuilt on the site by Henry III.

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The foundations of the apsidal (D-shaped) tower at the south-western end of the castle are clearly visible from the air (at the top of the picture).



A view of the remains of Carndochan castle's apsidal tower over the castle ruins. Bala Lake is visible in the distance.

Did Llywelyn the Great have a defence policy?

In an influential article published in 1969 Glanville Jones argued convincingly for the existence of what he called '[a] coherent Welsh defensive policy'.⁴ The stone castles built by Llywelyn the Great were a key element of Jones' theory of the existence of a deliberate 'policy' to defend Gwynedd during the thirteenth century. His argument was based primarily on the strategic location of the castles – Dolwyddelan castle undoubtedly stands in a threatening position above the Lledr valley whilst Dolbadarn castle guards the entrance to the Llanberis Pass. But despite the dramatic locations of these castles, we should, perhaps, question to what extent they were intended as obstacles to deter the enemy



Dolbadarn castle keep with its back towards Snowdonia. Blocks of green and purple slate were used to adorn the tower.

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⁴ G. R. J. Jones, 'The Defences of Gwynedd in the Thirteenth Century', *Transactions of the Caernarvonshire Historical Society* 330 (1969), 29-43.

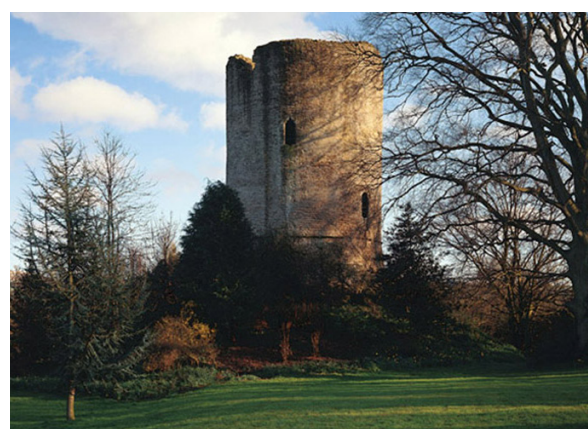
from outside the princes' territories. The princes' castles have little 'military' history, and what survives casts doubt on the military importance of the castles. Let me give you one example. During King John's military campaign in 1210 our primary source, *Brut y Tywysogyon* (The Chronicle of the Princes), tells how Llywelyn decided to destroy his castle at Degannwy, according to *Brut y Tywysogyon*, 'rac ofyn y brenhin' ('for fear of [the wrath of] the king').⁵ Rather than face the king's forces from the defensive position of his castle at Degannwy, Llywelyn undoubtedly resorted to the long-established Welsh tactic of guerrilla warfare, a way of tiring the enemy by retreating, hiding and attacking without warning. These tactics proved successful for Llywelyn, and have also been successfully used closer to our own time in wars such as those in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

Rather than focusing our attention on enemies from outside Wales as Glanville Jones did, we should perhaps look closer to home for the reasons for building and investing in these castles. If the landscape of Gwynedd made it difficult to conquer, the very same geographical features would certainly have militated against the efforts of the princes to govern their territories. We see this again in *Brut y Tywysogyon* as the unnamed chronicler notes how Llywelyn is forced to discipline his son, Gruffudd, by taking Meirionnydd from him and building a castle for himself there in 1221.⁶ Although the castle is not named, it is fairly certain that Castell-y-Bere was the castle built following this crisis. It is clear therefore that not everyone in Meirionnydd embraced the government of the princes of Gwynedd. This is further emphasised by the fact that no stone castles were built by the princes of Gwynedd on Anglesey, the symbolic and economic core of their realm. Not all stone castles were built purely to defend against external foes. Take Cricieth castle for example, another impressive castle probably built at about the same time as Castell-y-Bere, in Eifionydd, another area where there is some evidence of disquiet with the princes of Gwynedd.

In comparison with the later castles built by Edward I, and even some of the major castles of the Marcher lords of the period, such as Pembroke, the castles of Llywelyn the Great are limited and inferior. However, it must be remembered that Gwynedd had never seen castles such as these before, and that they were unprecedented both in terms of scale and quality. As Professor Huw Pryce suggested recently, perhaps they need to be viewed in the context of the wider efforts of the princes to raise their status among their own people.⁷ In this respect there is

a notable lack of archaeological and documentary evidence to suggest that the noblemen of Gwynedd took the opportunity to build castles of any kind in this period.

Another aspect that demonstrates the way in which the princes attempted to reinforce their superiority over their subjects was their insistence that the serfs of Gwynedd work on their castles at the prince's command. This is seen for the first time in the Iorwerth Redaction of the Law of Hywel Dda, a version of the medieval law of Wales originating in Gwynedd during the reign of Llywelyn the Great.⁸ It is possible that the less substantial and more unsophisticated curtain walls of some of the castles are the work of local labourers, although the impressive round tower at Dolbadarn is undoubtedly the work of skilled stonemasons.



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Bronllys' circular keep, built by Walter Clifford, is typical of the type of tower seen in the indigenous castles and Anglo-Norman castles of Wales during the first half of the thirteenth century.

These fine architectural features are also testament to the relationship between Llywelyn the Great and some of the Marcher lords. As the late Richard Avent suggested, some of the castles were probably inspired by those of the prince's Anglo-Norman allies.⁹ It is quite possible that the gatehouse of Cricieth castle was based on the castle of Ranulf de Blundeville, Earl of Chester, and one of Llywelyn's foremost allies. Similarly, was Dolbadarn's stately keep perhaps based on the round keep of Bronllys castle, one of the castles of Walter Clifford, Llywelyn's son in law?

These features all testify to the wealth of Llywelyn and his realm, probably during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. This was a comparatively peaceful period in Gwynedd. This confidence can be seen in the expenditure on the carved stonework of some of the castles, such as

⁵ T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogyon, or, The Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version* (Cardiff, 1973), p. 188.

⁶ T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogyon, or, The Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version* (Cardiff, 1973), p. 220.

⁷ H. Pryce, 'Welsh Rulers and European Change, c. 1100-1282', in H. Pryce and J. Watts (ed), *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 37-51, and pp. 45-6.

⁸ D. Jenkins (ed.), *The Laws of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales* (Llandysul, 1986), p. 124.

⁹ R. Avent, *Dolwyddelan Castle, Dolbadarn Castle, Castell y Bere* (Cardiff, 2004), p. 12.



This carved head was discovered on the site of Degannwy castle, and is believed to portray Llywelyn the Great. Intricate stonework can also be seen at Castell-y-Bere.

the leaf-pattern carvings found at Castell-y-Bere, and more strikingly the carved head discovered at Degannwy, perhaps portraying Llywelyn the Great himself. It is also important to remember the importance of the castles' internal arrangements, and the rooms that would have provided the princes with shelter as they travelled through their lands. Most striking of all perhaps is the way in which the castles were used to detain important prisoners. For example, Gruffudd, Llywelyn the Great's son, was imprisoned at Degannwy for six years, and later at Cricieth. And it seems likely that Llywelyn the Last imprisoned his brother, Owain Goch, for over two decades at Dolbadarn. It is no wonder that the poet Hywel Foel ap Griffri referred to Owain as '*Gŵr ysydd yn nhŵr yn hir westi*' ('The man long abiding in the tower').¹⁰ These aspects all emphasised the princes' power and authority, and encompassed much more than the purely defensive.

In conclusion, it is true to say that the castles of Wales have a prominent place in the history of the country in the Middle Ages, and that they are lasting and visible symbols of the process of conquest and cultural change experienced in Wales during that period. These buildings convey much more than merely the desire to defend lands in the face of external threats. Although the castles of the Welsh princes, and particularly the castles of Gwynedd, were overshadowed by the august fortresses of Edward I, their remains and their history serve as a reminder of the desire of the Welsh princes to adopt and exploit the latest technology to strengthen and maintain their authority.

Further Reading

R. Avent, *Cestyll Tywysogion Gwynedd / Castles of the Princes of Gwynedd*. Cardiff, 1983.

R. Liddiard, *Castles in Context: Power, Symbolism and Landscape, 1066-1500*. Macclesfield, 2005.

A. J. Taylor, *The Welsh Castles of Edward I*. London, 1986.

R. Turvey, *Cestyll ac Abatai Deheubarth*. Cardiff, 2003.



A map of Wales during the Middle Ages

¹⁰ Rh. Andrews (ed.), *Welsh Court Poems* (Cardiff, 2007), p. 25.