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Key

GWYNEDD Welsh kingdom

uwch Conwy region



Native Welsh masonry castle



Selected other places mentioned in the text



Native Welsh masonry castles mentioned in the text.

Introduction

Writing this book would have been impossible fifty years ago. At the turn of the 1970s the field of castle studies was in its infancy, and something of a Cinderella in the academic sense. Castellologists were few in number, and the formation of the Castle Studies Group at Gregynog – the final development, perhaps, in lending the field undeniable academic legitimacy – lay over a decade in the future. The situation was especially parlous in Wales in general, and in reference to the native Welsh castles in particular. The documentary materials relating to them were in many cases yet to be discovered, or awaiting thorough analysis; several of the castles discussed here had not yet been subjected to modern archaeological scrutiny. Not for nothing did John Kenyon describe Wales as having once personified ‘the poor man of British castle studies’.¹

Since then, various aspects of the history of the Age of the Princes² have been the subject of sustained and in-depth analysis, but a scholarly, book-length study of the native Welsh castles has never appeared. Perhaps that is not all that surprising. The native castles have certainly not been neglected: several articles and archaeological reports have been published devoted to individual castles, as well as a spate of popular and well-written guidebooks published by Cadw. However, an overarching academic survey has been noticeable by its absence. And no wonder: at first glance they look like a very mixed bag indeed, with little to unify them in terms of architecture, siting or purpose. Treating them as cut from the same cloth seems perilous, and those who have done so have tended to issue generalisations about their purpose that spread more darkness than light (see below). To some extent this reflects the cultural bias – set in place principally by Gerald of Wales (d. 1223) and Matthew Paris, and parroted by generations of historians (including many Welsh ones) for centuries thereafter – to the effect that the Welsh under the princes were destitute of modern weapons, ignorant of the

1. J. Kenyon, “‘Those proud, ambitious heaps’: whither castle studies?’ *AC*, 166 (2017), p. 16.
2. Defined for the purposes of this book as the period between the accession of Owain Gwynedd (the first ruler known to have used the style *princeps Wallie*, or prince of Wales) in 1137 and the victory of Edward I in the war of 1282–3.

principles of warfare and barbarous and duplicitous in character. The tendency of so many historians to offer generalities based on sources such as Gerald – who never knowingly left an axe unground where the Welsh were concerned – has not helped matters. The following passage, from the *Descriptio Kambriae*, is typical. Gerald begins by describing the Welsh approach to battle in positive terms, but his opinion is soon revealed to be less than admiring:

In war the Welsh are very ferocious when battle is first joined. They shout, glower fiercely at the enemy, and fill the air with fearsome clamour, making a high-pitched screech with their long trumpets. From their first fierce and headlong onslaught, and the shower of javelins which they hurl, they seem most formidable opponents. If the enemy resists manfully and they are repulsed, they are immediately thrown into confusion. With further resistance they turn their backs, making no attempt at a counterattack, but seeking safety in flight.

Stopping for a moment to quote Horace – ‘Although he may lack skill, only a coward flees’ – Gerald goes on to question their tactical sense: ‘Their sole idea ... is either to pursue their opponents, or else to run away from them.’³ A subsequent compliment regarding the ability of the Welsh to carry out ambushes and night attacks is rather back-handed, as is his description of their fierceness in battle, but at least they were put into writing; compared with some contemporary commentators, Gerald was being charitable. Matthew Paris spoke of the reprehensible conduct of the Welsh in massacring the entire population of English towns they captured, while, later in the thirteenth century, Welsh soldiers were depicted as duplicitous, slovenly, drunken and many other things besides: at Falkirk in 1298, for example, a large contingent of Welshmen serving in Edward I’s army against the Scots rioted, and eighty of them were killed by English cavalymen sent to quell the unrest.⁴ During the reign of Henry III – who at first opposed Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (r. 1194–1240; hereafter Llywelyn I) in Wales, and then his successors Dafydd ap Llywelyn (r. 1240–6; hereafter Dafydd II) and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (r. 1246–82; hereafter Llywelyn II) – the Welsh were routinely described as crafty, ‘traitorous’, given to ‘treachery’ and living in ‘bestial lairs’.⁵

Such depictions were part of a wider cultural discourse in England that racialised the Welsh. Commentators searching for ways to depict the Welsh invariably chose to highlight not points of commonality between the Welsh and

3. L. Thorpe (transl.), *Gerald of Wales: The Journey through Wales/The Description of Wales* (London, 1978), pp. 233–4.
4. M. Prestwich, ‘Welsh infantry in Flanders in 1297’, in R.A. Griffiths and P.R. Schofield (eds), *Wales and the Welsh in the Middle Ages: Essays presented to J. Beverley Smith* (Cardiff, 2011), p. 65.
5. M. Carlin and D. Crouch (eds and transls), *Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200–1250* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013), p. 118.

the Anglo-Normans and (later) English but their otherness – sometimes with malicious intent, sometimes not, but always with the result of simplifying the people and effacing nuances of custom, cultural norms and character. Rory Cox has recently re-presented this idea in terms of asymmetric warfare, noting that

ethnic hatred on both sides of the Anglo-Welsh border was exacerbated by the sense among the Anglo-Norman troops that they were not fighting an honourable enemy, ... and therefore they afforded the Welsh none of the privileges normally extended to a typical symmetrical opponent.⁶

This included denying the Welsh any sense of propriety, acumen or wisdom where warfare was concerned. Over a century after Gerald put his thoughts on the martial abilities of the Welsh to paper, we have the following description from the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*: ‘from the sayings of the prophet Merlin they [the Welsh] still hope to recover England. Hence it is that the Welsh frequently rebel, hoping to give effect to the prophecy; but because they do not know the appointed time, they are often deceived and their labour is in vain.’⁷ The note of bemusement at the credence given to such foolish beliefs is palpable, and one that, even later, Shakespeare was also quick to sound in his depictions of several Welshmen in his plays, chief among them Owain Glyndŵr.⁸ Stereotypes of the esoteric and gullible Welsh were easy to play on to audiences for whom such portrayals were both current and coherent.

This has implications for our understanding of the princes as castle-builders. What is true of perceptions of the medieval Welsh at war extends to native Welsh castles. They, too, have been maligned as peculiar, whimsical places, unsuited to the roles that have retrospectively been assigned to them. What follows is an attempt to correct that view.

6. R. Cox, ‘Asymmetric warfare and military conduct in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 38 (2012), p. 108.

7. N. Denholm-Young (ed.), *Vita Edwardi Secundi: The Life of Edward the Second* (Oxford, 1957), p. 69.