Wales

Churches, Houses, Castles

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Published by Allen Lane

Extract

Introduction

Aros mae'r mynyddau mawr,
Rhuo trostynt mae y gwynt;
Clywir eto gyda'r wawr
*Gân bugeiliaid megis cynt.**

The rugged summit of Aran Fawddwy in mid-Wales offers a panorama without equal in the British Isles. North lie the majestic peaks of Snowdonia. East are the soft hills and dales towards the River Severn and England. To the south the reclining humps of the Brecon Beacons guard the steep valleys of Gwent and Glamorgan. West is the sea and the glorious sweep of Cardigan Bay, from Llŷn and Bardsey Island down to the intimate coves of Pembrokeshire.

All Wales is embraced by this view. No place in Europe offers such an encompassing vista of one country. From this vantage point there is no obvious sign of human settlement. There is only landscape, rolling and soaring, with the imagination free to ponder the history and genius of the place. For whatever else Wales may or may not be, it is unquestionably one place.

Ten miles down the Dyfi valley from Aran Fawddwy is a spot where I have often stood, amidst the oldest built thing I know, a small stone circle on the deserted hillside of Tarren Hendre. I have wondered what its creators hoped or feared in devising this strange device.† Wales has some 140 recorded structures like this – henges, cromlechs, huts and barrows, best evoked at the Bryn Celli Ddu burial mound on Anglesey. All knowledge of their occupants has gone, leaving only a sense of wonderment at their ability to quarry and move stone. These are the people who transported bluestones from the Preseli mountains of Pembrokeshire to Stonehenge, one of Europe's most extraordinary works of prehistoric engineering.

Stones are the stuff of Wales. From stone mountains to stones engraved with mystic Celtic patterns, from stone forts erected by Wales's conquerors to stone

* The mighty hills unchanging stand,
Tireless the winds across them blow;
The shepherd's song across the land
Sounds with the dawn as long ago.
(John Ceiriog Hughes)
† Above Pant-yr-onn.

Plasnewydd: Llangollen tranquillity

villages, stone churches and the stone from which the Welsh have always dug their wealth. This is not a land of soft earth or chalk or shifting sands. It is a land of unyielding stoniness. Even the poem which adorns the lowering cornice of Cardiff's new opera house declares, 'In these stones horizons sing.' It is as if Wales were a nation trapped in its own intractable geological fact.

Whoever arranged my stone circle did so two millennia before the arrival in the 5th century BC of invading Celts, Indo-European-speaking tribes from the mainland of Europe. Of them we again know little, except that they divided into two groups, roughly identified by their language. The Irish and Scots spoke Goidelic (Gaelic) and the Britons a tongue called Brythonic, found initially across England, Wales and lowland Scotland and evolving into Cornish, Welsh and Breton.

Tacitus records a tantalizing glimpse of the ancient Welsh people, massed for war on the shores of Anglesey, probably in AD 61, and terrifying the Roman legionaries by the curses their druids and women hurled across the Menai Straits. These were the same druids, Tacitus later wrote, whom acolytes from France joined to study the animism of the woods and winds, who 'smeared their altars with blood from their prisoners and sought the will of the gods by exploring the entrails of men'.

We know that when the invading Romans first crossed the Severn in AD 47 (after landing in Britain in 43) they found a hard land to master. It took thirty years to defeat the Ordovices in the north and the Silures and Demetae in the south. The eventual conquest, in AD 79, was commanded from Chester and Caerleon outside Newport, the latter one of the largest Roman camps extant in Britain.

To subjugate this land required, at one point, a garrison of 30,000 troops. A network of Roman roads, forts and villas was built across Wales and survived for three centuries of colonization. The Roman presence was most intense in Gwent and Glamorgan, where the ever-observant 12th-century monk Gerald of Wales (see Manorbier, Dyfed) recorded 'immense palaces … hot baths, the remains of temples and an amphitheatre', and wondered at the sophistication of such people. The surviving amphitheatre at Caerleon is calculated to have seated 6,000 people. Roman sites are still being discovered, including one in 2008 outside Dolgellau, and a Mithraic temple near Caernarfon, the Roman Segontium.

With the colonists eventually came Christianity, though how far it penetrated into the Welsh population is unknown. Nor do we know what survived after the Romans left, when Magnus Maximus retreated from Britain in AD 383 to attempt to seize the imperial throne and rescue the Roman empire. This

Bryn-celli-ddu: mystic prehistory

ignorance is particularly regrettable since, while many inhabitants may have reverted to paganism, the new faith must have put down such firm roots that, barely a century after the Roman departure, a Christian movement appears to have swept the country, more remarkable than any recorded in Europe, the so-called age of saints. It was in the two centuries after the retreat of Rome that this region emerged as distinctively Welsh, yet we know almost nothing about its development.

Scholars believe that the 5th-century *clas* or teaching monastery at Llantwit Major in Glamorgan may have been founded at least within living memory of a Roman presence. There is a Roman villa here and the founder of Llantwit, Illtud, made it a centre of Christian study, sending missions to Ireland, Cornwall and Brittany. Illtud was believed to have been taught by Germanus of Auxerre in Gaul, one of the few known characters to have visited Britain in the immediate aftermath of the Roman retreat, in AD 429. There appear to have been many Roman patricians still resident. Archaeology records villas still in occupation well into the 5th century.

We assume that the remaining Romans (like the Britons in 20th-century India) did not abandon their habits or their religion. By then men of charisma and zeal were forming *clasau* (plural of *clas*) throughout Wales. St Samson passed from Llantwit to Caldy (Dyfed) and Cornwall. The patron saint of Irish Christianity, Patrick, is said to have come from Llantwit, or at least studied there. There were *clasau* at Llanbadarn, Tywyn, Meifod and at least thirty other sites. The one founded by Deiniol at Bangor in 525 claims to be the oldest cathedral in Britain. St David, the devout son of a Dyfed king, founded a *clas* in his native Pembrokeshire in the mid-6th century which became a centre of Celtic Christianity for 500 years.

Wales in other words was almost certainly not 're-Christianised' by Irish missionaries, as was once thought, but shared in a continuous post-Roman Christian culture that inspired and united the coastal peoples of the Irish Sea in the 5th and 6th centuries, a time when England was preoccupied with invasions of pagan Angles, Saxons and, later, Scandinavians.

The Anglo-Saxon occupation of England was protracted and terrible. The newcomers slaughtered or evicted the British and drove them north and west, evidenced by the almost complete supplanting of the Brythonic language in England, and the probable driving of some Britons to settle with their language in Brittany. It was this process that created Wales, secure in its mountains where lowland Saxons were loathe to venture. When the 6th-century missionary, Beuno, heard Anglo-Saxon being spoken on the far side of the Severn, he was disturbed by such 'strange-tongued men whose voice I heard across the river' and vowed to go no farther. These people, he prophesied, 'will obtain possession of this place, and it will be theirs and they will hold it for themselves.'

The survival of a continuous Brythonic culture in Wales is the only sensible explanation for the vigour of Christianity at this time. Yet for a book primarily about buildings it is a baffling period. The departure of the Romans led to an abrupt halt in the archaeological record of building activity. As the Welsh historian John Davies points out, 'The ethos which had sprung from the Greeks and which had been spread by the Romans vanished … With the long sunset came an age of myth and fantasy almost devoid of historical certainties.'

Myth and fantasy dominate what evidence we have. The writings in Latin about Wales of the 6th-century Gildas and the 9th-century Nennius tended to treat history as the stuff of sermons and diatribes. To Gildas the Saxon invasion was a straightforward punishment of the Britons for their sins. Nennius admitted that he based his writings on 'a heap of legends' and, where checkable, displays what Davies calls a 'monumental ignorance'. To him we owe the origins of the Arthur myth.

The paramount source on the British church in the Dark Ages, the Venerable Bede, used Gildas as a source and was hopelessly anti-Welsh (and pro-Irish). The Welsh, he wrote, had 'a natural hatred for the English and uphold their own bad customs against the true Easter of the Catholic church: nevertheless they are opposed by the power of God and man alike.' The best that can be said for these sources is that they validate the existence of an active religious culture in Wales back to the 5th century, one that was worthy of their critical attention.

There were as yet no towns to replace those abandoned by the Romans and we are bereft of evidence as to how the Welsh lived in the Dark Ages. It is assumed that they continued to inhabit such enclosures as Tre'r Ceiri (Gwynedd), the 'Welsh Machu Picchu' on the mountains of the Llŷn, or the stone huts at Dinllugwy (Anglesey). Other buildings, which would have been of wood and thatch, have long vanished.

The structure of government in the three centuries after the Roman departure is equally obscure. An Irish king, Nial, plundered west Wales in 405 and Irish influences are detectable in the south-west, notably an Irish script known as ogham, which occurs on standing stones only in this region. Brecon owes its name to an Irish king. A north Briton from the present Cumbria, Cunedda, invaded Anglesey some time after the Roman departure, some claim in order to drive out migrant Irish at the behest of the remaining Romans.

Here it was Cunedda's sons who founded the royal house of Gwynedd and were to claim sovereignty over it for some seven centuries. Cunedda represented a link between north Wales and Brythonic-speaking Northumbria, where his

people were being pushed northwards by the Anglo-Saxons. His court, moving between Northumbria and north Wales, produced the earliest Welsh poets, including Aneirin and Taliesin. The former told of battles against the Saxons by the 'old northerners' as far south as Yorkshire, where 'Although they were being slain, they slew;/ To the world's end they will be honoured.'

Aneirin's 'northern' Welsh was widely spoken in the Scots border country and lives on in such place names such as Penrith, Lanercost and Cumbria, similar to the Welsh word for Wales, Cymru. If his 9th-century copyists were accurate, Aneirin's tongue was remarkably pure and explains Gerald of Wales's remark in the 12th century that north Welsh was a richer language than that in the south, because its speakers were 'less intermixed with foreigners' (presumably Irish and Normans).

In his new introduction to the great Welsh epic, the Mabinogion, Will Parker points out that north Welsh culture in the Dark Ages was in large part that of refugees, dreaming of their lost lands in north Britain and forging a vigorous identity that was to colour and fracture Welsh politics for almost a millennium.

The descendents of Cunedda, such as Maelgwn Gwynedd and Cadwaladr, ruled Gwynedd through most of the Dark Ages. Powys, along the mid-Welsh border, was ruled by Eliseg, Cyngen and Rhodri Mawr, until the Cadwgans became its ancestral princes. South Wales was more divided, between Dyfed and Ceredigion (Pembroke and Cardigan) in the west and Brycheiniog (Brecon), Glywysing (Glamorgan) and Gwent in the east. But records were sparse and subsequent attacks by Vikings tended to eradicate archaeological evidence. John Davies's diagram of the royal houses of Wales in the Dark Ages is as complicated as the map of the London Underground.

Meanwhile the Welsh church was evolving from the age of the *clasau* to a more Roman coherence of episcopal spheres of influence, represented eventually by dioceses at Llandaff, St David's and Bangor. Here at last we have evidence of sorts, in stone crosses, place names and the outline of sacred enclosures. Wales starts to emerge from legend into fact.

The crosses are most vivid. While churches of wood and turf were rising and falling, crosses survived with their decoration and inscriptions intact, whether in Roman or Irish ogham script. Two stones in the churchyard at Nevern (Dyfed) mark the beginning and the end of this period, one to the Latin-named Vitalianus, possibly of the 5th century, the other, the great Nevern Cross, an abstract design of the 11th. They straddle an astonishing six centuries of British history.

Like those displayed in the collection at Margam (Glamorgan) the Nevern Cross displays a remarkable craftsmanship. To Jan Morris, ever the sardonic observer, 'the notorious deviousness of the Welsh finds its exact imagery in the convoluted art forms of the Celts, which depended upon illusory circles, disturbing knots and bafflingly inconclusive squiggles.' Yet they were works of great skill. As Nora Chadwick writes (in *The Celts*), 'A single false step, a slip of the tool, and the entire cross would have been ruined. But we do not find false cuts. The whole is of an almost mechanical perfection.' The crosses bear witness to the earliest known Welsh art, flourishing for some five centuries before the Norman conquest.

Interpreting sacred enclosures is more complex. The sites took their names from the founder of a church, who might be a hermit, monk, chief or son of a king. Many early 'saints' appear to have enjoyed hereditary authority and their monasteries were de facto centres of civil as well as religious life. David was allegedly the son of a king of Dyfed, Tysilio of a prince of Powys and Cadoc of a prince of Glamorgan. The prefix for a sacred place, *llan*, might be applied to the name of a local chief as well as a holy man. Hence Llangybi might be just the sacred enclosure of Cybi's clan.

Traces of these structures remain in their often circular plans and groves of yews, which later builders tended to respect even as they rebuilt walls and roofs. Short and with no architectural division between nave and chancel, Celtic churches had square-ended chancels (as opposed to the Norman apses) and no towers. A sense of these places can be had at Llandrillo (Clwyd) and St Govan (Dyfed). By the 11th and 12th centuries more were of stone. Some so-called 'Norman' churches, possibly Tywyn (Gwynedd) and Penmon (Anglesey), may have nothing to do with the Normans and more with the Irish/Welsh culture of the period. The surviving rounded arch at Strata Florida (Dyfed) post-dates the conquest but is clearly not Norman.

The ghosts of these Celtic churches flit across Wales's lonely beaches, mountains and deserted valleys, evoking the Dark Ages more forcefully than anywhere else I know in Europe. Their worship remained independent of Canterbury and Rome and was still under the guidance of the *clasau* into the 12th century. A remarkable priest at Llanbadarn (Dyfed), Rhygyfarch, author of a life of St David and of the Llanbadarn Psalter (now in Trinity College, Dublin), lamented the decline of the old church: 'One vile Norman intimidates one hundred natives with his command/ And terrifies them with his look./ You, Wales … your beard droops and your eye is sad.' It has been the cry of the Welsh down the ages.

By the 9th century more concerted attempts were being made to assert national unity in the face of the Saxon and Viking menace. Evidence is the 170-mile dyke constructed by the Mercian king Offa to delineate the Welsh/English border in 784. By the middle of the next century, Rhodri Mawr of Powys had conquered and ruled most of Wales. His grandson, Hywel Dda, through

judicious marriage, governed Gwynedd, Powys and Deheubarth (Dyfed and the present Breconshire) and negotiated a peace with the English earls.

In the 940s Hywel formulated a Welsh legal code whose emphasis on the folk-law of kinship (and the rights of women and children) rather than the law of regal and ecclesiastic authority survived in parts of Wales into the 16th century. It is regarded as among the most liberal codes in Europe at the time, even laying down the three grades of bard, the lowest being minstrel. The 'laws of Hywel Dda' gave early substance to Welsh cultural self-awareness. They were a seminal document of national consciousness.

A century after Hywel's death in 950, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, king of Gwynedd, conquered Powys, Deheubarth and Morgannwg (Glamorgan and Gwent) and thus achieved the Welsh Encyclopedia's accolade of being 'the sole ruler in the history of Wales to have authority over the whole country.' But in 1062 Gruffudd fell foul of the powerful English earl Harold Godwinesson and was murdered by a Welsh rival.

Wales thus contrived to fall apart when it most needed to stand together, just three years before the Norman conquest. A century later, Wales's most remarkable commentator, the monk Gerald of Wales (see Manorbier, Dyfed), son of a Norman father and a Welsh mother, was to reflect on this core weakness of the Welsh. They were, he wrote, 'as easy to subdue in battle as they are difficult to subdue in war … If only they could be inseparable, they would be insuperable.' But they were not inseparable. Wales was never conquered by the Saxons but its feuds and political fissures, its internal belligerence, ill-prepared it for the whirlwind that arrived on its borders at the end of the 11th century.

THE NORMAN CONQUEST

The Normans were the new Romans. While it took them three years to subdue England, it took them three centuries to subdue Wales. English historians, their tunnel vision fixed on wars with Scotland and France, grossly underrate the effort and expense that medieval English kings were forced to devote to holding Wales in thrall. Its strategic position on the route to Ireland and adjacent to the Midlands meant that control over it was both crucial and unreliable.

Wales was to demand a prodigious political and military enterprise, involving periodic wars and strategic marriages, the building of costly castles, monasteries and colonies, and the creation of an extraordinary class of Marcher lords, whose potency was to cause English kings constant trouble. When a devastating civil war, the Wars of the Roses, eventually engulfed England, Wales

St David's Cathedral: effigy of the Lord Rhys