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David E. Thornton,

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THE DEATH OF HYWEL DDA: A NOTE

Despite the fact that Hywel Dda was one of the most important Welsh rulers of the early middle ages, the date of his death has been a matter of some uncertainty among historians. Largely because of chronological difficulties in the relevant annalistic sources, there are in effect two alternative years in which he may have died: AD 949 or 950. Some historians have opted for either one of these alternatives,¹ whereas others have preferred the compromise '949/950' or (the present writer included!) have on occasion been inconsistent.² The purpose of this note is to review the issue of Hywel's *obit* and to present some relatively new evidence which, to my knowledge, has not been cited with reference to this problem and which should settle the matter.³

The earliest surviving Welsh source to record Hywel's death is the A-text of *Annales Cambriae* (=AC), which was completed in its extant

¹ Among those who have given AD 949 are D. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda: anglophil?', ante, 8 (1976-7), 1-13 (p.6), and A. D. Carr and Dafydd Jenkins, *A Look at Hywel's Law* (Whitland, 1985), p.5. Those who have given AD 950 include H. R. Loyn, 'Wales and England in the tenth century: the context of the Athelstan charters', ante, 10 (1980-1), 283-301 (p.98); David E. Thornton, 'Kings, chronicles and genealogies: reconstructing mediaeval Celtic dynasties', in K. S. B. Keats-Rohan (ed.), *Family Trees and the Roots of Politics* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp.23-40 (p.39); A. D. Carr, *Medieval Wales* (Basingstoke, 1995), p.27; A. H. Williams, *An Introduction to the History of Wales* (2 vols, Cardiff, 1941-8), I, 166; *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, ed. P. C. Bartrum (Cardiff, 1966), p.126.

² J. E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest* (3rd edn, London, 1939), I, 342; Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), p.106; David Walker, *Medieval Wales* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.5, 7. In addition, note David E. Thornton, 'Maredudd ab Owain (d. 999): Most Famous King of the Welsh', ante, 18 (1996-7), 567-91 (pp.568-9 [= 949/950], but p.571 [= 950]); and K. L. Maund, *Ireland, Wales, and England in the Eleventh Century* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp.42 (= 949), 37, 57, 63, 69 (= 950), 10, 25, 51, 101, 189 (= ca. 950).

³ Most of the material presented below indicates that Hywel did indeed die *ca.*

form at St David's probably during the period 954–977 (that is, during the reign of Hywel's son Owain) but is preserved in a later, non-Welsh manuscript.⁴ The chronological structure of the A-text is a 532-year 'Paschal' cycle which begins in AD 445, but there are problems with the chronology which means that the dating can be a year 'out' at various points.⁵ The 506th *annus*, which according to this chronology would equate to AD 950, states: *Higuel rex Brittonum obiit*.⁶ The two other extant versions of *AC* also record Hywel's demise:⁷

AC (B): Hoelus rex Britonum, scilicet Bonus, obiit.

AC (C): Howel rex Britonum, cognomento Bonus, moritur, cui successit Oweyn filius eius.

However, the respective chronological structures of these two texts have not yet been satisfactorily established so that their intended date(s) for the *obit* is not clear.⁸ All three versions of *AC* place Hywel's

950, and I will argue that 950 is the correct date. Consequently, we can safely discount the dubious evidence of a number of documents in the *Liber Landauensis* which would have us believe that he was still alive in the mid-950s or later: *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâv reproduced from the Gwysaney Manuscript*, eds. J. Gwenogvryn Evans and John Rhys (Oxford, 1893), pp.218–21 (dated AD 955 in the text), and also 240–3 and 247–9 (which synchronize Hywel Dda with the English King Edgar (i.e., 957/59–975!)).

⁴ Egerton Phillimore, 'The *Annales Cambriae* and Old-Welsh genealogies from Harleian MS. 3859', *Y Cymmrodor*, 9 (1888), 141–83; see Kathleen Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Scottish and Welsh Sources*, ed. D. N. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1980), pp.69–70, 88–91; and David N. Dumville, 'The Welsh Latin annals', in his *Histories and Pseudo-Histories of the Insular Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 1990), essay III.

⁵ Davies, *Wales*, p.201; Dumville, 'The Welsh Latin annals', p.466; Kathryn Grabowski and David Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals of Mediaeval Ireland and Wales. The Clonmacnoise-Group Texts* (Woodbridge, 1984), p.210.

⁶ Phillimore, 'The *Annales Cambriae*', p.168; also see *A[nnales] C[ambriae]*, ed. J. Williams ab Ithel (London, 1860), p.18.

⁷ London, Public Record Office, E164/1, p.10 (= B-text); London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A.1, fo. 141r (= C-text). For the texts of the two relevant entries, see *Annales Cambriae*, ed. Williams, p.18, and nn.19–20. In the MS of the C-text, a later hand has added the marginal note '948' next to Hywel's entry.

⁸ Williams's edition is unsatisfactory in this regard. K. L. Maund is working on a new edition of the *Annales* which, it is hoped, will serve to clear up the chronological problems at this point.

death in the *third* year after that of King Edmund of England. However, since Edmund was murdered on 26 May 946,⁹ then counting forward three years from 946 we would therefore get AD 949, and *not* 950, as the year for Hywel's own demise. Furthermore, the late Thomas Jones invariably favoured 949 in his editions of the vernacular Welsh *Brut y Tywysogyon*.¹⁰ Of these, MS Pen. 20 and all later copies of this version are unfortunately in lacuna at this point, compelling Jones to supply the equivalent text from the Red Book of Hergest version. Furthermore, the Hergest version itself gives no date whatsoever, simply recording:

A Howel Da vab Cadell vrenhin, pen a molyant yr holl Vrytanyeit, a vu varw.

(And King Hywel Dda ap Cadell, the head and glory of all the Britons, died.)

Here, Jones supplied the editorial date [949]. However, the equivalent entry in the related chronicle, *Brenhinedd y Saesson*, does supply a date:

Anno .IX^C.XLVIII. y bu varw Howel vab Cadell, brenhin a gogoneant holl Kymre.

(In the year 948, Hywel ap Cadell, the king and glory of all Wales, died.)

Here we have AD 948,¹¹ but Jones 'corrected' the text's date to [949]. The evidence of the Cambro-Latin and vernacular Welsh chronicles for the death of Hywel Dda is somewhat confused therefore: the earliest would seem to favour AD 950 but there are difficulties with the

⁹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (A and D), s.a. 946; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn, London, 1971), p.360.

¹⁰ *Brut y Tywysogyon. Peniarth MS 20*, ed. Thomas Jones (Cardiff, 1941), and *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Peniarth MS 20 Version*, trans. Thomas Jones (Cardiff, 1952), s.a. [-949]; *Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Red Book of Hergest Version*, ed. and trans. Thomas Jones (2nd edn, Cardiff, 1973), s.a. [949]; *Brenhinedd y Saesson or The Kings of the Saxons. BM Cotton MS Cleopatra B.v and The Black Book of Basingwerk, NLW MS 7006*, ed. and trans. Thomas Jones (Cardiff, 1971), s.a. 948 [=949].

¹¹ 948 was also supplied by the antiquary David Powel and was probably therefore the date found in the lost version(s) of the *Brut* to which he had access: *The Historie of Cambria, now called Wales* (London, 1584; facs. repr. Amsterdam and New York, 1969), p.58.

chronology of this text; and, of the Middle Welsh chronicles, only one supplies a specific date, which in itself is in need of editorial 'correction'.

However, these chronologically problematic Welsh sources are not the only surviving medieval witnesses to Hywel's death. For instance, the event is also recorded in two Irish chronicles.¹² The Annals of Ulster read:¹³

KĪ Ianair .Anno Domini .DCCCC°[49°. alias . DCCCC°.50°.] . . . Oel ri Bretan moritur.

(Kalends of January . In the year of the Lord 9[49, alias 950] . . . Hywel, king of the Britons, died.)

Here, the underlying date of AD 949 has been 'corrected' to 950 by a later glossator in the copy in Trinity College, Dublin, MS H.I.8, and scholars are generally agreed that this would be the 'true dating' for the underlying chronicle.¹⁴ In addition, the seventeenth-century translation known as the Annals of Clonmacnoise records that '*Hoell mcCahall king of Wales died*' in the annal-entry for the year '945',¹⁵ which equates to that for '949 alias 950' in the Annals of Ulster as quoted above. These two Irish chronicles would therefore date Hywel's death to AD 950, though again this is only so once they have been 'corrected' by later copyists or modern editors. In addition, it is not clear whether these two (slightly differently worded) notices reflect a contemporary Irish recording of Hywel's death (in which case, the dating may be reliable) or whether the annal-entry was incorporated into an earlier Irish

¹² Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals*, p.225.

¹³ *The A[nnals of] Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, ed. and trans. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, I (Dublin, 1983), 394–5.

¹⁴ For example, see Paul Walsh, 'The dating of the Irish annals', *Irish Historical Studies*, 2 (1940–1), 355–75. In this instance, the glossator *H*² has also supplied the 'Arabic' numbers 49.

¹⁵ *The A[nnals of] Clon[macnoise, being Annals of Ireland from the Earliest Period to A.D. 1408, translated into English by Conell Mageoghagan]*, ed. Denis Murphy (Dublin, 1896), p.155. The patronymic *mcCahall* is clearly a translation of the Irish 'mac Cathail', used for 'son of Cadell'.

chronicle from a Welsh source (in which case, the chronology would be dependent upon that of the Welsh source).¹⁶

Finally, the twelfth-century northern English annalistic compilation known as *Historia Regum*, traditionally attributed to Symeon of Durham, contains two references to Hywel's death, both *sub anno* 951: *Ouuel rex Brittonum obiit*.¹⁷ The first of these references occurs in the so-called 'Second Set of Northern Annals' (888–957) which may have been compiled not long after Hywel's death.¹⁸ However, analysis of the chronology at this point would suggest that the date 951 is probably erroneous and therefore, despite its relative contemporaneity, this text does not represent a third option: the two entries immediately preceding the record of Hywel's *obit* (*s.a.* 948 and 950) appear to be two years ahead of the 'true' dating. This might suggest that our entry *s.a.* 951 should accordingly be 'corrected' to AD 949. However, the next entry (dated *s.a.* 952) 'seems' to be two years *too early*; and this difference in chronological disparity between the entries immediately before and after 951 means that the precise 'correction' for Hywel's notice is more difficult to determine.¹⁹ The entry in the *Historia*

¹⁶ However, David Dumville has argued that, whereas *AC* borrowed material from an Irish chronicle of the 'Clonmacnoise-group', the reverse was not the case: the tenth-century Welsh entries found in the Irish annals of this group cannot be derived directly from the equivalent Cambro-Latin annalistic accounts (for instance, the former supply patronymics which are lacking in the latter). He suggests that these notices in the Irish chronicles were transmitted orally and more or less contemporaneously: see Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals*, p.226. However, the fact that *AU* (like *AC*, but unlike *AClon*) does not supply the patronymic may be significant.

¹⁷ *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. Thomas Arnold (RS, 75, 2 vols, London, 1882–5), II, 94, 127; *English Historical Documents*, I, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (2nd edn, London, 1979), p.279. A new edition of the 'Northern Annals' contained in the *Historia* is forthcoming in the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition' series. For Hywel's entry, see also Grabowski and Dumville, *Chronicles and Annals*, p.225, n.67.

¹⁸ P. H. Blair, 'Some observations on the "Historia Regum" attributed to Symeon of Durham', in *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. N. K. Chadwick (Cambridge, 1963; rev. imp. 1964), pp.63–118 (pp.104–6).

¹⁹ On these chronological problems, see Blair, 'Some observations', pp.104–6; W. S. Angus, 'The annals for the tenth century in Symeon of Durham's *Historia Regum*', *Durham University Journal*, 32 (1939–40), 213–29 (p.228).

therefore is an interesting additional witness, but cannot be used to resolve the chronological difficulty at issue.

The evidence of these Welsh and 'foreign' annalistic sources for the date of the death of Hywel Dda is therefore somewhat uncertain. There is a strong case for preferring AD 950, but until the chronological schemes of the three versions of *AC* have been thoroughly established, this conclusion must surely remain provisional. However, there is evidence from a non-Celtic and non-annalistic source which seems to establish the case for 950 with greater certainty. The occurrence of Welsh and Scottish kings as witnesses in a handful of Anglo-Saxon royal charters during the period 928–56 has long been known and studied by historians; and Hywel Dda, as the predominant Welsh ruler for most of this period, is the most common Welsh witness so recorded.²⁰ The chronological range for the published charters in which Hywel Dda (Howæl) is named is 928–49, indicating that he was indeed still alive in AD 949. However, there are two further Anglo-Saxon charters witnessed by Welsh kings among a series of (as yet) unpublished charters of Barking abbey, Essex, which came to light in 1968–9.²¹ The first charter is dated 932 and records a grant of land in *Buram* (possibly Bowers Gifford) by Athelstan to Abbot Beorhtsig.²² However, the second (of the so-called 'alliterative' type) records a grant of land in *Lippanwelle* (possibly in Barnstaple hundred) and *Ciricdune*

²⁰ See Loyn, 'Wales and England'; Kirby, 'Hywel Dda'; and, Lloyd, *HW*, I, 335–7, 353. I have briefly discussed elsewhere the identities of some lesser Welsh witnesses to the Anglo-Saxon royal charters: David E. Thornton, 'Predatory nomenclature and dynastic expansion in early medieval Wales', *Medieval Prosopography*, 20 (1999), 1–22 (pp.18–20).

²¹ Hatfield House, MS Ilford Hospital 1/6, fos. 16rv and 17v–18r. This manuscript is a late sixteenth-century cartulary of Ilford Hospital, Essex, based upon a lost cartulary of Barking. On the discovery of these charters, see Herbert Hope Lockwood, 'Sources and developments of local historical studies in the Barking and Ilford area', *Transactions of the Ilford and District Historical Society*, I (1973), 1–32 (pp.28–9); and idem, 'One thing leads to another: the discovery of additional charters of Barking Abbey', *Essex Journal*, 25 (1990), 11–13. I am grateful to Professor Simon Keynes for his advice about these documents.

²² The Welsh witnesses to this first charter are (in order): *Howæll subregulus* . . . *Iudwal subregulus* . . . *Morcant subregulus*. All three names occur as witnesses to other English charters and are probably to be identified with Hywel Dda, his kinsman Idwal Foel, king of Gwynedd, and Morgan ab Owain, king of Morgannwg (on whom, see below).

(at Chingford) by King Eadred to Barking: it is dated to AD 950 and, in addition, to the fourth regnal year of Eadred.²³

The witness list includes the names *Howel regulus cum Morcante* ('Hywel *regulus* with Morgan'). Hywel Dda is normally identified as the *regulus* named in the charters after 946 so it seems reasonable to assume that this is Hywel here also.²⁴ In addition, the title-less Morgan named here with Hywel is no doubt Morgan 'Hen' ab Owain (*ob.* 974), king of Morgannwg, who occurs as a witness to twelve other Anglo-Saxon royal charters (for the period 931–56). The two Welshmen head the list of notable lay witnesses to the charter and this is consistent with the ordering of names in other charters.

If the identification of *Howel regulus* with Hywel Dda holds (and there seems little reason to doubt it), then the second Barking charter provides strong evidence that Hywel was still alive in AD 950. This fact undermines the date AD 949 for his *obit* according to some annalistic sources (or their modern editors), and would suggest rather that he died at a subsequent point in 950, as recorded in other chronicles.

DAVID E. THORNTON

Bilkent University, Ankara

²³ An edition of these Barking charters is forthcoming by Cyril Hart in the 'Anglo-Saxon Charters' series: they will be no. 5 and 9 respectively. For the present, the text of the charters can be read on the website of the British Academy/Royal Historical Society Joint Committee on Anglo-Saxon Charters (where they are allotted the S ['Sawyer'] nos. 418a and 552a): <http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/sdk13/chartwww/barking.html>

The dating clause of S 552a reads: 'anno dominice incarnationis. Dccccl. et quarto quo regie dignitatis scepra suscepit.' Since Eadred probably succeeded his brother Edmund in May 946 (see above) and was crowned in August of that year, his fourth regnal year would be May or August 949–May or August 950. This presumably means that the charter dates before August 950. The date of AD 949 given by Hart elsewhere for this charter is clearly an error on his part: *The Danelaw* (London, 1992), p.434.

²⁴ Hywel's promotion in the charters from *subregulus* to *regulus* after 946 (and once, in Sawyer no. 550, dated 949, as *rex*) no doubt reflects the extension of his authority into Gwynedd following the killing of Idwal Foel by the English in 942/3 (this is another problematic date!).