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Three Welsh kings and Rome: royal pilgrimage, overlordship, and Anglo-Welsh relations in the early Middle Ages

REBECCA THOMAS

This article investigates the motivations behind royal pilgrimage to Rome in the early Middle Ages by examining the journeys of three Welsh kings (Cyngen ap Cadell in 854, Hywel in 886, and Hywel Dda in 928). These journeys have rarely been considered as a group, and in bringing them together this article proposes a new interpretation of Welsh royal pilgrimages, highlighting the important context of English overlordship. By scrutinizing the Welsh evidence in a comparative context, placing these Welsh journeys alongside examples from England and Ireland, this article also aims to contribute to our understanding of broader trends in early medieval royal pilgrimage.

Rome was a popular destination for early medieval kings from Britain and Ireland. The seventh and eighth centuries saw a striking number of English rulers relinquishing their kingship and journeying to Rome. This practice had gone out of fashion by the ninth century; when English kings went on pilgrimage to Rome, they now did so with the intention of returning. In this later context, there were often political reasons for undertaking such journeys, as seen in the case of Æthelwulf in 855 and that of Cnut in 1027. Our understanding of the journeys of these kings – both those who ended their days in Rome and those who returned to rule their

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kingdoms – has benefited from extensive scholarly discussion.¹ Attention has also been drawn to Irish parallels, such as the planned journey of an unnamed Irish king in 848, recorded in the *Annals of St Bertin*, and the pilgrimage of Sihtric, king of Dublin, in 1028.² The Welsh evidence, however, has gone largely unnoticed. There are three examples of Welsh kings travelling to Rome in the early Middle Ages that invite comparison with these instances of pilgrimage from England and Ireland. Cyngen, king of Powys, died in Rome in 854, followed by another individual known only as Hywel, who died there in 886. The final example is perhaps the most familiar: Hywel Dda (d. 950), king of Dyfed (and later also of Gwynedd) travelled to Rome in 928 and was the only one of our three kings to make the return trip to Wales.

Writing over a century ago, J.E. Lloyd drew a distinction between Hywel Dda, whom he interpreted as being driven to Rome out of his curiosity for the lands and peoples beyond his borders, perhaps using the English king Alfred as a model, and the other two Welsh kings. Of the pilgrimages of Cyngen and the first Hywel, he argued ‘it is clear that the journey was a penitential effort at the close of a busy and not too scrupulous reign, intended to smooth the pathway to a better world’.³ Lloyd’s assessment aside, there has been very little discussion of these Welsh pilgrimages to Rome. The individual pilgrimages are frequently cited in specific investigations of the reigns of Cyngen and Hywel Dda, but rarely are they considered as a group.⁴ By examining all three instances of Welsh royal pilgrimage in the early Middle Ages together, this article seeks to better understand why these rulers might have chosen to undertake their journeys to Rome.

However, these Welsh kings were not operating in a vacuum and examining the three instances alongside the evidence from England and Ireland is consequently crucial. Placing the Welsh royal pilgrimages in this broader context is a new way of examining these specific episodes, but also represents a fresh approach to investigating early medieval pilgrimage to Rome from Britain and Ireland more generally. As the Welsh evidence has been thus far neglected, its consideration in this manner has the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of broader trends in early medieval royal pilgrimage. This discussion will therefore begin with an examination of the English and Irish evidence, considering how scholars have interpreted these

¹ See discussion of this scholarship below.

² See below, pp. 563–4 and 567.

³ J.E. Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest*, 2 vols, 3rd edn (London, 1939), I, p. 334.

⁴ These pilgrimages are listed in an overview of the evidence for Welsh pilgrimage in the Middle Ages in H. Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales* (Oxford, 1993), p. 68.

pilgrimages and what general patterns have been identified. I will then consider each of the Welsh pilgrimages in turn. This will involve a detailed examination of the possible context for these journeys and a reassessment of the distinction drawn by Lloyd between the pilgrimage of Hywel Dda and those of the other two Welsh kings.

England, Ireland, and Rome

A significant number of English kings made the journey to Rome in the early Middle Ages, a trend which scholars have generally divided into two phases. In the first instance, several seventh- and eighth-century English kings chose to relinquish their position and spend the rest of their days in Rome, a phenomenon that has been explored by Clare Stancliffe. Four English kings ended their days in Rome in this period, and a further two kings planned such a journey.⁵ However, this specific practice had died out by the ninth century. English kings still journeyed to Rome, but they also, for the most part, returned to continue ruling their kingdoms.⁶ Indeed, Oliver Pengelley notes that whilst the examples of kings 'opting out' in the seventh and eighth centuries may have provided a model for ninth-century royal pilgrimage, the nature of these later pilgrimages varied significantly and possibly had more to do with political power than personal piety.⁷

A planned pilgrimage by an unnamed English king in 839 provides some evidence to support this idea of a shift in the nature of royal pilgrimage. For this year, the *Annals of St Bertin* state that Louis the Pious received envoys from an English king requesting permission to travel through his kingdom on pilgrimage to Rome. According to the annals, this king also encouraged the emperor to look after the souls of his people, sharing a vision experienced by an English priest. There follows a detailed account of the vision, in which the priest is warned that if the English do not repent and mend their ways, they will suffer divine punishment in the form of devastation by a pagan people. Joanna Story makes a convincing case that this communication with Louis ought to be associated with the West Saxon king Ecgerht (d. 839)

⁵ C. Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out', in P. Wormald *et al.* (eds), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 154–76, at pp. 156–7. The kings were Caedwalla of Wessex, Ine of Wessex, Cenred of Mercia and Offa of the East Saxons. Alchfrith, sub-king of Deira, and Oswiu of Northumbria planned to go to Rome. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the journey of Sigeric, king of the East Saxons, to Rome in 798, but Stancliffe notes that it is unclear whether he returned.

⁶ Stancliffe, 'Kings Who Opted Out', pp. 172–3. Burgred of Mercia is an exception that will be discussed further below, see p. 566.

⁷ O. Pengelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford (2010), p. 135.

rather than with his son Æthelwulf (d. 858). The former would have been planning a pilgrimage to Rome from a position of strength after securing the archbishop of Canterbury's support for himself and his heirs at the Council of Kingston in 838, whilst it is unlikely that Æthelwulf would have wanted to leave at the sensitive time of organizing his succession to the West Saxon kingdom.⁸ Although this journey did not take place – Ecgberht died later in 839 – the context is important for understanding the reasons for undertaking pilgrimage to Rome in the ninth century. The vision of divine punishment and the proposed pilgrimage are not explicitly linked in the *Annals of St Bertin*, but it is probable that there is a connection between the fear of pagan armies expressed in the vision and Ecgberht's desire to journey to Rome.⁹ Of course, this may simply be the use of a common trope; indeed, Story illustrates how the vision might have been interpreted as pertinent to the situation of the Carolingian emperor by the compiler of the *Annals of St Bertin*.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it seems likely that the growing viking threat was one of the reasons Ecgberht sought to travel to Rome.

This is especially significant as it is a reoccurring theme when we turn to another instance of a planned royal pilgrimage to Rome in the ninth century, this time by an Irish king. In the year 848, the *Annals of St Bertin* state that the Irish drove the vikings from Ireland with divine support, and as a consequence the Irish king sent envoys with gifts to Charles, and sought permission to travel through his kingdom on pilgrimage to Rome.¹¹ The Irish annals list a series of victories over the vikings in 848 by the high-king of Ireland, Máel Sechnaill, as well as Ólchobor, king of Munster, Tigernach, king of southern Brega, and the Éoganacht of Cashel. This winning streak continued as Máel Sechnaill and Tigernach plundered Dublin the following year.¹² As the

⁸ J. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750–870* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 222–3. See also S. Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Entries in the "Liber Vitae" of Brescia', in J.L. Nelson and M. Godden (eds), *Alfred the Wise* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 99–119, at p. 113, n. 58. Cf. R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Harlow, 1998), pp. 64–5; also P.E. Dutton, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln and London, 1994), pp. 107–8.

⁹ For discussion of the connection between this vision and the viking attacks, see C. Downham, 'The Earliest Viking Activity in England', *English Historical Review* 132 (2017), pp. 1–12, at pp. 10–11.

¹⁰ Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 220–1. See also Dutton, *Politics of Dreaming*, pp. 107–10.

¹¹ *Annals of St Bertin, s.a. 848*, ed. G. Waitz, *Annales Bertiniani, MGH SRG 5* (Hanover, 1883), p. 36; trans. J. Nelson, *The Annals of St-Bertin* (Manchester, 1991), p. 66. This has also been connected with the arrival of Sedulius Scottus at Liege in Belgium, see N.K. Chadwick, 'Early Culture and Learning in North Wales', in N.K. Chadwick *et al.*, *Studies in the Early British Church* (Cardiff, 1958), pp. 29–120, at pp. 101–2; D. Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland 400–1200*, 2nd edn (Abingdon, 2017), p. 264.

¹² For discussion see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid (d. 862)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/17770>; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 596–7.

Irish annals do not mention the proposed pilgrimage to Rome, we cannot with certainty identify the king of the Irish mentioned in the *Annals of St Bertin*. If this king was, as is often assumed, the high-king Máel Sechnaill, it may be significant that the Irish annals record a rebellion against him in 850, the year following his victory in Dublin, by Cináed son of Conaing, king of Ciannacht, with the support of the Gaill.¹³ No action by Máel Sechnaill himself is recorded in this year, with the high-king reappearing in 851, as the annals record his drowning of the same Cináed.¹⁴ We could postulate that Máel Sechnaill's absence on a pilgrimage to Rome might have provided the ideal context for Cináed's rebellion. However, this is simply speculation; even if Máel Sechnaill did plan a pilgrimage after his victory over the vikings in 848 there is no evidence that this plan was put into action. It is nevertheless significant that the *Annals of St Bertin* once more understood there to be a connection between this planned pilgrimage and the vikings.

We cannot be sure that Máel Sechnaill made it to Rome, and Ecgberht certainly did not, but there is enough evidence to support the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* record of two West Saxon royal pilgrimages, by Alfred in 853 and Æthelwulf in 855.¹⁵ Alfred's journey in 853 is corroborated by the *Liber Vitae* of S. Salvatore in Brescia, which includes two groups of English names as visitors to the monastery. Alfred's name occurs twice in the first group, which Simon Keynes has associated with the journeys of 853 and 855.¹⁶ A fragmentary letter from Leo IV to Æthelwulf, describing how the pope decorated Alfred as a spiritual son, supplies further evidence.¹⁷ The exact nature and purpose of this ceremony is disputed, although scholars have been sceptical of the claim made in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and developed by Asser in his *Life of King Alfred*, that Alfred was consecrated and anointed. It seems likely that this is an exaggerated account of a ceremony that was

¹³ *Annals of Ulster, s.a. 850*, ed. and trans. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 308–9. For scholarship connecting the embassy to Rome with Máel Sechnaill, see Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 264.

¹⁴ *Annals of Ulster, s.a. 851*, ed. and trans. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, pp. 310–11. For further discussion of the rebellion and drowning see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 596–7; D. Ó Corráin, 'High-Kings, Vikings and Other Kings', *Irish Historical Studies* 22 (1979), pp. 283–323, at pp. 305–10.

¹⁵ Janet Nelson expressed doubt over Alfred's journey to Rome in 853, but subsequently conceded the likelihood of its occurrence, compare J.L. Nelson, 'The Problem of King Alfred's Royal Anointing', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (1967), pp. 145–63; *eadem*, 'The Franks and the English in the Ninth Century Reconsidered', in P.E. Szarmach and J.T. Rosenthal (eds), *The Preservation and Transmission of Anglo-Saxon Culture* (Kalamazoo, 1997), pp. 141–58; *eadem*, 'Power and Authority at the Court of Alfred', in J. Roberts and J. Nelson (eds), *Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Related Themes in Memory of Lynne Grundy* (Exeter, 2000), pp. 311–37, at p. 319.

¹⁶ Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Entries', pp. 107–9 and 112–14

¹⁷ For further discussion of this evidence see Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 234–5.

in fact more ambiguous in nature.¹⁸ Nevertheless, based on this evidence we can be sure that the pilgrimage occurred, and that Alfred was involved. As Story notes, sending an advance party to make arrangements for a subsequent royal pilgrimage is a commonality between the two other pilgrimages already discussed, and may also have been Æthelwulf's intention in 853.¹⁹

Despite not being named in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* account of Æthelwulf's pilgrimage, the double occurrence of Alfred's name in the *Liber Vitae* does provide some evidence to support Asser's claim that he accompanied his father to Rome in 855. We have seen that at least two ninth-century kings had already planned pilgrimages to Rome by 855, but as Story notes, the significance of Æthelwulf's journey lies in it being the first concrete instance of a king from Britain or Ireland departing for Rome still in possession of his royal status, and with a clear intention to return.²⁰ Pongelley's interpretation of the trip as a display of Æthelwulf's power on a European stage is convincing, as is the suggestion of Carolingian influence. Æthelwulf may very well have seen himself as following in Charlemagne's footsteps and it is perhaps significant that the *Liber Pontificalis* lists the extensive gifts given by the West Saxon king to the church in much the same way as it records the offerings of the Carolingian emperor.²¹ This all contributes to the image of a West Saxon king using pilgrimage to illustrate his political power, and in this respect, the domestic context is also crucial. Janet Nelson has pointed to the strength of Æthelwulf's position on the eve of his pilgrimage to Rome: the West Saxons had inflicted successive defeats on the vikings and had assisted the Mercians in subduing the Welsh, an alliance solidified by the marriage of Æthelwulf's daughter to the Mercian king Burgred.²² Considered from this perspective, then, Æthelwulf's pilgrimage may not be so dissimilar to that planned by Máel Sechnaill in 848 following victory over the vikings in Ireland.

Not all ninth-century kings who journeyed to Rome did so on the back of great victories, however. Indeed, the earliest ninth-century royal pilgrim was Eardwulf of Northumbria, who, according to the

¹⁸ Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 235–8; Pongelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', p. 143. Janet Nelson has suggested that Æthelwulf was ensuring that Alfred would inherit a part of his kingdom on his death: 'Franks and the English', pp. 145–6; Nelson, 'Power and Authority', pp. 319–20.

¹⁹ Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 233–4; Pongelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', p. 143. Richard Abels further notes that by sending Alfred to Rome Æthelwulf hoped to create a close spiritual bond between himself and the pope: *Alfred the Great*, pp. 66–7. See also Nelson, 'Franks and the English', pp. 145–6.

²⁰ Story, *Carolingian Connections*, p. 239.

²¹ Pongelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', pp. 148–9.

²² Nelson, 'Franks and the English', p. 144.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, was expelled from his kingdom in 806.²³ The *Annales regni Francorum* add that Eardwulf visited Charlemagne at Nijmegen and expressed his desire to visit the pope in Rome. The annals continue to report the reinstating of Eardwulf in Northumbria by papal and Carolingian envoys, a description of events corroborated by Leo III's correspondence.²⁴ In Eardwulf's case, therefore, it seems likely that he sought practical political assistance in Rome.²⁵ Burgred of Mercia was similarly expelled from his kingdom in 874, this time under pressure from the vikings, and he died in Rome shortly after his arrival.²⁶ However, in Burgred's case there is no evidence that he sought assistance from either the Franks or from Rome, and his pilgrimage might be most productively understood in the framework of those kings who 'opted out' in the seventh and eighth centuries, albeit a forced retirement under political pressure.²⁷ These examples illustrate the complexity of the reasons behind royal pilgrimage to Rome in the ninth century. Burgred may have travelled there for reasons of personal piety, but this was connected to his expulsion from Mercia by the vikings. In this instance, political and religious motivations cannot be disentangled entirely. It is perhaps significant that every pilgrimage planned or undertaken in the ninth century occurred in the wake of triumph or adversity at home. These journeys give the impression that Rome served as a final arbiter, a destination both for rulers asserting their strength following victory and for those in a position of weakness following defeat.

Although there is evidence to suggest that a close relationship was maintained between England and Rome throughout the ninth and tenth centuries, Burgred's journey in 874 marks the end of English royal pilgrimage to the city until the eleventh century.²⁸ The next

²³ ASC 806 D: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS D*, ed. G.P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), p. 19 (text); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Revised Translation*, ed. D. Whitelock with D.C. Douglas and S.I. Tucker (London, 1961; rev. 1965), p. 39 (trans.).

²⁴ *Annales regni francorum*, s.a. 808, ed. F. Kurze, *Annales regni francorum unde ab. a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, MGH SRG 6 (Hanover, 1895), p. 126. For discussion see D. Rollason, 'Eardwulf (fl. 796–c. 830)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8394>.

²⁵ Pengelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', p. 136.

²⁶ ASC 874 A: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS A*, ed. J.M. Bately (Cambridge, 1986), p. 49 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, p. 48 (trans.). Simon Keynes has identified Burgred and his entourage as the second group of names in the *Liber Vitae* of S. Salvatore, see Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Entries', pp. 109–10.

²⁷ Pengelley, 'Rome in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England', pp. 138–9.

²⁸ On different aspects of the relationship between England and Rome in this period see F. Tinti, 'The Archiepiscopal Pallium in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in F. Tinti (ed.), *England and Rome in the Early Middle Ages: Pilgrimage, Art, and Politics* (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 304–42; R. Naismith and F. Tinti, 'The Origins of Peter's Pence', *English Historical Review* 134 (2019), pp. 521–52.

English king recorded to have made the journey is Cnut, in 1027.²⁹ In a letter addressed to the archbishops of Canterbury and York and to all English people, Cnut explains that he went to Rome for the remission of his sins and to ensure the safety of his kingdom and its people.³⁰ When in Rome he also negotiated for a reduction in tolls for pilgrims travelling from England and the ending of demands for payment from English archbishops arriving at Rome to collect the pallium.³¹ However, there is also an important political dimension to this pilgrimage, as Cnut travelled to Rome for the coronation of Emperor Conrad by the pope, and was one of two rulers to act as witness to this ceremony. This episode thus reflects the political importance accorded to Cnut in Europe, but Cnut himself is also, not unlike Æthelwulf, asserting this political power.³² It has been suggested that Cnut's pilgrimage prompted the undertaking of a similar journey by Sihtric, king of Dublin, in 1028.³³ However, Marie Therese Flanagan has illustrated that, understood in an Irish context, Sihtric's pilgrimage was nothing new. Thus, a number of Irish ecclesiasts had made the journey in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but perhaps the most striking evidence is that of the death of Máel Ruanaid Ua Máel Doraid, king of Cenél Conaill, in Rome in 1027.³⁴ Whilst it is certainly possibly that Cnut's journey was influential, Sihtric's pilgrimage to Rome cannot be divorced from its Irish context.

It is worth reiterating Oliver Pengelley's statement, noted above, that pilgrimage to Rome from the ninth century onwards had more to do with political power than personal piety. All cases of voluntary pilgrimage discussed here support this interpretation. This is not to say that piety, or the appearance of piety, was unimportant; Cnut's letter illustrates the desire of kings to associate pilgrimage with the salvation

²⁹ This date is based on the reference in Cnut's letter to the coronation of Emperor Conrad by Pope John XIX. For discussion see E. Treharne, 'The Performance of Piety: Cnut, Rome, and England', in Tinti (ed.), *England and Rome in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 343–64, at p. 345, n. 6.

³⁰ This letter survives as a Latin translation in the works of John of Worcester and William of Malmesbury: John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, ed. and trans. R.R. Darlington et al., *The Chronicle of John of Worcester, volume II: The Annals from 450 to 1066* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 512–19; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum anglorum*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors et al., *William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum / 'The History of the English Kings'*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998–9), I, pp. 324–9. For a discussion of the penitential depiction of this pilgrimage, see Treharne, 'Performance of Piety', pp. 352–3.

³¹ For discussion of this passage in the letter see Treharne, 'Performance of Piety', pp. 346–7.

³² For the political background to this episode see T. Bolton, *Cnut the Great* (Baskerville, 2017), pp. 159–71; T. Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great: Conquest and the Consolidation of Power in Northern Europe in the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 181–2.

³³ A. Gwynn, *The Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, ed. G. O'Brien (Dublin, 1992), pp. 36–7 and 64.

³⁴ M.T. Flanagan, *Irish Society, Anglo-Norman Settlers, Angevin Kingship: Interactions in Ireland in the Late Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1989), p. 11.

of their people. Rather, what characterizes royal pilgrimage from the ninth century onwards, and marks a change from the practice of kings 'opting out' in the seventh and eighth centuries, is the increasing importance of an additional political dimension. For many kings, pilgrimage to Rome appears to have become a way of asserting political power, especially at moments of adversity or triumph. Of course, the specific reasons for undertaking pilgrimage varied from case to case, although it is noteworthy that interaction with the vikings appears as an important dimension. In this context, royal pilgrimage might be operating both as an act of piety and an assertion of political power. Indeed, certain instances of pilgrimage might be better understood in the context of royal response to the threat of the vikings more broadly, which increasingly included measures intended to evoke the mercy of God. Thus, royal pilgrimage could be compared to the programmes of public fasting and prayer seen during Æthelred II's reign, which were paralleled – and possibly inspired – by similar initiatives in Carolingian Francia.³⁵ However, whilst Æthelred sought to save his kingdom from destruction, Máel Sechnaill, as we have seen, wished to celebrate his victory. Crucially, the couple of kings who were forced from their kingdoms aside, kings who planned pilgrimage to Rome did so from a position of strength.

How do the instances of Welsh royal pilgrimage fit into this broader context? As outlined above, Cyngen of Powys and Hywel (with no further identification) died in Rome, in 854 and 886 respectively. Hywel Dda went on pilgrimage to Rome in 928, but also returned to rule his kingdom for two further decades. It is immediately clear that these instances of Welsh pilgrimage overlap with the journeys made by English kings – with an especially interesting correspondence between the journeys of Cyngen, Alfred and Æthelwulf – but also do not follow the same broader chronological trend. Thus, Welsh traffic continues through the tenth-century gap seen in the evidence from England. That two of these Welsh kings died in Rome also raises interesting questions about the nature of their journeys – were these kings 'opting out' or fleeing adversity, for example – with implications for our broader understanding of the connection between the positions of early medieval kings and their desire to undertake pilgrimage to Rome. It is clear, then, that there are benefits for bringing these instances of Welsh royal pilgrimage into dialogue both with each other and with royal pilgrimage to Rome from other parts of the Insular world in the early Middle Ages. As we do not have the same level of documentation for

³⁵ S. Keynes, 'An Abbot, an Archbishop, and the Viking Raids of 1006–7 and 1009–12', *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007), pp. 151–220. Discussion of Carolingian parallels at pp. 184–6.

the journeys of Welsh kings as for those of their English counterparts, the following investigation will rely on close examination of context in order to deduce the possible reasons for these pilgrimages.

Hywel Dda, 928

Hywel Dda was the last of the three Welsh kings to embark on a journey to Rome, but he will be considered first here as his is the case most clearly comparable to the above examples of ninth-century kings undertaking – or planning – such journeys with the intention of returning. In the thirteenth century it was claimed that Hywel went to Rome (accompanied by the bishops of St Davids, Bangor, and St Asaph) to obtain the stamp of papal authority for his revised laws.³⁶ However, this claim, which was intended to refute accusations that Welsh law was immoral, ought to be understood in a twelfth- and thirteenth-century context.³⁷ The Harleian Chronicle (the A-text of the *Annales Cambriae*) does not provide a reason for Hywel's journey (or any details of his entourage), simply stating 'King Hywel went to Rome'.³⁸ The death of Hywel's wife, Elen, is recorded in the same year, and some sort of connection has been proposed.³⁹ It is certainly possible that personal piety, linked to his wife's death, played a role in Hywel's decision to embark on pilgrimage, and also could have contributed to the development of his epithet *da* ('good'), which was in use by the twelfth century at the latest.⁴⁰ However, the above discussion of the ninth-century Irish and English examples illustrates the complex web of political reasons that also drove such journeys, and consequently the possibility of a political dimension merits consideration here.

³⁶ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350–1064* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 267–8.

³⁷ H. Pryce, 'The Prologues to the Welsh Lawbooks', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 33 (1986), pp. 151–87.

³⁸ 'Higuel rex perexit ad Romam': Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 928, ed. and trans. D.N. Dumville, *Annales Cambriae, A. D. 682–954: Texts A–C in Parallel* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 16. Scholars have recently moved away from using the A-, B-, and C-text of *Annales Cambriae* as labels for these chronicles as they are not different versions of the same chronicle. The name Harleian Chronicle is taken from the manuscript in which the chronicle is found: B. Guy, 'The Origins of the Compilation of Welsh Historical Texts in Harley 3859', *Studia Celtica* 49 (2015), pp. 21–56, at pp. 25–6. Hywel's pilgrimage is dated to 929 in the vernacular chronicle *Brut y Tywysogion* (according to Thomas Jones's corrected chronology): T. Jones (ed. and trans.), *Brut y Tywysogion or the Chronicle of the Princes, Red Book of Hergest Version* (Cardiff, 1955), pp. 12–13. Hywel's presence is recorded at Æthelstan's assemblies at Exeter in April 928 and Worthy in June 931, and consequently his journey to Rome must have occurred within this period. A possible connection between the pilgrimage and Hywel's relations with Æthelstan is discussed further below, see pp. 570–2.

³⁹ D. Thornton, 'Hywel Dda [Hywel Dda ap Cadell] (d. 949/50)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13968>. See entries for 928 in the Breviate (B-text) and Cottonian (C-text) Chronicles, ed. and trans. Dumville, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁰ For discussion of the development of the epithet, see Pryce, 'Prologues', pp. 166–7.

J.E. Lloyd linked this pilgrimage to the example set by Alfred in particular, suggesting that Hywel Dda was a 'warm admirer' of the English king and that his journey to Rome formed part of his effort to model himself on his hero.⁴¹ Whilst David Kirby convincingly contested this view of Hywel more generally, underlining the pragmatic nature of his kingship and relationship with the English, he nevertheless also conceived of an important English context to Hywel's pilgrimage.⁴² This journey presumably followed hot on the heels of Hywel's attendance at a royal assembly in Exeter, also in 928, the first of Æthelstan's royal assemblies at which the Welsh king's presence is recorded.⁴³ The previous year, in 927, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* lists Hywel as one of a number of kings who submitted to Æthelstan at Eamont, although it is likely that Hywel's submission pre-dated this meeting.⁴⁴ It is in this context that Kirby understands Hywel's pilgrimage, suggesting that his journey to Rome was 'an act of self-assertion and penance' following his submission to Æthelstan.⁴⁵ Simon Keynes has similarly drawn attention to the correlation between these events, noting that Hywel's decision to go on pilgrimage in the same year as his attendance at Æthelstan's assembly is 'interesting'.⁴⁶

It is worth exploring this possible English context further. If Lloyd's argument that Hywel was emulating Alfred can be dismissed, it is unlikely that his pilgrimage was directly inspired by English practice because, as we have seen, his journey occurs during the period when there are no comparable examples of English kings going to Rome.⁴⁷ Whilst Kirby's suggestion that Hywel's journey was prompted by his submission to Æthelstan is an intriguing alternative explanation, his interpretation of the pilgrimage as penitential goes too far. Kirby's argument implies that Hywel understood his submission to Æthelstan as an act for which he was required to do penance.⁴⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that this was the case. Submission to an English

⁴¹ Lloyd, *History of Wales*, I, p. 334.

⁴² D.P. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda: Anglophil?', *Welsh History Review* 8 (1976), pp. 1–13.

⁴³ For discussion see S. Keynes, 'Welsh Kings at Anglo-Saxon Royal Assemblies (928–55)', *Haskins Society Journal* 26 (2014), pp. 69–122; Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 510–19; H.R. Loyn, 'Wales and England in the Tenth Century: The Context of the Athelstan Charters', *Welsh History Review* 10 (1980–1), pp. 283–301.

⁴⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 511.

⁴⁵ Kirby, 'Hywel Dda', p. 4.

⁴⁶ Keynes, 'Welsh Kings', p. 88.

⁴⁷ Although other forms of contact continued, see n. 28 above.

⁴⁸ For discussion of practices of royal penance in the Middle Ages more generally, see S. Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance 900–1050* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 174–82; R. Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe 600–1200* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 123–30. For discussion of penitential pilgrimage in particular see R.A. Aronstam, 'Penitential Pilgrimages to Rome in the Early Middle Ages', *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 13 (1975), pp. 65–83.

king was nothing new, as Asser's account of the submission of the Welsh kings to Alfred in the 880s illustrates.⁴⁹ Of course, the exact nature of English overlordship would have varied from king to king.⁵⁰ However, the existence of some form of overlordship was a common feature of Anglo-Welsh relations in this period. Indeed, Thomas Charles-Edwards suggests that Æthelstan's overlordship over the Welsh was simply inherited from Edward the Elder, to whom the submission of Hywel, Idwal and Clydog in 918 was itself in fact a transferring of the Mercian overlordship established by his sister, Æthelflæd.⁵¹ The Merfynion dynasty (named after Hywel's great-grandfather and king of Gwynedd Merfyn Frych, d. 844) benefited from this overlordship, with the expansion of their power into south Wales presumably achieved with the cooperation, or at least consent, of the Mercians.⁵² Crucially, Charles-Edwards proposes that Æthelflæd may have pursued a deliberate policy of elevating Hywel's status as the primary Welsh ruler, thus shifting the power base of the Merfynion from Gwynedd to Dyfed.⁵³ This primacy continued during Æthelstan's reign, as the consistent placing of Hywel's name ahead of the other Welsh rulers in the witness lists to the English king's charters illustrates.⁵⁴ Similarly, Hywel's name appears first in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* record of rulers who submitted to Edward in 918 and Æthelstan in 927.⁵⁵ Hywel had thus benefited from his relationship with the Mercians and West Saxons, and, relative to the other Welsh kings, was in a powerful position.

In this context, it seems unlikely that submission to Æthelstan drove Hywel to undertake a penitential pilgrimage. However, Kirby also notes that it may have been an act of 'self-assertion', and this might be closer to the mark.⁵⁶ We have seen that in the ninth century, and indeed in the case of Cnut in the eleventh century, pilgrimage to Rome could function as a statement of political power, and it is possible that this was Hywel's intention. The pilgrimage might have affirmed Hywel's status in the eyes of the English king as chief among the Welsh rulers, and asserted his authority over the other

⁴⁹ See below, pp. 584–5.

⁵⁰ For discussion of the different forms of overlordship see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 326–7.

⁵¹ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 499–504 and 510–11. See also Keynes, 'Welsh Kings', p. 77.

⁵² Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 506–10.

⁵³ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 513.

⁵⁴ For discussion of this evidence see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 514–18; Keynes, 'Welsh Kings'.

⁵⁵ Charles Edwards notes that the list of kings who submitted to Æthelstan in 927 is organized both chronologically and by status. In other words, Hywel's name heads the list as the king whose submission occurred first, followed by the other rulers listed in order of status (Constantine of Alba; Owain of Gwent; Ealdred of Bamburgh): *Wales*, p. 511.

⁵⁶ Kirby, 'Hywel Dda', p. 4.

Welsh sub-kings. Underlining the strength of his own position might also have served as a strategy to dispel any opposition to the policy of cooperation with Æthelstan.⁵⁷ Æthelwulf's experience clearly highlighted the dangers of undertaking pilgrimage to Rome: despite taking precautions to ensure the stability of his kingdom, a rebellion still occurred in his absence.⁵⁸ Whilst we do not know for exactly how long Hywel was away, a journey to Rome inevitably involved a considerable absence from one's kingdom.⁵⁹ That Hywel not only had the confidence to undertake this journey, but also managed to return with his political status unscathed, further underlines the strength and stability of his position. Indeed, as Charles-Edwards notes, for Hywel to attend Æthelstan's royal assemblies, he needed to travel through the territories of other Welsh sub-kings. That he was able to do so implies a stable political climate, and it is in this context that we might best understand the pilgrimage to Rome.⁶⁰ Submission to Æthelstan is an additional important dimension here too, as English overlordship may have contributed to the creation of this climate, with loyalty to the same overlord encouraging peaceful relations between the Welsh sub-kings.⁶¹

We cannot be sure why Hywel went to Rome in 928. That he did so for reasons of personal piety cannot be dismissed, but, considering that Hywel's first recorded attendance at one of Æthelstan's royal assemblies occurred in the same year, also following the meeting at Eamont in 927, Anglo-Welsh political relations provide an additional interesting dimension. That he undertook a penitential pilgrimage as a direct consequence of his submission to Æthelstan is unlikely. Rather, this discussion has illustrated the possible complexity of the connection between the journey to Rome and Hywel's relationship with Æthelstan. We have seen instances in the ninth century of pilgrimage to Rome being planned or undertaken by kings as attempts to affirm

⁵⁷ Some evidence of opposition to Hywel's policy might be provided by the Welsh poem *Armes Prydein Vaur*, which is conventionally dated to the first half of the tenth century. This poem attacks the collection of tribute by the *mechteyrn* ('Great King'), believed to be either Æthelstan or Edmund, and encourages the south Welsh to rise up against the English. See *Armes Prydein Vaur*, esp. ll. 17–24 and 69–72, ed. I. Williams, *Armes Prydein: The Prophecy of Britain from the Book of Taliesin*, trans. R. Bromwich (Dublin, 1972), pp. 2–3 and 6–7. For a recent discussion of the possible context of this poem, and its likely connection to south Wales, see R. Thomas and D. Callander, 'Reading Asser in Early Medieval Wales: The Evidence of *Armes Prydein Vaur*', *ASE* 46 (2017), pp. 115–45, at pp. 116–18 and 142.

⁵⁸ On the provisions made by Æthelwulf, see R. Abels, 'Royal Succession and the Growth of Political Stability in Ninth-Century Wessex', *Haskins Society Journal* 12 (2002), pp. 83–97, at pp. 88–9. Cf. Story, *Carolingian Connections*, pp. 239–40.

⁵⁹ See n. 38 above.

⁶⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 518–19.

⁶¹ This is discussed further below, see p. 590.

their political power, in several cases from a position of strength following military victories or establishing domestic stability. Whilst Hywel's journey occurred in the wake of submission to Æthelstan, he may have been operating within this same framework, as the action of a king at the height of his power.

Cyngen ap Cadell, 854

The story of Cyngen ap Cadell, the king of Powys whom the Harleian Chronicle tells us died in Rome in 854, appears very different.⁶² His journey has been interpreted as an act of abdication, driven from his kingdom by 'old age and misfortune', not unlike the case of Burgred of Mercia two decades later.⁶³ The Mercians and West Saxons have been identified as the architects of this misfortune, whose attack on the Welsh in the previous year is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*.⁶⁴ Cyngen of Powys has thus been seen as a pitiful figure, perhaps even providing the inspiration for the Llywarch Hen character of the Welsh *englynion* poetry, depicted as an old man lamenting his miserable fate.⁶⁵ However, more recently scholars have treated this interpretation with some scepticism, querying in particular the idea of misfortune as the main driver behind Cyngen's journey to Rome. Pointing to the earlier examples of kings 'opting out', Patrick Sims-Williams has suggested that pilgrimage to Rome 'could be a fitting climax to a long and successful reign', in Cyngen's case a reign that may have started as early as 808.⁶⁶ Even if Cyngen was driven from his kingdom, Sims-Williams continues, this does not represent a straightforward connection with the West Saxon and Mercian attack of 853. It may be that we should look to the Merfynion of Gwynedd (who were likely in control of Powys by 886), the vikings,

⁶² Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 854, ed. and trans. Dumville, p. 12.

⁶³ Lloyd, *History of Wales*, I, p. 325.

⁶⁴ Lloyd, *History of Wales*, I, p. 325. ASC C 854 (=853): *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MSC*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keefe (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 56 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, p. 43 (trans.). Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 7, ed. W.H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of St Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1959), p. 67; trans. S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great, Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (London, 1983), p. 69.

⁶⁵ I. Williams, *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry: Studies*, ed. R. Bromwich (Cardiff, 1972), pp. 150–1; Chadwick, 'Early Culture and Learning', pp. 89–90.

⁶⁶ P. Sims-Williams, 'Historical Need and Literary Narrative: A Caveat from Ninth-Century Wales', *Welsh History Review* 17 (1994), pp. 1–40, at p. 34; Jones, 'Hereditas Pouoisi: The Pillar of Eliseg and the History of Early Powys', *Welsh History Review* 24 (2009), pp. 41–80, at p. 75.

or even alternative Powysian dynasties, as the source of Cyngen's misfortune.⁶⁷

The Harleian Chronicle does not refer to the West Saxon and Mercian attack of 853 and consequently we are reliant on the accounts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser's *Life of King Alfred*. There are subtle differences between these two accounts and a consideration of both is productive.⁶⁸ The C-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (which gives the fullest version of this entry) states:

In this year Burgred, king of the Mercians, and his council asked King Æthelwulf to help him to bring the Welsh under subjection to him. He then did so, and went with his army across Mercia against the Welsh, and they made them all submissive to him.⁶⁹

The focus here is clearly on the submission or subjection of the Welsh. Asser, however, expands on this account and heightens the rhetoric:

In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 853 (the fifth of King Alfred's life), Burgred, king of the Mercians, sent messengers to Æthelwulf, king of the West Saxons, asking him for help, so that he could subject to his authority the inland Welsh, who live between Mercia and the western sea and who were struggling against him with unusual effort. As soon as King Æthelwulf had received his embassy, he assembled an army and went with King Burgred to Wales, where

⁶⁷ Sims-Williams, 'Historical Need', p. 34. The assumption that the Merfynion had taken control of Powys by 886 is based on the absence of Powys from Asser's list of kingdoms whose kings were driven to submit to Alfred from 886 onwards, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 487.

⁶⁸ Scholars agree that the copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* used by Asser does not match any of the surviving manuscripts exactly and thus must lie more than one stage back in its transmission: J. Bately, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Texts and Textual Relationships* (Reading, 1991), pp. 53 and 62; Stevenson (ed.), *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. lxxxv–lxxxviii. Use of Cambro-Latin features (such as *sinistralis* for north) and Welsh additions (place names, for example) suggest that Asser was translating the *Chronicle* himself: Stevenson, *Asser's Life*, p. lxxxiv; S.D. Keynes, 'On the Authenticity of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47 (1996), pp. 529–51, at pp. 544–6; R.L. Thomson, 'British Latin and English History: Nennius and Asser', in R.L. Thomson (ed.), *A Medieval Miscellany in Honour of John Le Patourel* (Leeds, 1982), pp. 38–53, at pp. 48–53.

⁶⁹ 'Her bæd Burhred Myrcna cing 7 his witan Æpelwulf cing þæt he him gefultomode þæt he him Norðwealas gehyrsumude. He þa swa dide 7 mid fyrde for ofer Myrc on Norðwealas 7 he him ealle gehyrsume gedyde.' *ASC C 854* (=853): *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MSC*, ed. O'Brien O'Keefe, p. 56 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, p. 43 (trans.).

immediately on entry he devastated that race and reduced it to Burgred's authority. When he had done this, he returned home.⁷⁰

There is still a focus on subjecting the Welsh to Burgred's authority, but Asser adds that Æthelwulf 'devastated that people'. In the context of such a description of complete destruction, it is easy to understand the attraction of the image of Cyngen fleeing to Rome in 854, utterly defeated by the West Saxons. However, as comparison with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* illustrates, Asser is our sole authority for this alleged devastation of the Welsh, and consequently it is vital to consider his account in further detail. An examination of how Asser shapes this episode, as well as his geographical imprecision, will illustrate that the *Life of King Alfred* provides an unsteady foundation upon which to build a case for Cyngen fleeing to Rome in 854 following the destruction of his kingdom by the West Saxons.

Crucial to understanding the way Asser crafts Æthelwulf and Burgred's campaign is his treatment of the Mercians more generally. Simon Keynes has drawn attention to Asser's strikingly negative depiction of the Mercians and proposed this as further evidence that Asser was writing for a Welsh audience.⁷¹ In this context, the important point is that Asser presents the Mercians as the main enemy of the Welsh. Thus, Offa is described as a tyrant who terrorized neighbouring kingdoms and built a dyke between Wales and Mercia, and Asser claims that a number of Welsh kings were driven to submit to Alfred because of the tyranny of Ealdorman Æthelred.⁷² It is not simply that the Mercians are frequently depicted as tyrants in the *Life of King Alfred*, but that tyrannical behaviour is, more often than not, directed against the Welsh. The significance of this depiction is illustrated by Asser's account of Burgred and Æthelwulf's campaign.

⁷⁰ 'Anno Dominicae Incarnationis DCCCLIII, nativitatis autem Ælfredi regis quinto, Burgred, Merciorum rex, per nuncios deprecatus est Æthelwulfum, Occidentalium Saxonum regem, ut ei auxilium conferret, quo mediterraneos Britones, qui inter Merciam et mare occidentale habitant, dominio suo subdere potuissent, qui contra eum immodice reluctabantur. Nec segnius Æthelwulfus rex, legatione eius accepta, exercitum movens, Britanniam cum Burghredo rege adiit, statimque ut ingreditur, gentem illam devastans, dominio Burgredi subdit. Quo facto, domum revertitur': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 7, ed. Stevenson, p. 67; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 69.

⁷¹ S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', in M.A.S. Blackburn and D.N. Dumville (eds), *Kings, Currency and Alliances. History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–45, at p. 43. For a recent overview of the debate concerning Asser's intended audience, see R. Thomas, 'The *Vita Alcuini*, Asser and Scholarly Service at the Court of Alfred the Great', *English Historical Review* 134 (2019), pp. 1–24, at pp. 2–3 and 23–4. It seems likely that Asser intended his work to be read in Wales, perhaps at St Davids specifically, but probably as one intended audience among others.

⁷² Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 14 and 80, ed. Stevenson, pp. 12 and 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 71 and 96.

Here it is the Mercians who are presented as being at the root of the problems of the Welsh: it is Burgred who requests Æthelwulf's assistance in subduing the Welsh, against whom the Welsh have been struggling and to whose authority they are subjected by Æthelwulf. Æthelwulf is thus depicted as an external party, brought in to assist Burgred who cannot handle the Welsh alone, before returning home. Æthelwulf's actions are also being carefully crafted to offer a further contrast with Alfred, and perhaps to act as a warning. Alfred is similarly the senior party in alliance with the Mercians, this time with Ealdorman Æthelred, but, unlike Æthelwulf, offers to protect the Welsh from Æthelred's tyranny. Æthelwulf's lending of assistance to Burgred thus serves to reinforce the attractive nature of Alfredian overlordship, whilst simultaneously highlighting the alternative to accepting this overlordship, illustrating the destruction that Alfred could inflict upon the Welsh if he so desired. The claim that the West Saxons devastated the Welsh in 853 serves to bolster Asser's case that the Welsh should accept Alfred's overlordship, and thus some scepticism is warranted as to the extent of this devastation.

The terminology used by Asser also necessitates interrogation, as he does not refer specifically to Cyngen's Powys. According to Asser, Burgred requested Æthelwulf's assistance in subduing 'the inland Welsh, who live between Mercia and the western sea'.⁷³ He subsequently notes that Æthelwulf and Burgred went into *Britannia* to subdue 'that people' (*gentem illam*).⁷⁴ In both instances, Asser is translating the term *Nordwealas* used in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. *Nordwealas* is a compound formed from the Old English noun *nord* ('north') and *wealas* (singular *wealh*), the latter being a term used to refer to foreigners and a label first used for the Britons in the seventh-century laws of Ine.⁷⁵ *Nordwealas* is used for the Welsh of Wales in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s entries from the ninth century onwards, distinguishing them from the Cornish (*Westwealas*) and the Britons of Strathclyde (*Stræcledwealas*).⁷⁶

⁷³ 'mediterraneos Britones, qui inter Merciam et mare occidentale habitant': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 7, ed. Stevenson, p. 67; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 69.

⁷⁴ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 7, ed. Stevenson, p. 67; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 69.

⁷⁵ J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1882–1912), s.v. *wealh*; M.L. Faull, 'The Semantic Development of Old English *Wealh*', *Leeds Studies in English* 8 (1975), pp. 20–44.

⁷⁶ For discussion of *Stræcledwealas* see F. Edmonds, 'The Emergence and Transformation of Medieval Cumbria', *The Scottish Historical Review* 237 (2014), pp. 195–216, at pp. 200–1. The terminology of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is not, however, entirely consistent (Hywel Dda is described as king of *Westwealas* in the annal for 927, for example), see C. Insley, 'Kings and Lords in Tenth-Century Cornwall', *History* 98 (2013), pp. 2–22, at p. 12.

That the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* simply refers to the Welsh of Wales in a general sense raises the question of whether Asser is doing the same in his translation. Significantly, Asser chose to render one of the instances of *Nordwealas* as a reference to a territory, *Britannia*. Elsewhere in the *Life of King Alfred*, it appears that Asser uses *Britannia* to refer to Wales, as in the notice of Offa building a dyke between *Britannia* and Mercia from sea to sea.⁷⁷ Moreover, monasteries in both *Britannia* and *Cornubia* are listed as the beneficiaries of Alfred's generosity, implying a perceived distinction between these two territories.⁷⁸ Whilst we can be fairly confident that, in the account of Æthelwulf and Burgred's campaign, *Britannia* is a general reference to Wales, it is unclear whether *mediterraneos Britones* should be understood as describing the inhabitants of this area. This phrase is conventionally translated as 'inland Britons'.⁷⁹ The choice of 'inland' is perhaps a little misleading, however, as Asser proceeds to note that these Britons lived between Mercia and the western sea (*mare occidentale*). Whilst this could be a description of Cyngen's Powys, which may have stretched as far as the sea at its widest point, it seems more likely that it refers to a broader territory. There are no other attestations of *mediterraneos Britones*, but there are several instructive examples of the use of *mediterraneus* to form a name for the Middle Angles. Thus, in his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede refers to 'the Middle Angles, that is the Angles of the Midlands'.⁸⁰ Asser's *mediterraneos Britones* could, then, be understood as the 'midland Britons'. In this context, I would suggest that *mediterraneos* might be explaining the location of these Britons in relation to the other Britons inhabiting Britain. Asser could be referring to the Britons located between the Britons of Cornwall and the Britons of Strathclyde, in other words, the Britons of Wales. Alternatively, since Asser refers to the 'regions of southern Wales' (*dexterallis*

⁷⁷ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 14, ed. Stevenson, p. 12; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 71. See also c. 7 and 79, ed. Stevenson, pp. 7, 63 and 65; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 69 and 93–4. On one occasion Asser refers to *Britannia Dexterallis* ('South Wales'): c. 80, ed. Stevenson, p. 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 96. *Britannia* is elsewhere used to mean Britain: c. 21 and 49, ed. Stevenson, pp. 19 and 38; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 74 and 83. On one occasion Asser refers to *Britannia insula*: c. 61, ed. Stevenson, p. 48; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 86. For discussion see H. Pryce, 'British or Welsh? National Identity in Twelfth-Century Wales', *English Historical Review* 116 (2001), pp. 775–801, at p. 777; A.W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff, 1944), p. vii.

⁷⁸ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 102, ed. Stevenson, p. 89; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 107.

⁷⁹ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 7, trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 69. See also R.E. Latham *et al.*, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Turnhout, 2015), <http://clt.brepolis.net/dmlbs/Default.aspx> [accessed 23/10/19], s.v. *mediterraneus* (1).

⁸⁰ 'Middilengi, id est Mediterranei Angli': Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.21, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 278–9. See also, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, s.v. *mediterraneus* (2b).

Britanniae partis) elsewhere in the biography, *mediterraneos Britones* could be interpreted as a reference to the Welsh located between the southern Welsh of Dyfed and Glywysing and the northern Welsh of Gwynedd.⁸¹ Under this interpretation, *mediterraneos Britones* would not only refer to the Welsh of Powys, but also of Ceredigion. The ambiguity of Asser's terminology renders certainty impossible. Nevertheless, there is no evidence here that Asser's *mediterraneos Britones* refers exclusively to the inhabitants of Powys.

Asser's account of Burgred and Æthelwulf's campaign, then, is both vague and potentially misleading, and consequently attention to wider context is important to understand Cyngen's situation. There is evidence of conflict between Mercia, Wessex and Powys in the ninth century, within which framework we might be able to understand the events of 853. In 822 the Harleian Chronicle tells us that the *Saxones* destroyed the fortress of Degannwy 'and they drew the kingdom of Powys under their control'.⁸² More ambiguous is the reference in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to Ecgberht leading an army among the Welsh in 830 and reducing them to humble submission to him.⁸³ This is generally interpreted as a by-product of Ecgberht's campaign of (temporary) conquest over Mercia. In other words, West Saxon overlordship over Mercia frequently resulted in overlordship over those parts of Wales that had previously been subject to Mercia. Crucially, this does not mean that Mercian overlordship over Powys had continued unchallenged between 822 and 830; there is no evidence to suggest that their subjection of Powys in 822 was long-lasting.⁸⁴ Indeed, it may be significant that Ecgberht is said to have led an army among the Welsh, implying that overlordship was not automatically transferred from Mercia to Wessex.⁸⁵ Nor is there a guarantee that Ecgberht's offensive was directed solely against Powys, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* once more simply refers to Ecgberht leading an army among the *Nordwealas*.⁸⁶ Overall, it is unclear whether the significance awarded to Ecgberht's campaign in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is

⁸¹ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 80, ed. Stevenson, p. 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 96.

⁸² 'et regionem Poyuis in sua potestate traxerunt': Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 822, ed. and trans. Dumville, p. 10. It is likely that *Saxones* here refers to the Mercians. Whilst the Harleian Chronicle does occasionally distinguish between the West Saxons and Mercians by referring to the latter as *Angli* (as in the entry for 894, for example), this is inconsistent, and the location of Degannwy makes the Mercians the most likely antagonists here, as assumed in Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 418.

⁸³ ASC A 828 (=830): *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Bately, p. 42 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, p. 41 (trans.).

⁸⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 418; Jones, 'Hereditas Pouoisi', p. 74. See further discussion below.

⁸⁵ Compare, for example, with the transferring of the submission of the Welsh kings from Mercia to Wessex in 918, discussed above. See p. 571.

⁸⁶ See discussion above, p. 576.

merited; the submission is not mentioned in the Harleian Chronicle and we do not know for how long the alleged overlordship lasted. What can be said is that the Mercians exerted authority over Powys in 822, probably followed by a similar effort by the West Saxons in 830.

If Cyngen's reign did start in 808, then these interactions with the West Saxons and Mercians presumably occurred on his watch. The Pillar of Eliseg, which is situated in Llantysilio-yn-Iâl, provides some further evidence for struggle between Mercia and Powys during his reign.⁸⁷ The inscription on this pillar is now illegible, and we are reliant on incomplete seventeenth-century transcripts.⁸⁸ The inscription names Cyngen ap Cadell as the patron, and traces his ancestry back to his great-grandfather, Elise, who is celebrated for seizing the 'inheritance of Powys' (*hereditatem Pouos*) from the 'power of the English' (*potestate Anglo[rum]*).⁸⁹ There follows a fragmented section that was already partly illegible in the seventeenth century but appears to celebrate the achievements of Cyngen. It has been suggested that Cyngen was comparing himself to his great-grandfather Elise, and thus the lost section presumably celebrated his own similar victory over the English.⁹⁰ The pillar's reference to the *Angli* makes it clear that it is victory over the Mercians that is celebrated here, and Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested that Cyngen's achievement may have been the regaining of Powys from the Mercians after the events of 822, discussed above.⁹¹ Owain Wyn Jones points to c.825 as the most likely time for this resurgence, a period of decline in Mercian fortunes marked by their defeat at Ecgbert's hands.⁹² However, this resurgence, likely commemorated on the pillar, could also have occurred much later, and might be the context for Asser's comment that the Welsh were struggling against Burgred with 'unusual effort'. It may be significant that Burgred's campaign occurred in 853 and is his first recorded activity as king of Mercia, having succeeded Berhtwulf in 852 or 853.⁹³ The circumstances of

⁸⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of this monument, see N. Edwards, 'Rethinking the Pillar of Eliseg', *The Antiquaries Journal* 89 (2009), pp. 143–77. For discussion of the Pillar's location, see P. Murrieta-Flores and H. Williams, 'Placing the Pillar of Eliseg: Movement, Visibility and Memory in the Early Medieval Landscape', *Medieval Archaeology* 61 (2017), pp. 69–103.

⁸⁸ For a text and translation of the inscription, see Edwards, 'Rethinking', pp. 171–3.

⁸⁹ For discussion of this section of the inscription see Edwards, 'Rethinking', pp. 162–3; Jones, '*Hereditas Pouoisi*', pp. 68–9.

⁹⁰ Edwards, 'Rethinking', p. 165; Jones, '*Hereditas Pouoisi*', p. 44; Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 418–19.

⁹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 418. For discussion of *Angli* see above, n. 82.

⁹² Jones, '*Hereditas Pouoisi*', p. 74.

⁹³ S.E. Kelly, 'Berhtwulf [Beorhtwulf] (d. 852)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2181>; *idem*, 'Burgred [Burhred] (d. 874?)', king of the Mercians', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4018>. For the date of Berhtwulf's death and Burgred's succession see John of Worcester, *Chronicon*, s.a. 852, ed. and trans., Darlington *et al.*, pp. 266–7.

Burgred's rise to power are unclear, but the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the sacking of London and Canterbury by the vikings in 851, forcing Berhtwulf into flight.⁹⁴ The Mercians were not in a strong position on Burgred's accession, then, and this might provide an additional possible context for Powys's resurgence. Alternatively, if this resurgence had already occurred c.825, as suggested by Jones, it is possible that Burgred, considering the defeat to the vikings that marked the end of his predecessor's rule, wished to start his own reign with a victory and assertion of his authority.

There is plenty of contextual evidence that points to Powys as a likely target of Burgred's campaign in 853. However, we should not assume that Powys was the sole victim of Mercian and West Saxon aggression. We have seen that the identity of those whom Ecgberht forced into submission in 830 is uncertain, and the Harleian Chronicle notes that an individual bearing the Old English name Duta attacked Glywysing in 864.⁹⁵ Evidence from the Irish annals also suggests the possibility of an attack on Gwynedd in 865.⁹⁶ Most significant, due to its chronological proximity to the events discussed here, is the Harleian Chronicle's notice for 849: 'Meurig was killed by the English.'⁹⁷ This Meurig has been identified as the king of Gwent, whose sons, Brochfael and Ffernfael, are among the Welsh rulers listed by Asser as submitting to Alfred in the 880s.⁹⁸ However, the Harleian Chronicle also records the death of another Meurig in 874, and it may be that it is with this Meurig we should associate the king of Gwent, whose sons were ruling in the 880s.⁹⁹ Another potential candidate for identification as the Meurig killed by the Saxons in 849 is Meurig ap Dyfnwallon, king of Ceredigion. The Harleian Chronicle tells us that this Meurig's grandfather, Arthien, died in 807, and that his son, Gwgon, was drowned in 872. There are instances of overlords using drowning as a

⁹⁴ ASC 851 A: *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Bately, p. 44 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, p. 42 (trans.).

⁹⁵ For discussion see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 486, n. 85.

⁹⁶ For discussion see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 486.

⁹⁷ 'Mouric occisus est a Saxonibus': Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 849, ed. and trans. Dumville, p. 10.

⁹⁸ P. Sims-Williams, 'The Kings of Morgannwg and Gwent in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 74 (2017), pp. 67–81, at p. 73; P. Sims-Williams, *The Book of Llandaf as a Historical Source* (Woodbridge, 2019), p. 140. See also, Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 358. Further evidence for this Meurig is provided by the Harleian genealogies and in the Book of Llandaf, see Sims-Williams, *Book of Llandaf*, p. 120.

⁹⁹ Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 874, ed. and trans. Dumville, p. 12. As assumed by P. Bartrum (ed.), *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff, 1966), p. 129 and W. Davies, *An Early Welsh Microcosm: Studies in the Llandaff Charters* (London, 1978), p. 19 and n. 1. Ben Guy also argues that the obit of 849 is unlikely to refer to Meurig ab Arthfael: 'Did the Harleian Genealogies Draw on Archival Sources?', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 32 (2012), pp. 119–33, at pp. 125–6.

form of punishment in this period, and it has been generally assumed that Rhodri Mawr was responsible for Gwgon's fate, based on the power later wielded by his sons, as attested by Asser, and Anarawd ap Rhodri's devastating of Ceredigion and Ystrad Tywi in 894.¹⁰⁰ Thomas Charles-Edwards has suggested that Anarawd's attack on Ceredigion in 894 might best be explained if the region had in fact fallen to Hyfaidd of Dyfed in 872, making him another candidate for the antagonist responsible for Gwgon's drowning.¹⁰¹ We could certainly also entertain the possibility of West Saxon or Mercian involvement, especially as the former were presumably responsible for the drowning of Dungarth, king of Cornwall, four years later, and the latter provided assistance to Anarawd in attacking Ceredigion in 894.¹⁰² There is the possibility, at least, of sporadic West Saxon or Mercian interference in Ceredigion in the mid-ninth century.

These specific pieces of evidence aside, the broader point is that we should be cautious before linking Powys with all ninth-century West Saxon and Mercian intervention in Wales. Nevertheless, Powys and Mercia were neighbours, and there are plenty of indications pointing to turbulent relations between these two kingdoms in this period. The likely scenario, then, is that when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* refers to the *Nordwealas*, and Asser to the *mediterraneos Britones*, they were, at least in part referring to the inhabitants of Powys, although perhaps not exclusively so. It seems probable, based on the evidence of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that some sort of submission occurred, although, as in the case of Ecgberht's establishing of overlordship in 830, it is not mentioned in the Harleian Chronicle.¹⁰³ Moreover, other evidence for interaction between Powys, Wessex and Mercia in the ninth century points to a fluctuating relationship, as the Mercians and West Saxons exerted a dominance that was not necessarily lasting. Asser, as we have seen, crafted his account to stress the benefits of Alfredian overlordship. Consequently, there is little reason to believe

¹⁰⁰ Other instances of overlords using drowning as punishment are the drowning of Cináed mac Conaing, king of Cianacht, by Máel Sechnaill in 851, and the drowning of Dungarth, king of Cornwall, in 876, presumably by the West Saxons. For discussion, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 508; Guy, 'Textual History', p. 18; J. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland. Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 298–9. For the possibility that Rhodri Mawr was responsible see D. Dumville, 'The "Six" Sons of Rhodri Mawr: A Problem in Asser's *Life of King Alfred*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (1982), pp. 5–18, at p. 15; B. Guy, 'The Textual History of the Harleian Genealogies', *Welsh History Review* 28 (2016), pp. 1–25, at pp. 18–19. Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 495.

¹⁰¹ For discussion of the claim found in the Harleian Chronicle that the *Angli* assisted Anarawd in his attack on Ceredigion, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 495–6. Cf. D. Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 110.

¹⁰² Owain Wyn Jones suggests that the lack of mention in the Harleian Chronicle marks this out as a 'retaliatory campaign against an overly assertive Powys', see '*Hereditas Pouoisi*', p. 75.

that Cyngen fled to – and died at – Rome as a consequence of the events of 853. This discussion thus provides further evidence to support Patrick Sims-Williams's view that we cannot assume that Cyngen fled his kingdom, or that the Mercians and West Saxons prompted this exile.¹⁰⁴ Cyngen's relations with the Mercians and West Saxons may, however, have been influential in a different way. Hywel Dda's pilgrimage to Rome occurred against the backdrop of attending the assembly of an English king, but, as we have seen, was unlikely to have been directly influenced by English practice. In Cyngen's case, it is striking that his journey is sandwiched between two West Saxon trips to Rome. Whilst there is little evidence that the West Saxons drove Cyngen to Rome, his journey in 854 may have been influenced by Æthelwulf's plans for pilgrimage. We might speculate that Cyngen, now compelled to visit the court of Burgred of Mercia or to attend his assemblies, might have become aware of Æthelwulf's intention to journey to Rome. Burgred would himself likely have had knowledge of these plans considering his increasingly close relationship with the West Saxon king, formalized by the marriage of Burgred to Æthelwulf's daughter soon after their campaign against the Welsh.

Hywel, 886

The second Welsh king known to have travelled to Rome, and the last example discussed here, also died there. For the year 886, the Harleian Chronicle tells us 'Hywel died in Rome'.¹⁰⁵ For this reason, J.E. Lloyd paired Hywel's pilgrimage with the earlier journey of Cyngen as a 'penitential effort' at the end of a largely unproductive reign, clearly distinguishable from the case of the more successful Hywel Dda.¹⁰⁶ However, we have seen that there is little evidence to support Lloyd's interpretation of a wretched Cyngen, and nor is it clear that this distinction bears up under scrutiny when we turn our sights to the case of this Hywel.

The identification of this Hywel as Hywel ap Rhys, the king of Glywysing who submitted to Alfred in the 880s according to Asser, is likely.¹⁰⁷ An obit of 886 for Hywel ap Rhys would be in keeping with the chronological framework provided by Asser and the charters in the Book of Llandaf (discussed further below). Hywel's death is not

¹⁰⁴ Sims-Williams, 'Historical Need', pp. 33–4.

¹⁰⁵ 'Higuel in Roma defun<c>tus est': Harleian Chronicle, *s.a.* 886, ed. and trans. Dumville, p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Lloyd, *History of Wales*, I, p. 334.

¹⁰⁷ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 80, ed. Stevenson, p. 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 96.

recorded in the Irish annals and thus this notice was most probably part of the St Davids chronicle (the annals kept at St Davids from the late eighth century that formed the basis of the Harleian Chronicle as it survives in Harley 3859).¹⁰⁸ As such, the identification of Hywel as a southern king makes sense. Whilst Hywel ap Rhys's background is unclear – his pedigree is not included in the Harleian genealogies – the Llandaf charters indicate that he was a contemporary of the kings of Gwent Meurig ab Arthfael and his son, Brochfael, the latter of whom is also mentioned by Asser.¹⁰⁹ In agreement with Asser, the Book of Llandaf refers to Hywel as king of Glywysing, but a number of the grants attributed to him are located in Gwent, suggesting that he may have also held some sway over this region.¹¹⁰ This is in contrast to the contemporary kings of Gwent, Brochfael and Ffernfael, whose grants are confined solely to Gwent.¹¹¹ There is no evidence to postulate that Hywel was driven to Rome by misfortune, or that he fled the destruction of his kingdom. His son, Owain, is named king of Gwent in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* entry for 927 (D-text), and consequently may have gained control of both Glywysing and Gwent at some point after 893 and the political status quo depicted by Asser.¹¹² Hywel's grandson, Morgan, after whom the kingdom of Morgannwg was presumably named, ruled until 974 and is the subject of a pedigree in the Jesus College 20 genealogical collection that ascribes Hywel ap Rhys to the main dynasty of Glywysing.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Kathleen Hughes established that the annals were kept at St Davids from the eighth century onwards (K. Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Welsh and Scottish Sources*, ed. D. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1980), p. 68), and there has been debate over the other sources incorporated into the chronicle, including a north-Welsh source and a version of the Clonmacnoise chronicle. For the most recent overview and discussion, see Guy, 'Origins', pp. 25–45; B. Guy, 'Historical Scholars and Dishonest Charlatans: Studying the Chronicles of Medieval Wales', in *The Chronicles of Medieval Wales and the March: New Contexts, Studies, and Texts*, ed. B. Guy, G. Henley, O.W. Jones and R. Thomas (Turnhout, 2020), pp. 69–106, at pp. 88–93.

¹⁰⁹ Sims-Williams, 'Kings of Morgannwg and Gwent', p. 75. For discussion of various possible reasons why Hywel's pedigree is not included in the Harleian genealogies see Sims-Williams, 'Kings of Morgannwg and Gwent', pp. 75–6. Morgan ab Owain, Hywel's grandson, is given a pedigree in the Jesus College 20 genealogies, which links Hywel (presumably by fabrication) to an earlier dynasty of Glywysing through Meurig ap Tewdrig, a ruler also found in the Book of Llandaf, see B. Guy, 'Medieval Welsh Genealogy: Texts, Contexts and Transmission', 2 vols, Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge (2016), I, pp. 84–6; Sims-Williams, 'Kings of Morgannwg and Gwent', pp. 76–7.

¹¹⁰ Sims-Williams, *Book of Llandaf*, p. 121. See also J. Reuben Davies, *The Book of Llandaf and the Norman Church in Wales* (Woodbridge, 2003), p. 14, n. 34.

¹¹¹ Sims-Williams, *Book of Llandaf*, pp. 121–2.

¹¹² ASC D 926 (=927): *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Cubbin, p. 41 (text); *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Whitelock *et al.*, pp. 68–9 (trans.); Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 495 and 505.

¹¹³ D.E. Thornton, 'Morgan Hen [Morgan Mawr] (d. 974)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/19210>. For the Jesus College 20 genealogies, see n. 109 above.

There is, however, an intriguing potential West Saxon context to this journey. According to Asser, Hywel ap Rhys was driven to submit to Alfred because of the tyranny of Æthelred of Mercia.¹¹⁴ The imprecision of Asser's account makes it unclear when exactly this occurred. Asser relates the submission of the Welsh kings immediately after his account of the summoning of scholars to Alfred's court, and this section as a whole is sandwiched between his Latin version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* entries for 885 and 886. The climax of the account is the submission of Anarawd of Gwynedd, and it seems likely that this occurred significantly later than 885/6.¹¹⁵ However, Asser begins this section by noting that 'at that time, and for a considerable time before then, all the districts of south¹¹⁶ Wales belonged to King Alfred, and still do'.¹¹⁷ Considering the location of this section, *illo tempore* presumably here refers to the point at which Asser agreed to spend six months at Alfred's court, which possibly occurred sometime in 886, and with which agreement the previous section ends.¹¹⁸ Asser finishes this account of his own summoning by explaining that the community at St Davids were hoping that Alfred would be able to protect them against Hyfaidd of Dyfed. Proceeding to describe the submission of the Welsh kings at this point consequently serves to clarify the relationship between Alfred and Hyfaidd.¹¹⁹ The *Life of King Alfred* thus provides a *terminus ad quem* of c.886 for the submission, which is consistent with the identification of Hywel ap Rhys as the Hywel who died in Rome in 886. However, it is unclear from Asser's account how long before 886 these submissions had occurred. Asser

¹¹⁴ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 80, ed. Stevenson, p. 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 96.

¹¹⁵ The most detailed reconstruction of events is provided by David Kirby, who suggests that Anarawd's submission ought to be dated to c.892, following the collapse of his alliance with the Northumbrians, perhaps linked to the viking attack recorded on Gwynedd in that year, see D.P. Kirby, 'Northumbria in the Reign of Alfred the Great', *Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland* 11 (1965), pp. 335–46, at pp. 342–5. For further discussion see also: Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 491–4, esp. p. 494, n. 120; R. Thomas, 'Perceptions of Peoples in Early Medieval Wales', Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge (2018), pp. 179–80.

¹¹⁶ Asser uses *dextralis* for south (and *sinistralis* for north) elsewhere in the text (c. 35, 52, 79, 80). These are commonly used in Cambro-Latin texts and are carried over from vernacular usage of left and right to mean north and south, see D.N. Dumville, 'Textual History of the Welsh–Latin *Historia Brittonum*', 3 vols, Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh (1975), I, pp. 110–11; R.J. Thomas *et al.* (eds), *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Cardiff, 1967–2002), <http://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html> [accessed 23/10/19], s.v. *gogledd; deau, de'*.

¹¹⁷ 'Illo enim tempore et multo ante omnes regions dextralis Britanniae partis ad Ælfrid regem pertinebant et adhuc pertinent': Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 80, ed. Stevenson, p. 66; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, p. 96.

¹¹⁸ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, c. 79, ed. Stevenson, pp. 65–6; trans. Keynes and Lapidge, pp. 94–6. For discussion of the dating of Asser's meetings with Alfred see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 27 and 213, n. 24.

¹¹⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 489.

states that Hywel's submission was driven by the threat of Æthelred of Mercia, the core of whose kingdom was located, at this point, on the doorstep of the kings of Glywysing and Gwent in south-east Wales.¹²⁰ Consequently, this submission must have occurred after the latter's rise to power in the early 880s. Æthelred's own submission to Alfred had taken place by 883, but it is unclear whether the submission of the southern Welsh kings ought to be understood as occurring prior to this submission, in the context of Alfred increasing his dominance over Mercia, or in its wake, with the Welsh kings turning to Alfred as the overlord of their enemy.¹²¹ Hywel's submission, then, cannot be dated more precisely than the early 880s.

Due to the ambiguity surrounding its date, how closely this submission ought to be linked to Hywel's death in Rome in 886 is unclear. As already discussed in the context of Hywel Dda and Cynge, submission to English kings was not unusual or necessarily politically disastrous in this period. Indeed, if Asser is correct in stating that Hywel's submission to Alfred was driven by the tyranny of Æthelred of Mercia, then this submission may have been politically advantageous in that it provided Hywel with the protection of a powerful overlord. Nevertheless, if Hywel's journey to Rome was politically motivated, this might be an important context. Interestingly, Patrick Sims-Williams has drawn attention to the English name of one of Hywel's daughters, *Erminthridh*, 'a symptom of the Anglo-Saxon connection'.¹²² Beyond the basic action of submission, the nature of this connection is ambiguous, but it may be that Hywel was repositioning himself in a changing political context, a strategy perhaps also later adopted by Hywel Dda, one of whose sons bore the English name Edwin.¹²³ It is worth considering the possibility, then, that Hywel's journey to Rome in 886 was also part of this strategy, an act of political positioning and an assertion of his own authority in a changing political landscape, not unlike the case of Hywel Dda. Unfortunately, the evidence does not allow us to move beyond speculation, but the political context considered here certainly suggests this explanation as a possibility.

¹²⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 491.

¹²¹ Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 20–1. Thomas Charles-Edwards suggests that the submission of the southern Welsh kings occurred prior to Æthelred's own submission, and formed part of the collapse of Mercian power in Wales, see *Wales*, pp. 489–93.

¹²² Sims-Williams, *Book of Llandaf*, p. 171, n. 104. The charter in which this name is recorded is discussed further below, see p. 586. Compare with the sixth-century Breton ruler, Theuderic, who bore a Merovingian royal name: Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, p. 73.

¹²³ Cf. Kirby, 'Hywel Dda', pp. 6–7.

How and whence Hywel emerged as king of Glywysing is unclear.¹²⁴ Asser's account, which tells us that he was active in the 880s, and which is corroborated by the Llandaf charters, is the only evidence for the chronology of his reign. Consequently, his age at his death in 886 is unknown, as is the length of his reign. However, a further few pieces of evidence merit consideration. His final charter preserved in the Book of Llandaf gifts two slaves to Bishop Cyfeiliog, for the sake of the souls of his wife and children (one of whom bears an English name, as noted above).¹²⁵ In a similar vein, he is identified as the patron of a monument at Llantwit Major referred to as the 'Houelt Cross'. This cross, which has been dated to the mid/late ninth century, bears an inscription proclaiming its preparation by a certain *Houelt* for the soul of his father, *Res*.¹²⁶ Such inscribed crosses, noting their construction by an individual for the sake of either their own soul or the souls of others, were fairly common in south Wales in this period, and there are parallels also in Ireland and England.¹²⁷ The Houelt Cross is not dissimilar to the Pillar of Eliseg discussed above, the inscription on which asked its readers to give a blessing on the soul of Elise.¹²⁸ As observed by Peter Brown, some idea of purgatory is present in all forms of early medieval Christianity.¹²⁹ In the present context, of particular importance is how these ideas influenced the actions of the living. According to Augustine, prayers and offerings could help the souls of those who were not altogether good or bad.¹³⁰ As well as detailed discussions by Bede and Ælfric, there is plenty of evidence to suggest

¹²⁴ See, for example, J.E. Lloyd's statement, that Hywel ap Rhys is 'of quite uncertain pedigree': *History of Wales*, I, p. 275.

¹²⁵ Sims-Williams, *Book of Llandaf*, p. 171. For the text see J. Gwenogvryn Evans (ed.), *The Text of the Book of Llan Dâw Reproduced from the Gwysaney Manuscript* (Oxford, 1893), pp. 236–7. There are a number of charters in the Book of Llandaf that refer to the giving of slaves, for discussion see Davies, *An Early Welsh Microcosm*, p. 41. There are also a number of charters that refer to the granting of gifts for the sake of the souls of named individuals: Davies, *An Early Welsh Microcosm*, pp. 169–70 (no. 155), 174 (183a), 182 (227b) and 185 (no. 243). Such gifts were frequently given with the expectation that the religious community in question would offer Masses for the souls of the individuals after death, see H. Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 219–38.

¹²⁶ M. Redknapp and J.M. Lewis, *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales. Volume 1, Breconshire, Glamorgan, Monmouthshire, Radnorshire, and Geographically Contiguous Areas of Herefordshire and Shropshire* (Cardiff, 2007), pp. 370–3; Davies, *Book of Llandaf and the Norman Church*, pp. 13–14.

¹²⁷ N. Edwards, *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales. Volume 2, South-West Wales* (Cardiff, 2007), pp. 93–6. For discussion of examples from England, some likely erected by members of the laity, see Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, pp. 246–7.

¹²⁸ See discussion above, p. 579.

¹²⁹ P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (London, 2015), pp. 17–18.

¹³⁰ Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, pp. 54–5. See also Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, pp. 206–7.

that this view was influential in early medieval Britain.¹³¹ The church received donations, for example, in return for commemoration of the donor's soul, and letters were sent to ecclesiastical figures requesting their prayers for family members.¹³² It is in this context that we should understand the construction of stone sculpture such as the Houelt Cross.

It is difficult to judge whether these additional pieces of evidence provide any further insight into Hywel's death in Rome in 886. Whilst the construction of inscribed stones commemorating the memory of an ancestor is a commonality that links his case with that of Cyngen, this practice was not unusual in this period, and Hywel's cross may have been erected on his father's death, possibly significantly pre-dating his journey to Rome. As for the granting of slaves to Bishop Cyfeiliog, the Book of Llandaf records a number of grants to the church for the sake of the souls of named individuals, and, in the case of royal grants, there is no demonstrable link with the end of the king's reign.¹³³ In Hywel's case specifically, such a grant could be interpreted as the action of a king about to undertake a pilgrimage to Rome, whether he intended to return or not. The earlier case of Æthelwulf provides a productive comparison. Before undertaking his pilgrimage to Rome, the West Saxon king divided his kingdom between two of his sons, and granted gifts to the church for the sake of his soul.¹³⁴ As much as benefiting Æthelwulf's soul, the purpose of these actions may have been to secure the loyalty of the clergy and laity in his absence, the necessity of which was illustrated by the rebellion that followed.¹³⁵ The provision made by Hywel ap Rhys for the benefit of both his own soul and those of his family, then, could also be understood within this framework.

There is no reason to believe that Hywel was driven from his kingdom by misfortune, or that his death in Rome marked the end of a long and unsuccessful reign. Hywel ap Rhys had submitted to Alfred, but this submission would have strengthened his position, securing his kingdom from any threat posed by the Mercians. More generally, as we have seen, submission to English rulers was a course of action followed by a number of Welsh kings in the ninth and tenth centuries, including Hywel Dda, and such submissions may have even helped to confirm the authority of these kings within Wales. In Hywel ap Rhys's case,

¹³¹ For discussion of the evidence of Bede and Ælfric see H. Foxhall Forbes, 'Diuiduntur in quattuor: The Interim and Judgement in Anglo-Saxon England', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 61 (2010), pp. 659–84. See also discussion of additional anecdotal evidence in Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, pp. 208–11.

¹³² For a discussion of this evidence see Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, pp. 211–12 and 219–38. See also n. 125 above.

¹³³ See n. 125 above. Compare the floruit given for Meirchion in Davies, *Early Welsh Microcosm*, p. 118 with charter 243 (p. 185), for example.

¹³⁴ Story, *Carolingian Connections*, p. 239; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 232–3, n. 23.

¹³⁵ Abels, 'Royal Succession', pp. 88–9.

there is no evidence that his status as king of Glywysing was in doubt in the 880s. His own origins and route to power are unknown, but by his death he seems to have held a prominent political position in south Wales. The evidence of the Llandaf charters points to the possible exercise of some sort of overlordship over Gwent, a political situation that was maintained, if not intensified, by his son and grandson. There is no evidence, then, to uphold the distinction drawn by Lloyd between the case of Hywel ap Rhys and Hywel Dda.¹³⁶ This is not to dismiss the English context, but rather to consider its impact on Hywel's actions in a different way. Rather than understanding Hywel as fleeing a sinking ship, we might interpret his pilgrimage as a statement of his political standing, and that of his dynasty, in this changing political environment.

Conclusions

There has been very little discussion of Welsh royal pilgrimage to Rome in the ninth and tenth centuries. The journeys of the Welsh kings are rarely mentioned in investigations of early medieval royal pilgrimage from England and Ireland, and, since the work of J.E. Lloyd, neither have they been subject to detailed analysis in their own right. This examination has sought to rectify this neglect in a discussion focused on the political context in which these kings were operating, informed by instances of royal pilgrimage to Rome from other regions in this period. Considering the sparsity of the evidence, the conclusions of such an investigation inevitably involve a degree of uncertainty, but our understanding of these pilgrimages has nevertheless benefited from their examination in this way. Each of the three Welsh kings that journeyed to Rome in the early Middle Ages were operating within their own specific contexts, their pilgrimages driven by their own specific circumstances. Moreover, these circumstances need to be understood as multidimensional and thus attempting to connect the journeys of the Welsh kings to a single recent battle or event is problematic. This chimes well with the broader trend in royal pilgrimage from the ninth century onwards, as scholars have identified individual political motivations behind the journeys of English and Irish kings. There are, nevertheless, significant connections between the cases of these three kings. What stands out is that all three journeys were undertaken against the backdrop of English overlordship. At the same time, that context did not affect all three journeys in the same way. In the case of Cyngen, I have suggested the possibility of direct

¹³⁶ Lloyd, *History of Wales*, I, p. 334.

West Saxon influence on his journey of 854. There is no explicit evidence for this influence – the Harleian Chronicle simply records Cyngen's death in Rome without further comment – and consequently a connection cannot be proven. Nevertheless, Cyngen's journey is sandwiched between the journey of Alfred in 853 and that of Æthelwulf in 855 and, considering the strong likelihood that he submitted to Burgred of Mercia in the presence of Æthelwulf in 853, the possibility of direct influence ought to be entertained.

The journeys of Hywel Dda and Hywel ap Rhys are different in that they occur during the period when no royal pilgrimages are recorded to Rome from England (or indeed from any other part of Britain or Ireland). Nevertheless, it may well be significant that both journeys occur against the backdrop of submissions to English kings. This does not mean that these kings were fleeing the destruction of their kingdoms or undertaking an act of penance following the acceptance of English overlordship. Such a context has been proposed for Cyngen's journey, but the above discussion has illustrated that there is nothing in the evidence to support this scenario above other possible explanations. It is likely that Cyngen submitted to Burgred in 853, but the evidence that this prompted his own departure is slim. In Hywel ap Rhys's case, the only evidence in favour of interpreting his journey to Rome as an act of abdication is that he died there. His journey also followed submission to an English king, but unlike Cyngen's, Hywel ap Rhys's dynasty continued to thrive into the tenth century, and there is no suggestion that his political position was fragile on the eve of his death in 886. Hywel Dda has been treated as a special case, primarily because he returned to rule his kingdom successfully for two decades. However, when he left for Rome in 928 his situation was not so different from that of Hywel ap Rhys. Both kings were operating in a strikingly similar context, having accepted English overlordship, but seemingly wielding substantial political power among the Welsh kingdoms. We have seen that the majority of pilgrimages from England and Ireland were planned and/or undertaken by kings in a position of strength. A similar pattern can be seen in the Welsh evidence.

Political stability offers a possible link between the cases of Hywel ap Rhys and Hywel Dda. The rebellion that occurred during Æthelwulf's absence illustrates the risks involved in leaving one's kingdom to journey to Rome. Indeed, this may be one of the reasons why so few English kings attempted the journey after 855. That Hywel Dda and Hywel ap Rhys chose to do so underlines the strength of their positions. English overlordship may be important here too, in that it may have contributed to the creation of a political environment whereby these Welsh kings were able to undertake such journeys. In

other words, overlordship facilitated peaceful relations between under-kings that created a stable political environment. This was not consistently the case: Anarawd's attack on Ceredigion in 894 may illustrate that, for Alfred at least, overlordship did not always work this way in practice.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, as Thomas Charles-Edwards has noted, the first half of the tenth century saw very little conflict between, and within, Welsh kingdoms, perhaps reflecting in part the success of English overlordship.¹³⁸ Whilst this overlordship may have contributed to the creation of favourable conditions for royal pilgrimage to Rome, it also might have played a role in developing the desire to undertake these journeys. Thus, pilgrimage to Rome could be understood as an act of political assertion in a changing political climate. Indeed, Cnut's letter of 1027 illustrates how a ruler's pilgrimage to Rome could be presented as a means of ensuring the safety of their kingdom.¹³⁹ These journeys might have served to underline the political standing of the Welsh rulers and their commitment to the wellbeing of their kingdoms. This is most likely in the cases of Hywel ap Rhys and Hywel Dda, as the strength of both their positions is difficult to dispute. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Cyngen did not necessarily travel to Rome from a position of weakness, and consequently such an explanation ought not to be dismissed here either. This is not to say that Welsh royal pilgrimage to Rome was a direct consequence of English overlordship; it is clear that not every Welsh ruler who submitted to an English king undertook pilgrimage to Rome. Nevertheless, submission is a constant factor in all three cases, and the context is strikingly similar for the journeys of Hywel ap Rhys and Hywel Dda. Submission to the English may be an important dimension to understanding these pilgrimages.

It is clear that investigating why these Welsh kings might have chosen to undertake their journeys to Rome can shed further light on the political developments of the ninth and tenth centuries. There are implications too for our appreciation of the relationship between Insular kings and Rome in the early Middle Ages more broadly. I began this article with a discussion of the changing relationship between kings and Rome from the ninth century onwards, as outlined in scholarship on royal pilgrimage from England and Ireland. Pilgrimage was no longer undertaken exclusively for reasons of personal

¹³⁷ This likely breakdown in West Saxon overlordship may be connected to the new viking threat faced by Alfred from 892, meaning that he was able to pay less attention to the activities of his clients, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 494–6.

¹³⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, pp. 518–19.

¹³⁹ For discussion of this letter and Cnut's pilgrimage see above, p. 567.

piety; journeys were frequently political, or at least boasted a significant political dimension. The instances of Welsh royal pilgrimage reinforce this picture and provide evidence that the trend continued through the end of the ninth century and first half of the tenth century, even if there was a break in journeys to Rome from other parts of the Insular world. Indeed, if the catastrophe of 855 encouraged English kings to put the brakes on their own travel to the Eternal City, Welsh kings were not similarly daunted.

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