



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

WELSH & ANGLO SAXONS

A COMPLICATED & CONFUSING RELATIONSHIP

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The Welsh & The Anglo Saxons

Introduction

The relationships between the Welsh and the Anglo-Saxons were a complex and often confusing subject.

Following the withdrawal of the Roman military in about 410 AD, Southern Britain still maintained Roman Civic and Military organisation whilst various small Kingdoms formed in the North and the West.

Troubled Relationship

The Saxons and Angles as well as Jutes and other Germanic groups had been settled in the east, often with the assistance and acquiescence of various British leaders. As is always the case, as the Saxons became more numerous and powerful, they wanted more land and they began to expand both Westwards and Northwards.

Various parochial wars broke out and these would persist for centuries. The Welsh, meaning strangers or foreigners to the Anglo-Saxons, would indeed become strangers in their own land, as the Anglo-Saxons would rise to become the dominant people within the British Isles, but they didn't have it all their own way and the endemic warfare in the late 400's and early 500's, brought about a halt in the expansion of the Saxons.

Often termed the 'Age of Arthur', the information available is confusing. Legends combined with some known facts, suggest that a Romano-British leader, Welsh to the Saxons, inflicted a series of defeats on the Saxons, halting their expansion for a generation. A great victory at the battle of Mons Badonicus, sometime either side of 500AD, appears to have been the event which brought an end to the warfare, at least for several decades.

Whether or not 'Arthur' existed is debatable but the subject is too vast to discuss in this article so we must look at the facts that have been recorded in order to understand the relationships between the long- time inhabitants of Britain and the Germanic invaders.

Early Welsh Kingdoms

Early Welsh Kingdoms started to form in the west of Britain in the 5th century. Dyfed and Byrcheiniog were amongst the first, in what we would call Wales today. Others such as Gwynedd would follow. There seems to have been some Irish connections with these fledgling Kingdoms and it is likely that Irish settlers and Christian priests influenced the developments of these states.

Strathclyde in what is now Scotland was a Welsh Kingdom and the Cornish too, were considered to be 'WEALH' Welsh, by the Saxons.

Whilst Irish influence was growing in the Welsh areas of Britain, ever increasing numbers of Germanic settlers were arriving in Southern and Eastern England. Battles were fought but the status quo remained with each side inflicting defeats on the other. Often these conflicts were violent and costly. Names of leaders emerged, Vortigern for the Welsh and Hengist and Horsa for the Anglo-Saxons, but what was fact and as to what was legend, is often hard to separate and understand.

Welsh literature celebrated the existence of their Kingdoms, not only in what we call Wales today, but in the 'Yr Hen Ogledd', the old north, and these were the lands of Strathclyde and Rheged. Cornwall would retain its independence until the 10th century and Gwynedd, the last of the self-ruled Welsh Kingdoms, would last until the 13th century.

577 AD

It's difficult to select a specific date for the beginning of an Anglo-Saxon push against the Western Welsh but in 577 AD, The West Saxons under their King Ceawlin inflicted a devastating defeat on them at the battle of Deorham. Three Welsh Kings perished, namely **Cynddyddan**, **Cynfael** and **Ffernfael**. Whatever one's views are on these early conflicts, Deorham marks a milestone, especially in Welsh history. Ceawlin had already defeated the Welsh in a battle at Barbury Castle, in Wiltshire, the previous year, but Deorham was a significant victory as it gave the Saxons control of the cities of Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester. These ancient Roman cities, had preserved Roman culture and civil administration amongst the Welsh, but were now in the hands of the barbarians. In 584, the Welsh tried to push the Saxons back to the east and they met with Ceawlin's forces at Fethanleag (Stoke Lyn in Oxfordshire). Ceawlin was, again, victorious.



Barbury Castle – Site of a Welsh defeat to the Anglo-Saxons in 576 AD

This was a dark time for the Welsh and they must have been in despair after these defeats by Ceawlin.

591 AD

In 591, Ceawlin forced the Welsh into battle at 'Woden's Barrow' or Wōdnesbeorġ, in Wiltshire. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle stated the following. '**Her micel wælfill wæs æt Woddes beorge, Ceawlin wæs ut adrifen.** (There was great slaughter at Woden's hill, and Ceawlin was driven out.).

Despite this Welsh Victory, the Saxon occupation of the West Country and the Midlands was too strong for the Welsh to break. The enemy were there to stay.

As was seemingly the norm for the times, if the Welsh weren't fighting the Saxons, they were fighting amongst themselves. The same went for the Anglo-Saxons and by the 630's, Penda, a powerful and warlike Mercian king attacked the West Saxons at Cirencester and annexed the city for the Kingdom of Mercia, This gave Penda control of the area, but it also separated the Welsh of the South West from those north of the Bristol channel. Wales proper and Cornwall now began to emerge. The Welsh populations of Shropshire and Cheshire would also be forced into the West.

Areas such as Dyffryn Clwyd would remain disputed territory from the 7th century until the final conquest of Wales in the 13th century.

The area between present day Snowdonia and the city of Chester was known as 'Perfeddwlad' (The middle country) as it was fought over and ruled by both Saxon, Welsh and English for centuries.

The Welsh border between Powys and England

The Welsh border between Powys and England was probably established in the 7th century and by 700 AD, the southern border was more or less as it is today, but in the north, especially in what is now Shropshire, endemic warfare was rife and the violence left the Welsh traumatised and dispossessed of their ancient homelands.

616 AD

In 616, A Welsh army had been defeated by an Anglo-Saxon army at the battle of Chester, but the enemy were not Mercians. They were Northumbrians.

Northumbrian interference in North Wales may have been short lived but it gave rise to one **Cadwallon Ap Cadfan of Gwynedd**. This Welsh King, allied himself with Penda of Mercia and they fought and defeated the Northumbrians at the battle of Hatfield Chase in 633. The Northumbrian King, Edwin died in the battle.

Cadwallon, however, wouldn't stop there. He took his army north into Northumbria and the sub-Kingdoms of Bernicia and Deiria. He created havoc.

Bede, stated that he ruled over the provinces of the Northumbrians for a year and that he was a rapacious and bloody tyrant. Though nominally a Christian, **Cadwallon** was said to be barbarous and cruel. Of course, Bede was an Anglo-Saxon so can his histories be trusted and was he biased?

Cadwallon and his army met their match at the battle of Heavenfield, at Chollerford on Hadrian's wall in 634 AD, by a Northumbrian army led by King Oswald. **Cadwallon** escaped but was run down near a stream called Denisesburna and Killed.



SITE OF THE BATTLE OF HEAVENFIELD. 643 AD

Eight years later, Oswald and a Northumbrian army waged war on Penda, the King of Mercia. Penda was supported by the Welsh Kingdoms of Gwynedd and Powys. **Cadwaladr ap Cadwallon**, King of Gwynedd and **Cynddylan**, Prince of Powys were the Welsh commanders.

A battle was fought at Maserfield, believed to be Oswestry, in Shropshire. Penda and his allies won and Oswald was killed in the battle. His body was crucified, hence the name Oswestry, Oswald's tree. Penda was now the most powerful and feared King in the British Isles.



Old Oswestry hill fort. Battlefield of Maserfield?

Penda, in turn, would perish at the battle of Winwaed in 655 AD, fighting against the Bernicians.

There are no records suggesting that any of the Welsh Kingdoms were present at this battle.

Deadliest of Enemies

It can be seen that the Welsh, the original Britons, and the Anglo-Saxons had been the deadliest of enemies but it is equally clear that when the opportunity arose, to gain certain advantages or increase a King's power or territory, that they did become allies.

It's doubtful that the people of this period had a sense of nationalism in the modern sense. Each and every Kingdom sought to be the paramount power and this prevented unification. What if the Welsh Kingdoms had united? Could they have joined with the other peoples of Britain, the Picts and the Scots and could they have defeated or held their own against the Anglo-Saxons? You can argue that if the Anglo-Saxons themselves had been united, then the whole of Britain, and even Ireland, may have become one land, England.

This is the enduring issue with the so called 'Dark Age' history. Endemic and parochial warfare, seemingly never ending, with Kingdoms rising and falling before the rise of the nations that we know today.

Simply put, we are a mixture of peoples with a shared history that is extremely complex. Nationalists neither understand or accept this and cherry pick the facts that suite their agenda.

Offa

Another Mercian King, would build a dyke separating the Welsh and the Anglo-Saxons, or so some would say, but the reality is, that he may not have been responsible for its construction and that it was not a defensive site but rather a means of controlling peoples passing from both Welsh and Anglo-Saxon territories. Offa conducted several expeditions into Wales in retribution for a Welsh attack on Hereford in 760. His enemies were the ancestors of the Tudors.

Offa's successor, Cenwulf, would also wage war in Wales, defeating a Welsh army at Rhuddlan in 796 and then launching a devastating attack on Dyfed in 818 and by destroying Degannwy, he then conquered and occupied Powys. It was clear, that Anglo-Saxon Mercia was too powerful for the Welsh to resist. The one-time allies of Mercia were shown no mercy by the ferocious Anglo-Saxon attacks.

8th Century

By the end of the 8th century, another player arrived on the scene, namely the Vikings. They too would form fluid relationships with Anglo-Saxon, Welsh and Scottish Kingdoms but were equally engaged in fighting all these peoples too.

At the battle of Buttington in 893, an Anglo-Saxon army cornered a Viking army just outside of Welshpool. A Welsh army also arrived on the scene and sat off on a hillside and watched as the Saxons slaughtered the Vikings. After the battle the Welsh left without threatening the Saxon army.



THE ANCIENT OAK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BUTTINGHAM BATTLEFIELD.

Had they arrived to offer battle to the Vikings or would they have assisted the Saxons if the Vikings had obtained the upper hand? We don't know!

When Athelstan invaded Scotland in 934 AD, he was accompanied by three Welsh Kings and their troops. **Hywel Dda, Idwal Foel and Morgan Hen.** In 937, at the battle of Brunanburh, there is no mention that the Welsh of Wales 'proper' were present, but equally, there's nothing to say they weren't. The Welsh of Strathclyde were there though, fighting alongside the armies of Alba and the Hiberno-Norse.

We know that in 967, that a Mercian army invaded Gwynedd and that the Saxons ravished Dyfed in 1012. There were many other attacks and all this was ongoing when both peoples were waging war against the Vikings.

1049

In 1049, **Gruffudd Ap Rhydderch of Morgannwg** became aware that his lands were to be attacked by a large Viking force. He met with them and persuaded them to Gwent and the area around the forest of Dean, Saxon lands. He joined in with them and defeated Saxon forces at Worcester. He then destroyed the fyrds of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. His successes made him over confident and in 1053 he attacked Gloucestershire again. The Saxons responded with an attack on a Welsh army led by Gruffudd's brother, Rhys. The Welsh were defeated and Rhys was decapitated and his head was presented as a trophy to the English King.

Gruffudd quickly responded with several attacks against English cities and towns. He continued to ally himself with the Vikings.

However, Gruffudd also had Welsh enemies too and one was by **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn.** After years of warfare and temporary control of Gwynedd and Deheubarth, **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn** finally killed Gruffudd Ap Rhydderch in battle in 1055.

Gruffudd ap Llywelyn

Gruffudd ap Llywelyn had fought his first battle in 1039, against a Mercian army at the battle of Rhyd-y-Groes, near Welshpool. He was victorious and would prove to be a resilient warrior. Having defeated the English, he set about seizing the throne of Deheubarth and in 1041 he defeated the King of that Kingdom, **Hywel ab Edwin** at the battle of Pencadair. **Hywel** managed to escape though his wife was captured.



Battlefield at Rhyd-Y-Groes.

Gruffudd ap Llywelyn finally finished off **Hywel ab Edwin** at the battle of the Tywi river, in 1044. **Hywel** died in the battle and now **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn was the undisputed ruler of Deheubarth**.

For the next 10 years **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn** fought against Viking raiders from Dublin, but he would then become involved in turmoil with the Anglo-Saxons again.

1055 AD

In 1055, that Edward the Confessor gave command of an English army to his nephew, a Norman called Ralph de Mantes. Ralph insisted that the English fought in Norman style and the army was trained and dressed as Norman heavy cavalry. The Welsh were led by **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn** and a rebellious Mercian Earl, called Alfgar. As the Welsh approached, to the horror of Ralf, the Saxons dismounted and formed a shield wall. They would fight in the time-honoured fashion. The Welsh and rebel Mercians slaughtered the English. Ralph and his fellow Norman officers fled the scene. After this debacle Ralph was called Ralph the Timid.

Gruffudd continued to trouble the English and his action destabilised the border regions and in 1056 the Bishop of Hereford led an army into the Wye Valley and attacked Wales. The Bishop, wanted revenge for the previous year's defeat at Hereford. The armies met and fought at the battle of Glasbury on Wye. The English army was destroyed and the Bishop was slain.

Gruffudd ap Llywelyn continued to dabble in politics both in Wales and England. He was also having to deal with frequent raids from the Dublin Norse, whom he seems to have got the better of.

Harold Godwinson, future King of England owned a hunting lodge in Gwent. For some unknown reason, **Gruffudd ap Llywelyn** attacked and destroyed it. Little detail is known. It would prove to have been a catastrophic error. Harold Godwinson was a ferocious warrior with a formidable reputation for acting quickly and decisively.

Edward the Confessor

The English King, Edward the Confessor had had enough. He sent the future King, Harold Godwinson into Wales with an army. Harold attacked Rhuddlan and destroyed a Welsh fleet. He captured **Gruffudd's** wife. Anglesey was attacked and Harold's brother, Tostig, arrived in North Wales with a Northumbrian army. Fire and sword were carried throughout the land. **Gruffudd** was probably the most powerful King that Wales had produced but in the face of the Anglo-Saxon onslaught his allies knew that the end was nigh. Most deserted him and **Gruffudd**, who had fled to Ireland was killed by members of his own household and his head delivered to Harold. Thus, an end came to the long conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and the Welsh.

Less than three years later, Anglo-Saxon England was no more and the Welsh had a new enemy, the Normans. Centuries of Anglo-Welsh warfare were about to begin.

The above is just a brief account of the conflicts between the Anglo-Saxons and the Welsh. I've just mentioned some of the issues and conflicts that occurred, but they were much more comprehensive than that which I've detailed. The early history between these peoples is fascinating for anyone interested in the period and research is rewarding for those who wish to learn more.