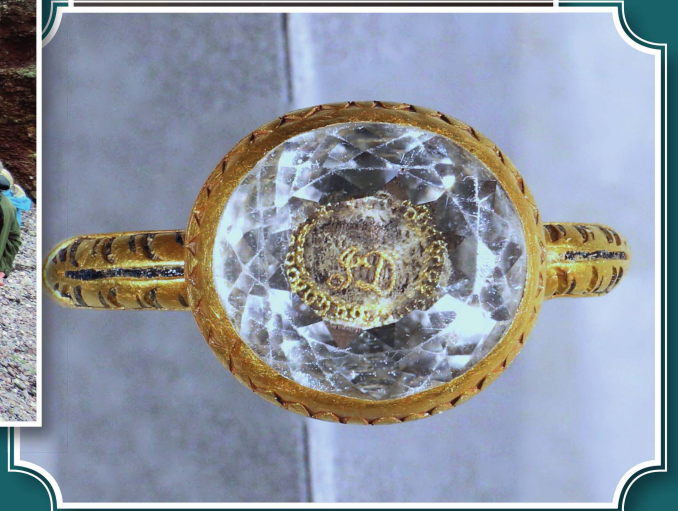


# ISLE OF MAN STUDIES

Proceedings of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society

Vol. XVIII 2023



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Front cover photographs:

- Common Blue butterfly, Marine Drive - see page 217 ff.
- Greeba Mill cruciform window(?) - see page 5 ff.
- Mourning ring (AD 1650-70 era) - see page 184 ff.
- Layers of geology at Langness - see page 201 ff.

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# ISLE OF MAN STUDIES

The Proceedings of the  
Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society

**Volume XVIII**

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Editor

Dave Martin BSc Hons, MRIN, FSA Scot, FRSA

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## Contents

<b>New Light on Manx Keeills: an archaeological and architectural reassessment of the structural and material remains of medieval chapels on the Isle of Man</b>	
<i>Andrew Johnson</i> . . . . .	5
<b>Early Bronze Age Stone Battle-Axes and Axe-hammers of the Isle of Man</b>	
<i>Amber Roy</i> . . . . .	29
<b>“Shee was the wysest woman in this lande” Margaret Quane (1616)</b>	
<i>Stephen Miller</i> . . . . .	39
<b>Neolithic street lighting, Christian symbolism or sexual metaphor: the use of quartz in the Manx vernacular built environment</b>	
<i>Patricia Tutt</i> . . . . .	53
<b>The Revival of Traditional Songs and Music in the Isle of Man</b>	
<i>George Broderick</i> . . . . .	69
<b>‘In medio duorum animalium’, the ‘Habakkuk motif’: carved images for ‘recognising’ Christ on Viking-Age Manx sculpture as an icon in the search for Redemption</b>	
<i>Ross Trench-Jellicoe</i> . . . . .	85
<b>‘Extinct’ Manx Butterflies</b>	
<i>Garry Curtis</i> . . . . .	127
<b>John Toland and the Druids on the Isle of Man</b>	
<i>Euan McArthur</i> . . . . .	133
<b>Manaw of the Britons: The Pre-Viking Kings of the Isle of Man</b>	
<i>Ben Guy</i> . . . . .	145
<b>Bishop Hill’s Cathedral of 1886</b>	
<i>Peter Litman</i> . . . . .	162
<b>‘Kione Speiney’ or ‘Kione Spainey’ - the conundrum of ‘Spanish Head’?</b>	
<i>George Broderick</i> . . . . .	171
<b>Reviews</b>	
<i>The Island of Extraordinary Captives</i> by Simon Parkin, reviewed by Yvonne Cresswell . . . . .	176
<i>Barbed wire university</i> by Dave Hannigan, reviewed by Alan Franklin . . . . .	178
<i>Clarke, Petit and St Mark’s</i> by Philip Modiano, reviewed by Katie King . . . . .	179
<i>Favourite of Fortune</i> by Andrew Bond, Frank Cowin, and Andrew Lambert, reviewed by Matthew Richardson . . . . .	181
<i>Spring Tides</i> by Fiona Gell, reviewed by Andrew Brand . . . . .	181
<b>Recent accessions and developments at the Manx Museum</b> . . . . .	186
<b>Society Business</b>	
The Society in 2021 and 2022 . . . . .	194
Excursions . . . . .	196
Obituary - Sandra Bolton . . . . .	224



## Manaw of the Britons: The Pre-Viking Kings of the Isle of Man

Ben Guy

*As a hub of Irish Sea communication and interchange, the Isle of Man has been home to many cultures and languages over the centuries – Gaelic, Norse, English. But in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede was quite certain that Man was an island of the Britons (meaning ‘Welsh’). Bede was not alone in perceiving Man in this way. Embedded within the vast and labyrinthine corpus of genealogies surviving from medieval Wales is authentic information concerning the Brittonic dynasties that ruled Man during the eighth and ninth centuries. There is evidence that these same dynasties drew on Irish legends preserved in the famous ‘Book of Invasions’ in order to place Manx dynastic history within the panorama of Irish and Brittonic legendary history. This article explores these themes and suggests that more can be said about Manx history during these murky centuries than is usually thought possible.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Isle of Man, ‘Ynys Manaw’ in Welsh, occupied an important place in the medieval Welsh imagination. According to an ancient Welsh proverb, recorded as early as the ninth century, Man was considered one of the ‘Three Chief Adjacent Islands’ of the kingdom of Britain.<sup>1</sup> For the twelfth-century poet Gwynfardd Brycheiniog, it was an island whose saints joined St David at the Synod of Brefi, but for other poets it was a source of forces hostile to the Welsh.<sup>2</sup> Above all, it was a central component of the ‘Insular world’: the group of islands in north-western Europe whose principal members are Britain and Ireland. This thinking is highlighted in a short poem, in medieval Welsh, preserved in the famous Book of Taliesin. The poem commemorates the death of Dylan, a magical character from the Mabinogion tale known as the ‘Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi’, who is associated with the sea. The tale tells how Math, king of Gwynedd, compelled his niece Aranrhod to undergo a virginity test by stepping over his magic rod. As she does so, two baby boys fall from her: one is whisked away by his uncle Gwydion and grows up to become Lleu, the later hero of the tale; but the other, quickly baptised and named Dylan, immediately makes for the sea, ‘and there and then, as soon as he came to the sea, he took on the sea’s nature and swam as well as the best fish in the sea ... no wave ever broke beneath

him’.<sup>3</sup> The poem on Dylan’s death seems to recall the various ‘waves’ linked to Dylan:<sup>4</sup>

*gwanu Dylan, adwythic lann, treis yn hytyruer.  
Ton Iwerdon, a thon Vanaw, a thon Ogled,  
a thon Prydein, toruoed virein, yn petwared.*

‘the striking of Dylan on the deadly shore,  
violence in the current.

The wave of Ireland, and the wave of Man, and  
the wave of the North,

and the fourth, the wave of Britain of the splendid  
hosts.’

Here, Man occupies a central place between Ireland, the ‘North’ (of Britain), and Britain itself. It was a core part of the Insular seascape, as viewed from the perspective of medieval Wales.

The purpose of the present article is to elucidate aspects of the relationship between Man and Wales in the pre-viking period; that is, in the early medieval centuries preceding the Scandinavian settlement of the island around 900. It is useful to begin with some general remarks about perceptions of Man during this period, and how those perceptions relate to the languages that were spoken on the island at that time. Against that background, we can reassess the role played by Man during the civil war that gripped the kingdom of Gwynedd (North Wales) in the early decades of the ninth century. This war was resolved only when a certain Merfyn Frych, king of Man, seized control of Gwynedd in 826. Merfyn’s Manx credentials are outlined and discussed in further detail. Lastly, genealogical evidence from

1. HB §8; Bromwich 2014, 246–7, 249; see too Thomas 2022, 30–1. In the bibliography, I have indicated wherever publications can be freely accessed online
2. Gwynfardd Brycheiniog: Parry Owen 2020, line 278. Hostile forces: *Peirian Faban*, line 6, ed. in Jarman 1950–2, 104, trans. in Bollard 1990, 51; *Gwasgargerdd Fyrddin*, line 41b, ed. in Jones, Williams & Pughe 1870, 105. The latter two poems are being newly edited and translated in the Merlin poetry project; see below

3. Davies 2007, 54

4. Haycock 2015, 483

medieval Wales is brought to bear on our knowledge of the kings of Man in this early period. It is suggested that the Welsh genealogical corpus was expanded with legendary material from Ireland by myth-makers at Merfyn's court, who sought to tie Merfyn's Manx ancestors into a broader historical mythology of the Britons.

#### LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN MAN IN THE PRE-VIKING PERIOD

In later times, Man is most readily associated with three languages: Manx, a Gaelic language that evolved on the island; Old Norse, introduced by settlers of Scandinavian heritage in the Viking Age; and English, now the common tongue. But the situation in the pre-viking period is much less clear.<sup>5</sup> Our main source of evidence is the inscribed stones of the fifth to ninth centuries, which bear inscriptions in several languages and scripts.<sup>6</sup> These inscriptions seem to reflect a society that was fundamentally multilingual, and this might be as much as we should expect in an island surrounded by landmasses where different languages were spoken. Moreover, language usage in the island probably varied across space and time. A group of three inscriptions, two from Ballaqueeny and one from Arbory, recorded in the Ogam script, attest the presence of Gaelic language in the south-west of the island in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the well-known stone from Knock y Dooney in the north of the island is bilingual, containing a Gaelic inscription written in the Ogam script and a Latin inscription written in Roman script. This Latin inscription must have been created for the benefit of Brittonic viewers, since the first name in the inscription (AMMECATI) is spelled in a way that suggests that British (i.e. proto-Welsh) was a living language on the island at that time.<sup>8</sup> The patrons of this monument must have anticipated that its viewers would include speakers of two languages, who were accustomed to reading inscriptions on stone using different script systems (Ogam letters for writing Gaelic, and Roman letters for writing Latin with British names). The same duality is

found in contemporary inscriptions in Wales, in areas that must have been bilingual to some extent at that time even though the British language would later dominate there. Perhaps, then, British was spoken more commonly in the north of Man than in the south, but the evidence is too exiguous for firm conclusions. There is another carved stone from the north, from Ballavarkish, dated to around the eighth century, which bears both British and Irish personal names inscribed with Roman script and, in one case, possibly Ogam script.<sup>9</sup> In this case, however, the name inscribed in Ogam may be British rather than Irish.<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that the names on the Ballavarkish stone are those of clerics of the local church, or of pilgrims leaving their mark at a noted shrine.<sup>11</sup> It is certainly true that religious vocation could inspire travel, and thus that religious communities could be home to multilingual communities. Thus, at the early monastic site at Maughold, one encounters two stones inscribed with Anglo-Saxon runes that commemorate a certain *Blagcmon*.<sup>12</sup> He may have been a Northumbrian who decided to take up the monastic vocation in Maughold in the seventh or early eighth century.

Although the evidence is fragmentary, it suggests that both of the Insular branches of Celtic language, Gaelic and British, were spoken on Man from the time of the earliest inscriptions in the fifth and sixth centuries, while further vernacular languages, such as Old English, could seemingly be found in the relatively diverse environments of monasteries by the seventh and eighth centuries. How does this evidence tally with external observations about the island? The earliest such observation comes from Orosius, a priest from Spain, who wrote a work of Christian history called *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* in 416/17. In the geographical excursus at the beginning of his work, Orosius describes Ireland and Man as follows:<sup>13</sup>

*Hibernia insula inter Britanniam et Hispaniam sita ... a Scottorum gentibus colitur. Huic etiam Euania insula proxima est et ipsa spatio non parua, solo commoda; aequae a Scottorum gentibus habitatur.*

5. For an informative overview of the early linguistic history of Man, see Thomson 2015  
 6. The best recent survey of this material, with accompanying map, is Charles-Edwards 2013, 148–52  
 7. Kermode 1994, nos 1–3; CIIC nos 501, 503, 504. There is also a second Ogam-inscribed stone from Arbory that seems to be somewhat later in date: Kermode 1994, no. 4; CIIC no. 502. Further information on the Celtic-inscribed stones of Man, with references, can be found at <[www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/cisp/database/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/cisp/database/)> (20 February 2023)  
 8. Jackson 1953, 173; Kermode 1994, Appendix A, 6–8; CIIC no. 500

9. Kermode 1994, Appendix B, 15–18; the Ogam has only been read fully by Macalister, in CIIC no. 1068  
 10. Sims-Williams 2003, 84  
 11. Respectively Kermode 1994, Appendix B, 18; Cubbon 1982, 265–6  
 12. Kermode 1994, nos 25 and 117; for Maughold as an early monastic site, see Megaw 1950; Wilson 2018, chapter 3  
 13. Edited in Arnaud-Lindet 1990–1, I, 32–3 (i. 2. 80–2). For the most part, I follow the translation offered in Ó Corráin 2017, 118–22; cf Fear 2010, 45. For the name form *Euania*, see Ó Corráin 2017, 123–4

'Ireland, an island situated between Britain and Spain ... is inhabited by the peoples of the Irish. Near to it is the island of Euania. It is fair sized and has a fertile soil. It is inhabited by peoples of the Irish.'

If Man was inhabited by *Scotti* (translated here as 'Irish'), it does not necessarily mean that the people who lived there had come directly from what is now Scotland or Ireland; but it does imply that they were now what we might call, in general terms, 'Gaelic', speaking a Gaelic language. It is possible that this perception of Man was influenced by the contemporary political situation. The Irish seem to have dominated the Irish Sea region in the fifth century, while in the sixth century Báetán mac Cairill, king of Ulaid (i.e. Ulster) in north-east Ireland from 572 to 581, apparently gained direct control over Man for a time.<sup>14</sup> This does not mean that Man was inhabited *only* by Gaelic peoples in the fifth century. The seaboard of Wales, too, witnessed settlement, as well as a certain degree of political dominance, by Gaelic peoples at this time, but it is probable that much of the population of Wales remained British throughout the period.

The view of Orosius can be contrasted with that of the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede, writing about three centuries later. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731, Bede describes the authority of the great Northumbrian king Edwin (reigned 616–33) in the following terms:<sup>15</sup>

*Aeduini ... maiore potentia cunctis qui Britanniam incolunt, Anglorum pariter et Brettonum, populis praeftuit, praeter Cantuariis tantum, necnon et Meuanias Brettonum insulas, quae inter Hiberniam et Britanniam sitae sunt, Anglorum subiecit imperio.*

'Edwin had still greater power and ruled over all the inhabitants of Britain, English and Britons alike, except for Kent only. He even brought under English rule the Mevanian islands which lie between England and Ireland and belong to the Britons.'

Using the term *Meuania*, found in some manuscripts of Orosius' *History*, Bede pairs the isles of Man and Anglesey together, attributing them to the 'Britons'. By this term, he meant the non-English inhabitants of southern Britain, sections of whom would later be known by terms like 'Welsh', 'Cornish', 'Breton' and 'Cumbrian'. He does not specify whether he thought that Man was inhabited by Britons, or ruled by Britons, or both.

Bede returns to Edwin's power over these islands a little later in his work:<sup>16</sup>

*Quin et Meuanias insulas, sicut et supra docuimus, imperio subiugavit Anglorum; quarum prior, quae ad austrum est, et situ amplior et frugum prouentu atque ubertate felicio, nongentarum sexaginta familiarum mensuram iuxta aestimationem Anglorum, secunda trecentarum et ultra spatium tenet.*

'He even brought the Mevanian islands under the power of the English as we have said before. The former of these [Anglesey], which is to the south, is larger in size and more fruitful, containing 960 hides according to the English way of reckoning, while the latter [Man] has more than 300.'

Here, Bede offers estimates for the number of 'hides' contained in Anglesey and Man, a 'hide' being a unit used to measure the fiscal value of land in Anglo-Saxon England. The existence of such figures may imply that an overlord, perhaps Edwin himself, had estimated how much tribute should be paid by each island.

Bede's testimony is valuable for warning us against the notion that Man must always have been dominated by Gaelic peoples in the pre-viking period. The situation may have been in flux to some extent, but there is evidence to support Bede's view that, in the eighth century, Man was dominated, politically, by Britons.

#### MAN AND GWYNEDD IN THE NINTH CENTURY

Gwynedd, the principal kingdom of North Wales, including Anglesey, was in a state of civil war in the 810s.<sup>17</sup> Between 812 and 816, a series of battles were fought between Cynan Dindaethwy, then king of Gwynedd, and his rival Hywel Farf-fehinog ('greasy-beard').<sup>18</sup> Anglesey was the key battleground, but the prize, no doubt, was the kingship of Gwynedd. Cynan Dindaethwy claimed to belong to the old line of kings who had been based in the west of Anglesey probably since the sixth century. They claimed descent from an earlier figure called Cunedda, who had allegedly travelled to Gwynedd from a different Manaw: not the Isle of Man, but 'Manaw Gododdin', a region in what is now Scotland that gave its name to Clackmannan and Slamannan. Cynan himself was especially associated with Anglesey. His epithet, *Dindaethwy*, refers to a commote in the

14. Charles-Edwards 2013, 148–9; Ó Corráin 2017, 123

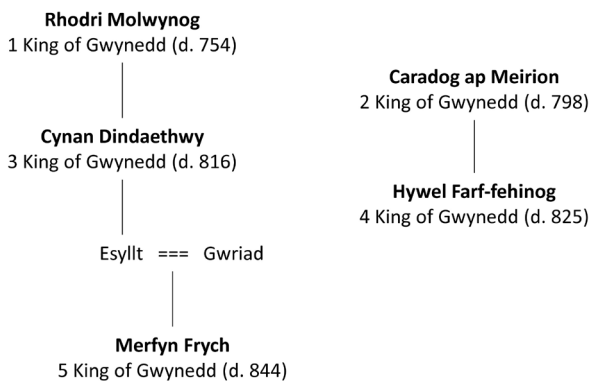
15. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 148–50 (ii. 5). I have slightly adapted Colgrave and Mynors's translation in this and the following case

16. Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 162–3 (ii. 9)

17. For a general account, see Charles-Edwards 2013, 476–8; for the dates, along with texts and a translation of the Welsh Latin chronicles that provide them, see Dumville 2002

18. For Hywel's epithet, see Guy 2020, 377 (LIIG §44)

eastern part of the island, and the same association is probably commemorated in a name that was used for Anglesey by Irish chroniclers in the ninth and tenth centuries, *Moin Conain* ('Cynan's Anglesey').<sup>19</sup> Hywel, by contrast, belonged to a dynasty based on the northern coast of the mainland, in what became the cantref of Rhos. His father, Caradog ap Meirion, had held the kingship of Gwynedd in the 790s, before he was killed by the English in 798, and Hywel clearly intended to pursue his inherited claim.



**Figure 1.** The participants in Gwynedd's civil war, 812–26

During the course of this conflict, in 816, King Cynan suddenly died. This seems to have allowed his rival, Hywel, to take the kingship of Gwynedd for himself, which he held for the next nine years up to his own death in 825. Hywel's dynasty was not to stay in power beyond his reign. By the end of 826, in a final act of the war, the kingship of Gwynedd was seized by someone known to history as Merfyn Frych ('the freckled').<sup>20</sup> Merfyn was Cynan Dindaethwy's grandson through his mother, Eryllt, who was Cynan's daughter (figure 1).<sup>21</sup> It is likely that Merfyn was aligned with Cynan's faction in the war, and yet, according to the norms of medieval Welsh kinship, he would have been perceived as belonging to a different dynasty, since dynasties were conceived in relation to the male line of descent. In other words, Merfyn's seizure of the kingship was a coup-d'état which saw a new dynasty ascend to the throne of Gwynedd. By the twelfth century, this dynasty would be known as the 'Merfynion', meaning 'descendants of Merfyn'.<sup>22</sup>

19. Guy 2020, 239 n. 34, with references

20. For the date, see Dumville 1974, 439–40

21. Some later Welsh genealogies omitted Merfyn's name from the pedigree, which caused confusion about his relationship with Eryllt: see Sims-Williams 1994, 21–2; Guy 2020, 226, 234, 245, 288

22. Charles-Edwards 2013, 467

If Merfyn came from a different dynasty, who was he, and where did he come from? A variety of sources from later medieval Wales give a persistent answer to this question: Merfyn came from the Isle of Man.<sup>23</sup> The most compelling testimony to this is found in a medieval Welsh poem called *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer* ('The Companionship of Myrddin and Gwenddydd his Sister'). The first edition and translation of this poem to be based on all the manuscript copies has recently been completed by the present author as part of the ongoing collaborative project called 'An Edition of the Welsh Merlin Poetry', funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>24</sup> The new work on this poem conducted within the project has established that it was probably composed in the early thirteenth century. The poem itself takes the form of a dialogue between two legendary characters who were thought to have lived in the sixth century: Myrddin (the original 'Merlin'), who had acquired prophetic powers after he had been driven mad at the battle of Arfderydd in Cumbria, where his lord Gwenddolau had been killed; and Myrddin's sister Gwenddydd, whose role is to console her brother while asking him to reveal the future history of Britain. In one part of the poem, Myrddin recounts the kings who ruled Gwynedd between the sixth and early thirteenth centuries. The poet clearly drew on a considerable amount of earlier poetry and traditional lore, some of which has survived, some of which has not. When Myrddin reaches the period of Gwynedd's civil war in the early ninth century, this is what is said:<sup>25</sup>

[Myrddin:]

*Oes Kynan yMon a ui;*

*nyt achatuo y deithi.*

*A chyn galwer mab Rodri,*

*maban keledigan vi.*

23. Among previous treatments of this connection, see especially Charles-Edwards 2013, 467–79, and also Sims-Williams 1994, 11–20; Thornton 2003, 88–96. The discussion below adds new evidence to the debate

24. Details at <<https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FW000717%2F1>> (21 February 2023). For an earlier translation, based on a smaller sample of manuscripts, see Bollard 1990, 30–46

25. I quote from the new edition and translation prepared for the project, which will be freely available on the project website in due course



[Gwenddydd:]

*Kyuarchaf o echlyssur byt,  
a'm dyweit y chwaryan,  
p'by wledych wedy Kynan?*

[Myrddin:]

*O leas Gwendoleu yg gwaetfreu Arderyd,  
digoni o vrað.  
Meruin Vrych o dir Manað.*

[Myrddin:]

It will be the age of Cynan in Anglesey;  
he will not defend his rights.  
And though he may be called Rhodri's son,  
he will be a little concealed boy.

[Gwenddydd:]

I ask for the sake of the world,  
tell me calmly,  
who will reign after Cynan?

[Myrddin:]

Because of Gwenddolau's death in the bloodshed  
of Arfderydd  
terror takes effect.  
Merfyn Frych from the land of Man.'

In the first stanza, the poet emphasises Cynan Dindaethwy's special connection with Anglesey, which was mentioned above. There also appear to be references to his inability to defend his kingdom against Hywel Farf-fehinog, and to a slur casting doubt on his paternity; Cynan himself claimed to be son of a former king of Gwynedd called Rhodri, who died in 754.<sup>26</sup> The poem then skips over the usurper Hywel, just as it had previously skipped over Hywel's father Caradog ap Meirion, king of Gwynedd at his death in 798. Myrddin speaks instead of the coming of *Meruin Vrych o dir Manað* ('Merfyn Frych from the land of Man').

26. For a contemporary reference to Cynan's paternity, from an Irish perspective, see CI *s.a.* 816. For general references to early Irish chronicles, I refer to Charles-Edwards's reconstruction and translation of the Chronicle of Ireland (= CI), but editions and translations of individual Irish chronicles can be found online here: <<https://celt.ucc.ie/irlpage.html>> (21 February 2023)

Judging by the other references to early kings of Gwynedd in the poem, the poet must have had a good reason for thinking that Merfyn came from Man. He might have known an earlier Welsh poem that treated the topic in more depth. Just such a poem is mentioned in a Welsh historical work known as *Disgyniad Pendefigaeth Cymru* ('The Descent of the Sovereignty of Wales'), which survives in an early sixteenth-century manuscript.<sup>27</sup> This text draws on *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer* and other early Welsh sources in order to present a dynastic history of Gwynedd. This is what it says about Merfyn:<sup>28</sup>

*Yn ol Dyfyn i doeth Moroyn Vrych a llynges o  
Vanaw ac i goressgynodd Wynedd, a hynny a  
ddaroganodd Talestin. Efa gant gerdd a elwir Llyn-  
ges Voroyryn ... I holi yr ynys hon, Moroyn Vrych  
a gavas Epyllt verch Gynan Dindaethwyff yn wraic  
briod iddo, a Gwyddel a oedd. Ac yna y troes Gwyn-  
edd arr gogail; weldyma chwedyl Moroyn Vrych.*

'After Dyfyn, Merfyn Frych came with a fleet from Man and he conquered Gwynedd, and Taliesin prophesied that. He sang a song that is called Merfyn's Fleet ... To claim this kingdom, Merfyn Frych obtained Epyllt daughter of Cynan Dindaethwy as his wedded wife, and he was an Irishman. And then Gwynedd was inherited on the female side; this is the tale of Merfyn Frych.'

The lost 'tale of Merfyn Frych' is certainly intriguing, but had it survived, it would not necessarily have constituted good evidence for ninth-century history. The tale appears to have reflected the thirteenth-century idea that Epyllt was Merfyn's wife, rather than his mother, and that Merfyn 'inherited' the kingdom of Gwynedd through her.<sup>29</sup> Such an idea suited the claims of Merfyn's descendants, but does not reflect the realities of the ninth century. The claim that Merfyn was an Irishman might similarly derive from the later medieval context, when the Isle of Man was perhaps more obviously associated with Gaelic culture. Much more pertinent to the present discussion is the reference to an earlier prophetic poem attributed to the legendary Welsh poet Taliesin, which has unfortunately not survived. Other prophetic poems on political themes can be found in the fourteenth-century manuscript known as the Book of Taliesin, and some of those poems date back as far as the tenth century.<sup>30</sup> It is entirely credible that one such prophetic poem bore the title *Llynges Veroyrn* ('Merfyn's Fleet') and 'prophesied' Merfyn's conquest of Gwynedd

27. Edited and translated in Bartrum 1970

28. Bartrum 1970, 258, with my translation

29. Guy 2020, 204–5

30. Most obviously *Armes Prydein Vawr*; in general, see the introduction to Haycock 2013

from Man.<sup>31</sup> Its style may have been similar to a surviving prophetic poem called *Llynghes Von* ('Anglesey's Fleet'), composed probably in the twelfth or thirteenth century, which happens to mention Merfyn as an important ancestral figure.<sup>32</sup> The same lost prophetic poem might have been the original source for the poet of *Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer*.

More cursory references to Merfyn's connection with Man can be found in other texts from Wales. There is probably an allusion to the connection in an elegy composed by Bleddyn Fardd for Owain Goch (d. 1282), brother of Prince Llywelyn ap Gruffudd and descendant of Merfyn Frych. One part of this poem lists Owain's male-line ancestors in turn before claiming that Owain comes from *hil gōraβl breinhyāβl brenhin Manaw* ('the lineage, valiant and royal, of the king of Man').<sup>33</sup> This is likely to be a reference to Owain Goch's descent from Merfyn Frych, a foundational male-line ancestor, though it is also possible that it refers to the claimed common descent of the princes of Gwynedd and Godred Crovan's dynasty in Man, which Welsh genealogists in the thirteenth century were keen to highlight.<sup>34</sup> More concretely, a chronicle known as *Epitome historiae Britanniae*, assembled in south-east Wales in the late fourteenth century, gives an account of early Welsh dynastic history that is largely based on Gerald of Wales, but adds a note that Merfyn was *brenin Manaw* ('king of Man').<sup>35</sup> In the early sixteenth century, this information was of interest to someone from North Wales, probably a cleric in the diocese of Bangor, who copied this passage, along with the detail that Merfyn

was *brenyn Manaw*, into his notebook.<sup>36</sup> The same information entered genealogical writing. An elaborate genealogy of Henry VII, drawn up by various genealogical experts from north-east Wales and elsewhere in the late fifteenth century and preserved in a manuscript written in Edward VI's reign (1547–53), refers to Merfyn several times as *kyng of Man*.<sup>37</sup> This same genealogy, along with the modified claim that Merfyn was 'first king of Man', was later printed as an appendix to William Wynne's *History of Wales*, published in 1697, which became the source for the link between Merfyn and Man in later antiquarian writing.<sup>38</sup>

We can therefore establish clearly enough that there was a persistent idea in later medieval Wales that Merfyn Frych came from the Isle of Man, and that he may have been king there before seizing the kingship of Gwynedd in 826. The next question is, can this idea be corroborated by any earlier evidence? There are in fact two such pieces of evidence, which can respectively help to link Merfyn's father Gwriad and son Rhodri to the island. We know the name of Merfyn's father Gwriad thanks to a Welsh genealogy drawn up in the twelfth century. Although the remoter parts of this genealogy were invented to suit the political claims of that time, it is nonetheless likely that it accurately preserves the names of Merfyn's four immediate forebearers in the male line, who are discussed further below.<sup>39</sup> On other grounds, the name 'Gwriad' is highly plausible as a name for Merfyn's father. During the early Middle Ages, it was common for ruling dynasties to re-use certain 'leading names' within the family, and so it is notable that Merfyn also had a grandson called Gwriad, who was killed alongside his father, Rhodri Mawr, fighting the English in 878.<sup>40</sup> There may have been at least one other descendant of Merfyn called Gwriad active in the first half of the tenth century.<sup>41</sup> But outside Merfyn's family, the name is only otherwise attested in Wales among early medieval rulers of the south-east. It is therefore all the more striking that the same name should appear inscribed on the side of a Manx cross slab that is roughly contemporary with Merfyn.

31. Note that the form *Vorvyrn* that occurs in the text itself is misleading in several respects: firstly, there has been confusion between the names 'Merfyn' and 'Morfryn', as was common in this later period; and secondly, the scribe has inserted an additional -y- into the consonant cluster -vr-, as this scribe can be seen doing elsewhere too. Cf Guy 2020, 368 nn 19 and 36, 370 n. 9, 371 n. 8 (where this same scribe is responsible for the readings of manuscript C)
32. Evans 1911, 18, col 1051, lines 5–29
33. Andrews and McKenna 1996, poem 48, line 21
34. Guy 2020, 35–6. An early thirteenth-century collection of Welsh genealogies recorded the ancestry of Rōgnvaldr Guðrōðarson (king of Man 1187–1226), highlighting how he allegedly shared a common ancestor with Rhanillt, mother of Gruffudd ap Cynan (king of Gwynedd 1099–1137): Guy 2020, 211, 366 (LLIG §16.1); cf Broderick 1980, 33–6; Thornton 1996, 94–6. For political relations between the rulers of Gwynedd and Man in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see McDonald 2007, 63, 101–7; Jones 2020, 195–202
35. Edited and translated in Rees 1853, 284, 619; see Henley forthcoming, chapter 1

36. Now Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth 126, p. 43; see Huws 2022, i, 389
37. The manuscript is London, British Library, Royal 18. A. lxxv, folios 5r, 6r, 8v; see Guy 2020, 217–18, 263
38. Wynne 1697, 335; cf p. 24
39. Guy 2020, 116–18
40. Thornton 1999, 7; for Gwriad's death in 878, see Dumville 2002, 12–13 (s.a. 878); Guy 2020, 371 (LLIG §28.6)
41. Charles-Edwards 2013, 516 and n. 78





**Figure 2.** The CRUX GURIAT stone at a roadside location at Port y Vullen, where it had been moved, sometime before 1841, from its original location in a nearby field. Photograph by Mr T Keig, published in Kermode 1897, opposite p. 48



**Figure 3.** The CRUX GURIAT inscription. Photograph by the present author, 18 February 2023

The possibility that the ‘CRUX GURIAT’ stone commemorates Merfyn’s father has been much discussed since the identification was first suggested by Kermode and Rhÿs in 1897.<sup>42</sup> The stone, once situated in a field near Port y Vullen but now housed at Maughold church, is a granite slab carved with a ring-headed cross, which Kermode dated to the eighth or ninth centuries (figure 2).<sup>43</sup> On the right-hand edge of the slab (as the onlooker views it), the words CRUX GURIAT (‘Gwriad’s cross’) have been inscribed on it using Insular half-uncial letters; that is, the sort of letters that would normally have been used in this period for writing in manuscripts (figure 3). The first word is Latin, and the second is the personal name that would be spelled ‘Gwriad’ in modern Welsh, but which is here spelled in the standard Old Welsh manner (where the final letter *t* means /d/). It is possible that the inscription was added to the stone after the cross was first carved, but if so, it is unlikely to have been added long afterwards. David Wilson has observed that this cross slab is one of several carved granite crosses now associated with Maughold that appear to have been carved by the same local mason, possibly a member of the Maughold community.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, it remains significant that the CRUX GURIAT stone was not originally sited at the church itself. It was originally located in the middle of a field at Port y Vullen, and Kermode supposed that it had been sited within the burial ground associated with the keeill site on Ballaterson Treen.<sup>45</sup> In the early twentieth century, it was recorded that local people in the neighbourhood remembered seeing lintel graves on the site that had been revealed by the plough.<sup>46</sup> It is entirely possible that the ‘Gwriad’ commemorated on the stone was interred in this burial ground. The erection of the memorial stone itself testifies to this Gwriad having been an elite figure of some importance. If Merfyn Frych, son of Gwriad, was a king of Man at the time that he seized Gwynedd in 826, it is highly plausible that this stone commemorates his father, or, given the recurrence of ‘leading names’ in the family, some other close male relative.

42. Kermode 1897, 51; Rhÿs 1897; cf Jones 1972, 17; Jones 1990, 36–7, 43; Sims-Williams 1994, 14–15; Thornton 2003, 90–1; Charles-Edwards 2013, 141, 150–1, 467–8

43. Kermode 1897, 49–50; Kermode 1994, no. 48; CIIC no. 1066

44. Wilson 2018, 42. However, Wilson’s further conjecture that the inscription CRUX GURIAT commemorates the name of the sculptor, ‘inscribed by a literate friend on a stone he had finished before his death’, is unconvincing

45. Kermode 1897, 48

46. Kermode 1994, 122; *Manx Archaeological Survey*, Fourth Report (1915), 21, also available online at <[www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/history/arch/4rpt/index.htm](http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/history/arch/4rpt/index.htm)> (22 February 2023)

Turning from Merfyn's father to his son, there is Irish evidence that affiliates Merfyn's son Rhodri specifically with the Isle of Man. At his death in 878, Rhodri Mawr ('the great') was a powerful Welsh king who seems to have extended his sway over much of Wales.<sup>47</sup> As such, his death was recorded in a contemporary Irish chronicle.<sup>48</sup> In the main manuscript of the so-called 'Annals of Ulster', which preserves a version of that Irish chronicle, a short poem has been added in the margin of the page that has been judged to come from around the time of Rhodri's death.<sup>49</sup> This is the first verse of the poem:<sup>50</sup>

*Ruaidri Manann, minn n-aíne,  
Aed a crichaib Cinn Tire,  
Donnchad, domna finn flatha,  
Garbsith, minn Macha mine.*

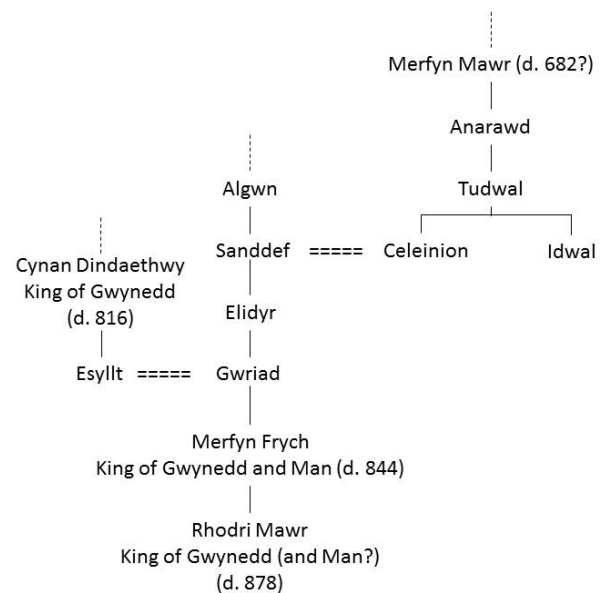
'Ruaidrí of Man, splendid diadem,  
Áed from the lands of Kintyre,  
Donnchad, fair material of a ruler,  
Garbsith, diadem of smooth Macha.'

The poet seems to be pointing out that at least three of the kings who died in 877–8 shared a common trait: they each ruled a kingdom that was geographically separate from their ancestral homeland. For example, the Áed mentioned in the second line is Áed son of Cináed, who ruled the kingdom of the Picts, in what is now eastern Scotland, from 876 to 878. However, his father, Cináed son of Alpín, had come from Kintyre, in the western kingdom of Dál Riata, before apparently seizing the kingship of the Picts in about 842.<sup>51</sup> One could say the same about Rhodri: he was known primarily as king of Gwynedd, but his ancestral homeland was the Isle of Man. This poem therefore provides direct confirmation of the Welsh evidence claiming that Merfyn came from the Isle of Man. But we should not deduce from this that Merfyn and his family had given up their interest in Man as soon as they came to Gwynedd. As has been argued most recently by Thomas Charles-Edwards, it is likely that Merfyn seized Gwynedd from a position of strength in Man, probably as its king, and there is no reason to assume that he would have given up that position in order to become king of Gwynedd. It is more plausible that he held both

kinships concurrently. Both kingships may have then been inherited by Rhodri when Merfyn died in 844, explaining why the Irish poet could refer to Rhodri as 'Ruaidrí of Man'. In turn, if Rhodri continued to exercise authority in Man before his death in 878, this situation might help explain why vikings did not settle in Man before the end of the ninth century.<sup>52</sup>

## THE LEGENDARY ORIGINS OF THE KINGS OF MAN

We can establish with reasonable confidence that Merfyn Frych came from the Isle of Man, and his ability to seize control of Gwynedd in 826 strongly suggests that he held royal authority there, as later Welsh texts imply. That being so, we can fairly assume that Merfyn's ancestors, as recorded in medieval Welsh genealogies, would have been associated with Man too, and that some of them had probably also been kings of Man before Merfyn. Figure 4 sets out the genealogical evidence as a family tree.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 4.** The ancestry of Merfyn Frych in medieval Welsh genealogies

Welsh genealogies record two main lines of descent. As mentioned above, Merfyn's male-line ancestors first appear in a twelfth-century pedigree, the remoter reaches of which were fabricated to reflect the politics of that time. But the names of Merfyn's four direct male predecessors (Gwriad, Elidyr, Sanddef, Algwn) are likely to be

47. Guy 2020, 68–71

48. CI s.a. 878

49. Charles-Edwards 2013, 468 and n. 10

50. I quote the text from the online edition of the Annals of Ulster, s.a. 878, online at <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100001A/index.html>> (22 February 2023); for the translation, I follow CI, I, 327–8 n. 6

51. Woolf 2007, 95–6, 116–17

52. For this line of reasoning, see Charles-Edwards 2013, 467–79

53. The diagram takes into account the variant versions of the two relevant medieval pedigrees, which are set out in parallel in Guy 2020, 117, 288, 290



reliable. Another related twelfth-century pedigree claims that Elidyr's mother, and thus Merfyn's great-grandmother, was a certain Celeinion, who belonged to a different lineage.<sup>54</sup> Unlike Merfyn's male-line ancestors, Celeinion's lineage is recorded in a tenth-century collection of genealogies, which itself drew on material from the ninth century; there is therefore good authority for that line. As will be discussed in more detail below, Celeinion's brother Idwal is the focus of this earlier version. Even without the claim of a marriage link through Celeinion, we might have suspected that this lineage was ancestral somehow to Merfyn Frych, since it used certain 'leading names' that were later favoured by Merfyn's family, including 'Anarawd' and the name 'Merfyn' itself.<sup>55</sup> Judging by the genealogies, this earlier Merfyn, called *mawr* ('the great') in the genealogies, may have lived very roughly in the middle of the seventh century. Some have thought that he can be linked with a record in the Irish annals for that time.<sup>56</sup> Under the year 682, the Irish annals record 'the killing of Muirmin in Manu' (*iugulatio Muirmin in Mano*), an event that possibly came about because that same Muirmin (ie 'Merfyn') had been the leader of the Britons who had successfully attacked Ulster earlier that year.<sup>57</sup> In light of the discussion of Merfyn Frych above, it is striking that the annal associates someone called Merfyn with the Isle of Man, and it is very tempting to identify this Merfyn killed in 682 with the Merfyn Mawr who was great-grandfather of Celeinion and Idwal. It also supports the supposition that this lineage, like Merfyn Frych's own lineage, was based in the Isle of Man.

The putative 'Manx' lineage of Celeinion's brother Idwal, great-grandson of Merfyn Mawr, plays an important role in the tenth-century collection of genealogies just mentioned. This collection, known as the 'Harleian' genealogies after the manuscript in which it is preserved, was assembled in St Davids, in south-west Wales, around 954.<sup>58</sup> Different sections of the collection serve different purposes. The section that concerns us

here is the first, which consists of four pedigrees. Before proceeding further, it is important to recognise that pedigrees such as these in the Harleian genealogies are fundamentally *royal* records. This does not mean that every individual recorded in the pedigrees was thought to be a king. But it does mean that the person whose name comes at the beginning of the pedigree, and whose lineage is traced backwards in time, was deemed to have been a king. With this in mind, we can consider whose lineages are traced in these first four pedigrees:

1. The first pedigree traces the lineage of Owain (d. 988), king of Deheubarth ('South Wales'), back through earlier kings of Gwynedd ('North Wales').
2. The second pedigree traces another lineage of Owain, king of Deheubarth, this time back through the earlier kings of Dyfed in South Wales.
3. The third pedigree traces the lineage of Hywel Farf-fehinog (d. 825), king of Gwynedd, who fought Cynan Dindaethwy in the civil war discussed above.
4. The fourth pedigree traces the lineage of Idwal, brother of Merfyn Frych's great-grandmother Celeinion.

The last pedigree effectively proves that Celeinion's brother Idwal was thought to have been a king. Given his connections with both Merfyn Frych and Merfyn Mawr, the implication is that he had been king of Man. Such a conclusion makes sense of why his pedigree was included in this section of the Harleian genealogies in the first place. The purpose of the four pedigrees is to show why Merfyn's dynasty (including his descendant Owain) had the right to rule various kingdoms. Firstly, it is shown that Owain descended from the previous lines of kings who had ruled the major kingdoms of North and South Wales, Gwynedd and Dyfed. Then, we are given the pedigrees of the last kings from other dynasties who had previously ruled kingdoms that were later held by Merfyn's dynasty: namely, Hywel Farf-fehinog in Gwynedd, and Idwal son of Tudwal in Man. The arrangement of these pedigrees provides further support for the idea that Merfyn was king of Man at the time when he seized Gwynedd in 826, and they imply that his family had held the kingship of Man since the reign of Idwal in the eighth century (just as they then held the kingship of Gwynedd after the reign of Hywel). Furthermore, there are reasons for thinking that an earlier, ninth-century version of the Harleian genealogies began not with Owain, but with Owain's great-grandfather

54. Guy 2020, 116

55. Sims-Williams 1994, 16; Thornton 1999, 5–7; for this Anarawd, son of Merfyn Mawr, see Jones 1972. For leading names, see the discussion of Gwriad above

56. For previous discussion, see Egerton Phillimore in Owen 1892–1936, III, 209–10; Jones 1990, 37, 42–3; Sims-Williams 1994, 15–16; Thornton 2003, 92–3; Charles-Edwards 2013, 470–1

57. CI s.a. 682 and note 3, with text of the Annals of Ulster from the online edition at <<https://celt.ucc.ie/published/G100001A/index.html>> (22 February 2023)

58. For full discussion of this collection and the points raised below, see Guy 2020, 51–79. The text is edited in Guy 2020, 333–7

Rhodri Mawr, showing that he was descended from earlier kings of Gwynedd. If that is correct, the arrangement of the pedigrees would support the proposition that Rhodri inherited the kingship of Man from his father Merfyn Frych.

At this point, we can take a closer look at the pedigree of Idwal son of Tudwal, probably king of Man, as it is preserved in the Harleian genealogies.<sup>59</sup>

*Iudgual map Tutagual map Anaraut map Mermin map Anthec map Tutagual map Run map Neithon map Senill map Dinacat map Tutagual map Eidinet map Anthun map Maxim Guletic, qui occidit Gratianum regem Romanorum.*

Most of the pedigree consists of a series of personal names connected with the Old Welsh word *map*, here meaning 'son of'. At the end, there is also a short note in Latin. What does it all mean? The names in an early medieval pedigree such as this typically fall into three groups. Firstly, we can probably assume that at least the first four or five names or so are historically accurate. Secondly, the names in the middle part of the pedigree, beyond living memory even in Idwal's time, are less likely to be historically accurate, and might instead have been fabricated in order to connect Idwal's lineage with a particular origin point. Thirdly, the names at the end of the pedigree, while very unlikely to represent *literal* ancestors of the dynasty, serve the important purpose of connecting the dynasty with a specific, desired origin point, which could serve to legitimise the dynasty's power. In Idwal's pedigree, this last function is most obviously fulfilled by *Maxim Guletic* ('Maximus the ruler', 'who killed Gratian king of the Romans', as the Latin note says. This is a reference to Magnus Maximus, usurper of the Western Roman Empire between 383 and 388, who deposed the legitimate emperor Gratian. In early medieval Wales, Maximus was considered an originator of post-Roman sovereignty among the Britons, and this was sometimes expressed by various Welsh kings claiming descent from him.<sup>60</sup>

The same function may also have been fulfilled by the two individuals portrayed in the pedigree as son and grandson of Maximus: *Anthun* and *Eidinet*. Under various guises, these two people appear in other legendary contexts, suggesting how those responsible for the pedigree wished to tie the dynasty of Man into broader historical myths. The first name would be spelled 'Annun' in modern Welsh; it derives from the Latin name

'Antonius', and can be seen elsewhere in the name of a commote in Ceredigion, in western Wales, called 'Anhuniog'.<sup>61</sup> The second name is difficult to comprehend as it stands, but the two other surviving versions of this pedigree call the same person *Edneuet* or *Ednyfet*, 'Ednyfed' in modern Welsh.<sup>62</sup> This is a normal Welsh personal name, spelled *Iutnimet* elsewhere in the Harleian genealogies, and it is likely that *Eidinet* is a corruption of this name. As will be seen below, 'Ednyfed' is an especially appropriate name for the son of Annun.

Annun is a significant name in the context of Idwal's pedigree because the same name appears elsewhere in medieval Welsh genealogy as that of a significant dynastic progenitor. Peter Bartrum assembled evidence that implies the existence of an early Welsh genealogical scheme in which Annun functioned as the common ancestor of two important royal lines (figure 5): that of Llŷr Llediaith, which furnished some of the main characters in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, and that of Beli Mawr, from whom the kings of Gwynedd and the kings of the northern Britons were said to descend.<sup>63</sup> Annun himself was said to descend from various figures of legend, such as Brutus, founder of Britain, and the Trojan hero Aeneas, and ultimately Noah and the biblical patriarchs. This element may seem particularly far-fetched from our standpoint, but such claims were common in early medieval Europe. It is significant that the particular ancestry attributed to Annun in this scheme is only otherwise found in *Historia Brittonum* ('The History of the Britons'), a historical text written in Gwynedd during the reign of Merfyn Frych, in 829/30.<sup>64</sup> The significance of this will become apparent below.

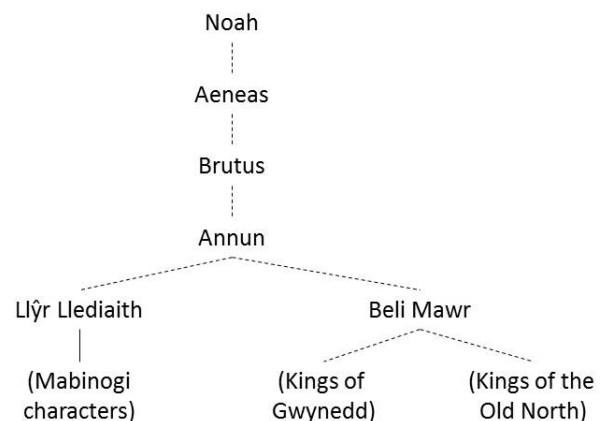


Figure 5. An early Welsh genealogical scheme

59. Text taken from Guy 2020, 334 (HG §4).

60. Guy 2018, 386–90

61. Richards 1965, 208

62. Guy 2020, 290

63. Bartrum 1968. For full details of the argument presented below, see Guy 2020, 235–40

64. HB §18

Another group of early Welsh genealogical texts similarly treats Annun as an important foundational figure. These texts collectively concern the ‘Matter of Brycheiniog’: in other words, the legendary origins of the kingdom of Brycheiniog in south-eastern Wales, corresponding broadly to the historic county of Brecknock or Breconshire.<sup>65</sup> Like many Welsh territories, Brycheiniog’s name derives from a personal name, Brychan. These texts extrapolate from this fact and attempt to give the eponymous ‘Brychan’ a biography. They also attribute to him long lists of sons and daughters, many of whom can be identified as ‘saints’ in Brycheiniog and elsewhere. For present purposes, the most important aspect of these texts is that they claim that Brychan’s mother Marchell was descended from a certain ‘Annun the Black, king of the Greeks’; in the scheme of these texts, it is Brychan’s mother, rather than his Irish father, who is said to have belonged to the original line of kings of Brycheiniog (called ‘Garth Madrun’ before Brychan’s time).<sup>66</sup> The alleged Greek connection is not explained.

It is notable that Brychan is given several connections with the Isle of Man elsewhere in the texts. He is said to have been buried ‘in an island which is called Ynys Brychan, which is next to Man’ (*in insula que uocatur Enys Brachan, que est iuxta Manniam*).<sup>67</sup> Moreover, he is said to be the father of at least three saints connected to Man. One, called in various versions *Run*, *Ruvann* or *Rein*, is said to lie in the western part of Man.<sup>68</sup> He was probably intended to be identified with St Runius (Rónán), patron of the parish church of Marown. A perceived connection between St Runius and Brychan might have arisen because St Runius had been equated with St Rónán mac Beraig of Dromiskin in Louth (on the east coast of Ireland, opposite Man), whose father, Berach, bore a name that would have struck medieval genealogists as being tantalisingly similar to Brychan.<sup>69</sup>

A second saintly son of Brychan, called *Kynon*, is also said to lie in Man.<sup>70</sup> Since he is a brother of the first, it may be that *Kynon* was intended to represent St Conchan, the patron of the parish of Onchan, which neighbours Marown.<sup>71</sup> The same two figures, patrons of Marown and Conchan, are possibly to be found paired together in early accounts of St Patrick, which claim that two bishops called *Conindrus* and *Rumilus* welcomed St Maughold to the Isle of Man.<sup>72</sup> Less likely is a connection between Brychan’s son *Kynon* and St ‘Connanus’, who is described as bishop of Man in Colgan’s account from 1645, since this ‘Connanus’ is probably a composite figure who was concocted by combining elements of other separate saints.<sup>73</sup> Lastly, the third saintly offspring of Brychan who is connected to the Isle of Man is his daughter *Bethan* or *Bechan*, but her implied identity is unknown.<sup>74</sup>

To sum up so far: (1) the lineage of Idwal son of Tudwal, probably king of Man, is traced back to a certain Annun, who is made a son of Maximus; (2) there is evidence for an early Welsh genealogical scheme, related to *Historia Brittonum*, that made two key royal lines of the Britons converge with a certain Annun; (3) legendary material surrounding Brychan of Brycheiniog traces his mother’s line back to a certain ‘Annun the Black, king of the Greeks’, and Brychan’s family is furnished with a series of tantalising connections with the Isle of Man. This body of material needs to be compared with the much more extensive and complicated Irish legendary material surrounding a figure called ‘Agnoman/ Agnon of the Greeks’.<sup>75</sup> For present purposes, the most significant aspect of ‘Agnoman of the Greeks’ in early Irish legend is that he was considered the father of Nemed, one of the early invaders of Ireland. During the early

65. For the dating and interrelationships of these texts, see Guy 2020, 130–6. For texts and translations of the two main narrative versions, see Wade-Evans 1906; I also refer below to the partial edition of the texts in Bartrum 1966, 14–19, where the section numbering is clearer

66. The five surviving versions of Marchell’s pedigree are tabulated in parallel in Guy 2020, 293

67. Wade-Evans 1906, 27; Bartrum 1966, 16 (*DSB* §13); my translation

68. The references are partly corrupt, but can be found at Wade-Evans 1906, 25–6 and Bartrum 1966, 15 (*DSB* §11.6, attributed to *Kynon*); Wade-Evans 1906, 29 and Bartrum 1966, 18 (*CB* §14.6, *Run*); Guy 2020, 339 (*JC* §2.7, *Ruvann*); and Guy 2020, 355 (*LIIG* §1.2.6, *Rein*)

69. On St Rónán of Dromiskin, see Ó Riain 2011, 498, 538–40, who notes that he may have been associated with Marown

70. Again, the references are partly corrupt, but compare Wade-Evans 1906, 25–6 and Bartrum 1966, 15 (*DSB* §11.6); Wade-Evans 1906, 29 and Bartrum 1966, 18 (*CB* §14.4); Guy 2020, 338 (*JC* §2.6); Guy 2020, 355 (*LIIG* §1.2.3)

71. On Conchan, see Megaw 1962–3, who rightly emphasises that Conchan himself could have been a Gael or a Briton; however, whatever his true origin was, it would have been the perception of his name by the Welsh in a later time period that led to his identification with a son of Brychan, if indeed *Kynon* does represent St Conchan

72. For this episode, see Lewis 2013, 30–3. Steinforth (2021, 249) similarly suggests a connection between *Conindrus* and *Rumilus* and Brychan’s two Manx sons

73. Colgan 1645, i, 59–60; cf Steinforth 2021, esp. 247–8. My thanks to Barry Lewis for advice on St ‘Connanus’

74. Wade-Evans 1906, 26 and Bartrum 1966, 15 (*DSB* §12.11); Wade-Evans 1906, 30 and Bartrum 1966, 18 (*CB* §15.11). Note also Brychan’s daughter *Tidyei*, who is linked to Man in just one of the Brychan texts: Guy 2020, 356 (*LIIG* §1.3.14)

75. For this character, see Jaski 2003, 19–31

Middle Ages, the Irish *literati* worked up an elaborate historical mythology that explained the early history of Ireland as a series of invasions, partly serving to connect the island's history with biblical history.<sup>76</sup> This historical mythology is best known from the eleventh-century work *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, the 'Book of the Takings of Ireland', which exists in various versions.<sup>77</sup> Nemed was responsible for leading one of those early invasions. Although the descendants of Nemed later left Ireland, one group of descendants, through his son Fergus Lethderg and grandson Brittán Mael, are said to have travelled to Britain, where they became the ancestors of the Britons. Another group of Nemed's descendants went to Greece, from where they later returned as a people called the Fir Bolg. The Fir Bolg ruled over Ireland for a time until they were defeated in the battle of Mag Tuired by the Tuatha Dé Danann. Upon this, the Fir Bolg are said to have fled to various nearby islands. As one version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* puts it, 'Everyone who escaped of the Fir Bolg and of any of them (?) who had no desire to be in servitude to the Tuatha de Danann, went out from Ireland in flight, and came into Ara and Islay and Rachra and Man and islands of the sea besides' (*Cach aen tra terno do Feraib Bolg, ⁊ di neoch dib ris narbh ail beith i foghnum do Tuathaib De Danann, lator a Herinn for teichedh, corrangatar in Araind ⁊ in Ile ⁊ i r-Rechraind ⁊ hi Manaind ⁊ in innsib in mara chena*).<sup>78</sup>

Key elements of this scheme were known to the Welsh author of *Historia Brittonum*, written in Gwynedd in 829/30 during Merfyn Frych's reign. *Historia Brittonum* sets out its own version of the early invasions of Ireland. It reports the second invasion as follows:<sup>79</sup>

*Secundus ad Hiberniam venit Nimeth, filius quidam Agnominis, qui fertur navigasse supra mare annum et dimidium, et postea tenuit portum in Hibernia, fractis navibus eius, et mansit ibidem per multos annos, et iterum navigavit cum suis, et ad Hispaniam reversus est.*

'The second who came to Ireland was Nemed, a certain son of Agnoman, who is said to have sailed on the sea for a year and a half, and afterwards, when his ships had been damaged, he reached a port in Ireland, and he remained there for many years, and then he sailed again with his people and returned to Spain.'

Later, *Historia Brittonum* also briefly alludes to the fate of the Fir Bolg, imagining that they were led by a leader called *Builc*:<sup>80</sup>

*Builc autem cum suis tenuit Euboniam insulam et alias circiter.*

'*Builc*, moreover, with his people, held the Isle of Man and other islands round about.'

The elements of the Irish legendary history of Nemed were clearly known in Gwynedd in the ninth century. We should recall too a point mentioned above: that the unusual ancestry attributed to Annun in the early Welsh scheme that makes him an important apical figure is otherwise found only in *Historia Brittonum*.<sup>81</sup> All these factors point towards the same conclusion. The Irish legendary character called 'Agnoman/Agnon of the Greeks' was borrowed into Welsh legend, where he became known as 'Annun the Black, king of the Greeks', or simply 'Annun'. Irish stories about Agnoman's descendants through his son Nemed formed the basis for Annun's role in Welsh legendary genealogy. Just as one group of Nemed's descendants became the Britons, while another group became the Fir Bolg, who would eventually settle in Man and other islands, so Annun was made an important ancestor of the Britons in Welsh genealogy, in particular for the Manx dynasty of Idwal son of Tudwal and for Brychan, founder of Brycheiniog, whose family allegedly had several Manx connections. One further factor helps to confirm that the Welsh 'Annun' was based on the Irish 'Agnoman/Agnon'. It will be recalled from the discussion above that Annun's son in the pedigree of Idwal son of Tudwal was probably called 'Ednyfed'. This name was spelled *Iutnimet*, or similar, in Old Welsh. The first element of the name, usually spelled *iud*, means 'lord', but the second element, *nimet*, literally meaning 'sanctuary', is etymologically identical with the Irish 'Nemed'.<sup>82</sup> This suggests that, in the case of the genealogy of the kings of Man, 'Nemed' was borrowed from Irish legend alongside 'Agnoman/Agnon', becoming 'Ednyfed'.

76. For an overview of this process, see Carey 1994

77. For this text and its versions, see Scowcroft 1987; 1988. For detailed references to the sections of the text that are relevant from the present discussion, see Guy 2020, 238–9

78. LGÉ, iv, 110–11

79. HB §13; my translation

80. HB §14; my translation

81. HB §18

82. Williams 1930, 298–9





**Figure 6.** A ninth-century genealogical scheme for Merfyn Frych? The diagram’s sources are shown in italics; for the abbreviations, see Guy 2020

CONCLUSION: THE CONTEXT OF MANX MYTH-MAKING

What do we learn of the early kings of Man from this discussion about the legendary aspects of their genealogy? It shows us that, at some point, there was an attempt to tie the Manx dynasty of Idwal son of Tudwal to a broader historical mythology of the Britons. This myth-making was based on the developing scheme of Irish legendary history, but it was adapted by the Britons for different purposes. We have seen that the key elements of the Irish scheme, as well as aspects of the derivative Brittonic scheme, were well-known to the author of *Historia Brittonum*, written in Gwynedd in 829/30. The text itself mentions that it was written in the fourth year of the reign of Merfyn Frych, a king of Gwynedd who came from the Isle of Man, and who claimed descent from the earlier Manx dynasty of Idwal son of Tudwal, which Merfyn’s own dynasty appears to have supplanted.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the early years of Merfyn Frych’s reign would have provided exactly the right political environment for stimulating a desire

to connect the Brittonic dynasties of the Isle of Man with a broader historical scheme of the Britons, explaining how Merfyn’s family was connected with the Britons of Wales and providing justification for Merfyn’s rule in Gwynedd. Such a scheme was created, and the result, insofar as the surviving fragments reveal, was made up of the elements shown in figure 6.<sup>84</sup>

Even if it were necessary to judge this scenario solely on the basis of the evidence already presented, there would already be a compelling case for believing that this myth-making was taking place in the circle of Merfyn Frych. But there is one further piece of the puzzle that helps us understand exactly how the relevant Irish legendary material would have become known at Merfyn’s court. This is the letter associated with

84. Note that the surviving portions of this scheme record differing numbers of generations in the two lines of descent between Merfyn Frych and Annun. This is not a cause for concern: firstly, some parts of this proposed scheme survive only in fragments that were recycled in other contexts (such as the line between Annun and Beli Mawr); and secondly, medieval genealogists tended to worry much less about harmonising generation numbers in medieval pedigrees than some modern antiquaries!

83. HB §16

the so-called ‘Bamberg cryptogram’, written by a group of travelling Irish scholars to their teacher Colgu back in Ireland. These scholars wished to warn their brethren in Ireland that, if they should travel through the court of Merfyn Frych on their way to the Continent, they might be publicly subjected to an intellectual puzzle involving a cipher with Greek letters. This is the relevant bit of the letter:<sup>85</sup>

*Hec est inscriptio, quam Dubtach in arce Mermin Brittanorum regis demisit ad probandos Scottorum sapientes, se ipsum excellentissimum omnium Scottorum Brittonumque opinans, scilicet putans nullum Scottigenarum quanto magis Brittonum doctorum in presentia Mermin regis istam scripturam perlegere atque intelligere potuisse ... suppliciter poscimus ut istam explanationem ignorantibus et simplicioribus nostris Scottigenis fratribus trans britannicum mare navigare uolentibus per tuam beniuolam caritatem insinues, ne forte in presentia Mermin gloriosi Brittonum regis illam scripturam non intelligentes erubescant.*

‘This is the inscription that Dubtach, thinking that he himself was the most distinguished of all the Irish and the Britons, set forth in the fortress of Merfyn, king of the Britons, to test the wise among the Irish, evidently believing that none of the teachers of Irish birth, much less those of the Britons, would have been able to read and understand that writing before King Merfyn ... we humbly ask that, in your benevolent love, you [Colgu] relate this explanation [of the cryptogram] to the unlearned and more naïve of our Irish brethren wishing to sail across the British sea, lest perhaps they should be made to blush in the presence of Merfyn, the glorious king of the Britons, not being able to understand that writing.’

We learn from this letter that Merfyn maintained at least one Irish scholar, called Dubtach, at his court. Other Irish scholars were accustomed to visit his court when they were travelling across the ‘British sea’ (*britannicum mare*), probably meaning what we now call the Irish Sea: presumably ‘British’ because, for them, it led to Britain. Given what we know of Merfyn, his ‘fortress’ (*arx*) might have been located in Anglesey, mainland Gwynedd, or indeed the Isle of Man. The Irish scholars at Merfyn’s court exchanged intellectual puzzles. These would have been exactly the kind of people who could have introduced Irish legendary history to Merfyn’s court, and discussed how it might be reinterpreted in Merfyn’s political context. Irish intellectuals of this kind are, in fact, mentioned directly in *Historia Brittonum*; as the author says, ‘And if anyone should wish to know when or at what time Ireland was inhabited and

deserted, the wisest of the Irish have reported it to me like this’ (*Si quis autem scire voluerit quando vel quo tempore fuit inhabitabilis et deserta Hibernia, sic mihi peritissimi Scottorum nuntiaverunt*).<sup>86</sup> Dubtach certainly seems to have counted himself among the ‘wisest of the Irish’. Perhaps he and his friends were directly responsible for creating the new genealogical scheme shown in figure 6.

This article has attempted to explore several issues related to the earliest history of the Isle of Man and its kings, some of a general nature, some more specific. We have seen that Man, in the period from the fifth century to the ninth, was probably a multilingual island where both Gaelic and British were spoken, as well as other languages like Old English. Despite this linguistic diversity, by the eighth century it could be perceived by Bede as an island of the Britons, probably because it was dominated by Brittonic kings. In the early ninth century, one of these Brittonic kings of Man, called Merfyn Frych, intervened in a civil war in Gwynedd, and ended up establishing a new dynasty that would continue to rule in Gwynedd until the end of political independence in 1282. On account of Merfyn’s Manx origins, medieval Welsh genealogies preserve details about earlier Britons who were kings of Man. Chief among these was Idwal son of Tudwal, who appears to have been the last king of his lineage to rule Man before the kingship was seized by Merfyn’s family in the eighth century. During Merfyn’s reign in Gwynedd, Irish intellectuals at his court used elements of Irish legendary history to create a new historical mythology of the Britons. In particular, they borrowed the Irish characters Agnoman/Agnon of the Greeks and Nemed, along with their pre-established roles as ancestors of the Britons and the people of Man, and used them to create a new genealogical scheme that tied the early kings of Man into the wider history of the Britons. By doing so, they could show that Merfyn, despite being an interloper from the Isle of Man, had every right to rule the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd.

*Note: this paper was delivered to the Society’s meeting on 18 February 2023.*

85. Text from Derolez 1952, 368–9; my translation. For recent comment on this text, see Ó Cróinín 1993, 47–52; Howlett 2015, 233–48, 256–9

86. HB §15; my translation

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### Abbreviations

CI - *The Chronicle of Ireland*, translated in Charles-Edwards 2006

CIIC - Macalister 1945–9

HB - *Historia Brittonum*, edited in Faral 1929, III, 2–62, and edited and translated in Morris 1980

LGÉ - Macalister 1938–56

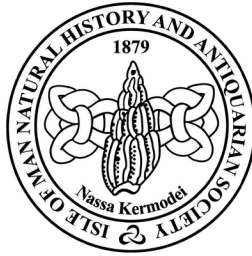
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## About the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society

The Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society was founded in 1879 by a small group of amateur scholars led by P M C Kermodel who was to serve the Society tirelessly until his death in 1932. Kermodel, a typical nineteenth-century polymath, was a distinguished natural history scholar (the logo above shows Nassa Kermodel, one of his discoveries) but his antiquarian interests became even better known, particularly his study of the outstanding series of Celtic and Norse cross-slabs of the Island culminating in his seminal book *Manx Crosses* (1907). As the Society grew in size and importance it played a significant role in the campaign to persuade the Government of the Isle of Man to establish the Manx Museum, an aim which was envisaged in the first Manx Museum and Ancient Monuments Act of 1886 (which commenced protection of the Island's monuments), and became reality in 1922.

In the words of the Society's constitution, the objects of IoMNHAS are 'the advancement of knowledge of Natural History and Human History and Cultural Development, especially in the Isle of Man and countries related thereto. The Society shall seek to promote its objects by practical investigations in the field, by the furthering of cultural and documentary studies, by lectures, by the issue of publications for the benefit of the public, and in other such ways as may be determined by the Committee.'

From its inception, the Society has arranged a series of summer excursions to sites of antiquarian or natural history interest, and winter meetings at which papers have been read covering these fields of study.

The publication of relevant papers advancing the academic disciplines covered by the Society has also been an important part of its work, through a succession of journals - the *Transactions* 1879 to 1882, *Yn Lioar Manninagh* (the Manx Book) 1880 to 1906, the *Proceedings* (1906 to 2013), and now *Isle of Man Studies* since 2014. All contain many contributions of lasting significance to Manx studies, and the excursion reports in these volumes provide a valuable snapshot of the condition of monuments and buildings. The Society also publishes monographs (most recently on Rushen Abbey), and previously published the *Manx Archaeological Survey, Peregrine* (1941-1976), and *The Antiquarian* (2009-2013).

The Society works to promote knowledge, awareness, and conservation of our Cultural, Natural and Built Heritage via diverse lectures, excursions, study visits to areas around the Irish Sea region, symposia and conferences. Members contribute to research, mainly on-Island but also in relation to wider research topics. The Society promotes collaborative research, and to encourage younger researchers offers up to two bursaries a year to students in full-time education whose research relates to Manx subjects within the Society's aims and objectives.

Membership is not limited to Manx residents, and the Society has a significant number of members resident in the British Isles and worldwide who are interested in matters Manx.

On the Society's web site [www.manxantiquarians.com](http://www.manxantiquarians.com) can be found:

- Further information about the Society
- Details of events organised by the Society
- Details of its publications
- Details of the Marshall Cubbon bursary scheme
- Membership details, including discounted rates for families and students in full-time education
- Contact details

News on the Society's events can also be found via the Society's Facebook page:

[www.facebook.com/IsleOfManNaturalHistoryandAntiquarianSociety](https://www.facebook.com/IsleOfManNaturalHistoryandAntiquarianSociety)

<b>New Light on Manx Keeills: an archaeological and architectural reassessment of the structural and material remains of medieval chapels on the Isle of Man</b> <i>Andrew Johnson</i> . . . . .	5
<b>Early Bronze Age Stone Battle-Axes and Axe-hammers of the Isle of Man</b> <i>Amber Roy</i> . . . . .	29
<b>“Shee was the wysest woman in this lande” Margaret Quane (1616)</b> <i>Stephen Miller</i> . . . . .	39
<b>Neolithic street lighting, Christian symbolism or sexual metaphor: the use of quartz in the Manx vernacular built environment</b> <i>Patricia Tutt</i> . . . . .	53
<b>The Revival of Traditional Songs and Music in the Isle of Man</b> <i>George Broderick</i> . . . . .	69
<b>‘In medio duorum animalium’, the ‘Habakkuk motif’: carved images for ‘recognising’ Christ on Viking-Age Manx sculpture as an icon in the search for Redemption</b> <i>Ross Trench-Jellicoe</i> . . . . .	85
<b>‘Extinct’ Manx Butterflies</b> <i>Garry Curtis</i> . . . . .	127
<b>John Toland and the Druids on the Isle of Man</b> <i>Euan McArthur</i> . . . . .	133
<b>Manaw of the Britons: The Pre-Viking Kings of the Isle of Man</b> <i>Ben Guy</i> . . . . .	145
<b>Bishop Hill’s Cathedral of 1886</b> <i>Peter Litman</i> . . . . .	162
<b>‘Kione Speiney’ or ‘Kione Spaine’y’ - the conundrum of ‘Spanish Head’?</b> <i>George Broderick</i> . . . . .	171
<b>Reviews</b>	
<i>The Island of Extraordinary Captives</i> by Simon Parkin, reviewed by Yvonne Cresswell . . . . .	176
<i>Barbed wire university</i> by Dave Hannigan, reviewed by Alan Franklin . . . . .	178
<i>Clarke, Petit and St Mark’s</i> by Philip Modiano, reviewed by Katie King . . . . .	179
<i>Favourite of Fortune</i> by Andrew Bond, Frank Cowin, and Andrew Lambert, reviewed by Matthew Richardson . . . . .	181
<i>Spring Tides</i> by Fiona Gell, reviewed by Andrew Brand . . . . .	181
<b>Recent accessions and developments at the Manx Museum</b> . . . . .	184
<b>Society Business</b>	
The Society in 2021 and 2022 . . . . .	194
Excursions . . . . .	196
Obituary - Sandra Bolton . . . . .	224

