

Abstract for Viking Congress 2021

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Title: Poetry and taxes: Welsh responses to viking attacks in the late tenth century

Abstract:

The period from the 960s to the 980s saw viking attacks on Wales intensify, largely due to the sustained efforts of a Hiberno-Scandinavian dynasty ruling in Man and the Hebrides. Scanty details from Welsh, Irish, and English chronicles can be synthesised to supply a roll-call of assaults, ravagings, and battles, but many other questions remain unanswered. What was the impact of these attacks on Welsh society? How were the attacks and the attackers perceived by their victims? And how did Welsh rulers respond to the onslaught? This paper seeks to address these questions through two approaches.

Firstly, it is argued that Welsh vernacular poetry can provide insight into contemporary perceptions of these events. The potential value of such material is illustrated by a poem conventionally entitled *Etmic Dinbych*; this poem is generally agreed to date to the late ninth century, and it has recently and convincingly been argued by Professor Paul Russell that an additional stanza was added to the poem around a century later to celebrate the conquest of Gwynedd by Maredudd ab Owain in 986. I argue that two further poems may throw light upon perceptions of viking attacks on Wales in the same period: *Kyuoessi Myrdin a Gwendyd y Chwaer* and *Dygogan Awen*. The former is a poetic regnal list which appears to describe a period of viking ascendancy in the second half of the tenth century, previously unrecognised in scholarship. The second, commonly known as *Armes Prydein Vechan* because of its connection with the more famous tenth-century poem *Armes Prydein Vawr*, is verbally linked to the first and may describe the downfall of Iago ab Idwal, king of Gwynedd, in 979, when he was captured by vikings.

Secondly, I return to the chronicle evidence and offer a re-reading of the events of 987–9. In 987, Guthfrith Haraldsson is said to have ravaged Anglesey and taken 2000 captives. Two years later, the Welsh chronicles report that the Welsh king, Maredudd ab Owain, made a payment to the ‘Black Gentiles’. The chronicles are divided, however, about whether this was a ransom payment, intended to redeem the captives, or whether it was a general tribute payment. Most commentators follow the former interpretation, though David Thornton has opted for the latter. I argue that the latter interpretation is not only to be preferred, but that a careful reading of the evidence can suggest that Maredudd gathered a danegeld payment analogous to those initiated by Æthelred II in England in 991.