

“Better provided with daring than with arms”?:
Representations of High Medieval Welsh Warfare Re-examined
Through a Case Study on Owain Gwynedd

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Henry's Army Trapped in a Welsh Defile - Edward Frank Gillett (1922)

A modern artistic interpretation of the 1157 Battle of Coleshill, in which Owain Gwynedd's Welsh force ambushed King Henry II of England, along with his troops.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Paul Groves and Geoffrey Roberts.

“Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh

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I - Introduction

In Roger de Hoveden's account of the 1141 Battle of Lincoln, Baldwin fitz Gilbert declares the following in a speech intended to inspire King Stephen's troops:

“[Ranulf] the earl of Chester is a man of unreasonable boldness... bringing with him few good soldiers... The Welchmen whom he has brought with him are only objects of our contempt, opposing their unarmed rashness to the front of battle, *devoid of skill and all knowledge of the art of war*, like cattle running upon the hunting-spear.”¹

Yet Lincoln ended with Baldwin's defeat. Ranulf “rushed upon [Stephen] with all... his armed men”, capturing Baldwin and the king.² The Welsh role in this victory remains a matter of discussion, but it's clear Baldwin's assessment was misguided.³ This representation of Welsh soldiers is relevant for two reasons: it is evidently loaded with anti-Welsh bias, and it was, as the battle's result suggests, inaccurate. This dissertation shall examine representations of high medieval Welsh warfare within primary evidence and secondary scholarship, in order to assess their veracity.⁴ The ways in which the Welsh in battle were represented shall be investigated, both from inside, in Welsh contemporary sources, and outside, in non-Welsh sources. These representations will then be compared, with similarities and differences highlighted, in order to identify any noteworthy themes, and to interrogate the effects of any potential biases. Conclusions that other historians have drawn from similar material shall be scrutinised against this dissertation's findings.

Overviews of medieval combat have greatly influenced popular representations of Welsh warfare. Two such examples are the sourcebooks of Oman and Nicolle, both of which present problematic representations.⁵ Oman considers the Welsh in two contexts: as part of a “Celtic element” who served the conquering Anglo-Saxons, and as soldiers within English armies.⁶ Whilst such analysis might prove insightful, only so much can be gleaned of Welsh tactics when only engagements in which the Welsh fought under English command are analysed. Oman highlights

¹ Emphasis my own. Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden Vol. I.*, trans. by Henry T. Riley (London, 1853), pp. 241-242.

² Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden*, p. 244.

³ In depth consideration of the Battle of Lincoln is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation, given the imposed restrictions associated with this work. For an overview of the primary evidence and the representations based upon it, see Sean Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales, 633-1283: Welsh Military Institutions* (Cardiff, 2014), pp.136-138.

⁴ Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, “Welsh warfare” shall be used as a shorthand for “high medieval Welsh warfare”, except in cases where a different period is clearly referred to. A detailed explanation of the specific time period under study, along with a rationale, is found below.

⁵ Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War: The Middle Ages from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1898); David Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book: Warfare in Western Christendom* (London, 1999).

⁶ Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, pp. 65, 67.

Welsh expertise in archery, and briefly considers that the Welsh *may* have introduced the mail-shirt to the English, but ultimately concludes that any “advanced” technology used by the Welsh must have been confined to eastern Britain, as “the wilder tribes of Wales... in the later centuries, were neither wearers of armour nor combatants on horseback.”⁷ Similarly, Nicolle analyses the Welsh solely as part of a wider Celtic category, regarding them, along with all other “Celtic states” as “primitive”. The Welsh are represented through their relationship with the Normans or English, as opposed to a distinct culture deserving of its own analysis.⁸

Nelson’s work on the Normans in Wales generates a similar picture.⁹ Nelson presents a more generous view of the Welsh, stating that “[when in familiar terrain,] there were no better warriors”, and commending their prowess when “united and properly directed”.¹⁰ However, the Welsh are still represented only as a foil to the Normans, rather than a group who receive their own thorough analysis. Nelson’s description of the Welsh as a “primitive” culture for whom the Norman style of warfare lay “beyond their capabilities” makes clear his representation is loaded with the same stereotypes of an uncivilised tribespeople found in Nicolle and Oman.¹¹ Likewise, Bartlett suggests the Normans brought inherently superior military practices to Wales, and R. R. Davies paints the Welsh as “militarily backward”, hailing the sophistication of Norman tactics.¹²

These works exemplify the ‘established’ representation, one casting the Welsh as militarily primitive.¹³ For instance, Welsh proclivity for an ‘ambush and retreat’, guerilla, style of warfare is identified, but presented as a symptom of a disorganised culture and evidence for a lack of tactical prowess.¹⁴ This representation stresses Welsh adaptation to the ‘superior’ Normans, but does not investigate Welsh influence *upon* the Normans conversely.¹⁵ These representations echo those found in the contemporary non-Welsh records, particularly the writing of Gerald of Wales. Gerald’s observations are considered throughout this dissertation, as they typify a contemporary Marcher perspective.

⁷ Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, pp. 400, 68.

⁸ Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book*, pp. 76, 121.

⁹ Lynn Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales, 1070-1171* (Austin, TX, 1966).

¹⁰ Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, pp. 12, 19.

¹¹ Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, pp. 12, 13.

¹² Robert Bartlett, ‘Technique militaire et pouvoir politique, 900-1300’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 41.5 (1986), pp. 1138, 1142-1149; R. R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford, 1991), p. 89.

¹³ Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, p. 12; Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, p. 559.

¹⁴ Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, p. 12; Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book*, pp. 60, 67.

¹⁵ Bartlett ‘Technique militaire’ pp. 1142-1149; Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, pp. 12, 17; Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book*, p. 121; Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, p. 68.

Over the past three decades, research has emerged that challenges this established representation. Much has been contributed through foci on the Welsh and consideration of Welsh sources - approaches mostly absent from the works considered above.¹⁶ Suppe uses Welsh sources to reveal that Welsh retreats were not disordered flights, but tactical withdrawals which “remained cohesive and potent.”¹⁷ He highlights Welsh forces were “capable of... full-scale siege[s]” and lists examples, something at odds with Nelson’s assertion that “the intricacies of siege warfare were foreign to [Welsh] experience”.¹⁸ Suppe also identifies ways in which Welsh warfare influenced the practices of the Normans.¹⁹ Through analysis of the *Mabinogion*, Sioned Davies scrutinises the representation that pre-Conquest Welsh did not fight on horseback, a practice generally believed to be introduced by the Normans.²⁰ Sean Davies incorporates broader developments in medieval Welsh historiography to the study of warfare, urging reassessment of the idea that Welsh warfare was more “barbaric than elsewhere”.²¹ Davies finds that “Welsh military forces were comparable to those elsewhere in Europe”, cautioning that “variations... should be considered in relation to... the bias of our sources”.²²

Turvey’s study on Welsh princes emphasises similarities between Welsh commanders and their European counterparts.²³ The composition lacks depth in places; occasionally works, arguments and claims are discussed but not cited. Nevertheless, Turvey illustrates the benefit of considering Welsh military leaders in the same way that English kings, for example, have been considered. Turvey challenges the established representation by concluding that “to suggest the Welsh were... guerrilla fighters who cannot meet the enemy on equal terms would be to do them a disservice”.²⁴ This approach chimes with that of Pryce, whose compilation ‘The Acts of Welsh Rulers’ synthesises primary evidence that allows for deeper study of Welsh warfare through analysing the actions of Welsh leaders.²⁵ In contrast, Stephenson sought to “break free of... assumptions and approaches that have dominated work on medieval Wales” by deviating from a “fixation with princes”.²⁶ Despite

¹⁶ R. R. Davies is most certainly an exception here, as he considers Welsh sources at length. His representation of the Welsh is generally far more generous and balanced than the others mentioned above, but his representation of Welsh *warfare* has still been included, as it clearly aligns with the established view. Oman’s work is also something of an exception, as it does briefly draw upon evidence from medieval Welsh literature. Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, p. 68.

¹⁷ Frederick C. Suppe, *Military Institutions on the Welsh Marches: Shropshire, 1066-1300* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1994), p.12.

¹⁸ Suppe, *Military Institutions*, p. 29; Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, p.12.

¹⁹ Suppe, *Military Institutions*, p. 125-142.

²⁰ Sioned Davies, ‘Horses in the Mabinogion’, in *The Horse in Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, ed. by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997), p. 137.

²¹ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, pp. 1-2.

²² Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 259.

²³ Roger Turvey, *The Welsh Princes: The Native Rulers of Wales 1063-1283* (London, 2002).

²⁴ Turvey, *The Welsh Princes*, p. 143.

²⁵ *The Acts of Welsh Rulers: 1120-1283*, ed. by Huw Pryce (Cardiff, 2005).

²⁶ David Stephenson, *Medieval Wales c.1050-1332: Centuries of Ambiguity* (Cardiff, 2019), p. 3.

differing approaches, Turvey and Stephenson both demonstrate the merits of studying the period with the intention of scrutinising established representations.

Colclough synthesises these ‘progressive’ approaches with an analysis of source material to assess representations of warfare within both contemporary records and modern scholarship.²⁷ Colclough argues differences between Welsh and Norman warfare highlighted in primary sources were of “political importance to both cultures... therefore the truth in these descriptions is questionable”, suggesting this may be why historians “often [re-emphasise]... differences between English and Welsh soldiering”.²⁸ The breadth of Colclough’s work, whilst a strength, is also its limitation; analysis of specific battles within is restricted, and there is space for further research to address this. This dissertation applies such a method in an attempt to address this omission in the historiography, and demonstrate the merits of this approach. Whilst some research briefly considers perspectives of other historians, there is a lacuna of work that considers them en masse, scrutinising representations from modern historians and contemporary writers by analysing them against military engagements. This dissertation utilises a case study on specific military engagements to integrate Colclough’s assessment of the historiography with an analysis of historical material, including financial records, letters, and poetry, in order to assess claims made about Welsh warfare.

Two engagements have been chosen to highlight broader trends whilst maintaining focus. Owain Gwynedd has been selected as a focus for this case study, as his military career contradicts representations which imply an absence of Welsh tactical prowess, or impotence of Welsh strategy. Furthermore, Owain’s life (1100-1170) coincided with a period of heightened conflict across Wales.²⁹ This period saw the ascendancies of Owain’s kingdom, Gwynedd, and later of Deheubarth, ascendancies the Normans sought to check with force.³⁰ The period also spanned the Anarchy.³¹ The period is well-documented in contemporary sources, offering abundant material for analysis. The engagements chosen for study are Crug Mawr (1136), considered in Chapter II, and Coleshill (1157), considered in Chapter III. Crug Mawr has been chosen for the way in which primary sources recorded it. These differing representations reveal much, and can be used to assess representations found

²⁷ It should be stressed that the ‘progressive’ representations are not monolithic and are grouped as such only for their deviation away from the ‘established’; some deviate more than others, and many may provide assertions that challenge those in other ‘progressive’ representations.

²⁸ Samantha Colclough, ‘Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare: Wales c.1100 - c.1450’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Bangor University, 2015), pp. 295-296.

²⁹ Suppe, *Military Institutions*, p. 4.

³⁰ Stephenson, *Medieval Wales*, pp.35-37; Suppe, *Military Institutions*, p. 4.

³¹ Ralph Griffiths, ‘England, post-Conquest’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Robert Bjork. Available at: www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624-e-2010, Accessed 26 May 2024; Ralph Griffiths, ‘Owain Gwynedd (c. 1100-70)’ in *The Oxford Companion to British History (2 ed.)*, ed. by Robert Crowcroft and John Cannon. Available at: www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677832.001.0001/acref-9780199677832-e-3227, Accessed 26 May 2024.

elsewhere. It has also received limited scholarly attention, something this dissertation seeks to address. Coleshill, however, has been chosen for the abundance of secondary scholarship concerning it.³² Much of this has centred on Henry II, presenting Owain as a relief against which to study the English king, thus providing further representations that invite analysis. A brief biography of Owain Gwynedd is provided at the outset of Chapter II. Areas of potential future research are outlined in the appendix.

³² Paul Barbier, *The Age of Owain Gwynedd* (London, 1908); David James Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', *Welsh History Review*, 2 (1964), pp. 367-373; Colclough, 'Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare'; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*; John Edwards 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill: Some Further Reflections', *Welsh History Review*, 3 (1967), pp. 251-263; John D. Hosler, 'Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales, 1157 and 1165', *The Journal of Medieval Military History*, 2 (2004), pp. 53-71; Paul Latimer, 'Henry II's Campaign against the Welsh in 1165', *Welsh History Review*, 14 (1988), pp. 523-552.

II - Crug Mawr (1136)

The death of Henry I in 1135 precipitated a crisis for Norman ambitions in Wales. Following the king's demise, revolts broke out across Wales.³³ Gerald of Wales records battles near Kidwelly, the expulsion of Flemish colonists in Haverfordwest, and the removal of the English from Llanbadarn Fawr. These events Gerald precedes with a portentous, likely metaphorical, bursting of two pools near the River Wye on the night of Henry's death, their waters rushing "precipitously down the valleys", much like the Welsh insurgents.³⁴ The symbolism would not have been lost on Gerald's readers. The *Brut y Tywysogion* documents an army sacking four castles in Ceredigion almost immediately following Henry's death, heaping praise upon the army's leaders: Owain and Cadwaladr, sons of Gruffydd ap Cynan, *tywysog* of Gwynedd.³⁵ During Henry I's reign, Gruffydd had adopted a prudent policy of appeasement toward English rule, but this soon changed after Henry's death.³⁶ Aged, ailing, and losing his eyesight, Gruffydd likely entrusted matters of warfare to his sons.³⁷ As the *Brut* indicates, they wasted no time in joining the revolts. With his older brother Cadwallon having died in battle in 1132, Owain was in line to take his father's place.³⁸ No doubt aware of Gruffydd's declining health, Owain surely realised the significance of the opportunity before him; one in which he could prove himself as a leader, politically and militarily. Legitimacy of medieval leadership was based on many factors, but key among these (and in some cases, more important than hereditary claim) was military capability.³⁹ This was as true in Wales as elsewhere.⁴⁰ If Owain could not prove himself militarily, it is possible his claim to Gwynedd may have been challenged. It is amidst these circumstances that we find Owain marching back into Ceredigion in autumn 1136.

The Battle of Crug Mawr occurred sometime around October 1136, near the base of Crug Mawr, a hill northeast of Aberteifi (Cardigan).⁴¹ It stands as a rare example of a pitched battle involving the Welsh and the Normans, and its contemporary significance is well attested by the range of sources that recorded the decisive Welsh victory. Much can be inferred about contemporary

³³ Davies, *The Age of Conquest*, pp. 44-46.

³⁴ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, ed. and trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 136-137, 141-142, 146, 180, 79.

³⁵ Hereafter, the *Brut y Tywysogion* is referred to as the *Brut* in the dissertation body. Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, ed. and trans. by John Williams [Ab Ithel] (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 156-159.

³⁶ Davies, *The Age of Conquest*, pp. 44-46.

³⁷ Paul Barbier, *The Age of Owain Gwynedd* (London, 1908), p. 5.

³⁸ Davies, *The Age of Conquest*, pp. 45-46.

³⁹ Benno Teschke, 'Geopolitical Relations in the European Middle Ages: History and Theory', *International Organization*, 52.2 (1998), p. 343-344; Emily Winkler, *Royal Responsibility in Anglo-Norman Historical Writing* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 213-238.

⁴⁰ Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 9-31, 80-92.

⁴¹ Barbier, *Owain Gwynedd*, p. 6; Ralph Griffiths, *Conquerors and Conquered in Medieval Wales* (New York, NY, 1994), pp. 278-279.

representations of Welsh warfare based on what these chronicles do and do not disclose about the battle.

Most likely, Crug Mawr's inciting incident was the death of Richard fitz Gilbert (de Clare), lord of Ceredigion, earlier in the year. Whilst not directly referenced as a cause, the *Annales Cambriae* details Richard's death and immediately after records the march of Owain and Cadwaladr into Ceredigion, suggesting a causal relationship.⁴² Richard's father had conquered much of Ceredigion, and it appears the "chief activity of Richard's life" was consolidating these conquests, turning the area into "a second England".⁴³ Thus it is unsurprising that the power vacuum ensuing Richard's death was exploited by an invasion of Ceredigion by the powers of Gwynedd. Owain's decision to march on Ceredigion serves to indicate his strategic percipience.

The chief Welsh sources, the *Brut* and the *Annales*, both record an alliance between the forces of Gwynedd and Deheubarth, stating Gruffydd ap Rhys (among other leaders) came to the aid of Owain and Cadwaladr.⁴⁴ This alliance evidences the ability of *tywysogion* to fight alongside one another when needful, supporting Sean Davies' assertion that political violence among Welsh nobility was declining in this period, and challenging Gerald of Wales' observation that the Welsh "have no regard for... ties of peace and friendship".⁴⁵ Instances of cooperation such as this highlight that, whilst inter- and intra-dynastic conflicts were not uncommon in Wales, historians should not overstate the prevalence of such violence as a means to draw contrast between practices in Wales and elsewhere. Finally, if we are to understand that Owain led this coalition, the event demonstrates his capacity to marshall a large, diverse force. That the sources allege this force was one of combined arms, containing infantry, armoured cavalry, and archers, further supports this inference.⁴⁶ This substantiates Turvey's suggestion that Welsh skill at arms was not confined to guerilla warfare, and contradicts Nelson's claim that pitched battles were beyond Welsh capabilities.⁴⁷ Presumably, when Oman spoke of "tribes of Wales... in the later centuries" wearing no armour and not fighting on horseback, he was not referring to Gwynedd or Deheubarth in the twelfth century, for otherwise, Crug Mawr challenges his assertion.⁴⁸

⁴² Hereafter, the *Annales Cambriae* is referred to as the *Annales* in the dissertation body. Anon., *Annales Cambriae*, ed. by John Williams [Ab Ithel] (London, 1860), p.40.

⁴³ David Crouch, 'Clare, Richard de [Richard of Ceredigion, Richard fitz Gilbert] (d.1136), baron', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5446>, Accessed 3 May 2024.

⁴⁴ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 158; Anon., *Annales Cambriae*, p.40.

⁴⁵ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 230; Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 257.

⁴⁶ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p.158; Anon., *Gesta Stephani, regis Anglorum, et ducis Normannorum*, ed. by Richard Clarke Sewell (London, 1846), p.11.

⁴⁷ Turvey, *The Welsh Princes*, p. 143; Nelson, *The Normans in South Wales*, pp. 12.

⁴⁸ Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, p. 68.

Of these Welsh sources, only the *Brut* gives an estimate of the numbers involved, stating the Welsh force numbered around 6000 infantry and 2100 cavalry, and whilst the size of the Norman force is not given, their losses are stated to be about 3000.⁴⁹ This number is revealing when compared against one of the more comprehensive Norman sources on the battle, the *Gesta Stephani*.⁵⁰ Although the *Gesta* gives no precise number of Normans fielded, it implies at least 3000.⁵¹ Moreover, none of the sources give the impression this force was considered small. Multiple sources state it included important nobles and their troops, along with, as the *Brut* put it: “all the Flemings... all the marchers... all the French [Normans] from Aber Nedd unto Aber Dyvi”.⁵² This was no minor force that the Welsh defeated. We should accept these numbers with caution, however, particularly the Welsh numbers recorded in the *Brut*. Brooks suggests that the entire knight service of England at the time was only 5000, making it unlikely that the Welsh leaders, calling upon a comparatively limited demographic and economic base, could summon such a vast cavalry force.⁵³ This therefore also calls into question the *Brut*'s number of Welsh infantry, although a large infantry force would have been far easier to muster than one of cavalry. The contemporary material presents challenges for analysing the numbers Welsh leaders could summon. Whilst statements like Gerald's that “the entire nation are trained for war. Sound the trumpet for battle and the peasant will rush from his plough to pick up his weapons as quickly as the courtier from the court”, could be read as attempts to strengthen perceptions of the Welsh as inherently ‘savage’ or ‘warlike’, other evidence does suggest that Welsh leaders, specifically those of Gwynedd, could summon large, irregular forces.⁵⁴ The *Brut* records an instance where “men of the country who had retired to the sanctuaries of the churches” were called upon for battle by Owain's sons, Cynan and Hywel, in 1147, and Hywel's poem on Gwynedd's defence of Anglesey (led by himself) against Henry II's forces in 1157 describes how a “beardless warrior put to flight a thousand leaders”.⁵⁵ Davies suggests this latter reference could indicate the utilisation of boys under military age in combat when required, using this to support his theory that Welsh leaders could “muster significant numbers”.⁵⁶ It is highly possible that a force of irregulars could have been present at Crug Mawr, given the engagement's context within the popular revolts

⁴⁹ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p.158-160

⁵⁰ Hereafter, the *Gesta Stephani* is referred to as the *Gesta* in the dissertation body.

⁵¹ I base this claim upon the quote “*ipsosque Ricardi milites, sed et alios nonnullos qui usque ad tria millia, cum peditum agmine, ex vicinis urbibus et castellis ad auxilium eorum convenerant,*” which I have translated as “Richard's soldiers, also with some others, who had raised from nearby cities and castles three thousand men, and a column of infantry.” I would suggest that it is unclear whether or not the given number of 3000 also includes Richard's soldiers or the column of infantry. Anon., *Gesta Stephani*, p. 11.

⁵² Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, pp.158-161; Anon., *Annales Cambriae*, p.40; Anon., *Gesta Stephani*, p. 11.

⁵³ Richard Brooks, *Cassell's Battlefields of Britain and Ireland* (London, 2005), p. 152.

⁵⁴ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 233.

⁵⁵ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 175; Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd, ‘Ode VI’, in *Welsh Poems: Sixth Century to 1600*, ed. by Gwyn Williams (London, 1973), p.44

⁵⁶ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, pp. 53, 72-74.

spreading through Wales. It is not hard to imagine common people taking up arms against their colonisers.

The numbers in the *Brut* and *Gesta* also provide an impression of the immensity of Norman losses. Whilst the Norman force was evidently not totally eradicated (all sources mention some Normans fleeing or being taken captive), their losses were clearly substantial. As a point of reference, it is estimated that the Normans fielded a force of around 6000 at Hastings, and lost roughly a quarter.⁵⁷ Thus, Norman losses at Crug Mawr most likely outweighed those at Hastings, potentially by double. Descriptive details in the sources also evidence the extent of the Welsh victory. The *Brut* and the *Annales* both state the Normans were variously killed, burned, trampled by horses, drowned in the river, or taken captive.⁵⁸ The fact these two sources agree, however, should not be taken as a mark of their veracity, as both were likely independently derived from a common original.⁵⁹ However, in this case, their details can be corroborated against the Norman sources. These record the same manners of Norman deaths, but include descriptions of ferocity absent from Welsh sources. The *Gesta* details abduction of noncombatants, slaughter of the elderly, burning of churches, and subjection of women to public sexual humiliation, whereas the *Brut* states that the Welsh “obtained the victory honourably, with an immense number of prisoners and spoils”.⁶⁰ This discrepancy highlights the importance of considering both Welsh and non-Welsh sources. Whilst we cannot know which account is closer to the truth, we can glean their purposes. The *Brut* intended to represent a Welsh victory as a mark of honour and prowess, whilst the *Gesta* sought to use the victory as a mark of Welsh barbarity and heathenism.

The loss stuck firmly in the minds of the Normans, and within the imagination of their chroniclers. This is made particularly clear in the *Chronicon ex chronicis*, which describes the Norman deaths at Crug Mawr in graphic detail.⁶¹ The *Chronicon* describes how, following the Norman retreat over the river Teifi, the bridge they were crossing collapsed, the drowning soldiers

⁵⁷ Spencer Tucker, *Battles that Changed History: An Encyclopedia of World Conflict* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011), p. 107; John Kuehn and David Holden, *The 100 Worst Military Disasters in History* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2020), p. 56.

⁵⁸ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 158; Anon., *Annales Cambriae*, p.40.

⁵⁹ John Edward Lloyd, ‘The Welsh Chronicles’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 17 (1928), pp. 369-391; Latimer, ‘Henry II’s Campaign against the Welsh in 1165’, p. 532.

⁶⁰ Anon., *Gesta Stephani*, p. 11; Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p.160.

⁶¹ The authorship of the *Chronicon ex chronicis* is uncertain. The edition of the chronicle that I have access to is an older one, and the editor credits the chronicle to Florence of Worcester, thus I have reflected this in my following citation of the work. However, more recent research suggests that the chronicle may have been the work of John of Worcester, or was otherwise compiled by both Florence and John. For a further discussion on the authorship of the chronicle, see Reginald R. Darlington and Patrick McGurk, ‘The ‘Chronicon Ex Chronicis of ‘Florence’ of Worcester and Its Use of Sources for English History Before 1066’, in *Anglo-Norman Studies V: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1982*, ed. by R. Allen Brown, (Bury St. Edmunds, 1983), pp. 185–196.

forming “a bridge of human bodies and a horrible mass of horses”.⁶² This sight may have proved so harrowing that it even influenced contemporary literature. The similarities between the description in the Norman chronicles of Crug Mawr and Layamon’s narrative of the Arthurian Battle of Badon Hill (likely written in the century following Crug Mawr) are intriguing, particularly his reference to “*hu ligeð i þan stræme stelene fisces*”.⁶³ Layamon may have been inspired by the “emotive imagery” of Crug Mawr that remained in collective memory.⁶⁴ He wouldn’t have been the only writer to draw such a comparison; the Welsh poet Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr also likened Crug Mawr to the Battle of Badon.⁶⁵ The fact both Welsh and English writers chose to compare Crug Mawr to a legendary Brittonic victory reveals the event’s contemporary import.

Further testament to the battle’s significance in collective memory is the fact that Gerald of Wales had the site of battle pointed out to him as he passed it, some 50 years later.⁶⁶ In his record, two details stand out. Firstly, he omits Owain Gwynedd, crediting Gruffydd ap Rhys with the victory. Although contemporary sources generally agree that Gruffydd was among the coalition at Crug Mawr, none indicate he led it. At the time of Gerald’s writing, Owain had been dead for nearly two decades, leaving Gwynedd no longer the power it had been, and Rhys ap Gruffydd (son of Gruffydd ap Rhys) had become the preeminent Welsh *tywysog*.⁶⁷ Gerald might have chosen to highlight Gruffydd’s role either to include reference to a more contemporarily relevant dynasty, or even as an appeal to Rhys specifically, with whom he had a number of personal liaisons.⁶⁸ Additionally, Gerald includes a personal judgement absent from other sources; he suggests the Welsh were able to defeat the Normans at the “very first encounter” only due to the fact that Richard fitz Gilbert had been killed prior. Whilst certainly likely that Richard’s troops may have performed better under his leadership, claiming it was *solely* Richard’s absence that allowed the Welsh to win obfuscates any other potential reasons for their resounding victory. These additions illustrate the way in which the record could be

⁶² Florence of Worcester, *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi Chronicon ex chronicis*, ed. by Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1849), p. 97.

⁶³ “how steel fish lyeth in the river”. Translation mine. Layamon, *Layamon: Brut, Volume II*, ed. by George Brook and Roy Leslie (Oxford, 1978), line 10640, p. 554.

⁶⁴ Catherine Clarke, ‘Layamon’s Badon Hill and the Battle of Crug Mawr’, *Notes and Queries*, 54 (2007), pp. 368-370.

⁶⁵ Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, *Gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, Vol. II*, ed. by Nerys Ann Jones and Ann Parry Owen (Cardiff, 1995), as cited in Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p.129.

⁶⁶ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 177.

⁶⁷ T. J. Pierce, ‘Owain Gwynedd (c. 1100 - 1170), king of Gwynedd’, in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Available at <https://biography.wales/article/s-OWAI-GWY-1100>, Accessed 9 May 2024; T. J. Pierce, ‘Rhys ap Gruffydd (1132 - 1197), lord of Deheubarth, known in history as 'Yr Arglwydd Rhys' ('The lord Rhys')’, in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Available at <https://biography.wales/article/s-RHYS-APG-1132>, Accessed 9 May 2024.

⁶⁸ Lewis Thorpe, ‘Introduction’ in *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales* (Harmondsworth, 1978) pp. 15, 18, 25.

adjusted to suit the needs of the chronicler: in these cases, to appeal to a chosen Welsh leader on one hand, and to diminish the value of a Welsh victory on the other.

The drowning of the Normans in the Teifi also serves as insight into the Welsh combatants' capability, and the conduct of the Normans. If the site of battle suggested by Griffiths, based upon the description in the *Itinerarium*, is accepted, then the nearest point of the Teifi lay over two kilometres southwest from where battle commenced (Figure 2).⁶⁹ This is an immense distance for the Welsh to maintain their pursuit, suggesting an ability to maintain a cohesive offensive force over a long period and space. This also points to an incredibly disorganised Norman retreat. This was not a tactical withdrawal, but a chaotic flight, one resulting in the catastrophic breaking of the bridge over the Teifi and thus further Norman losses. It is hard to imagine such a flight would have precipitated had the Normans not been greatly outmatched by their opponents. This retreat calls into question representations of Norman military superiority and Welsh military inefficacy. In Gerald's *Descriptio*, he states that when the "enemy resists... [the Welsh] are immediately thrown into confusion... they turn their backs, making no attempt at a counterattack,... seeking safety in flight".⁷⁰ Colclough reminds that Gerald's motivations must be considered; "[the *Descriptio*] cannot be seen solely as an ethnographic piece, but also as... an opportunity to celebrate the success and role of his kinsmen, the Marcher lords".⁷¹ That the *Brut* levied much the same criticism against the Normans at Crug Mawr: "with cruel fighting on every side, the Flemings and the Normans took to flight, according to their usual custom", demonstrates further that chroniclers, Welsh and non-Welsh, were often more concerned with highlighting perceived cultural differences than accurately representing events.⁷²

References in the sources to trampling hint at the Welsh execution of a cavalry charge - more importantly, a successful charge. Further evidence of this may be supplied by Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, who wrote of Owain "*ym Mrwydr Aberteifi drylliai gwaywffyn cwympedig*", a description that Davies interprets as alluding to a Welsh charge, possibly a mounted one, breaking a line of spearmen.⁷³ These intimations suggest a Welsh skill in mounted combat, or atleast a willingness to engage in it, calling into question certain representations of Welsh mounted combat. Gerald of Wales suggested that the Welsh "gradually learnt from the English and the Normans how to... use horses in battle, for they have frequented the court and been sent to England as hostages".⁷⁴ Besides the fact

⁶⁹ Griffiths, *Conquerors and Conquered*, p. 279.

⁷⁰ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 259.

⁷¹ Colclough, 'Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare', pp. 121.

⁷² Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 161.

⁷³ "in the Battle of Aberteifi, he shattered spears". Translation mine. Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, *Gwaith Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, Vol. II*, ed. by Nerys Ann Jones and Ann Parry Owen (Cardiff, 1995), as cited in Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 267.

that it seems absurdly unlikely that the Welsh could have learnt the intricacies of mounted combat from the English merely by being present at their court or in their jails, the evidence also fails to corroborate this suggestion. Crug Mawr's evidence fits within recent scholarship which has sought to better understand Welsh use of cavalry. Whilst the popular view maintains mounted shock combat was brought to Britain by the Normans, allusions to its practice exist within Welsh poetry that may predate Norman arrival.⁷⁵ The *Mabinogion* includes a reference to the mythical king Hafgan being sent "an arm's and a spear's length over the crupper of his horse" by a single blow, which could be seen as a reference to a blow dealt by a couched lance delivered in a charge.⁷⁶ The poem *Y Gododdin* also includes references to mounted combat, but in this case the riders throw spears from horseback, rather than engaging in charges.⁷⁷ Naturally, representations in poetry must be treated with caution. Although the *Mabinogion* was based on folklore predating Norman arrival in Britain, Anglo-Norman influences can still be found throughout the poems, the extant copies of which were produced after the Conquest.⁷⁸ The degree to which representations of warfare in Welsh poetry accurately reflect contemporary practice is still debated, as is the degree to which these practices, if they were in use, were continuations of pre-Conquest British mounted warfare like those referenced in *Y Gododdin*, or a diffusion of techniques introduced by the Normans.⁷⁹ References to the use of cavalry at Crug Mawr are particularly valuable, as they demonstrate the way in which chronicle evidence of specific engagements can contribute to wider debate. They also expose contemporary representations of Welsh combat to scrutiny. Gerald of Wales stated Welsh leaders rode into battle on horseback whilst "common people prefer to fight on foot", yet that "horsemen will often dismount, as circumstance and occasion demand".⁸⁰ Gerald often overstated the differences between the Normans and the Welsh, and he could be guilty of doing so here.⁸¹ The 'common people' among the Norman forces also fought on foot, cavalry warfare being the preserve of those few among the social class that could afford to keep and maintain costly horses for battle.⁸² This class was likely larger in Norman England, but it is not unique to the Welsh that only a select group fought on horseback. It has also been suggested the prevalence of Norman cavalry has itself been overstated, with dismounted knights favoured in given

⁷⁵ Jessica Hooker, 'A Textual Commentary on the First Branch of the Mabinogi' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge University, 1995), pp. 89-97.

⁷⁶ Anon, *The Mabinogion*, ed. and trans. by Charlotte Guest (London, 1927), p. 16.

⁷⁷ Aneirin, *Gododdin: The Earliest British Literature*, ed. and trans. by Gwyn Thomas (Llandysul, 2012) pp. 47, 55, 77, 120-123.

⁷⁸ Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', p. 137.

⁷⁹ Nerys Ann Jones, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry', *The Horse in Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives* (Cardiff, 1997), p. 88-89; Jenny Rowland, 'Warfare and Horses in the Gododdin and the Problem of Catraeth', in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 30 (1995), p. 21.

⁸⁰ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 234.

⁸¹ Jones, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry', p. 89; Colclough, 'Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare', pp. 295-296.

⁸² Martin Dougherty, *Weapons and Fighting Techniques of the Medieval Warrior: 1000-1500 AD* (London, 2008), p. 22.

engagements.⁸³ Crug Mawr gives new context to Gerald's claim; horsemen no doubt did dismount when the circumstances called for it (to fight on terrain where a horse would prove a hindrance, for example), but Crug Mawr demonstrates the Welsh were perfectly capable of utilising cavalry successfully when prudent to do so. This supports Colclough's observation that Gerald's descriptions "have more to do with creating an image of Welsh inferiority and the conquering English bringing better tactics to a backward society" than with painting an accurate image of Welsh warfare.⁸⁴ Contemporary records of specific battles, such as Crug Mawr, can not only challenge established representations of warfare, but can also contribute to wider debates, such as those involving the Welsh relationship with mounted combat.

Given the battle's outcome, and its impression upon contemporary writers, it is understandable why the *Brut* referred to Owain and Cadwaladr as the "ornament of all the Britons... slayers of the foes; the pacifiers of the quarrelsome; the tamers of antagonists".⁸⁵ This victory surely helped cement Owain's position as *tywysog* of Gwynedd after his father's death. Crug Mawr challenges the representations maintained by non-Welsh contemporary chroniclers and by some modern historians. Not only do the sources evidence a Welsh capability to succeed in pitched battle, fight on horseback, and summon and utilise a large, diverse force, they also illuminate a proclivity among chroniclers to represent warfare in ways that served their needs and suited their audiences. To the Welsh, Crug Mawr was a battle of honour, to the Normans, one of brutality.

All of this considered, a revealing omission becomes clear. The primary evidence plainly records an immense pitched battle between two well-prepared sides, one in which the Welsh achieved clear victory, yet Crug Mawr has received limited scholarly attention.⁸⁶ Perhaps it has received such scant scrutiny due to the fact that it fits so poorly into the established view of Welsh warfare, and Welsh history en masse. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to trace extensively the influences and changes in the historiography of Wales, but suffice it to say that large portions of the established image of Welsh history were built upon a Victorian, Anglocentric approach - and within this image, a decisive Welsh military victory would not neatly fit.⁸⁷ As shall be explored in the following chapter, research that considers significant Welsh engagements often does so through a focus on English

⁸³ Jim Bradbury, 'Battles in England and Normandy, 1066-1154', in *Anglo Norman Warfare*, ed. by Matthew Strickland (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 92.

⁸⁴ Colclough, 'Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare', pp. 119-120.

⁸⁵ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 159.

⁸⁶ Notable exceptions to this trend are the works of Ralph Griffiths, Sean Davies, and Catherine Clarke, all discussed above.

⁸⁷ Martin Johnes, 'History and the Making and Remaking of Wales', *History*, 100 (2015), pp. 667-669; Lindsay Henderson, 'Wales and Welsh Historiography' in *Social Change in the 21st Century: 2004 Conference Proceedings*, ed. by L. Buys, C. Bailey, and D. Cabrera (Queensland, 2004), pp. 2-9; Huw Pryce, *Writing Welsh History: From the Early Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 1-8, 303-338; Geraint Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales* (Cardiff, 1992), pp. 301-306.

kings. In researching this dissertation, no scholarship was found that focused *solely* on Crug Mawr.⁸⁸ The secondary sources considered in this chapter which present progressive representations of Crug Mawr can be viewed within the context of changing perspectives on Welsh history and an emergent search for a Welsh national identity, separate from an Anglocentric conception of Britain that has dominated historiography.⁸⁹ It is particularly unfortunate that Crug Mawr has received such limited attention given how acutely it challenges established representations of Welsh warfare, such as those of Oman, Nelson and Nicolle.⁹⁰ The primary evidence presents an illuminating and decisive battle, yet this evidence has seldom been carefully considered by historians beyond those actively engaged in amending existing, limited representations of Welsh history. An improved understanding of Welsh warfare will emerge when battles such as Crug Mawr are given the attention previously reserved for the battles of British history which conform to the Anglocentric image.

⁸⁸ Catherine Clarke's aforementioned work centres on Crug Mawr, but it is more an analysis of Layamon's writing than it is an analysis of the engagement itself.

⁸⁹ An in-depth analysis on the ways in which political and cultural changes have impacted the historiography concerning Wales, and more specifically, Welsh military history, can be found in the introduction of Samantha Colclough's thesis. Colclough, 'Image and Reality in Medieval Weaponry and Warfare', pp. 1-27.

⁹⁰ See above chapter: I - Introduction.

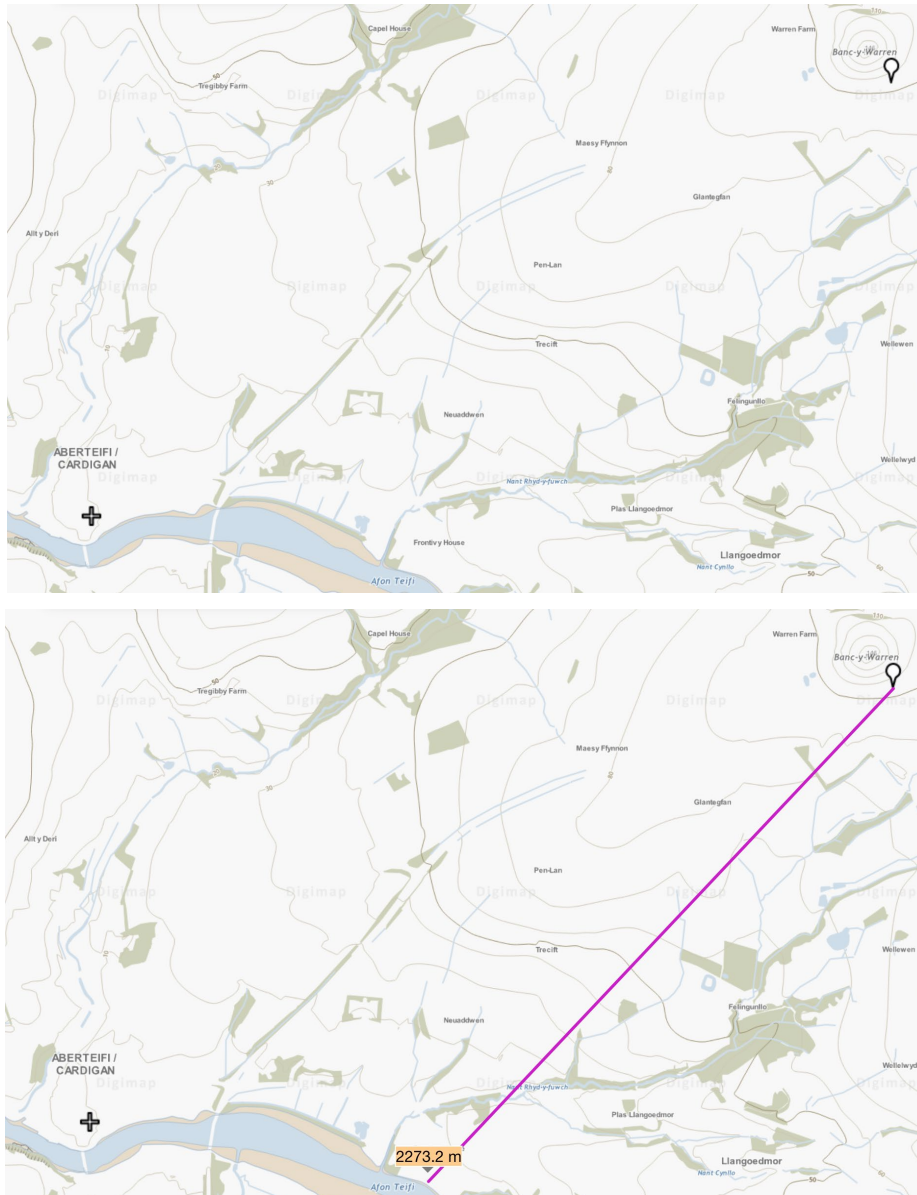


Figure 2. Maps showing approximate site of battle (white pin), the River Teifi, and Cardigan Castle (black cross).⁹¹ The purple line illustrates the shortest distance between the site of the battle and the Teifi.⁹²

⁹¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, the site of battle has been approximated based upon the description given in the *Itinerarium Cambriae*. Whilst this location cannot be taken as fact, it has been accepted by other historians, such as Griffiths (see discussion below), and is thus also used here.

⁹² These maps use modern Ordnance Survey data and thus do not necessarily reflect geographical features as they existed in 1136. Roads and buildings have been removed for readability.

III - Coleshill (1157)

By 1157 much had changed for Owain Gwynedd. He had succeeded his father in 1137 and he no longer fought alongside his brother, Cadwaladr, having expelled him first in 1143 and again in 1152.⁹³ Furthermore, Henry II was now king of England. Henry had spent the years since his succession fighting to consolidate control over his possessions in England and on the continent, and following this, he was determined to reaffirm royal power in Wales.⁹⁴ It was this desire, against Owain's recent territorial consolidation of the areas surrounding Gwynedd, that provoked the engagement at Coleshill. Perhaps more remarkable than Crug Mawr, Coleshill saw King Henry II narrowly avoid death at the hands of a Welsh ambush, yet interpreting the engagement has divided scholarly opinion, highlighting the differing approaches of historians toward Welsh warfare.

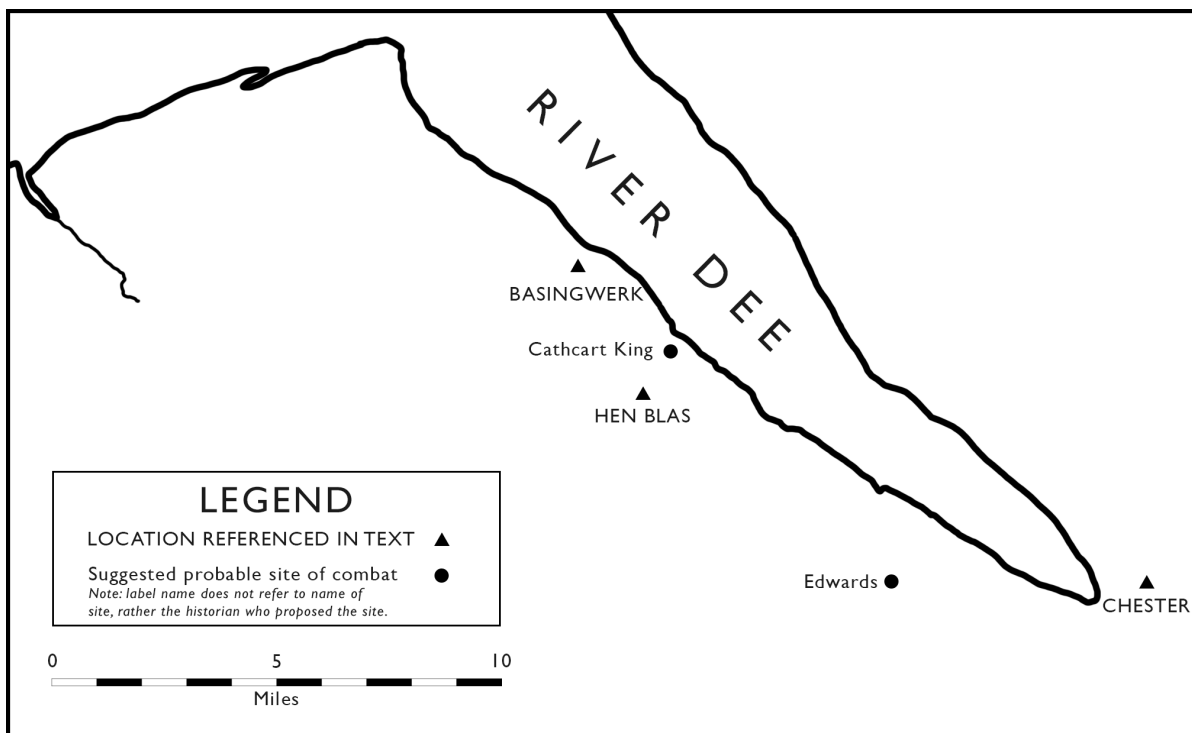


Figure 3. Map showing previously suggested sites of combat.⁹⁵

In 1157, Henry had gathered his troops in Chester, and in response, Owain encamped his own near Coleshill, anticipating Henry's expedition west.⁹⁶ The exact placement of Owain's defences has

⁹³ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 160; John Edward Lloyd, 'Cadwaladr (died 1172), prince', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Available at <https://biography.wales/article/s-CADW-APG-1096>, Accessed 5 May 2024

⁹⁴ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 129.

⁹⁵ Suggested sites of combat are based upon locations given in the maps of Cathcart King and Edwards, found within their respective articles on Coleshill. Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 368; Edwards, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 252.

⁹⁶ John Edward Lloyd, *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest Vol. II* (London, 1912), p. 497; Barbier, *Owain Gwynedd*, p. 83; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130.

been debated. Whilst Cathcart King and Davies suggest Basingwerk, Edwards proposes Hen Blas, further toward the English border (Figure 3).⁹⁷ Regardless of the precise location, all agree that Owain had adopted a remarkably forward position. He could have retreated west, harrying the king's forces as they entered Gwynedd, but instead chose to "[fix] an appointment for battle" and face the king on the field, likely in order to defend his recently acquired "frontier province" of Tegeingl.⁹⁸ This evidence challenges Gerald of Wales' assertion that the "sole idea of [Welsh] tactics is either to pursue their opponents, or else to run away from them", and that "they cannot meet the enemy on equal terms".⁹⁹ Gerald overstates the singularity of the Welsh. The Welsh were not uniquely afraid of pitched battles; such engagements could prove so costly to both sides that it was not uncommon for military leadership throughout western Europe to avoid them.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, Veninger has argued that the *tywysogion* of Gwynedd were actually *more* willing than their contemporaries to engage in pitched battles.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, no pitched battle transpired at Coleshill, but Owain clearly expected one, prepared for one, and was encouraging Henry into one. Henry would have been able to summon a much larger force than Owain, and he probably did, despite levying only a fraction of the troops available to him.¹⁰² The Pipe Rolls show that these were supplemented with a contingent of archers and naval support, demonstrating not only the weight of the force Henry brought into Wales, but also the wealth at his disposal that his opponents could not rely upon.¹⁰³ The Welsh sources note Owain constructed ditches to strengthen his defensive position, and his selection of the field of battle would have forced Henry's troops down a narrow path with which Owain possessed first-hand experience.¹⁰⁴ Not only was Owain utilising natural features to his advantage, he was constructing fortifications to supplement these. This example of tactical prudence being utilised to multiply the capabilities of a smaller force in expectation for a pitched battle is far from simple 'pursuit and evasion', the sole tactics attributed to the Welsh by Gerald.

⁹⁷ Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 368; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130; Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 185; Edwards, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 255.

⁹⁸ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 184; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130.

⁹⁹ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 260.

¹⁰⁰ Jan Frans Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe During the Middle Ages: From the Eighth Century to 1340* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 15, 124, 180, 328; Kerry Cathers, "'Markings on the Land' and Early Medieval Warfare in the British Isles", in *Fields of Battle: Terrain in Military History*, ed. by Peter Doyle and Matthew Bennett (Dordrecht, 2002) pp. 9-10.

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Veninger, 'Castles, Conflict and Social Theory – Introducing a Native Welsh Narrative to the Archaeological Record of Twelfth-Century Gwynedd – a Landscape Approach' in *Fields of Conflict Conference 2018 Pequot Museum: Conference Proceedings*, ed. by Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center (Ledyard, CT, 2019), pp. 86-87.

¹⁰² William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England Vol. I* (Oxford, 1891), p. 492.

¹⁰³ Exchequer, *The Great Rolls of the Pipe for the Second, Third, and Fourth Years of the Reign of King Henry the Second, A.D. 1155, 1156, 1157, 1158*, ed. by Joseph Hunter (London, 1844), pp. 88-89; Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 497.

¹⁰⁴ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 184; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130.

Henry sent the majority of his force toward the Welsh defences, but himself led a lighter force to outflank Owain. Due to the location of the Welsh defensive position, Henry's flanking force had to travel through the woods of Hawarden, where Owain had placed a force led by his sons, in preparation for such a manoeuvre.¹⁰⁵ Henry's troops were essentially funnelled into an ambush by the terrain, further demonstrating Owain's tactical foresight in selecting the site of engagement. It was in the woods that conflict ensued. The non-Welsh sources record a chaotic skirmish in which multiple English nobles were killed, the royal standard was dropped, and Henry erroneously proclaimed dead.¹⁰⁶ After sustaining heavy losses, Henry's troops regained some composure, although historians differ on whether Henry pushed through the ambush, or retreated and regrouped with his main force. Regardless, Owain then left his entrenched position, harassing the royal force as it continued its journey northwest along the coast.¹⁰⁷ The sources are unclear on Owain's motivation. The *Brut* seems to suggest he feared a double envelopment, with Henry arriving "from behind [and] the earls from the other side approaching with an immense armed host", however, such a manoeuvre is not corroborated by the non-Welsh sources.¹⁰⁸ Gervase of Canterbury and William of Newburgh omit the engagement's end entirely, moving swiftly from the dropping of Henry's standard directly to him receiving homage from the Welsh leaders.¹⁰⁹ Jocelin de Brakelond names Roger de Clare as the man who retrieved the king's standard, but his account of the battle ends here. Whilst the details of the battle's conclusion cannot be gleaned from these accounts, it is clear the non-Welsh chroniclers did not wish to dwell on the ruinous outcome of Henry's flanking manoeuvre.

Coleshill's unclear outcome makes its assessment challenging. On the one hand, Owain yielded his position, and Henry continued marching west. In the ensuing peace negotiations, Owain relinquished Tegeingl and restored Cadwaladr to his former possessions.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, Henry suffered a humiliating ambush. It was likely this, coupled with the failure of his naval force (defeated when it landed on Anglesey), that encouraged him to make peace instead of continuing his Welsh expedition.¹¹¹ Notably, the *Brut* framed the withdrawal of the naval force almost identically to the

¹⁰⁵ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130; Edwards 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 259.

¹⁰⁶ William of Newburgh, *The Church Historians of England, Vol. IV, Part II*; trans. by Joseph Stevenson (London, 1861), Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 3. Available at *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/williamofnewburgh-two.asp#5>, Accessed 5 May 2024; Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury, Vol. I*, ed. by William Stubbs (London 1879), p. 165; Jocelin de Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, trans. and ed. by H.E. Butler (Oxford, 1949), p. 70.

¹⁰⁷ Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 130; Barbier, *Owain Gwynedd*, p. 84; Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 373.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁹ William of Newburgh, *The Church Historians of England*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 4; Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, p. 165.

¹¹⁰ Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 500.

¹¹¹ Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 498-499; Barbier, *Owain Gwynedd*, p. 85; Davies, *War and Society in Medieval Wales*, p. 74, 131.

Norman retreat at Crug Mawr, stating again that such a flight was their “accustomed manner”.¹¹² It is therefore unsurprising that historians differ on how far Coleshill can be considered a ‘victory’ for Henry; their conclusions must be based upon opaque evidence, clouded by biases and vested interests. The Welsh and non-Welsh sources diverge in their characterisation of the engagement, although perhaps not as may be expected. In the *Brut*, Henry marches “undauntedly”, and the *Annales* describe him as diligent and industrious.¹¹³ The non-Welsh sources are far more critical. Gervase accuses Henry of insisting upon his plan “*nimis ferociter et minus prudenter*”, Newburgh states he moved “incautiously”, and Gerald blames his ambush on “youthful ardour and rash enthusiasm”.¹¹⁴ This willingness to highlight the king’s failings may have been heightened by Henry’s unpopularity among the ecclesiastical class following the murder of Thomas Becket.¹¹⁵ However, this potential bias should not be overdrawn; whilst Gerald’s opinion on Becket may have coloured his view of Henry (Cathcart King suggests Gerald “detested” him), the other chroniclers that recorded Coleshill were more measured, at least in their public writings.¹¹⁶ Brakelond calls Henry “glorious”, and Newburgh’s attitude to Henry has been described as “balanced and realistic”.¹¹⁷ Naturally, criticism of the English king does not preclude the typical derision of the Welsh. The non-Welsh sources represent the outcome not as a result of Welsh skill, but of Henry’s shortcomings. In these same sources the Welsh are still depicted as “savage” men who fight with “deceit”.¹¹⁸ It would not suit the aims of non-Welsh chroniclers to credit the Welsh with any success, instead they focus on Henry’s failings.

These contemporary representations have a visible effect on modern historiography. Whilst analyses of the engagement have focussed on measuring Henry ‘success’, this research still reveals much about representations of the Welsh. Lloyd’s record of the engagement echoed the chronicles in its claims that Henry suffered from “youthful heedlessness”, adding that the king “knew nothing of Welsh methods of warfare”.¹¹⁹ It has been suggested that Lloyd’s writing was partially guided by “patriotic impulses”, and his context within a “Welsh national awakening” should be held in mind

¹¹² Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 189.

¹¹³ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 184; Anon., *Annales Cambriae*, p.47.

¹¹⁴ “ferociously and without prudence”. Translation mine. Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, p. 165; William of Newburgh, *The Church Historians of England*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 3; Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales*, p. 196.

¹¹⁵ James Alexander, ‘The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography’, *The Journal of British Studies*, 9.2 (1970), pp. 20-22.

¹¹⁶ Lewis Thorpe, ‘Introduction’, pp. 18; Cathcart King, ‘Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill’, p. 367.

¹¹⁷ Jocelin de Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, p. 70; Nancy Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago, IL, 1977), p. 97.

¹¹⁸ William of Newburgh, *The Church Historians of England*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 2; Jocelin de Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, p. 70. Butler translates de Brakelond’s “*fraudibus*” as “wiles” but I feel deceit better captures the spirit of the original Latin.

¹¹⁹ Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 497.

when evaluating his appraisal.¹²⁰ That said, his assessment remains more balanced and circumspect than others. Cathcart King presents a compelling explanation for Henry's actions, balancing this with appreciation of Owain's "great enterprise", characterising the engagement as a "skilful thrust-and-parry between two well-matched commanders."¹²¹ However, his claim that the engagement was an "awkward situation of King Henry... magnified into a Welsh victory" seems poorly phrased.¹²² Firstly, an ambush that led to the death of many of Henry's nobles and the abandonment of his standard is arguably better described as 'disastrous' than 'awkward'. Secondly, the claim that the event has been "magnified into a Welsh victory" cannot be assessed, as Cathcart King does not substantiate it with any references. He claims that Lloyd "[failed] to understand the events of the day's fighting", and whilst Lloyd was more critical of Henry's decisions, he does not paint the event as a Welsh victory; he concludes Coleshill was "inglorious and disastrous for the English, but... not a day of rout".¹²³ Edwards' work mainly concerned itself with locating exactly where Owain was camped, and where his forces met Henry's, and he mostly agrees with Cathcart King's assertions that Henry's tactics were "sound in principle".¹²⁴ Hosler gives the most spirited defence of Henry's decisions. His argument rests on the insistence that Henry was not rash nor ignorant of Welsh tactics as the chronicles, and Lloyd, claimed.¹²⁵ Hosler correctly notes that Henry's force was in some ways well prepared. The aforementioned fact that Henry summoned a smaller than usual levy evinces this; Henry could have afforded to keep a smaller force in the field for longer.¹²⁶ Most likely Henry expected a protracted campaign, perhaps one involving ambushes, harassment, and attrition. Yet Hosler states that whilst Henry was familiar with Welsh methods and potentially anticipated an ambush, he did not "count on the *strength* of the Welsh ambush".¹²⁷ This final admission counters, in part, Hosler's own argument. Ultimately, Henry II was not well prepared for the engagement; the outcome proved as much. Whilst Lloyd's assertion that Henry knew *nothing* of Welsh tactics might be overstatement, it can be said that whatever Henry knew of Welsh tactics theoretically, he failed to exploit practically. Furthermore, Hosler's language presents echoes of biases found in the contemporary sources; he describes the Welsh as "tricky and evasive" and "an intractable bunch", highlighting the partiality that influences his writing.¹²⁸ Finally, confusion is introduced into his arguments by a number of errors. It has been noted that he mistakenly refers to Cadwaladr as heir of

¹²⁰ Huw Pryce, *J. E. Lloyd and the Creation of Welsh History: Renewing a Nation's Past* (Cardiff, 2011), p. 169-170.

¹²¹ Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', pp. 371, 373.

¹²² Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 367.

¹²³ Cathcart King, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 369; Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 498.

¹²⁴ Edwards, 'Henry II and the Fight at Coleshill', p. 251.

¹²⁵ Hosler, 'Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales', pp. 65-66.

¹²⁶ Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, p. 497.

¹²⁷ Emphasis my own. Hosler, 'Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales', p. 67.

¹²⁸ Hosler, 'Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales', p. 67; John Hosler, *Henry II: A Medieval Soldier at War* (Leiden, 2007), p. 53.

Powys, and to Owain Gwynedd as Owain *ap* Gwynedd.¹²⁹ Accurate and measured representations of Welsh warfare cannot be achieved through works that approach the topic with biases or do not dedicate the same level of research to the Welsh as to their military opponents.

Much as Cathcart King charged others with magnifying the engagement into a Welsh victory, contemporary historians have in many cases warped what was for Henry a disastrous engagement into some kind of success. It is telling that not a single one of the primary chronicles thus far considered recorded the event as an English victory. As has been seen, the non-Welsh sources conspicuously avoid the engagement's end, moving directly to the peace agreement. This peace agreement also deserves scrutiny. Hosler claimed the English "campaign was a success because the Welsh insurrection had failed... and [Owain] paid homage to... Henry", but this 'homage' should not be read as equivalent to submission.¹³⁰ Whilst the non-Welsh sources mention Owain paying homage, the *Brut* does not, stating merely that "the king made peace with Owain".¹³¹ Furthermore, it is possible the non-Welsh sources were merely referring to a general act of reconciliation; medieval writers who used the word 'homage' were not necessarily always referring to a feudal or hierarchical relationship.¹³² It was also clear that Owain "implicitly rejected royal overlordship", as he continued to refer to himself as both *rex* and *princeps* after the peace agreement.¹³³ The references to homage found in the sources, and the fact of the peace agreement in general, are not convincing indicators of an English 'victory'.

The ambush was a catastrophe for Henry. Brakelond's account suggests as much. Brakelond knew personally the man who had dropped the king's standard (Henry de Essex); both lived at Reading Abbey, where Essex retired to live as a monk after losing the judicial duel that served as his trial for dropping the standard at Coleshill. Brakelond's claim that Essex "in very truth...believed... king Henry II had perished" is potentially based on testimony from the man himself.¹³⁴ Brakelond states clearly that Essex, a man of "high renown" and "conspicuous in feats of arms", truly believed the king had died, and encouraged his allies to retreat.¹³⁵ One can only imagine how overwhelming the Welsh ambush must have been for the king's acclaimed and ostensibly skilled standard bearer to believe that Henry II had been defeated.

¹²⁹ Daniel Farrington, 'The Political and Military Impact of Henry II's Campaigns in Wales' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Wales, 2020), p. 5; Gideon Brough, 'Medieval Diplomatic History: France and the Welsh, 1163-1417' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cardiff University, 2012), pp. 19-20.

¹³⁰ Hosler, 'Henry II's Military Campaigns in Wales', p. 67.

¹³¹ Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, p. 165; William of Newburgh, *The Church Historians of England*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Paragraph 4; Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 189.

¹³² Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 29, 353-355.

¹³³ Pryce, 'Owain Gwynedd and Louis VII', pp. 4-6; *The Acts of Welsh Rulers*, pp. 322, 324-328.

¹³⁴ Jocelin de Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, pp. 70-72.

¹³⁵ Jocelin de Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, p. 69.

Henry II's second Welsh campaign, in 1165, further betrays Coleshill's impact on the king. In preparing to face Owain near Crogen, the *Brut* describes that Henry ordered the trees of the woods he passed through to be felled.¹³⁶ The prior ambush had made such a lasting impression on the king that he resorted to clearing forests to avoid a similar event occurring again. Owain's own views are also revealing. In 1160, Owain took the unprecedented step of attempting to establish diplomatic relationships with King Louis VII of France, writing three letters to the Capetian court.¹³⁷ In his last, he requests the French king's advice and support, whilst offering to aid him against Henry.¹³⁸ He supplements this with a demonstration of his credentials, explaining that when he faced Henry previously "more of his men fell than mine".¹³⁹ Not only is this an important example of a Welsh leader looking beyond their borders for diplomatic support, it also suggests that in Owain's eyes, he had bested Henry. It seems highly unlikely that Owain would overstate previous engagements that he did not personally deem as successes. If contemporary opinion was that Henry was victorious in his Welsh campaigns, surely Louis would have had access to such information, and it would not have served Owain to misrepresent the facts. This is not to say that Coleshill was a resounding Welsh success, evidently Owain had hoped to keep Tegeingl, but it is clear that representations which frame Coleshill as a 'success' for Henry should be reassessed.

Coleshill may not have been the decisive Welsh victory Crug Mawr was, but it supports many of the inferences based upon the first engagement. Notably, Owain was clearly willing to engage in another pitched battle. He was capable of selecting a site of battle and arraying his troops in a way that mitigated shortcomings of his own force, whilst protecting this position with field fortifications and a counter-flanking detachment. Coleshill also provides evidence of the ways in which chroniclers' biases present challenges for historians; the non-Welsh sources are influenced by anti-Welsh bias, and in some cases, their attitudes toward Henry. The way these sources have influenced historical research demonstrates that in order to create a balanced representation of Welsh warfare, modern scholarship must extend its focus beyond English kings.

¹³⁶ Anon., *Brut y Tywysogion*, p. 201.

¹³⁷ Huw Pryce, 'Owain Gwynedd and Louis VII: The Franco-Welsh Diplomacy of the First Prince of Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 19.1 (1998), p. 1.

¹³⁸ "vobis serviam nocendo ei secundum consilium vestrum". *The Acts of Welsh Rulers*, pp 327-328.

¹³⁹ Pryce, 'Owain Gwynedd and Louis VII', p. 7.

IV - Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to examine and analyse representations of Welsh warfare found within primary evidence and secondary scholarship, analysing these through a case study of military engagements. Comparison of Welsh and non-Welsh sources supports Colclough's suggestion that descriptions of Welsh and Norman warfare in the primary sources were of questionable truth. Highlighting (and exaggerating) the differences between the two was of political and societal importance to both cultures. Non-Welsh sources often sought to highlight an inherent 'warlike' or 'savage' nature within the Welsh and to portray them as militarily inferior. An excellent example of writers exaggerating the differences between the two cultures can be seen in the way in which *both* Welsh and Norman writers highlighted a proclivity to flee battle in the other culture, but did not note this habit in their own. Whereas Welsh victories were celebrated by Welsh chroniclers as the results of their leaders' bravery and skill, non-Welsh sources used these victories to highlight the barbarity of Welsh combatants, in the case of Crug Mawr, or attributed them to the personal failings of the English king, in the case of Coleshill.

A number of Welsh military practices that contradict existing representations of Welsh warfare have been identified. Welsh leaders looked beyond their borders for tactical and diplomatic support, they carefully selected sites on which to do battle, strengthened their position by utilising the natural landscape and field fortification, were capable of mobilising and commanding large and diverse forces of combined arms, and could lead these forces into decisive victories. Not only does this contradict Gerald of Wales' representation that the Welsh were capable only of vicious onslaught followed by cowardly retreat, it also contradicts 'established' representations in modern historiography, such as those of Nelson, who maintained that such advanced tactics were beyond Welsh capabilities. The same evidence supports the representations of Sean Davies and Turvey, who argued that the Welsh were not confined to guerilla engagements and were entirely capable of succeeding in pitched battles. The primary evidence can also contribute to wider debates on Welsh military practices, for instance supporting Sioned Davies' suggestion that the Welsh practised mounted warfare before the arrival of the Normans, and challenging Bartlett's theory that such practices were the production of a superior martial culture that radiated outward from the centre of Europe. Analysis of the chronicles can also provide accounts to test Sean Davies' theories on the numbers a Welsh leader could muster and the people that composed these armies.

It is clear that some secondary scholarship on Welsh warfare would benefit from reassessment. Consideration of Crug Mawr illuminates the lacuna of research that focuses solely on Welsh engagements, and demonstrates the value of such work in expanding the understanding of Welsh military history, and the role of such research in challenging established views of Norman superiority.

Research on Coleshill demonstrates the pitfalls present in considering engagements that involved the Welsh only through the lens of studying an English king. Analyses by Hosler, Cathcart King and Edwards have imposed an English success where the primary evidence for one is questionable, highlighting the need for works which approach the topic conscious of potential biases in the primary sources, whilst dedicating equal attention to the Welsh as is afforded their military opponents.

There is space for future research to apply the case study method utilised in this dissertation to other battles in Welsh history, and it is hoped that this may provide new contributions and scrutiny to the representations of Welsh warfare.

Appendix

Potential Future Avenues of Research

Listed below are tangential areas of potential future study, identified during the research process. The following topics have been mentioned briefly within this dissertation, but could not be explored at length given the succinctness required of this paper.

- The Welsh role in the Battle of Lincoln (1141), with a specific focus on the way in which the Welsh combatants were represented in the primary sources, and how these have affected the interpretations of modern historians.
- Outside influences, particularly within the political and cultural landscape, that have influenced the historiography of Wales, with a specific focus on Welsh warfare.
- It was noted that the case study method utilised in this dissertation could be fruitfully applied to other military engagements in Welsh history. Notable engagements that might prove most illuminating include:
 - Rhyd y Groes (1039)
 - Lincoln (1141)
 - Crogen (1165)
 - Coed Llathen (1257)

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¹⁴⁰ See page 12, footnote 61 for a comment on the authorship of this source.

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