

## Medieval biographies and the geography of power: the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*

Rhys Jones

*Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3DB, Wales, UK*

---

### Abstract

In this paper, the author explores themes of legitimacy surrounding the production and consumption of medieval biographies. Generally speaking, these instances of life histories sought to promote and sustain relationships of power within medieval society. The many-layered themes of legitimacy which appear in such texts are discussed in the context of the biography of a 12th-century king of the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*. This is a text that illustrates many of the far-reaching political and institutional changes that were occurring during the period. The version of history contained within the *Historia*, however, should not be seen as one which was wholly biased in favor of its subject, Gruffudd. Accordingly, the author argues that such texts should not be viewed as the ones that were purely invented in nature since the consumers of these life histories often possessed the ability to contest any obvious fabrications of past events contained within them. As such, the author suggests that we need to explore the relationship between the circumstances surrounding the production and the consumption of life histories if we are to gain a fuller appreciation of the historical geographies contained within them.

© 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Historia Gruffud vab Kenan; Geography; Medieval biography

---

### Introduction

Life histories have been viewed as a key, though problematic, resource for research in history and the social sciences. Though biographical research has been touted as a research method that has the potential to open up new avenues of enquiry and to give voice to previously unheard and marginalized groups, we should not underestimate the possible difficulties associated with its use.<sup>1</sup> One set of potential problems that I want to discuss in this paper are issues relating to the production and consumption of life histories. Watson and Watson-Franke,<sup>2</sup> for instance, outline some crucial questions that any student of a particular

---

*E-mail address:* [raj@aber.ac.uk](mailto:raj@aber.ac.uk)

life history should ask of the circumstances surrounding its production: these include the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the research subject, the circumstances in which the life history was related to the researcher and the preconceptions, if any, of the researcher regarding the individual, group or culture being studied. In other words, according to Watson and Watson-Franke, the motives surrounding the production of a given life history need to be explored in great detail since they may affect the nature of the version of the past contained within it, thus compromising its potential as a basis for exploring historical geographies. In addition, these comments—by implication—highlight the fact that we need to be fully aware of the variety of historical, political, economic and social contexts in which these life histories are produced and consumed. These may affect the ways in which those individuals concerned with the production of the life history—either as subject, recorder, compiler or researcher—choose to remember the past. Similarly, I would suggest that the circumstances under which individuals or groups consume such documents may also affect the accounts of the past contained within them.

In many ways, such statements echo the contradictions that exist with respect to notions of time and history, so central to the whole concept of life histories. These tensions revolve around the inherent tendency of individuals, when remembering and relating the occurrences that happened—or the feelings experienced—in their past, to reforge the account of the past in the light of their present-day situation and experience. This ‘necessity to reinterpret’ does not imply that life histories should be considered as wholly fabricated versions of an individual’s past.<sup>3</sup> As Vansina<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated in the case of group histories—and echoing Bourdieu’s work on the concept of *habitus*—individuals and groups negotiate their accounts of the past in a complex manner; even though individuals and groups may slightly modify their conception of the past as a result of their contemporary circumstances, the present very rarely has the power to alter a society or an individual’s conception of the past out of all recognition. Similar arguments have been made by the students of individual life histories. Kohli,<sup>5</sup> for instance, has argued that although life histories may possess a ‘reconstructive character’—or in other words an element in which individuals reforge their conceptions of the past in the light of their present circumstances—there also exists ‘some specifiable relation between the narrative reconstruction and the events to which it refers’. In effect, life histories—as with all versions of the past—comprise of elements of factual continuity and permanence along with aspects of subjective interpretation and reconstruction. It is in this context that we need to take full account of the circumstances surrounding the production and the consumption of life histories, ones which may affect the way in which these accounts of the past are remembered and interpreted.

The purpose of this paper is to stress the need to explore the circumstances surrounding the production and consumption of life histories, and as part of this wider objective, to examine the role of more permanent and factual historical themes in the subjective interpretation of past events.<sup>6</sup> I explore these features of life histories by discussing one particular type of life history, namely medieval biographies. Generally speaking, medieval biographies are primarily texts that represent the voices of the ruling stratum, which aim to promote and sustain given power relationships within medieval society. In particular, various themes of legitimacy are of paramount importance in these life histories of secular and ecclesiastical leaders. These texts are predominantly concerned with establishing an individual’s legitimate right to inherit and rule a particular kingdom or ecclesiastical benifice, and as such, their main aim was to sustain power relationships within various lay and ecclesiastical structures. Nonetheless, I will also argue that was possible for the consumers of these biographies to contest any obvious manipulation or fabrication of history held within them. In effect, the versions of the past contained

within these life histories were often constructed in forms which complimented traditional or popular conceptions of the past of a given society. Consequently, the study of such medieval biographies also enables us to explore the dialectical relationship that exists between an allegedly factual past and the subjective reordering of that past by a given individual or group. I will illustrate these two issues by referring to one particular life history of a 12th-century Welsh king, namely the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*. In this regard, the comments made will relate specifically to medieval lay life histories, though I would suggest that they may also have some relevance to ecclesiastical life histories of the same period.

### Medieval ecclesiastical and lay biographies: the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*

The various lay and ecclesiastical biographies that were compiled in a written format during the Middle Ages have often been used by historians and historical geographers as a valuable account of the historical and political geography of the period. The principally empirical use of medieval biographies means, however, that little work has been carried out on them in a conceptual context. If, as Watson and Watson-Franke argue, ‘life [histories do] not benefit from any consistent point of view defining its objectives in the larger context of the social sciences’,<sup>7</sup> then I would suggest that the study of medieval biographies has similarly suffered from a lack of theoretical and conceptual direction.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, Fentress and Wickham<sup>9</sup> discuss various biographies as part of their exploration of medieval memories, but even so, their explicit focus is on the ways in which these help to constitute social memory rather than being an investigation of the nature of medieval biographies. I would argue, therefore, that there is a need to address medieval lay and ecclesiastical biographies in a more systematic manner, and to theorise regarding their significance as sources of information for history in general, and historical geography in particular.

In this regard, the compilation of lay and ecclesiastical biographies from the 12th century onwards should be viewed as part of a wider process in which levels of literacy and the production of written texts increased dramatically during the Middle Ages. This shift ‘from memory to written record’ has been well documented by Clanchy, and revolves around the increasing bureaucracy of both secular and ecclesiastical governance.<sup>9</sup> Biographies were one important element in this fundamental change in the way in which historical facts were recorded. Ecclesiastical biographies such as hagiographies, for instance, sought to recount the lives of important ecclesiastical figures. These saintly legends, of necessity, portrayed their main characters in a favorable light, and were concerned with furthering various political and economic ends. Abou-el-Haj,<sup>10</sup> for example, has demonstrated how hagiographies were instrumental in the effort to promote acts of pilgrimage associated with certain cults of saints. Significantly, Davies and Fouracre<sup>11</sup> have noted how some hagiographies deliberately incorporated grants of land to the ecclesiastical institution associated with the subject of the saintly legend. This literary technique, in particular, illustrates the role these texts played in sustaining unequal relationships of political and economic power.

Lay biographies also incorporated discourses of power that helped to legitimize certain socio-spatial formations. Indeed, there was a long tradition in medieval society of promoting versions of the past as a means of sustaining contemporary political and institutional arrangements.<sup>12</sup> Related to the more formal medieval biographies of the later Middle Ages, for instance, are the foundation legends of kingdoms of the early medieval period.<sup>13</sup> Even though these ostensibly sought to legitimize the existence of certain kingdoms, they also stressed the key role played by early political leaders in forging those political

entities. As such, they also can be viewed as versions of history that sought to use the life history of key individuals as a means of achieving certain political ends. One good example of such a foundation legend relates to the kingdom of Gwynedd during the ninth and 10th centuries. The tale revolves around the political career of a certain Scottish prince, Cunedda, and his efforts to create a unified kingdom of Gwynedd.<sup>14</sup> Legends such as this, along with later medieval biographies, were the key means of promoting and sustaining particular political geographies throughout the Middle Ages.

One such medieval life history is the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, the biography of the life and political career of a 12th-century king of Gwynedd, Gruffudd ap Cynan.<sup>15</sup>

In its existing form, it is an early 13th-century Welsh translation of a mid-to late-12th-century Latin original.<sup>16</sup> The *Historia* charts the way in which Gruffudd ap Cynan, a member of the ruling Gwynedd dynasty, challenged for the throne of the kingdom of Gwynedd in the late-11th century. Returning from a forced exile in Ireland, he managed by the 1130s to create and rule a stable kingdom of Gwynedd in north-west Wales. Gruffudd's road to political success was, however, an arduous and uneven one, especially during the early stages of his career. He was twice forced to flee to Ireland in order to escape his political enemies: he was also imprisoned for approximately 12 years by Earl Hugh of Chester.<sup>17</sup> These setbacks, however, did not dent Gruffudd's ambitions to become the main political leader of north-west Wales. After escaping from captivity in 1093 he succeeded in both withstanding the military threat of the Normans and in quashing the political aspirations of other native rulers within the region. The *Historia* states that by the 1120s he was the undisputed focus of political power in Gwynedd and, until his death in 1137, succeeded in ruling a stable and relatively peaceful kingdom.

In the following sections I want to discuss two related themes concerning this specific medieval biography. First, I want to focus on the many layers of legitimacy incorporated into the text. Second, I will explore the way in which the narrative of the text problematises the link between factual history and interpretations of the past. I discuss these themes below.

### *The production and consumption of medieval lay biographies: issues of legitimacy*

The first thing we need to stress is that the *Historia* was written for specific reasons and under particular socio-political circumstances. In this respect, the main aim of the biography was to legitimize Gruffudd ap Cynan's period of rule as king of Gwynedd. We need to realise in this respect, however, that the timing of the compilation of the *Historia* suggests that the text should not be viewed as an attempt to demonstrate Gruffudd's right to rule for Gruffudd's own sake. The fact that the Latin original of the text was only produced in the mid- to late-12th century—in other words, a period after Gruffudd's reign—suggests that the main aim of the text was to legitimize the rule of one of Gruffudd's successors and progeny, possibly Owain Gwynedd or Llywelyn ab Iorwerth.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the author of the *Historia* sought to use Gruffudd's reign as a means of legitimising Gruffudd's successors' rule by proxy. By demonstrating the legitimacy of Gruffudd's claim to rule, and the prosperity of his subsequent reign, the biographer also demonstrated Gruffudd's successors' de facto right to rule Gwynedd.<sup>19</sup> The most likely individual to have instigated the compilation of the biography in this respect would have been Owain Gwynedd, Gruffudd ap Cynan's son. The 12th century—the century during which the biography was produced in its written format—was also the century in which Gruffudd's son, Owain Gwynedd, sought to create a stable and precisely subdivided landscape of townships and parishes in Gwynedd for the first time.<sup>20</sup> I would suggest that the compilation of the biography of a king of Gwynedd—perhaps by a biographer in Owain Gwynedd's employ—and the creation of a permanent structure for local secular

and ecclesiastical administration in Gwynedd should be viewed as two important, and possibly complimentary, elements in a concerted effort on Owain Gwynedd's part to strengthen his political, institutional and military control of the kingdom of Gwynedd.

In this regard, I would like to suggest that the theme of legitimation operates at a number of levels. Arguably, themes of legitimacy arise in the *narrative* of the biography in three distinct contexts. In the first place, there can be no doubt that the *Historia* is very much geared towards praising Gruffudd's actions as king and legitimizing his regal status.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, we need to understand that Gruffudd's claim to the throne of Gwynedd was relatively tenuous. According to Welsh law, one had to be a king's son or a king's brother in order to be considered as a candidate for the kingship.<sup>22</sup> Gruffudd was neither, being the grandson of a previous king of Gwynedd. As a result of this, Gruffudd's biographer uses two main techniques in order to add weight to Gruffudd's claims to the kingship: Gruffudd is either referred to as Iago's grandson, in other words, the grandson of a former king of Gwynedd, or as the son of Cynan, a rightful king of Gwynedd who was usurped. In many ways, the first tactic is a little surprising in that it would not have helped Gruffudd's cause to any large extent. As stated earlier, according to the Welsh laws, a grandson of a former king did not have the automatic right to be considered as a king himself. The second tactic would have also posed some problems. In dealing with events in the relatively recent past, it was difficult for the biographer to make out a convincing case regarding Gruffudd's father's regal status. Despite—or perhaps because of—these difficulties, much of the *Historia* revolves around the theme of legitimizing Gruffudd's political claims to be a king of Gwynedd.

One option that was open to the compiler of the biography was to stress the exalted nature of Gruffudd's stock. By maintaining that Gruffudd's forbears, on both his mother's and his father's side, were kings since time immemorial, the biographer sought to stress themes of regal continuity within Gruffudd's family history. The life history begins by noting Gruffudd's lineage on his father's and mother's sides, tracing his ancestry back to Adam—and thence to God—and to Harald Harfagri, king of Denmark, respectively.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Maund notes that the opening sections of the *Historia* use the term 'king' a total of 39 times.<sup>24</sup> By emphasizing the exalted nature of Gruffudd's stock in the long term, therefore, the biographer sought to downplay the non-regal status of Gruffudd's father, Cynan. A second option open to the compiler of the *Historia* was to legitimize Gruffudd's rule by concentrating on his attributes as an individual. Gruffudd is portrayed, for instance, as an individual of equal status to Henry I, king of England. In the same vein, the *Historia* claims that Gruffudd 'built churches, orchards and gardens over all his kingdom, so that Gwynedd sparkled with churches like stars in the firmament'.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Gruffudd's bravery and skills as a military leader feature heavily in the text of the biography. On the eve of the battle of Mynydd Carn, for instance, a significant conversation occurred between Gruffudd and his ally, Rhys ap Tewdwr, prince of South Wales:

And then Rhys spoke to King Gruffudd, 'Lord, we should defer the battle until tomorrow, since the hour is late and the day is dying.' 'You may delay', replied Gruffudd, 'but I and my army will rush upon them now'.<sup>26</sup>

Obviously, in this conflict of opinion, Gruffudd's bravery and elevated status is self-evident, even when compared with Rhys ap Tewdwr, the powerful prince of South Wales.

A second theme of legitimacy appears in the narrative of the text in the context of justifying the existence of the kingdom of Gwynedd. The compiler of the life history, by maintaining that Gruffudd was the legitimate king of Gwynedd, was also affirming his belief that Gwynedd itself was a coherent

political unit or kingdom. In the political jungle that was Wales in the Middle Ages, kingdoms were rarely viewed as political units that had a pre-destined right to exist generation after generation. To a large extent, the kingdoms that existed in medieval Wales were ones which had to be constructed anew each time the kingly succession passed to a new individual: in many ways, therefore, Welsh politics during the early medieval period was based on the pragmatism of military power rather than on ideas of the sanctity of political and territorial units.<sup>27</sup> The *Historia*, however, emphasizes that the kingdom of Gwynedd had some territorial coherence as a political unit, and furthermore, that this kingdom should be ruled and governed by Gruffudd ap Cynan. In effect, the biographer can be perceived as someone who was attempting to stress the legitimacy of Gwynedd, as well as Gruffudd's right to rule it. Both Gruffudd and the kingdom of Gwynedd gained in credibility and status from the other: a strong king to a large extent meant a strong kingdom, and Gruffudd's position as ruler of Gwynedd was inextricably linked to the political and military success of the kingdom that he ruled.

Third, I would suggest that the life history also legitimizes a kingdom of Gwynedd that is organised as a predominantly territorial state, and as such, can also be viewed as a text that sought to stress a territorialized conception of social power.<sup>28</sup> One of the main changes that occurred in the Middle Ages in a politico-geographical context was the territorialization of power associated with the state-making process. Societies moved from being primarily ordered into a series of kin- or lineage-groups into being organized as distinct territorial units or early states.<sup>29</sup> The *Historia* clearly demonstrates some of these major organizational changes occurring within medieval Welsh society. Gruffudd's status in the text, for instance, was not based upon his control of groups of people but was predominantly derived from his physical control of a kingdom of Gwynedd defined in a territorial manner. Gwynedd, for instance, is described as a *cywoeth*, or a territory, in Gruffudd's possession.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the biographer constantly refers to the various territorial units, such as the *cantref* and the commote, that formed the administrative geography of Gwynedd—in other words, the administrative basis for the collection of renders and dues and the maintenance of law and order. It is noted by the biographer, for example, that Henry I, 'with grace and love', confirmed Gruffudd's control of the *cantrefi* of Llyn, Eifionydd, Ardudwy and Arllechwedd.<sup>30</sup> In effect, as well as portraying a situation in which Gruffudd is inextricably linked with a kingdom that is constituted as a stable political entity, the biographer aims to stress the institutional and structural basis for such a territorial unit. Rather than portraying a world in which kings gained power by controlling groups of people, the Gwynedd portrayed in the *Historia* is one which was constituted in predominantly territorial terms.

As well as its obvious importance in the narrative of the text, I would like to suggest that the third theme—in other words, the legitimization of a territorial state of Gwynedd—is further strengthened by the production of the life history in a *written format*. The development of literacy and the production of written texts have long been viewed by anthropologists and historians alike as evidence of fundamental changes in the complexity of society.<sup>31</sup> This does not mean that literacy and written texts should be viewed as things that necessarily 'create' or 'cause' the process of state formation. Gough has argued rather that they should be seen as 'enabling factors' in the territorialization of power.<sup>32</sup> Numerous empirical instances exist of the key role played by literacy in the development of territorial institutions in given societies. Nieke, for instance, in her study of literacy and writing in the kingdom of Dalriada in early medieval Scotland, has noted the way that

early kings [were] beginning to use...written artefacts to further their own ends and aspirations...at a time when the kings were also developing new means of administering their kingdom.<sup>33</sup>



Similarly, Larsen<sup>33</sup> has explored the importance of writing to the development of state institutions in prehistoric Mesopotamia. Perhaps the key theme in this context is the role played by writing in enabling the ruling stratum to preserve information in a far more systematic and permanent manner than that afforded by more traditional and oral means of recording facts.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this point has been well-made by Clanchy in his study of the growth of literacy in medieval England.<sup>34</sup> I argue that the production of written biographies, such as the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, should be viewed in the same fashion. In the same way as hagiographies corresponded to discourses of power which sought to legitimize the apparent permanence and authority of the Church, we can view the production of written lay biographies, such as that of Gruffudd ap Cynan, as efforts to promote the permanence and authority of the institutions of the state. Part of the significance of the historical ‘facts’ that are discussed in the *Historia* is that these now possessed a permanent, visible and material manifestation. The production of a permanent written record of Gruffudd’s life and political career, and of gradually abandoning the more ephemeral and oral means of recording the past, should be viewed as one important element in a concerted effort on the behalf of the rulers of Gwynedd during the 12th century to abandon the equally ephemeral political geographies of the period in favor of a more durable state organization.

In this regard, the production of the *Historia* in a written format is somewhat ironic. The problem with producing a written version of the *Historia* is that it would have, of necessity, made it difficult for a large section of the population of Gwynedd to consume the information contained within it.<sup>35</sup> As such, the critical themes of legitimacy that appear in the text of the *Historia* would conceivably have lost much of their impact. If we accept this, then I would like to suggest that the actual production of the biography in a written format raises a paradox concerning the way in which the medieval Welsh population would have consumed the historical information contained within the biography. The theme of legitimacy that seems to be ever-present in the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*—and indeed in the majority of medieval biographies—indicates that such texts should not be viewed as mere written narratives of an individual’s life. The life histories, stories and legends that were incorporated into these biographies could only convey authority and status onto a secular or ecclesiastical leader if the messages and themes within them were conveyed to a wider audience. Of course, in the Middle Ages, the only effective way of communicating messages to a majority of the population was to do so orally.<sup>36</sup> As such, although a major part of the significance of medieval biographies lies in the fact that they were produced in a written format, thereby breaking away from conventional methods of oral transmission of histories and legends, they still had to depend on the age-old traditions of oral presentation and performance in feasts, gatherings, legal proceedings and coronations in order to make any real political or social impact.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Versions of history: the past meets the present*

It has become evident in the above discussion that the information contained within the *Historia* was promoted as a means of legitimizing aspects of the political and institutional geographies of 12th-century Gwynedd. I would suggest, however, that the political nature of the text did not necessarily mean that the themes addressed within it could be portrayed in a manner which was totally flattering to Gruffudd. In effect, it is likely that the compiler of the biography had to engage with the past in a manner which, to a large extent, reflected more popular conceptions of Gwynedd history and this meant that a number of difficult and potentially contentious ideas concerning the past had to be discussed within the account of Gruffudd’s life. The first difficulty for the biographer lay in the need to convince the audience of the life history of the legitimate claims of Gruffudd to the throne of Gwynedd, not a straightforward task given

the fact that his father's status meant that he had no legitimate claim to the kingship. What made the situation even more difficult for the biographer was the fact that this flaw in Gruffudd's lineage occurred in the very recent past, thereby increasing the possibility that any outright fabrication of history would be detected. As noted earlier, the compiler of the biography, presumably under the direction of Owain Gwynedd, sought to counter this weakness in Gruffudd's lineage by adopting a variety of tactics. However, by honing in on the largely uncontentious issue of Gruffudd's regal status in the long term, the biographer cunningly sought to downplay the serious—and more relevant—faults in Gruffudd's immediate ancestry. It is in this context that we can see the biographer trying to negotiate a version of the past which was as flattering to Gruffudd as possible. Crucially, though, I would argue that this version of history was also negotiated with respect to popularly-held views concerning the history of Gwynedd.<sup>38</sup> The biographer would probably have seen little reason to base Gruffudd's claim to the kingship of Gwynedd solely on the regal status of his father since such a falsified view of the recent past would not have been accepted amongst the inhabitants of the kingdom and would therefore have been of little use as political propaganda.

In the second place, the *Historia* has to deal with aspects of Gruffudd's political and military career which were not altogether flattering in nature. Gruffudd's flight to Ireland to escape his foes and his period in Earl Hugh of Chester's prison were unfortunate periods in Gruffudd's life and would have been unlikely to have been included in Gruffudd's life history were it not for the crucial fact that the *Historia* was compiled relatively soon after Gruffudd's reign. Once again, we see the power of the consumers of the life history to contest any obvious fabrications within it. In effect, a version of Gruffudd's life history which was purely panegyric in nature would not have been accepted by members of the population of Gwynedd who were familiar with the events surrounding their previous king's reign. The inclusion of relatively demeaning tales in the *Historia*, however, did not preclude the biographer from placing an alternative spin on the circumstances surrounding such events. The section describing Gruffudd's defeat at the battle of Bron yr Erw, for instance, portrays the subject of the biography in a very regal and valiant manner, even though the circumstances were far from favorable for Gruffudd. Indeed, the biographer makes it clear that the Gruffudd was betrayed at the time of the battle by the men of Llyn, led by a certain Merwyd.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the biographer is keen to draw parallels between Gruffudd's experience in the battle of Bron yr Erw and other historical instances of betrayal:

Caesar, Emperor of Rome, after conquering the whole world, was murdered through betrayal by the senators of Rome. Arthur too, king of kings of the island of Britain...was killed due to an act of betrayal...<sup>40</sup>

Discussing Gruffudd in such exalted company served two purposes. In the first place, it demonstrated his high political and military status. In the second place, it also illustrated the fact that even military leaders of the stature of Caesar and Arthur were forced to contend with deceit and betrayal. Gruffudd's experience at the battle of Bron yr Erw was not unusual, therefore: they were merely what was to be expected for a magnificent, yet perhaps misunderstood, military leader.

The evidence that I have discussed in this section suggests that even the compilers of official lay biographies in the Middle Ages—in other words, texts with distinctly political aims—had to produce life histories which tallied with more popularly held views concerning the past. Despite their duty to their patrons they could not produce a life history which bore little or no relationship with the past. In effect, the compilation of such a totally biased version of past events would have been self-defeating: without a core which was based in fact, the themes of legitimation that were central to these narratives would have



lost all their potency. It is in this context that we can draw parallels with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, in which he argues that

practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted.<sup>41</sup>

In many ways, such a statement echoes the points made above regarding the conceptions of the past that appear in the *Historia*. According to Bourdieu, individuals will react negatively if their commonly held beliefs and values are violated in any obvious manner. In this respect, even official versions of history contained within medieval biographies can only be manipulated to a certain extent, especially in the case of accounts of the relatively recent past. It would seem likely that even in the relatively autocratic medieval period the consumers of accounts of the past were able to contest obvious fabrications of history. Of course, this did not mean that the compilers of such biographies were not afforded any literary latitude. The account of Gruffudd's defeat at the battle of Bron yr Erw illustrates the gloss that the biographer could bring to bear on unfavorable occurrences. The power of the consumers of these biographies meant, however, that their compilers were forced to steer a potentially difficult course between the need both to reflect popularly held views concerning the past and their duty to reinforce and justify the political geographies of their present.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have discussed some of the themes that arise from using life history material for research in the social sciences, and particularly in human geography. Specifically, I have focused on the usefulness of medieval biographies as sources of evidence for the political geography of the Middle Ages. In this regard, the study of one particular life history has enabled us to understand some of the main political and institutional changes affecting medieval Welsh society. The many-layered themes of legitimation within the life history sought to justify Gruffudd's political status, in other words, Gruffudd's right to rule the kingdom of Gwynedd; to legitimize the political coherence of the kingdom of Gwynedd, and also to legitimize its territorial constitution. Importantly, I also argued that we could view the actual production of the text of the biography in a written format as a further attempt to legitimize the new territorial method through which Gruffudd, and especially his successors, ruled Gwynedd. I have also discussed the ways in which the political purpose of the biographical text meant that it was always possible for the consumers of such life histories to contest any obvious fabrications of history contained within them. Consequently, it may be possible to suggest that a further critical theme of legitimacy exists in the context of the *Historia*—and indeed all medieval biographies—namely the need for the consumers of the life history to legitimize its contents, or in other words, to believe the information contained within it and to incorporate it into their world views. It is only by doing this that medieval biographies—whether lay or ecclesiastical—become politically useful as representations of an individual or a society's past. Moreover, the specific instance of the *Historia* suggests that much may be gained through exploring the mutually constitutive relationship that exists between the contexts in which life histories are produced and consumed:<sup>43</sup> in effect, these accounts of the past are often produced with a specific audience in mind, and as such, our understanding of them as sources of historico-geographical information is impoverished if we fail to understand the contours of the relationship between the twin acts of the production and consumption of life histories.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Stephen Daniels, Catherine Nash and to the four anonymous referees for their helpful comments on this paper.

## Notes

1. See P. Thompson, Life history and the analysis of social change, in: D. Bertaux (Ed), *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, Beverley Hills, CA, 1981, 290; See also M. Miles and J. Crush, Personal narratives as interactive texts: collecting and interpreting migrant life-histories, *Professional Geographer* 45 (1993) 84–94; K.H. Halfacree and P.J. Boyle, The challenge facing migration research: the case for a biographical approach, *Progress in Human Geography* 17 (1993) 333–348.
2. L.C. Watson and M. Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1985, 16–21.
3. J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 85.
4. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, 1985; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977; P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, 1992; J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 171.
5. M. Kohli, Biography: account, text, method, in: Bertaux (Ed), *Biography and Society*, 69.
6. It should be noted that J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 1444–45—focusing on collective or social memory—describe the debate regarding the relationship between factual history and a reconstituted account of the past as being sterile in nature. It would seem, however, that an understanding of the relationship is necessary if we intend using life histories as means of exploring historical geographies.
7. L.C. Watson and M. Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*, New Brunswick, NJ, 1985, 1.
8. Clanchy's monumental study of the increasing importance of the written word in the Middle Ages, for instance, contains no critical and systematic assessment of the nature of written lay and ecclesiastical biographies. Indeed, his typology of the various classes of medieval manuscripts does not include a category for such documents; see M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, Oxford, 1993, 81–113; See, however, W. Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester, 1982, 207–208.
9. J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 144–172.
10. B. Abou-el-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formations and Transformation*, Cambridge, 1997, 2.
11. W. Davies and P. Fouracre, The role of writing in the resolution and recording of disputes, in: W. Davies, P. Fouracre (Eds), *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*, Cambridge, 1986, 213.
12. In a more general context see J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, 1985.
13. See for instance R. Jones, Foundation legends, *origines gentium* and senses of ethnic identity: legitimising ideologies in medieval Celtic Britain, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17 (1999) 691–703.
14. D. Harvey and R. Jones, Custom and habit(us): the meaning of traditions and legends in early medieval Celtic Britain, *Geografiska Annaler* 81B (1999) 225–227.
15. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977.
16. N.A. Jones, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*: the first audience, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 149–150.
17. D. Moore, Gruffudd ap Cynan and the medieval Welsh polity, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 1–59; C.P. Lewis, Gruffudd ap Cynan and the Normans, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 61–77.
18. For a case demonstrating Llywelyn ab Iorwerth's role as the patron of the biography see K.L. Maund, Gruffudd grandson of Iago, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 115–116; K.L. Maund, *Ireland, Wales and England in the Eleventh Century*, Woodbridge, 1991.
19. The cult of Charlemagne is probably the best example of the way in which the actions of a past king could legitimize the rule of another king descended from him. See J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 153–162.
20. C.A. Gresham, Medieval parish and township boundaries in Gwynedd, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 34 (1987) 137–149.

21. D.E. Thornton, The genealogy of Gruffudd ap Cynan, in: K.L. Maund (Ed.), *Gruffudd ap Cynan*, 79–108. see also T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, Oxford, 1993, 220–224.
22. A. Owen (Ed), *Ancient Laws and Institutes of Wales*, London, 1841, 8.
23. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977; D.E. Thornton The Genealogy of Gruffudd ap Cynan. See full details in note 210.
24. K.L. Maund, Gruffudd, grandson of Iago, 109. See full details in note 18.
25. D. Moore, Gruffudd ap Cynan and the medieval Welsh polity, 3. See full details in note 17.
26. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977, 15.
27. R. Jones, *Daearyddiaeth Wleidyddol, Weinyddol a Sefydliadol Cymru yn yr Oesau Canol*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1996. In an Irish context, see D.Ó. Corráin, *Irish regnal succession: a reappraisal* *Studia Hibernica*, 11 (1971) 1–39; J.R. Llobera, *The God of Modernity: the Development of Nationalism in Western Europe*, Oxford, 1994, 42.
28. M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: The Beginning to AD1760*, Cambridge, 1986. In this regard, the emphasis on a territorialised notion of secular power may mirror similar changes occurring in the context of ecclesiastical versions of the past, as contained in hagiographies. These often stress the existence of an ecclesiastical structure which is ordered in a predominantly territorial manner.
29. R.A. Dodgshon, *The European Past: Social Evolution and Spatial Order*, Basingstoke, 1987; M. Sahlins, *Tribesmen*, Englewood Cliffs, CA, 1968.
30. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977, 28.
31. J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, Cambridge, 1986; J. Goody and I. Watt, The consequences *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963) 304–345; M.T. Larsen, Introduction: literacy and social complexity, in: J. Gledhill, B. Bender, M.T. Larsen (Eds), *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralisation*, London, 1988, 173–191.
32. K. Gough, Implications of literacy in traditional China and India, in: J. Goody (Ed), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge, 1968, 84.
33. M.R. Nieke, Literacy and power: the introduction and use of writing in early historic Scotland, in: J. Gledhill, B. Bender, M.T. Larsen (Eds), *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralisation*, London, 1988, 237.
34. These ideas resonate with Giddens's discussion of the importance of 'storage capacity' for the development of state institutions during the modern period. See A. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Cambridge, 1981.
35. See the first audience, for a discussion of the likely audience for the *Historia* N.A. Jones, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan: the first audience*, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 149–150.
36. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Madison, 1985.
37. See for a discussion of the elision between oral and written versions of the past J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford, 1992, 96–97.
38. N.A. Jones, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan: the first audience*, in: K.L. Maund (Ed), *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, Woodbridge, 1996, 156.
39. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977, 10–11.
40. D.S. Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Cardiff, 1977, 11.
41. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977, 78; P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge, 1992, It is doubtful whether a truly objective version of the past can be produced and, in the context of this paper, it may be better to draw a comparison between the version of history contained within Gruffudd's biography and the popularly-held views of the past of the inhabitants of Gwynedd.
42. See R. Jones, The mechanics of medieval state formation: observations from Wales, *Space and Polity* 3 (1999) 85–99.
43. This resonates with recent work by Fairclough in the context of critical discourse analysis in which he calls for an exploration of the circumstances surrounding the production, distribution and consumption—or, in other words, the discursive practice—of a particular text. See N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge, 1992, *passim*.