

# The Problem of Constructing a Myth About “Helen of Wales” in Historical Memory and UK Digital Space (End of the 18th-Beginning of the 21st Centuries)

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## ABSTRACT

Based on medieval chronicles, works of antiquaries and online content, the article presents a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the image of the Welsh Princess Nest in the historical memory and digital space of great Britain (late 18th - early 21st centuries). The author concludes that the myth of the Princess occupies an important place in the hierarchy of images of the past that make up the collective memory of Wales. From the end of the 18th century with the growth of self-awareness and the process of nation-building, the Welsh have increasingly been turning to the medieval past, which they perceived as a period of continuous struggle for their political independence. In this context, the image of Nest as a victim of Norman violence became the personification of the whole Wales.

**Keywords:** Wales, the Welsh, Nest, image, national identity, historical memory, digital space

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, one of the most popular tourist destinations in the UK is Wales, which attracts travelers with a large number and variety of castles located on its territory. Interest in Welsh castles is fueled by the numerous historical stories and romantic myths associated with them, which are actively covered through online content, as well as through various advertising materials and tourist attributes. Quite popular, along with the story of the revolt of Owen Glendower, is the historical story of the abduction of the Welsh Princess Nest ferch Rhys, wife of the Norman Lord Gerald of Windsor, Prince Owain ap Cadwgan. The location of the abduction is still not exactly established. Websites for tourists demonstrate that two castles: Carew (The Ghosts of Carew Castle) and Cilgerran (Cilgerran Castle. Wales's very own Helen of Troy), claim the right to be considered.

As for the Princess herself, her image in the digital space is presented in two guises.

On the one hand, this is the image of a beauty kidnapped by a Prince, whose ghost is waiting for her lover in the walls of the castle of Carew. On the other hand, she appears as a scarlet woman who was the mistress of King Henry I of England, and then, being married to a Norman Lord, gave birth to a child to her captor (A Real Historical Hussy).

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

At present, many points in the history of Nest remain controversial and unexplored due to the scarcity of preserved material. Unfortunately, we were able to find only two fundamental works dedicated to this Welsh Princess. First of all, I would like to mention the work “Gender, nation and conquest in the High Middle Ages: Nest of Deheubarth”, in which Susan M. Jones examines the change in the image of the Princess on the basis of historical writings of writers and historians, as well as notes of travelers of the 18th-20th centuries (Johns, 2013). The author, taking into account the impact of various cultural and ideological factors, tries to assess the role of women in the history of Wales, as well as to identify the significance of the influence of gender relations on the process of forming Welsh identity. In another book, “Princess Nest of Wales: Seductress of the English”, K. L. Maund attempted to recreate the life milestones of the Princess, about which very little information has come down to our time (Maund, 2007). The author shows what difficulties Nest had to face, and how she overcomes them through various deprivations. In this study, we decided to address the problem of the origin of the historical myth of Princess Nest, as well as its transformation in the historical memory of Great Britain in the late 18th - early 21st centuries.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The key tasks are as follows:

1. To identify the factors that influenced the transformation of the image in the historical memory of Great Britain in the late 18th - early 21st centuries.
2. To analyze the significance of the myth of the kidnapping of the Princess in the process of constructing the national identity of the Welsh.

### 4. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the research is to reveal the evolution of images of Princess Nest based on the works of antiquaries and historians, as well as online content.

### 5. RESEARCH METHODS

The proposed research is based on a wide range of methods used in the study of historical memory, intellectual history and "women's history" by a number of authors (M. Halbwachs, P. Ricoeur, A. Assmann, J. Assmann, A. Lovejoy, M. Foucault, J. Scott, N. Z. Davis, etc.).

The ideas and discourses of thinkers of a particular era play an important role in building a state, community, nation, ethnicity, etc. Narratives created by intellectuals turn into myths that transform historical experience into timeless narratives transmitted from generation to generation (Assmann, 2014, 24). Scientists, intellectuals and various societies serve as keepers of the memory of the past and on the basis of knowledge of history act as creators of the national idea in the context of their own time and political, socio-economic and cultural situation. The study of the ideas of intellectuals allows us to highlight the peculiarities of understanding and perception of the national specifics of a particular people. If the map of historical memory is made up of symbols, traditions and myths that contain memories of the past, then intellectual history imposes creative thinking of intellectuals on this base, drawing the edges of images of the past.

### 6. THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Medieval manuscripts provide us with very little information about Princess Nest. The chronicle of the Princess tells of her being kidnapped by Owain ap Cadwgan in 1106. The Prince's father organized a festival at his court, where the Prince happened to hear about the beauty of Nest. He goes with a small entourage to visit his relative. After meeting with the Princess, Owain being the head of a group of 14 people, entered the castle at night and set it on fire. Nest, believing that enemies had come after Gerald, helped her husband to escape (Brut Twysogion, 1860, 85). After destroying the castle, Owain took Nest with her two sons and daughter and returned to

his homeland. Nest persuaded the Prince to return her children to Gerald of Windsor. When Ricard, Bishop of London and Constable of Henry I in Shrewsbury, heard of the insult to Gerald, he decided to take revenge on Owain. Confidant of the English king persuaded Ithel and Madog ap Maredudd ap Bleddyg to make an invasion of Powys. Owain and his father Cadwgan fled to Ireland, and Nest was returned to Gerald. Finally, the "Chronicle of the Princes" announces the death of Owain. He was attacked by a group of Flemings, instigated by Gerald, who fired two arrows at the Prince (Johns, 2013, 139).

In the autobiography of Giraldus Cambrensis, author of the works "Description of Wales" and "Journey through Wales", it is mentioned that his mother was Angharad, who was the daughter of Nest. This ecclesiastical figure also lists all his children, including Henry, the son of the English king, indicating the love relationship that existed between Henry I and the Welsh Princess before marriage (The Autobiography of Giraldus Cambrensis, 1937, 83).

The awakening of interest in the romantic story of Princess Nest falls on the Era of Romanticism (the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> - first half of the 19th centuries). This was primarily due to the growing influence of celticism on British culture and the actualization of the problem of Celts as native inhabitants of the island in British intellectual discourse. In "The History of Wales before the Death of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd", published in 1842, Thomas Price addresses the story of Nest's abduction. In his narrative, there is a sense of disapproval of the actions of Prince Owain, who was blinded by passion after meeting her (Price, 1842, 516-517). This criticism can be seen in later works. For example, Gweirydd ap Rhys in "The History of Wales" (Hanes y Brytaniaida R'Cymry) (1872) denounces the act of Owain, who is representative of the typical immoral aristocracy of Wales (Johns, 2013, 151). The author claims that the Prince dishonored Nest, who herself had contributed to her abduction. This interpretation of the myth arose in connection with the romanticization by English writers of the history of "Celtic" Wales. Some English intellectuals viewed the Norman conquest of the Welsh territory from a positive point of view. For example, in the "Modern Universal British Traveler", published in 1779, the Welsh are depicted as "rude, ferocious, and lustful" people (Johns, 2013, 151). The act of Union between England and Wales is seen as the first step towards the elimination of unacceptable laws and customs, and the spread of religion among the poor as the reason that the Welsh have become rational and civilized on a par with the English.

R. Fenton's "A Historical Tour of Pembrokeshire", published in 1810, provides more detailed information about the historical context of the abduction of the Welsh beauty. The author suggested that the marriage of Nest and Gerald was concluded after the Princess became a concubine of Henry. However, the marriage itself is presented by the writer as an attempt by the Norman Lord to strengthen his position with the help of lands received as Nest's dowry. Fenton thus sees the abduction in the context of the harsh political realities of the early twelfth century. And the place where the adventure of Owain ap

Cadwgan was carried out is the castle of Carew, which was sacked and burned (Fenton, 1811, 369).

W. Warrington, in his "History of Wales", confirms that Nest was the mistress of Henry I, and they had two children, one of whom was Robert of Gloucester. Gerald, through his marriage to the Welsh Princess, received the South-West lands of Wales. According to the antiquarian, it was thanks to Nest that the Norman Lord managed to escape during a night raid on the castle (Warrington, 1823, 405). In addition, Warrington questions the very fact of the kidnapping. It is noteworthy that by this time Gruffydd ap Rhys, the brother of the Princess, had returned from Ireland, and who may have hoped to return their possessions. Therefore, it can be assumed that Warrington addresses the plot of Nest's abduction, viewing it as an integral part of the unfolding political instability in South-West Wales.

It is worth noting that the English historian relied on William Wynne's "History of Wales" (1697), which, in fact, reflected the version set out in David Powell's "History of Cumbria" (1584). Wynne notes that the burning of the castle was deliberate, as well as the devastation of the countryside through which the kidnappers' path ran when they fled from Deheubarth. Warrington thus deviated from the version presented in the "History of Wales" by Wynne, perhaps unwilling to portray the Welsh resistance to the Normans in a positive way. Thus, Warrington shows that Nest's abduction was an integral part of the narrative of the Norman subjugation of Deheubarth.

In 1854, T. J. Llywelyn Prichard's book "Heroines of Welsh History" was published, it was dedicated to "the virtues of true womanhood in all its manifestations, purity and excellence". Perhaps this work was a reaction to the negative characterization of the Welsh, which the English commissioners presented in their "Report on education in Wales" (1847). The work of T. J. Llywelyn Prichard reflects the increased interest in the middle ages in the 19th century and the worship of the moral values of heroes. The author refers to the history of Nest in order to criticize the actions of the Anglo-Norman royal power. After the death of her father, the escape of her brothers, and the complete destruction of her father's house, she had no protection from the lust of the barbarian King, who made the Princess his concubine (Prichard, 1854, 327). Nest is thus portrayed by T. J. Llywelyn Prichard as a victim of royal violence.

In "A History of Wales" by Jane Williams Nest also appears as a victim whom Henry I seduced by promising to marry her. Therefore, the abuse of the English king over the Welsh Princess became the personification of Norman violence against Wales and the entire Welsh people (Williams, 1869, 207-209). J. Williams also considers the abduction of Nest in the context of Welsh resistance to the Norman invasion of the Western Celtic region. The role of Cadwgan ap Bleddy, reproaching his son for his shameful act, is a central feature of the story of the Princess's abduction. This motive serves as a reminder to the reader that Owain's behavior was regarded by the Welsh and English as a moral error that led to the

retribution - the death of the kidnapper who dragged Wales into war. Nevertheless, the English king Henry I's seducing Princess Nest, who is the embodiment of Wales, is assessed by Jane Williams as an insult to the Welsh people. Therefore, the writer sees Owain's action as a patriotic act of resistance. As a result, we can conclude that the book by Jane Williams reflected the stereotypical image of the hero - a passionate Welsh patriot who lost his head from love, committed an immoral act that led to the defeat of the Welsh in the war.

In the book "The History of Little England beyond Wales" by Edward Laws, published in 1888, Nest is depicted as the legendary beauty, likened to Helen of Troy (Laws, 1888, 108). When creating this image of the Princess, two stories were combined: on the one hand, the epic tragedy of Homer, on the other hand, the myth of the origin of the Welsh from the Trojans. Both of these plots are key to constructing the image of the Welsh as heroic opponents of the Norman villains. As a result, as we see, at the end of the 19th century the image of Nest appears as "Helen of Wales", which was created to reflect the nationalist view of the Welsh people on their ancestors' resistance to the Norman conquest in South-West Wales. In 1911, J. E. Lloyd published his work "A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest", which was distinguished from other works by the deep understanding of the Welsh past and thorough analysis of medieval chronicles. Lloyd saw conquest and colonization, as well as the Welsh response to these processes, as key determinants of nation formation. The scientist wrote a romantic and nationalistic history in order to arouse the interest of his countrymen in the past. The story of the abduction of Princess Nest corresponded to the approach of historians to determine the harmful influence of Norman rule on the formation of Welsh identity (Lloyd, 1912, 417-418). It is curious that Lloyd called Nest, the fate of whom was inextricably tied to her native nation and people, a symbol of Welsh patriotism. The book "England and Wales. Walks in Britain" (1932) by Henry Morton contains detailed information about Nest's abduction. The author accuses Owain of imprudence and of losing his mind, since his attempt to kidnap the wife of the King's Constable of Pembrokeshire, a woman who bore a son to the King of England, dragged the country into war, and North Wales may have lost its independence and much-needed peace. After the escape, "while Owen and Nest settled in a hunting Lodge in the shade at the foot of the cliffs of Egluise, all of Wales and Marku went up in flames. King Henry was furious. Cadwgan, fearing for his son, tried to persuade him to return Nest to her husband, but he refused, however he returned the children. Cadwgan's lands were taken, and Owain had to flee to Ireland. Some time later, Nest seems to have returned to Pembroke" (Morton).

In 1986, the journal "Country Quest" published an article about "Plus Uchaf", which contained information about Nest and Owain, and the narrative itself resembled a modern guide to Llangollen. As for today, the myth of the Welsh Princess is quite widely represented in the modern

digital space. This suggests that the folklore of Wales is of great interest to modern readers, which is introduced

## 7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is worth noting that the image of Nest began to form in the Middle Ages, and its revival and subsequent transformation dates back to the end of the 18th-21st centuries. Actualization in the historical memory of Wales of the myth of the abduction of the Princess contributed to the process of formation of the Welsh nation and the growth of its identity, which took place on the basis of conversion and reinterpretation of the Medieval past. Over a fairly long period, the image of Nest, seen in the context

through the media (Johns, 2013, 198).

of Welsh resistance to the Norman conquest, has undergone significant changes. Some intellectuals portrayed the Princess as Helen of Troy, and her abduction explained the beginning of the war, while others personified her with Wales - a victim of Norman violence. Today, the myth of Princess Nest occupies an important place in the hierarchy of images of the past that make up the historical memory of Wales.

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