

Introduction

Elis Gruffydd and His Chronicle

This book is about the legendary figures of Merlin and Arthur as depicted in the many original Welsh folktales left out of the widespread accounts of their exploits in English, Latin, and French through which most people know these stories today. But it is also about the survival of the magical arts from antiquity to the Renaissance and the broader cultural world of the Welsh, who were finally conquered and colonized by the Normans and the English during the medieval period but whose language and traditions were never extinguished.

The stories translated here have been culled from a single source, the enormous, sixteenth-century chronicle of Elis Gruffydd, written in his native Welsh. Its more than two thousand pages tell the history of the world from the Creation to the reign of Henry VIII, the author's contemporary, in exhaustive detail, including feats of the leading figures in histories of Europe. Much of Elis's masterpiece, however, can be tedious and tiresome for those not interested in the succession of popes or political maneuverings of princes. But tucked away among such political, military, and historical details are wonderful stories from the popular culture of the times that reflect the beliefs and fears of the people, commoners and elites alike, among whom such stories and beliefs circulated. This near-forgotten voice from the sixteenth century offers a treasure-house of sustained exploration of the widespread belief in the powers of magic, necromancy, prophecy, and related mystical arts, with Merlin and Arthur playing prominent roles.

Importantly, this book is also about the survival and adaptation of tradition, as it demonstrates how medieval Welsh thinking about Arthur and his court—a body of legends indigenous to Wales and the Britons who ruled the island before the arrival of the Romans and later the Anglo-Saxons—continued into the sixteenth century, often in ways that combined influences from other countries with the native stories about these most Welsh of heroes.

Elis used a dizzying combination of sources in a variety of languages, not only written works but also folklore, rumor, and hearsay. Crucially, these include not just the French and Anglo-Saxon compilations that today's readers know best but also the many Welsh folktales never recorded in these foreign collections. Indeed, the versions of the tales that modern readers know all come from nonnative accounts written in foreign languages long after the stories originally circulated—like reading about the Homeric heroes in a Turkish retelling. When you're reading Arthurian Romances, you're reading the twelfth-century collection of a Frenchman, Chrétien de Troyes; if you read Geoffrey of Monmouth's history of the kings of Britain, you're reading the work of a British cleric writing in Latin. The English *Le morte d'Arthur* was written by Thomas Mallory in the fifteenth century. Although Elis was writing about the legends and history of Britain from the perspective of a century later, as a Welsh speaker he was privy to long-standing native oral traditions and folktales and to Welsh-language texts no longer extant today.

The general shape of the stories of the births of Merlin and Arthur and their subsequent careers may be broadly familiar to readers, but the treatment of the material here is uniquely Welsh, with many of the details found nowhere else. While Merlin and Arthur are no doubt the most recognizable, there are many other legendary and historical figures of antiquity and medieval Romance who populate these pages. Taken as a whole, these stories have a very high entertainment value and provide a window onto a world that suffered through numerous plagues and near-constant political strife. It was a world that men of the "arts" attempted to tame through prophecy, necromancy, sorcery, astrology, and other forms of magic. This book offers a unique and much-needed perspective on these remarkable characters and the world of medieval Wales.

THE CHRONICLER AND HIS MASTERPIECE

Elis Gruffydd was born in Flintshire in north Wales around 1490; his home was at Gronant Uchaf in the parish of Llanasa (or Llanasaph), less than a mile from the Pantyllongdy home of Tomas fab Tomas fab Gruffudd Fychan, apparently a close relative. The historian Prys Morgan has described Elis as a member of the poorer branch of a minor-gentry family. He was intensely literate in his native language, was able to read several other languages, and surely had some kind of education before leaving Wales. Morgan also suggested that Elis might have had some bardic instruction in his early years.¹ As will be seen below, Elis certainly recorded a considerable amount of other people's poetry in manuscript, including strict-meter bardic compositions. As wealthier branches of his extended family maintained houses of some stature, it is possible that he had some contact with the peripatetic poets of north Wales during his early life, perhaps hearing bardic works performed there or in the houses of neighbors. However, given the fact that Elis was by no means averse to writing about himself and describing his own accomplishments, one would expect to find examples of his own poetry in his manuscripts, had he written any.² Although Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's hypothesis that Elis was instructed by one or more of the monks from the Cistercian Valle Crucis Abbey during his youth is ultimately unprovable, it is easier to accept than imaging him as a bardic pupil who never recorded any of his own poetry. All that can be said with certainty is that Elis was extremely literate and thus educated in some manner, and that he definitely did not attend a university.³

Elis's chronicle of the six ages of the world is one of the longest works ever composed in the Welsh language. It consists of more than

1. Prys Morgan, "Elis Gruffydd of Gronant—Tudor Chronicler Extraordinary," *Flintshire Historical Society Publications* 25 (1971): 11 The spellings *-udd* and *-ydd* both occur in Elis Gruffydd's written name, the two vowel sounds in unstressed syllables having coalesced by the late medieval period.

2. For example, in recording information about the defenses of Calais, Elis notes that he himself was responsible for maintaining one of the outer bulwarks (Mostyn 158, 583r-v; see n. 4 below).

3. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, "Elis Gruffydd a Thraddodiad Cymraeg Calais a Chlwyd," *Cof Cenedl* 11(1996): 31-58

2,400 large manuscript pages and takes as its subject the entire history of the world, from the beginning of humanity as described in the Christian Bible up to the year 1552.⁴ It draws upon a dizzying collection of sources, written in different languages—Welsh, English and French, Latin, and possibly Flemish—and ranging from manuscripts and printed books to oral history, rumor, and folktale. Elis’s world history includes events in *y dwyrain*, “the east,” and the “discovery” of America. However, a combination of factors—including his personal interests, the way in which he imagined his readership, and the sources available to him—ensured that the work focuses increasingly on Britain (seen first as the realm of *yr Hen Frytaniaid*, or “the Ancient Britons”) and then on England, Wales, and France.⁵ Patrick K. Ford, the translator of the stories in this book, has provided a means for readers to familiarize themselves with these aspects of the chronicle, for he includes a narrative here titled “The Origins of Britain” and stories about various monarchs of Wales, England, and France, as well as ones involving the Welsh princes.

Elis wrote this great work while serving as a professional soldier in Calais, the English monarchy’s last foothold in France. In many ways his work and what we know of him suggest that his life was paradoxically both emblematic of many Welsh experiences during the Tudor period and totally unique. Although the medieval bardic tradition continued throughout the sixteenth century, a very different kind of Welsh literati were challenging the bards’ time-honored cultural hegemony before the end of Elis’s life. In that tradition, professional poets under-

4. The chronicle is in two volumes, now labeled NLW MS 5276D and NLW MS 3054D (the latter also called Mostyn 158, in reference to an earlier manuscript collection to which it belonged), both in the manuscript collection of the National Library of Wales and each divided into two parts. Excellent digital images of the entire work are available thanks to the NLW: see <https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/early-modern-period/elis-gruffudds-chronicle>.

5. Much of the following discussion draws upon my earlier works *Soffestri'r Sae-son* [:] *Hanesyddiaeth a Hunaniaeth yn Oes y Tuduriaid* (Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2000) and “The Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995). For more information about the wider literary contexts discussed here, see A. O. H. Jarman et al., eds., *A Guide to Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992–98); Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton, eds., *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Damian Walford Davies, ed., *The Oxford Literary History of Wales*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

went years of training before graduating into the upper echelons of the bardic order and being licensed to compose and perform strict-meter praise poetry for *uchelwyr*, members of the Welsh gentry. Bards often served as manuscript copyists as well and were thus guardians and transmitters of traditional Welsh letters and learning by multiple means. Now, however, university-educated humanists were an increasing cultural force, sometimes openly criticizing the traditional bards and debating ways in which the Welsh language and its literature could be developed and enriched, as well as ensuring the publication of the first Welsh books, in the 1540s. Elis did not attend university and so did not receive formal exposure to the *studia humanitatis* curriculum, and thus he cannot be described as a humanist in the strict sense. However, his work displays a commitment to what can be described more loosely as a humanist educational agenda.⁶ By the same token, he was not a bard, although he was certainly exposed to a great deal of bardic learning and compositions, as will be discussed below. Elis created the longest work of Welsh-language literature produced up to that point, yet he belonged to no established Welsh literary milieu; while this might be seen as paradoxical, his lack of formal affiliation might also help explain the unique nature of his literary contribution.

Given the nature of the native and domestic literary tradition into which Elis was born, it is noteworthy that his chronicle was composed in Calais by a Welshman who lived most of his life beyond the borders of the land of his birth. The phrase *self-imposed exile* is perhaps not accurate, given the fact that Elis clearly embraced the career that kept him first campaigning on the continent, then living and working in London, and finally serving as part of the garrison in Calais. On the other hand, he was engaged in ultimately unsuccessful legal action over family lands, so it is possible that he might have retired to Wales at some point and led the life of a minor country gentleman had he managed to inherit or otherwise accrue enough resources to enable him to do so.⁷

Above all else, the great volume of material that Elis wrote in the Welsh language testifies to his intense desire to remain intellectually, and emotionally engaged with his mother tongue and the culture it

6. See, e.g., Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 3.

7. Morgan, "Elis Gruffydd of Gronant," 10–11

transmitted. Words which he himself wrote in his chronicle suggest that he was well aware that he was making a substantial contribution to the Welsh historiographical tradition. After finishing the final narrative section, a discussion of current and recent events in 1552, during the reign of Edward VI, the chronicler concludes his massive work with this colophon: “Da J delych di o veddiant ellis gruffyth sawdiwr o gallis J vediantt tomas vab tomas vab shion vab gruffudd vychan i bantt y llongdy yngwespur, oewwn plwyf llan assaph yn sir y fflint oewwn Tegangyl” (Well may you come from the possession of Elis Gruffydd, soldier of Calais, to the possession of Tomas fab [son of] Tomas fab Gruffudd Fychan, to Pantyllongdy in Gwespur, in the parish of Llanasaph in Flintshire in Tegangl).⁸ This sentence might have served in part as a kind of postal address, directing whomever Elis had charged with bearing the chronicle from Calais to the recipient’s Flintshire home in northeast Wales. It can also be read as an articulation of the relationship among the author, his work, and the intended readership. Personified and addressed as “you,” the chronicle is presented as a living Welsh entity linking the writer living in Calais with a specific place and an individual reader in Wales.

While Tomas fab Tomas fab Gruffudd Fychan is named in its final lines, the chronicle repeatedly addresses an imagined reader, the rhetorical construct helping to anchor the past being narrated in the present of the act of reading. Elis often begins a section with the noun *Syre*, meaning “lord,” “sir,” or “sirrah” (though not in the derogatory sense of “sirrah” as found, for example, in many of the plays of William Shakespeare). Other aspects of Elis’s narrative style likewise keep an image of his reader foregrounded, urging a continued close engagement with the long work. In at least one place, it is clear that the chronicler intended for his work to reach a plurality of readers back in Wales, defined specially as “men of fine substance and honor,” or “[g]wyr o fliant ac anrhydedd.”⁹

The suggestion that he came from a comparatively poor branch of a family of *uchelwyr*, or gentry, is borne out by the fact that he sought a career as a common soldier. Elis recorded details of his own military career in his chronicle, some of which are supported by external sources.

8. NLW MS 3054D, 688v.

9. See the discussion of the chronicle’s introduction below.

es.¹⁰ Morgan helpfully summarizes the particulars: “Elis went to Venlo in Gelderland in 1511, to Cadiz under Lord Darcy in the same year, to Fuenterrabia (in Navarre) in 1512, and to Therouanne and Tournay from 1513 to about 1518.”¹¹ He was certainly in military service by the time he was in his early twenties and might have started as a teenager. Despite his being involved in lawsuits concerning family lands in Wales during the 1530s,¹² there is no evidence that Elis ever returned to the country of his birth. He became a servant to Sir Robert Wingfield, perhaps while campaigning on the continent,¹³ and was later appointed the overseer of Wingfield Place in London, a position he held from 1524 to 1529 or 1530. The first of his surviving manuscripts, “The Book of Elis Gruffydd,” was written at Wingfield Place in 1527.¹⁴

That manuscript is a miscellany or anthology, containing—like so many of the extant Welsh manuscripts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—a considerable selection of bardic poetry, as well as genealogies, prophecies, and various prose texts.¹⁵ The contents of his chronicle demonstrate that Elis continued to be interested in Welsh bardic culture and traditions relating to poets notable in history or central to leg-

10. Mostyn 158, 669v.

11. Morgan, “Elis Gruffydd of Gronant,” 11–12

12. Morgan, “Elis Gruffydd of Gronant,” 10. As Morgan noted, Elis, Siôn ap Dafydd, and Siôn’s brother Robert were petitioning the chancery court over their lands between 1533 and 1538. See also E.A. Lewis, ed., *An Inventory of the Early Chancery Proceedings Concerning Wales* (Cardiff, University Press Board, 1937), 1B, 123–24.

13. Morgan, “Elis Gruffydd of Gronant,” 11. Elis served Wingfield during the 1523 campaign in France, details of which he records in his chronicle (Mostyn 158, 440v–448v). This section of the work has been edited by Thomas Jones and published as “Disgrifiad Elis Gruffudd o Ymgyrch Dug Suffolk yn Ffrainc yn 1523,” *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 15 (1954): 268–79.

14. This manuscript is also in Elis’s autograph hand. On folio 225r he writes, “Elis Gruffydd a’i ennedigayth yn Gronnant Vcha ym p[ll]wy Llanhassaph yn Sir y Fflint a’i ysgrivenodd anno XCCCCXXVIJ ynn Llundain ymhalas Sir Robert Wyng, yn yr amser hwnw depetti ynghaleis” (Elis Gruffydd, originally from Gronant Uchaf in the parish of Llanasaph in Flintshire, wrote this in the year 1527 in London in the mansion of Sir Robert Wingfield, at that time deputy in Calais).

15. For a detailed description of the contents of “The Book of Elis Gruffydd,” see Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on Manuscripts in the Welsh Language*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1902), 96–103; Daniel Huws, *A Repertory of Welsh Manuscripts and Scribes, c. 800–c. 1800* (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, forthcoming).

end: for examples, see “Merlin and the Dreams of Gwenddydd” in part 2 and “Rhobin Ddu” in part 3. The poetry recorded by Elis in his earlier manuscript fills 104 of its 266 large pages and constitutes an anthology of compositions by the most famous Welsh poets from the later medieval period working in the strict cywydd meter (couplets of seven-syllable lines with an end rhyme falling alternately on accented and unaccented syllables and with *cynghanedd*, internal ornamentation mandatory in every line), such as Dafydd ap Gwilym, Iolo Goch, Gruffydd Grug, Dafydd Namur, Guto’r Glyn, and Lewis Glyn Cothi, and a few poems ascribed to two of the *cynfeirdd*, or “early poets,” Taliesin and Llywarch Hen.¹⁶ The remaining contents include a genealogy from Adam to Brutus, “Y Kronickly Byr . . . sydd Esgrivenedic Jr dwyn kof am y xxiv Brenin a varnnwyd yn benna . . . o’r Brytaniaid & Edfeilad” (The short chronicle . . . which was written in order to record the twenty-four kings who were judged to be the greatest . . . of the Britons and the Italians); “The Debate between the Soul and the Body,” said to have been translated into Welsh from Latin by Iolo; a tract on the seven planets; “Aristotle’s Letter to Alexander”; traditional Welsh prophecies; and a version of “The Seven Sages of Rome,” apparently translated into Welsh from French or English by Elis himself.¹⁷ Some of the texts found in this early manuscript, including the poetry attributed to the legendary Taliesin and “The Short Chronicle,” presage themes and narratives to which Elis would return at length in his great chronicle.

During his time in London, the man whom he served, Sir Robert Wingfield, became the deputy governor of Calais. As Henry VIII kept no standing army in the modern sense, a position in the garrison guarding Calais was one of the few ways a professional soldier could ensure a salary, and Elis clearly used his personal connection to secure just such a place. He left London in 1530 to join the garrison of Calais, where he seems to have remained for the rest of his life. According to official records of the town, he married a local woman, Elizabeth Manfielde, had children, and bought a house in Calais.¹⁸ In the part of his

16. For Llywarch Hen, see Patrick K. Ford, ed. and trans., *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

17. Henry Lewis, “Y Seithwyr Doethion,” *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 2 (1924–25): 202.

18. Morgan, “Elis Gruffydd of Gronant,” 14.

chronicle dealing with that year, he records that “ynn y vlwydd o wladychiad y brenin vgain mlynedd kyua, yn niwedd yr hron, yr hrynn ysydd y’w ddywedud ar y seithued ddydd ar hugain o fis Jonnawr, J doethum j mewn waedgys o rettunw Kalais, ynn y mann J trigais j o hynny allan, ynn y lle i bum i ynn dwyn vy mowyd y hran v[w]yaf o hynny allan ynn gweled ymrauaelion o bethau ar a uai gymhesur i roddi wynt mewn ysgriuen” (at the end of twenty full years of the king’s reign, that is to say on the twenty-seventh of January, I came into the wages of the retinue of Calais, where I lived from that time on, where I have been spending my life for the main part of the time from then on witnessing various things which deserve to be put in writing).¹⁹

As the final part of the work does include many things that its author witnessed in Calais, the words of the passage above can be taken as a reference to the chronicle itself. Two folios later in the manuscript, Elis notes that he began writing soon after settling in Calais: “Ac ynnol J mi breseddu ynGhalais, myui a ddechreuais nodi kwrs y byd ac ynn vnwedig tyrnas Loegyr, brenin yr honn a oedd yn parhau ynni gariad vyth hryngtho ef a Nann Bwlen, yr hon a oedd yn lliidiog jaiwn wrth y Kardinal o Loeger” (And after I settled in Calais, I began to record the way of the world, especially that of the realm of England, whose king was still continually pursuing his love for Anne Boleyn, who was very angry with the cardinal of England).²⁰ There is good internal evidence, then, allowing us to conclude that Elis began his chronicle in 1530 and finished it in 1552. Given the completely unprecedented length of the work and remembering that he was employed as a soldier, not a full-time writer, it is no surprise that he took twenty-two years to produce this massive text.²¹ Even so, as Ford mentions in his translator’s note, there are signs that Elis often composed his sentences hastily, an observation that raises an image of the soldier writing furiously during his free time, attempting to get as much in as possible before returning to duty or family.

19. Mostyn 158, 485v.

20. Mostyn 158, 487v.

21. The manuscript, completed about 1552, was bound into the collection later known as *Cwrtmawr 1*. Like Elis’s two other extant works—his “Book” and a translation of medical texts (see below)—it is in his autograph hand.

He completed one other substantial work during his time in Calais, a collection of Welsh translations of English works on medicine.²² As Elis suffered from illness during the 1540s, his scholarly interest was clearly linked to personal experiences. Consisting of 852 pages, this work would be remarkable in its length if it didn't seem short when set against the more than 2,400 pages of Elis's chronicle. If only the other two works had survived, Elis would be remembered as an interesting but not remarkable copyist, anthologizer, and translator. It is because of his chronicle, the work from which Ford has drawn the narratives presented here, that Elis stands out as one of the most remarkable and significant Welsh-language authors of the sixteenth century.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHRONICLE

The sections of Elis's chronicle selected for inclusion in this book can be read as isolated texts, and Ford's lively and engaging English rendition of their prose ensures that they will be appreciated and enjoyed. We will return to them shortly. However, any reader interested in their context should keep in mind that they are part of a long history of the world. It is thus worth discussing in some detail how Elis went about creating this ambitious work and what kinds of influences and sources informed its composition.

The chronicle's early pages have headers in Elis's own hand, alternating between *llyur kynnta o'r vij*, "the first book of the seven," on the recto of each folio and *Yr Oes Gynnta o'r Byd*, "The First Age of the World," on the verso. While this continues through the manuscript's first 270 folios, the practice becomes less consistent and at times confused.²³ The attempt to organize the work in terms of books, most likely stemming from the influence of Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*, is then abandoned, and the majority of the work is arranged chiefly

22. S. Minwell Tibbot notes that Elis's main source was Sir Thomas Elyot's *Castel of Helthe*, most likely published for the first time in 1531 (*Castell yr Iechyd* [Cardiff Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1970], x).

23. See, e.g., NLW MS 5276D, 13r.

according to the *sex aetates mundi*, or, in Welsh, *chwech oes y byd*, “six ages of the world.”²⁴

It is not only the page headers that use the concept of the six ages as a structuring principle. Dates are commonly given in terms of *oedran y byd* (the age of the world), either *ymlaen* (before) or *ar ol* (after) the central temporal reference point in Christian chronologies, *dyuodiad Krist*, “the coming of Christ.”²⁵ Individual narratives are sometimes introduced with reference to the age in which they happened, as Elis employs phrases such as *ywn yr oes honn*, “in this age [X was born or Y took place].” The chronicle is a universal history, and the comprehensive scheme of the traditional six ages of the world informed its creation on many levels, dictating the material’s general chronological organization and providing a stylistic handle for locating specific narratives within that broader framework.

This framework had enjoyed considerable esteem in Christian historiography for centuries. Some of the most famous thinkers of the early church had shaped its development; indeed, it was founded to a great extent on the ambitious chronological tables of Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–350), who synchronized the histories of different peoples. Implicit in his schematization was the assertion that all of pre-Christian history was but a foreshadowing of Christian history. Saint Augustine (354–430) molded Eusebius’s chronology into a more developed organization, introducing the ideas of “the great empires” and the *sex aetates mundi*. These six ages were defined as the periods from the Creation to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Christ, and from the birth of Christ to Judgment Day. During Augustine’s lifetime, Orosius employed the six ages framework in his *Historia adversus paganos* (dated to 417–18). Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) included a chronicle using the *sex aetates mundi* in his *Etymologiae*, a work that had a profound influence on several literary and historiographical traditions.

24. The last page with the word *llyfr*, “book,” used in a header is NLW MS 5276D, 137v.

25. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 81–88

Although Elis sought to record the history of *chwech oes y byd*, the vast majority of his work deals with the final age of the six. Indeed, roughly a third of the entire composition is consumed by the most recent 150 years of history, from circa 1400 to 1552.²⁶ For the fifteenth century, he relied heavily on two published English chronicles, John Rastell's *Pastyme of the People* (mentioned in "The Origins of Britain," in part 1) and Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble Houses of Lancaster and York*. Many of the narratives in part 3 of this book are from this section of the chronicle. In treating Welsh history, Elis used oral history and folklore, as well as written texts. An excellent example included here is the collection of associated narratives featuring the prophetic bard Rhobin Ddu (see the story named for him in part 3). It seems that Elis had heard tales about this character during his youth in Wales and had seen poetry ascribed to him in other manuscripts. When Elis came to generate his own version of these narratives, published English chronicles treating the wars of the fifteenth century and historiographical and genealogical material contained in Welsh manuscripts also informed his work.

The excerpt that Ford dubs "Owain Tudur and Catherine de Valois and the Rise of the Tudors" is a rollicking and often funny love story. However, in relating this narrative, Elis was also meditating on a matter central to his own identity, for the story highlights the Welsh origin of the Tudor dynasty, which he served. As has been noted already, Elis says that he "put in writing" a great deal of "things" that he himself witnessed. In recording contemporaneous or recent events, he also incorporated information provided by his circle of friends and acquaintances, many of them servants in high places and eavesdroppers in the corridors of power.

But beyond the current events and their continuing effects on history, what the reader of this selection of stories will find most telling about Elis's life and times is the pervasive influence of elements of the supernatural: prophecy, to be sure, but also necromancy, ordinary magic in its many forms, unearthly interventions of many varieties, and the effects of natural phenomena. It is irrelevant to consider Elis's

26. The coronation of Henry IV in 1399 is discussed on folio 279r of NLW MS 3054D, thus leaving more than four hundred folios, or eight hundred "pages," for the following century and a half of history.

belief in such things, for he was a person of his time. It is clear from his treatment of these otherworldly phenomena that he accepted the existence of supernatural intervention in the lives of ordinary people. What is telling, perhaps, is that stories of the kind in this book were not consigned to a separate section of his chronicle but rather recorded as part of the ongoing history he recounts. While we may wonder at the credence given such supernatural interventions in those times, they occurred in the ordinary course of lives lived. It is for this reason, among others, that Ford has indicated the stories' manuscript numbers and folio pages, where the interested reader may, upon examination, find that a particularly bizarre otherworldly experience sometimes directly follows a list of popes or the activities or fate of one of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire.

Those seeking to identify exact written sources employed by Elis are often frustrated by his tendency to use vague references, which cite only *y llyure*, "the books," *yr ysgriuen*, "the writing," *vy nghopi*, "my copy," *vy awdur*, "my author," or *opiniwn*, the "opinion" of some general group or community of authors or other people. Typical examples are "J mae ymrauaelion oppiniwns mewn llyure yn lloygyr" (there are various opinions in books in England) and "Ynn ol opiniwn hrai o'r Kymru" (according to the opinion of some of the Welsh).²⁷ Students of literature, history, and folklore alike are at one and the same time excited and frustrated by his imprecise allusion to sources such as *ysdori*, "a story," *kronick*, "a chronicle," and *chwedyl*, "a tale." However, Elis does mention specific references on occasion, sometimes naming a source directly in the body of his narrative (e.g., "megis ac j mae yr awdur Galfriedws yn dangos," "as the author Geoffrey shows"), in the margin (e.g., "darllain ystori Halle," "read Hall's history"), or in a heading (e.g., "Prolog Rastel," "Rastell's Prologue"). The reader who works through the entire chronicle may get the impression that the sprawling composition is set within a complex web of sources and, indeed, is itself a creation woven partly by combining those individual strands and partly by situating something new within that textual web. These sources can be viewed as a complicated network of cultural relationships connecting a variety of texts and traditions. Sitting spiderlike at the center of this vast web is the authorial persona of Elis,

27. Mostyn 158, 283v, 285v.

manipulating individual strands and weaving new ones. As Ford explains in his translator's note, Elis addresses the fact that his various sources do not always agree, and he often challenges opinions voiced by earlier authors.

The narratives selected by Ford often evince a tension, in his words, "between rational history and a cosmology that demands the operation of arcane forces." In a very real sense, Elis's view of history was tempered by traditions that promoted belief in supernatural forces, as we have seen. The Welsh word *brut* eventually came to be used for a traditional kind of historiographical text or textual tradition (the most popular of which was, judging by manuscript evidence from the medieval and early modern periods, *Brut y Brenhinedd*, the "Brut of the kings," the Welsh translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*). Similarly, the word *brud* came to refer to Welsh prophecies. Both common nouns derive from the proper noun *Brutus*, the name of the first of the legendary rulers whose exploits were chronicled by Geoffrey and others both before and after Elis. During the medieval period and on up through Elis's time, however, the final *t* or *d* in a word was not fixed, and either form could mean either "prophecy" or "text about history." Indeed, as I have argued at length elsewhere, it is best to view them not as two different terms but as one, *brut/d*, which indexes a complex mode of thought in which the past, present, and future of the Welsh and their nation are held in productive association with one another.²⁸ Elis is at times cynical and dismissive in his treatment of traditional Welsh prophecy in his chronicle. However, in other parts of the same work he suggests that it is possible to engage with prophetic texts and successfully read the signs relating to the future, just as the chronicler can sift through evidence to describe past events.

Several narratives translated here provide some insight into Elis's complex relationship with Welsh historiography and prophecy: See especially the reference to Gildas in "Merlin and the Threefold Death" and the chronicler's musings toward the end of "Gwrtheyrn and the Falling Castle." Also extremely relevant is "Rhobin Ddu."

The most salient aspect of the work's style, and one that provides unity of tone throughout the massive composition, is the presence of Elis's unique and often humorously intrusive authorial persona, very

28. Hunter, *Soffestri'r Saeson*. See also Hunter, "Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd."

much in evidence in the stories presented *infra*. In a very real sense, this persona can be considered his most original and memorable literary creation. It is manifest in the frequent asides that address the reader directly, sometimes questioning the veracity of a source the author has just paraphrased, flavoring criticism with biting sarcasm, and sometimes providing more general commentary on human nature. In addition to including these comments in the body of his text, Elis glossed his work himself, tempering the high drama of the narratives with humor and cynicism that force the reader to reevaluate the history being related.

The stories presented by Ford in this book provide numerous examples of the ways in which Elis's authorial persona directly addresses the reader. This is a dynamic aspect of the work's style, for, while always instructing and sometimes bringing the reader in close to share a joke or humorous comment about the material in question, he also often rebukes the reader for being willing to believe things that are untrue or "contrary to faith and reason."

As the history moves closer to the present, the closer this authorial persona comes to the foreground as Elis relates events that he himself witnessed, including some in which he played a part. First-person narration had been used before in Welsh literature: medieval love and nature poetry is often cast in the first person (seen in, for instance, the twelfth-century Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd's repetition of the phrase "caraf i," "I love," and the fourteenth-century Dafydd ap Gwilym's fondness for beginning a *cywydd* with a formulaic narrative anchor, "fal yr oeddw," "as I was . . ."). However, these poems are expressions of love or meditations on nature and not what Meredith Anne Skura would term "self-writing."²⁹ In contrast, the later part of Elis's chronicle could be described as the first autobiography in the Welsh language. He details the military campaigns in which he participated, discusses things he witnessed or heard about in the corridors of power in London, and describes aspects of a soldier's life in the Calais garrison in the first person.

One example is his detailed description of his move from London to Calais, one of the major milestones in his life and career. In describing

29. Meredith Anne Skura, *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

a dangerous sea, Elis comes to the foreground as a central character in his own story. Although a Protestant convert, he tells us that when a storm threatened to sink the ship, he was one of those who prayed to various Catholic saints, confessing thus: “Addewais i ynof fy hun ddyfod ar fy nhraed a cheiniog i Ddwynwen pa bryd bynnag ar y rhoddai Duw a’r Saint gennad i mi i sathru troedfedd o dir Lloegr” (I promised in myself to travel by foot with a penny for [Saint] Ddwynwen whenever God and the saints gave me permission to set foot on the land of England). Elis then presents the reader with some detailed self-mockery designed to make an important theological point about the worship of false idols: “Ac yn y modd yma yr oeddem ni oll yn rhoddi ein gobaith yn fwy i gyffion o gau brenne, y rhain a oedd rai ohonynt hwy ccc o filltiroedd oddi wrthym ni, nog i Dduw ac i’r prenne, drwy wyrthiau Duw, a oedd yn ein cynal ni ar ucha y dŵr” (And in this manner we were all placing our hope more in pieces of false wood, which were, some of them, three hundred miles away from us, than we were [placing our hope] in God and the pieces of wood that were, through God’s miracles, keeping us above the water.)³⁰ The writer becomes his own character, and that character is made both object and subject of his text’s morality tale. While a host of kings, popes, and other important people figure prominently in the chronicle, Elis himself emerges as its most complex and human character, often commenting from the margins of history—and writing in the margins of his own work—as a wise, cynical, and humorous bystander, coming to the foreground of the text at times as a hero and at other times as the butt of his own joke.

One of the striking aspects of the chronicle’s autobiographical sections is the way in which Elis presents, suggests, and constructs his own identity—always Welsh, at times British (perhaps more in the Welsh sense of *yr Hen Frytaniaid*, “the Ancient Britons,” than in terms of common twenty-first-century usage), and at times a proud member of the “English” army. He lived through the Acts of Union (1536–43), which formally annexed Wales to the Kingdom of England, the most obvious manifestation of developments that saw Wales brought more firmly into the grip of the Tudor state. Rather than offer a protesting voice, Elis

30. Mostyn 158, 486r. See also Jerry Hunter, “Poets, Angels and Devilish Spirits: Elis Gruffydd’s Meditations on Idolatry,” in *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition*, ed. Joseph F. Nagy and Leslie Ellen Jones (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), 765–96.

was one of many Welsh people who enthusiastically entered the service of that regime. In discussing military campaigns in which he—along with a great number of other Welsh soldiers—took part, he describes the force as *byddin Lloegr*, “England’s army,” or *y milwyr Saesneg*, “the English soldiers,” and he was clearly proud of its successes. However, he was also intensely aware of tensions between Welsh and English soldiers within that military community.

In one of the chronicle’s autobiographical sections, he describes the disastrous campaign of 1523 in which he participated.³¹ Suffering from extremely bad weather in France, some of the soldiers in Henry VIII’s army grew unruly. Elis tells us that these men were warned against actions that were “nothing less than treason” (*ddim llai no thratturiaeth*) and for which they could be executed. Like many of Elis’s recordings, recreations, and fabrications of lively dialogue, his version of the would-be mutineers’ collective answer is memorable: “*J’r hynn ir attebai y kyuriw wyr gwrthnysig annswynhwyrol drwy ddywedud nad oedd waeth gantheunt twy i krogri yn Lloegyr no me[i]rw o annwyd ynn Ffrainck*” (To which these stubborn and senseless men replied that they did not think it worse to be hanged in England than to die of cold in France).³²

At this juncture, Elis once again becomes a central character in the story he is relating, tossing in substantial doses of humor and self-satire as he assures readers that he witnessed these events firsthand: “*Y soon a’r shiarrad hwn a glybu vy meistyr J Syr Robard Wingffild, yr hwn a wnaeth i mi gyuodi o’m gwaal, ynn y mann ir oeddwn J mor gynnes a’r porckell, i wrando yr ymddiuan ac i nodi y kyuriw wyr ac a oedd yn gwneuthud y vugad honn*” (My master, Sir Robert Wingfield, heard this rumor and talk, and he made me get up from my shelter, where I was as warm as a piglet, in order to listen to the conversation and note which men were making that noise). More disgruntled talk ensues, leading to the call to return home, and Elis is again forced to leave his warm bed, listen to the soldier’s complaints, and do his part to forestall the mutiny. Cleverly contrasting different aspects of his character and his role, he depicts himself as a hapless man robbed of a good night’s sleep while emphasizing the crucial service he provided by helping Sir

31. Mostyn 158, 441r–447r. See also Jones, “Disgrifiad Elis Gruffudd o Ymgyrch Dug Suffolk.”

32. Mostyn 158, 445v.

Robert Wingfield avoid rebellion in the ranks. Moreover, in introducing the episode, he stresses that Welsh and English soldiers alike were grumbling (“y gwynuan a wnai lawer o’r Saeson ac o’r Kymru,” “the complaint was made by many of the English and the Welsh”).³³ This may have been “the English army,” but the Welsh were a distinct and at times separate group within that mobile military community.

At one point in this extended autobiographical narrative, the chronicler describes how tensions between the army’s Welsh and English factions came to the surface in a life-threatening manner. After recording the open cry “to go home” voiced by some soldiers, Elis writes that “everybody was placing the entire blame on the men of Wales, even though twice as many of the Englishmen were even more eager to turn for home than the Welsh” (pawb ynn bwrw yr holl vai ar wyr Kymrv ir bod dau kymaint o’r Saesson ynn chwannogach i droi adref no’r Kymrv). To summarize the nature of the anti-Welsh prejudice that he experienced in the army, Elis draws upon some traditional Welsh wisdom: “Yet, as the proverb is true, ‘the dog one desires to kill is the dog who kills the sheep’” (Neithyr, megis ac J mae’r ddihareb ynn wir, “y ki a vynnwr J laadd hwnnw a vydd ynn lladd y deuid”)—that is, the accusation of killing sheep is used to justify killing a dog that one simply doesn’t like.³⁴

While serving in London during the 1520s, Elis kept the company of other Welshmen as much as possible, and he often states explicitly that acquaintances from Wales also working in London were the sources of specific rumors and information about goings-on in the Tudor court and other high places.³⁵ Similarly, while campaigning in France and during his more than twenty years in Calais, he associated himself with other Welsh soldiers. Thomas Jones provides a roll call of these friends and associates: “the spearman, Rhobert ap Rheinallt, from Oswestry . . .; the officer, Thomas Johns, from South Wales; his own cousin, Ifan Llwyd ap Siôn Cyffin, from Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, who died in Elis’s billets; the standard bearer, Siôn ap Dafydd ap Gruffudd from Ystrad Alun; the cavalry man, Owain Gwyn; and many

33. Mostyn 158, 445v.

34. Mostyn 158, 442v.

35. Jerry Hunter, “Taliesin at the Court of Henry VIII: Aspects of the Writings of Elis Gruffydd,” *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 10 (2003): 41–53

others, . . . whom he does not name.”³⁶ We thus glimpse how a professional soldier from Wales who lived most of his life outside that country mitigated the distance from his native land by seeking out and maintaining a Welsh social circle wherever he was. While it can be assumed that these soldiers spoke Welsh together whenever possible, the fact that Elis remained intellectually and emotionally engaged with his mother tongue is overtly manifest in the wealth and breadth of his Welsh-language material in his three surviving works. Although he lived most if not all of his adult life outside the land of his nativity, he wrote extensively in Welsh for a readership back in Wales.

The colophon addressing the chronicle and wishing it a safe trip from Calais to Tomas ap Tomas ap Gruffydd Fychan of Pantyllongdy in Flintshire was discussed above. Elis also included an introduction of sorts, which addresses more than one intended reader, including perhaps Tomas but surely the better-off relatives in Flintshire whom he hoped would help him with his hitherto unsuccessful legal battle. His nemesis in this was Piers Mutton, who had claimed lands that the soldier of Calais considered to be his own birthright:

Ac am vy llaur nid wyf J ynn damuno dim, onid ych kerdigrwydd Ach gair da chwi, A meddwl am y ttrais ar kam a ddaruu y beirs mwttwn i wnneuthud a myui ynn dwyllodrus dan eulun kyuraith Ar kam J mae i ttiueddionn ef yniwnneuthud A myui yn wastadol, Ac ynn debig yw wnneuthud oherwydd nad wyf J ynn abyrl i ddyuod Jr wlad i ddilin y gyuraith, yr honn gann a glowaf J ysydd gwedi mynned ar gyuyrgoll ynghymru A lloigyr, onid ir sawl a vo kyuoethog J evro dwyllo y gwyr o gyuraith, yr hynn nid ydwyf i yn abyrl yw wneuthud.³⁷

And for my labor I do not desire anything, other than your kindness and your good word, and a consideration of the violence and the wrong which Piers Mutton has done continually to me, and is likely to continue to do because I am not able to come to the country to follow the law, which, as I hear, has gone astray in Wales and England, except for the one who happens to be wealthy enough to grease the hands of the lawyers, which I am not able to do.

36. Thomas Jones, “A Welsh Chronicler in Tudor England,” *Welsh History Review* 1 (1960): 15.

37. NLW MS 3054D, 2r–v.

Elis continues this wordy appeal, denouncing a lack of “justice” (*kyuio-wnder*) and beseeching these readers to intervene on his behalf, stating that he would do the same for them where they in need and he in a place to do so. He concludes this introduction with a poignant sentence: “Hyn a ddaruu J mi i sgriuen v hrag mynned y matter drosgof ynn llanhassaph” (This I wrote lest the matter be forgotten in Llanasaph).³⁸ While referring directly to his claim on lands in Llanasaph, Flintshire, these words can be extended, as Morgan suggests, to all of “the matter” discussed in the long chronicle.³⁹

Whatever the nature of the exact “matter” that Elis wanted remembered in his old parish back in Wales, there is no mistaking the fact that the earlier part of this introduction describes the material contained in the work: “Nid wyf i ynn kymerud arnnaf amgennach no gwr sympyl disas diddysg anwybodol a vai ynn kymerud arno vod ynn ben llongwr i lywio ac i gyurwyddo llongiaad o wyr o vliant ac annrhydedd dros vor llydan i wlad ynn yr h[o]n ni biasai neb o honnunt twy irmoed ynn y blaen” (I do not pretend to be anything more than a simple, rustic, uneducated, unknowledgeable man who would pretend to be a captain steering and guiding a ship full of men of fine substance and honor across a wide sea to a land where none of them had ever been before).⁴⁰ In describing his massive chronicle as a new “land,” he suggests that he knew full well that Welsh readers had never before encountered such a work in their native language. As is common in introductions to works from the medieval and early modern periods, the author ceremonially debases himself before his readers, protesting that he is unworthy, while suggesting the opposite by presenting a work clearly considered to be worthy of interest. However, the specific metaphor that Elis employed in his introduction is extremely significant for several reasons, not the least of which is that it reminds us that he sent this novel and ambitious contribution to Welsh literature back to Wales from across the sea. Perhaps more significant is what it says about how he regarded his ambitious project. Couching self-praise in ritual self-debasement, this sentence also stresses that the chronicle’s Welsh readers could not travel to this wondrous new land without Elis. Thanks to

38. NLW MS 3054D, 2v.

39. Morgan, “Elis Gruffydd of Gronant,” 20.

40. NLW MS 3054D, 688v.

these new translations by Patrick Ford, readers who can't understand Elis's original Welsh prose will nonetheless be able to visit some of the more interesting and memorable parts of that vast and fascinating literary landscape.

THE TRANSLATOR AND HIS WORK

Patrick Ford has long been interested in Elis and his chronicle. In 1977 he published *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (also from University of California Press).⁴¹ Among other things, that book presented readers with the first modern English translation of "The Tale of Gwion Bach" and "The Tale of Taliesin," two associated narratives that he translated from Elis's chronicle.⁴² These stories describe how supernatural powers were acquired by Gwion Bach, later reborn as the poet and culture hero Taliesin. In addition to containing memorable episodes such as the shape-shifting pursuit of Gwion Bach by the witch Ceridwen and Taliesin's defeat and humiliation of Maelgwn Gwynedd's court poets, these linked stories provide a lively Welsh parallel to Irish narratives describing the acquisition of poetic inspiration.⁴³ This makes it no surprise that Ford's translation has become a mainstay in the study of Celtic literature and is surely one of the many factors that have kept his popular 1977 book in print for more than forty years.

While poetry associated with the legendary character Taliesin survives in earlier manuscripts, prose tales of Gwion Bach and Taliesin first appear in a work written between 1530 and 1552, Elis's "Cronicl Chwech Oes y Byd," or "Chronicle of the six ages of the world." In preparing the present book, Ford has returned to Elis's chronicle to provide readers with a wide selection of narratives about magic, prophecy, and related themes in translation, the vast majority of which have never been available in English before. The contents provide an exciting

41. For an edition of the original Welsh text, see Patrick K. Ford, ed., *Ystoria Taliesin* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992).

42. The first English translation was published by Charlotte Guest during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Also discussed in Patrick K. Ford, *The Celtic Poets: The Songs and Tales from Early Ireland and Wales* (Belmont, MA: Ford and Bailie, 1999).

43. See Ford, *Celtic Poets*; Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

introduction to the variety of narratives found in Elis's long chronicle, including his unique treatment of subjects from literary traditions with which the reader will most likely be familiar, as well as a great deal of traditional Welsh tales.

The value of these Welsh narratives cannot be overemphasized. Some were surely folktales, transmitted orally and heard by Elis when he was a child or young man in Wales. Others he perhaps gleaned from older manuscripts that have since disappeared. For example, "The Tale of Taliesin" mentioned above is not the only traditional story involving the ruler Maelgwn Gwynedd found in the chronicle. There is also the lively story that Ford titles "Maelgwn Gwynedd, His Wife, and the Ring." While it contains international folktale motifs that help scholars situate it within a broader context of tradition and oral transmission, this specific Welsh tale is not recorded in an earlier source. Indeed, Elis's chronicle is *the* most valuable early source for traditional Welsh narratives after the medieval manuscripts containing the *Mabinogion* tales. Readers of this new book will see why.

Jerry Hunter