

## Authority and Conflict at the Cistercian Abbey of Strata Florida

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### Abstract

On three occasions between c. 1340 and c. 1440 it was alleged that the renowned Welsh Cistercian abbey of Strata Florida was attacked and invaded by fellow White Monks. This article explores these incidents in detail for the first time. It argues that these episodes should not be seen as reflecting a decline from Cistercian standards or of an increasingly local outlook among the Order's abbeys in *Pura Wallia* but rather as indications of the prestige of Strata Florida within the Cistercian affiliation that derived from Whitland, and as products of local rivalries within the wider communities in which the Cistercian abbeys of mid Wales were located.

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The focus of this article is on three disputes or disturbances at one of the most prestigious – if not the largest or wealthiest – of the Cistercian abbeys in Wales, Strata Florida (Ceredigion).<sup>1</sup> Although first established by the Anglo-Norman constable of Cardigan Castle

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<sup>1</sup> The size and wealth of monastic houses clearly fluctuated over time, but as a guide, Strata Florida was valued in 1535 at just over £118 per annum and was surrendered by its abbot and seven monks. The wealthiest Welsh houses were Tintern (£192), Aberconwy [Conway] (£162), and Basingwerk (£150), and the poorest were Grace Dieu (£19) and Cwmhir (£24). The largest in terms of monastic population was Tintern with thirteen monks, and the smallest Cwmhir with three. The population was not, however, recorded at some of the Welsh abbeys. See David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses England and Wales*, second edn (London, 1971), pp. 112–28.

in 1164 Strata Florida is usually regarded as the first of the houses of White Monks to be founded by a native Welsh lord, for in the following year it was taken under the wing of Rhys ap Gruffudd (the Lord Rhys, d. 1197) of Deheubarth, the leading Welsh ruler of his day. Thereafter Rhys was treated as effective founder. The grants he made then, which were augmented in 1184 and later by his successors, led to the accumulation of a vast estate of nearly 250 square miles.<sup>2</sup> Strata Florida remained closely associated with the descendants of the Lord Rhys until the decline of the dynasty of Deheubarth, and provided a mausoleum for many of its members. It witnessed political set pieces, such as the ceremony staged in 1238 by Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, ruler of Gwynedd (d. 1240), designed as a demonstration of his power in order to secure the agreement of the other Welsh rulers to his succession plans. It was also a centre for the preservation and transmission of native Welsh culture. One of the questions raised in this article is whether it was despite – or perhaps because of – this pre-eminence in Welsh affairs that it was also the scene of dispute on at least three occasions in a period of just over one hundred years.

A brief summary of these three episodes will demonstrate their seriousness. In the months, perhaps even years, leading up to July 1346, Abbot Llywelyn Fychan of Strata Florida complained that his election was being challenged by a monk of that house named Clement ap Rhysart and others of his brethren. Clement and his associates, so Llywelyn claimed, had carried off the goods of the house and impeded his own government of the

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<sup>2</sup> David Austin, 'The archaeology of monasteries in Wales', in Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (ed.), *Monastic Wales: New Approaches* (Cardiff, 2013), pp. 3–20 (p. 12), and, in the same collection, Jemma Bezant, 'The medieval grants to Strata Florida Abbey: mapping the agency of lordship', pp. 73–87. See also Jemma Bezant, 'Revising the monastic 'grange': problems at the edge of the Cistercian world', *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, 3 (2014), 51–70.

abbey. His allegations were part of a dispute that is first mentioned in the records of the Cistercian General Chapter in 1344 and lasted at least until the autumn of 1347. On the second occasion – as we shall see the year is problematic – another abbot of Strata Florida, this one named John (Johan), claimed that the abbot of his daughter house at Aberconwy, John (Johan) ap Rhys (Rees), had come to Strata Florida with a troop of armed men and archers, had occupied it for forty days, prevented the performance of divine office, driven off the cattle, seized the goods of the house, and commandeered the common seal. As if that were not enough, he had imprisoned some of the monks. The third episode culminated on 30 May 1444 when William Morys, described as former abbot of Strata Florida, is recorded as having been forced to resign after he had incurred the enmity of ‘powerful men’. One of these appears to have been John ap Rhys who, as abbot of another Welsh Cistercian house, Cymer near Dolgellau, had helped to install William Morys as abbot, probably in 1440 or 1441. John ap Rhys appears to have resigned from Cymer with the express intention of displacing William Morys and making himself abbot of Strata Florida, and when he failed, he returned to Cymer, and forcibly ejected the man who had been elected in his stead, John Cobbe.

This article considers the evidence for these episodes together and in detail, and offers an assessment of their significance, drawing on a range of documentary sources: records generated both by the General Chapter of the Cistercian Order and the abbey of Strata Florida itself; petitions to the English Crown and the responses these elicited; government records and episcopal registers. It highlights the importance of petitions from the White Monks in Wales to the English king both in terms of their content and in the way in which this legal device was utilized by the Welsh Cistercians. It argues that the second incident, the ‘invasion’ of Strata Florida by the abbot of Aberconwy, occurred over forty

years earlier than has previously been thought, and places these three incidents within their political and social contexts. It is argued that they inform our understanding of the operation of the Cistercian abbeys of *Pura Wallia* in the period after the Edwardian Conquest and the Statute of Rhuddlan, and of their relationships with both the English Crown and the Cistercian Order.

## **The Problem**

In his wide-ranging book *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England* Martin Heale devotes a short section to ‘disputed elections’ and notes that there might have been a range of reasons for such conflicts. First, he identifies a tendency for English monasteries to resist the election of a superior from another house or one foisted on them by an external authority such as a bishop, or, in the case of the Cistercians, the General Chapter. Further, he draws attention to examples of contests between internal candidates, or between factions within the community. However, he considers the most common cause of dissent to have arisen either from external interference or from the attempts of a superior who had been deposed to recover his office.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the reason, he rightly notes that there ‘is little doubt that a disputed abbatial election was one of the most harmful and destabilizing occurrences that could befall a monastic community’.<sup>4</sup> The heads of Welsh monasteries are ripe for the kind of historical investigation that Heale has brought to bear so effectively for communities in England, and the present article is part of a broader

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Heale, *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 34–7.

<sup>4</sup> Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, p. 36.

study of the abbots and priors of medieval Wales.<sup>5</sup> In the light of Heale's analysis of the likely causes of abbatial disputes, one of the questions addressed here is whether it is possible to discover the nature of these rivalries over Strata Florida. Were they a product of outside interference or internal dissension, or were they related to the external social and political contexts in which they occurred?

### **The Context: From *Pura Wallia* to the Principality**

The disputed elections that are the subject of this paper took place in the one and a half centuries or so after the Edwardian Conquest of Gwynedd, whose rulers were the most powerful of the thirteenth-century dynasties of *Pura Wallia*, that is, those areas of Wales that had remained under native control in the face of Anglo-Norman encroachment. In other words, the political context of these disputes was the process of adaptation of those monastic houses located within former native lordships to English administrative and legal systems as established by the Statute of Rhuddlan (1284).<sup>6</sup> As is clear from the data relating to heads of religious houses meticulously collected by David Smith and others, compiling a

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<sup>5</sup> This article is undertaken within the AHRC funded project 'The sacred landscapes of medieval monasteries: an interdisciplinary study of meaning embedded in space' (AH/R005842/1). It is also part of the 'Monastic Wales' project ([www.monasticwales.org](http://www.monasticwales.org)) and also I should like to thank Dr Karen Stöber for her helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> The Cistercian houses that had been founded by native Welsh rulers (as opposed to marcher lords) or acquired them as their patrons were: Aberconwy (transferred to Maenan in 1284 but still known as Conwy), Valle Crucis, Strata Marcella, Cymer, Cwmhir, Strata Florida, and Whitland, and the nunneries of Llanllŷr and Llanllugan.

full list of heads of individual monasteries is in most cases difficult if not impossible.<sup>7</sup> However, it seems that – in contrast to the treatment of Anglo-Saxon abbots in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066 – there was no immediate or wholesale removal of Welsh abbots after 1284. At Abbey Cwmhir there is no reason to suspect that Abbot Cadwgan who occurs in 1276, 1279 and 1281 was not the same Cadwgan who was still there in 1297.<sup>8</sup> Abbot Llywelyn of Cymer last occurs in 1281 and by 1284 had been succeeded by another Welshman, Cadwgan.<sup>9</sup> At Strata Florida Abbot Anian held office on both sides of the Conquest, and is most likely the man of that name who went on to be archdeacon of Anglesey and bishop of Bangor.<sup>10</sup> Abbot Maredudd (Maredwt) of Aberconwy who occurs in 1278 and 1281 had by 1284 been replaced by the man Smith calls ‘David’. This highlights an issue when dealing with Welsh names, for the Latin ‘Dauid’ could just as easily be translated not as David but as Dafydd.<sup>11</sup> There is nothing to indicate that Abbot ‘David’ was an

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<sup>7</sup> David Knowles, C. N. L. Brooke, and Vera C. M. London (ed.), *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales, I, 940–1216*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2001); David M. Smith and Vera C. M. London (ed.), *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales, II, 1216–1377* (Cambridge, 2001); David M. Smith (ed.), *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales, III, 1377–1540* (Cambridge, 2008). Any work on the superiors of monastic houses must acknowledge the seminal nature of these works of reference.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, p. 258. Smith suggests that as Cadwgan may be the unnamed abbot described as ‘newly elected’ in December 1279 there may have been two abbots of this name.

<sup>9</sup> Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, p. 312. It is noteworthy, however, that the *Brut y Tysysogion* calls Anian (Einion) ‘Sais’, the Englishman: see below, note 18.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, p. 275. See J. Goronwy Edwards (ed.), *Littere Wallie Preserved in Liber A in the Public Record Office* (Cardiff, 1940), nos 71, 187 (pp. 47, 95); *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office* (London, 1902–, afterwards *Cal. Cl. R.*), 1279–88, pp.

Englishman, and the sequence of abbots of Aberconwy both before and after 1284 suggests a succession of Welshmen. For some time to come we can see an ethnic continuity among those who ruled the Cistercian houses of *Pura Wallia*.

More radical change, which had potential to impact on the headship of the monasteries of *Pura Wallia*, can be seen in the transfer of lay patronage. Patronal rights over Valle Crucis and Strata Marcella, the dynastic abbeys of northern and southern Powys respectively, passed to the new lords established in these areas by the king.<sup>12</sup> The patronage of abbeys in what came to be the Principality of Wales passed, almost unspoken, into the hands of the English Crown. Certainly, as petitioners to the Crown in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Welsh abbots are likely to describe their abbeys as of the patronage of the king and the foundation of his ancestors. Around 1320, for instance, the abbot of Whitland wrote 'to his lord and founder, the king of England' ('a soun seigneur & foundour le rey Dengleterre') describing himself, using a common formula, as 'his chaplain, the abbot of Whitland in Wales' ('soun chapeleyn labbe de la Blaunchelande en Gales').<sup>13</sup> John Cobbe addressed the king as 'yur chapelein and orator ... abbot of youre house of Kymmer'.<sup>14</sup>

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407–8; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office* (London, 1891–, afterwards *Cal. Pat. R.*), 1343–45, p. 231.

<sup>12</sup> Max Lieberman, *The Medieval March of Wales: the Creation and Perception of a Frontier, 1066–1283* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 220; David Stephenson, *Medieval Powys: Kingdom, Principality and Lordships, 1132–1293* (Woodbridge, 2016), pp. 174–5. For some of the effects of this change of patronage at Strata Marcella see Janet Burton, 'Tensions in a border abbey', forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> London, The National Archives (hereafter TNA) SC 8/82/4057; see also SC 8/4/165 and SC 8/34/1681.

<sup>14</sup> TNA SC 8/336/15874; see also SC 8/87/4334, 4335, 4336, discussed below. For the range of 'rhetorical strategies' employed by English religious houses in addressing the Crown, see Gwilym Dodd and Alison

At the time of Edward I's successful subjugation of native Wales, the hereditary patron of Strata Florida was Rhys ap Maredudd of Dinefwr. Rhys rebelled in 1287 and was executed in 1292; other members of the family lost their lives for revolt, and the remnant of the dynasty of Strata Florida's founder, Rhys ap Gruffudd of Deheubarth, dwindled in status.<sup>15</sup> Despite passing into royal patronage Strata Florida did not lightly shed its loyalties to its native Welsh heritage. This had coloured its history throughout the thirteenth century. Part of a crippling fine of 1200 marks (£800) imposed by King John was still a millstone round the abbey's neck thirty years later.<sup>16</sup> Suspected collusion with Llywelyn ap Gruffudd may have been the cause of some destruction at the house, which in 1284 received compensation of

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K. McHardy (ed.), *Petitions to the Crown from English Religious Houses c. 1272–c. 1485*, Canterbury and York Society, 100 (2010), pp. xvi–xix.

<sup>15</sup> John Davies, *A History of Wales* (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 164–5; R. A. Griffiths, 'The revolt of Rhys ap Meredith 1287–88', *ante*, 3, 2 (1966), 121–4.

<sup>16</sup> The fine is usually interpreted as a commutation of King John's 1212 order for the destruction of Strata Florida because it supported his enemies. However, it had already been incurred by 1211: 'Abbas de Stratflur r. c. de M et CC m. reddendas ad terminos in carta ipsius abbatis. In thes. Nichil': Doris M. Stenton (ed.), *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Thirteenth Year of the Reign of King John, Michaelmas 1211* (London, 1953), p. 235 ; 'Abbas de Straffur DCC m. sicut continetur in rotulo precedenti': Patricia M. Barnes (ed.), *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Fourteenth Year of the Reign of King John, Michaelmas 1212* (London, 1955), p. 160. The same sum was owed in 1214: Patricia M. Barnes (ed.), *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Sixteenth Year of the Reign of King John, Michaelmas 1214* (London, 1962), p. 136. Part of the fine had still not been paid by 1253 ('Sciatis quod de ccc marcis, que nobis restant reddende de fine dcc marcarum quem abbas de Strata Florida fecit nobiscum pro debitis suis, idem abbas per preceptum nostrum liberavit Roberto Waler', constabulario nostro de Cardigan, cclx. marcas ad operationes nostras ejusdem castri, et xl marcas eidem abbati perdonavimus'): *Cal. Cl. R. 1251–1253*, p. 398.



£78 for war damage,<sup>17</sup> and around the same time fire devastated the church.<sup>18</sup> The monks were implicated in the uprising, in 1294–5, of Madog ap Llywelyn and his associates who included Maelgwn ap Rhys Fychan, descendant of the Lord Rhys.<sup>19</sup> On 13 March 1300 the monks were given licence to rebuild on the former site of their abbey which, it was alleged, had been burned against the king's will in the rebellion five years earlier, but there were conditions: the woods and ways about them were to be cut down and repaired as these might be a source of danger.<sup>20</sup> It is against this background of negotiation between accommodation of and opposition to the English settlement of *Pura Wallia*, and the removal of native Welsh patrons, that these abbatial conflicts are to be set.

### **Destabilization in the 1340s: Llywelyn Fychan and Clement ap Rhysiart**

How far, by the 1340s, the abbey had stabilized after the Edwardian Conquest and subsequent rebellions, is not altogether clear. There is only one named abbot between Anian Sais (who succeeded in 1280 and occurs in 1294) and Maredudd (1336, 1338) and that is John (*Johannes*), who in 1299, along with the abbot of Whitland and others, was

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<sup>17</sup> 'pro dampnis et oppressionibus nostre domui tempore gwerre': *Littere Wallie*, nos 149, 181 (pp. 80–1, 90–1).

<sup>18</sup> T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogion or the Chronicle of the Princes: Red Book of Hergest Version* (Cardiff, 1955), pp. 268–9, records that in 1280 'died Phylip Goch, the thirteenth abbot of Strata Florida. And after him none other than Einion Sais became abbot. And in his time the monastery was burnt.'

<sup>19</sup> J. Griffiths, 'The revolt of Madog ap Llywelyn 1294/5', *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society*, 16 (1955), 12–24.

<sup>20</sup> *Cal. Pat. R. 1292–1301*, p. 499.

party to an inquisition.<sup>21</sup> There is then a long gap in the recorded abbots of the house until October 1336 when Abbot Maredudd (Meredith) received royal confirmation of the charters of his abbey.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, in a writ dated 1 October 1338, the bishop of St Davids sought royal aid in the excommunication of the abbot of Strata Florida, here named as Maredudd Bool, for non-payment of the biennial tithe granted to the king.<sup>23</sup> The next recorded incident relating to the abbot of Strata Florida comes in the records of the Cistercian General Chapter for 1344, mentioned above, which states that in a previous chapter (*capitulum super praeterito*) the abbots of Beaulieu (Hampshire) and Thame near Oxford had been delegated to investigate the election of the head of Strata Florida.<sup>24</sup> There is, however, no record of this commission in surviving previous chapter records. This is the first reference to the matter, and all that can be said is that the complaint went back to 1343 but possibly earlier. The two delegated abbots were to investigate an alleged

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<sup>21</sup> Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, p. 312, citing W. Rees (ed.), *Calendar of Ancient Petitions relating to Wales* (Cardiff, 1975), p. 368. For this inquisition see TNA C/145/58/29. Smith and London, as well as Rees, render the abbot's name as 'John'. It is not clear, however, whether *Johannes* was the Latin form of an English or Welsh name.

<sup>22</sup> *Calendar of the Charter Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 6 vols (London, 1903–27), 1327–41, pp. 382–86 (p. 382); *Cal. Pat. R. 1377–81*, p. 551 (included in an inspeximus of 20 October 1380 to Abbot Llywelyn Fychan).

<sup>23</sup> TNA C 85/167/22. C85: signification of excommunication, that is, a writ informing the king that a person had remained excommunicate for forty days and requesting the assistance of the secular arm under the writ 'de excommunicato capiendo'; C 85/167: Welsh dioceses of Bangor, St Asaph, Llandaff, St Davids. For discussion of the procedure see F. Donald Logan, *Runaway Religious in Medieval England, c. 1240–1540* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 104–11.

<sup>24</sup> J.-M. Canivez, ed., *Statuta Capitulum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis ab Anno 1116 ad Annum 1786*, 8 vols (Louvain, 1933–41), III, 494 (1344/65).

unacceptable irregularity (*error intolerabilis*) in the election of Llywelyn Fychan, which had been conducted (*celebratum*) by the abbot of Whitland, father abbot of Strata Florida. If satisfied that the election was canonical they were to confirm it. The two abbots must have judged it to have been valid, for the chapter of 1344 duly ratified their reconfirmation of the election. No other party is mentioned by name, but what is clear is that the General Chapter ruling did not end the controversy, and, as outlined briefly above, by 1346 Clement ap Rhysiart, monk of Strata Florida, now for the first time named as Llywelyn's rival for the abbacy, continued to oppose the abbot recognised by the General Chapter.

What is striking about subsequent events is the wide range of parties to which representation was clearly made. Eight or nine months after the ratification of Llywelyn's election by the General Chapter, the case appeared in the register of the bishop of Hereford: on 1 June 1345 Bishop John Trilleck recited a bull of Pope Clement VI (1 March 1345) which he had received, the contents of which are as follows.<sup>25</sup> Clement Apricard had complained to the pope that although he had been canonically appointed to the rule of Strata Florida, which was then vacant, and had exercised that rule faithfully and according to custom, Llywelyn Fychan, monk of the monastery, had seized it (*spoliavit*) violently – or caused it to be seized – and intruded himself into the headship of the house. Clement

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<sup>25</sup> J. H. Parry (ed.), *Registrum Johannis de Trillek, Episcopi Herefordensis, AD MCCCXLIV–MCCCLXI*, Cantilupe Society (1910) and Canterbury and York Society, 8 (1912), p. 52: 'Conquestus est nobis dilectus filius Clemens Apricard, abbas monasterii de Strata Florida, ordinis Cisterciensis, Menevensis diocesis, quod licet ipse ad regimen ipsius monasterii tunc vacantis canonice assumptus fuerit et regimen ipsum gessisset et gereret fideliter et solerter, quidam Leulynus Vaughan, monachus dicti monasterii, nullum pretendens electionis postulatum seu provisionis titulum, associat se quibusdam suis in hac parte complicitibus, dictum Clementem regimine dicti monasterii per violentiam spoliavit spoliative mandavit et fecit, seque intrusit in regimine monasterii prelibati'.

sought restoration to his post, and the remainder of the papal mandate delegated Bishop John, along with two canons of Hereford, to investigate. The bishop appointed Thomas Hackeluit to conduct the enquiry, but the faculty was revoked – as indeed it was for the two men subsequently appointed to take his place.<sup>26</sup> Two years later the matter was still unresolved. In April–May 1347 the bishop and two canons of Hereford were ordered by the dean of St Mary Arches in London, acting for the official of the archbishop of Canterbury, to send a record of their progress to the Court of Arches, to which the case had devolved on appeal by Llywelyn and with the consent of Clement; Bishop Trilleck's response was that all the documentation relating to the appeal had been sent to London where it was with Clement's counsel.<sup>27</sup> Thus, whereas Llywelyn had sought confirmation by the General Chapter, his rival took the initiative in another way and turned to the pope, who in turn delegated to the bishop of Hereford, and thence – on appeal by Llywelyn – to the Court of Arches, that is, the court of the archbishop of Canterbury acting as metropolitan.

Resolution of the case cannot have been helped by the intervention of yet another party. On 18 July 1346 Edward, Prince of Wales (the Black Prince), sent a mandate to Sir Thomas de Bradeston, his justice of South Wales, informing him of the complaint of Llywelyn, abbot of Strata Florida, that Clement ap Richart (Rhysiart) and other monks of his assembly ('de sa couyne') had carried the chalices, vestments, and other goods and chattels from the house, which the prince had taken under his special protection. Clement, however,

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<sup>26</sup> *Register Trillek*, pp. 37 (13 May 1346), 62 (25 April 1346).

<sup>27</sup> *Register Trillek*, pp. 112–3. As the court of the archbishop of Canterbury acting as metropolitan, the Court of Arches was England's principal ecclesiastical court; its medieval records, held at the church of St Mary Le Bow, were destroyed in the Great Fire of London (1666). See F. Donald Logan (ed.), *The Medieval Court of Arches*, Canterbury and York Society, 95 (2005), pp. xiii–xv.

seems to have sought the Prince's ear 'by a hint made to us, to acquire our letters allowing him to have sustenance in the said house for himself and the said monks, without making restitution for the goods and chattels mentioned above' ('par une suggestione a nous faite eit purchace noz lettres dauoir sa sustenance en la dite meison pour lui et lez ditz moignes saunz faire restitucion des biens et chatels deuaunt ditz'). This was to the great detriment ('grande destruccion') of the abbey. The Prince therefore ordered the justice not to readmit Clement until he had offered compensation and made proper obedience to the abbot as required by the rule of their Order.<sup>28</sup>

On 8 February the following year – so over six months later – the Prince wrote again to the justice having learnt that the case was proceeding through 'la court cristiene' – clearly a reference to the Court of Arches. It is now referred to as a dispute between Llywelyn 'abbe de Stratflour' and Clement 'who also says he is abbot of the same place' ('qi de dit aussint estre abbe de mesme le lieu'), a situation resulting in the great impoverishment of the house which is on the point of destruction. This is 'by reason of certain persons who are interfering to support the party who does not have right in this matter' ('par enchainon des ascuns qi se meddlent en mayntenance de la partie qe nad droit a ce gest dicte').<sup>29</sup> The Prince expressed his desire that the abbey and its possessions be safeguarded, particularly as the house was of his patronage ('de nostre auouwere'). The Justice was ordered not to tolerate such interference any longer, nor to allow 'any intrusion or force to be made concerning the possession of the said house in hindrance of him who has the rule thereof' ('nule intrusion ne force estre mys as possessions de la dite maison en empechement de

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<sup>28</sup> TNA E 36/144, fol.1cv; calendared in *The Register of Edward the Black Prince Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 4 vols (London, 1930–33), I, 2.

<sup>29</sup> TNA E 36/144, fol. 36v: calendared in *Reg. Black Prince*, I, 44.

celui qi ad la gouvernement dyceles’) – Llywelyn Fychan – until the dispute be settled in the court.<sup>30</sup>

A third letter is dated 25 October 1347. Llywelyn ‘our beloved in God’ (‘nostre cher en dieu’) had complained once more that the lands, rents, and possessions of the abbey had been seized from him and the abbey occupied by Clement ap Rhysart and others, and once again asked the Prince’s aid in obtaining restitution of the premises and goods. The Prince again speaks here of his obligation to support the abbey: ‘for this reason, that the house was founded by our predecessors and is of our patronage and we are obliged to support and sustain it, to the end that it might be revived, and that divine service and other works of charity, established there of old, may be sustained and supported’ (‘par cause qe le est de la fundacion de noz deuantiers et de nostre auoweson sumes tenuz de aider et mayntener a fin que le feust releuee et deuin service et autres oeures de charite illeoques auncienement establiz feussent mayntenuz et sustenz’).<sup>31</sup> This is a clear statement that the abbey, founded by the Lord Rhys ap Gruffudd of Deheubarth and in the patronage of his successors, had effectively passed in the wake of the decline of the house of Dinefwr into the hands of the English Crown, more specifically the English-designated Prince of Wales.

Whether this struggle for the control of the headship of Strata Florida was a product of the 1340s or had longer roots, is impossible to tell. If it arose after the excommunication of Maredudd Bool then it went back to 1338. Further, it is worth considering it in the

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<sup>30</sup> TNA E 36/144, fol. 36v: calendared in *Reg. Black Prince*, I, 44.

<sup>31</sup> TNA E 36/144, fol. 121v: calendared in *Reg. Black Prince*, I, 132. Dodd and McHardy note that as petitioners, monastic houses often ‘played the patronage card’ by claiming to be of royal foundation, and also to stress, as here, the need for continuation of divine service: *Petitions to the Crown*, pp. xix–xx, xxv.

context of recorded troubles in the 1320s and 1330s and involving the Clement family, which had been in West Wales since the early days of the Edwardian Conquest.<sup>32</sup> By late 1284 Geoffrey Clement the elder had been appointed steward to the king's justiciar, and he was also granted custody of Llanbadarn castle, which he held at the time of his death in the early stages of the uprising of 1294/5.<sup>33</sup> He was succeeded by his son, another Geoffrey, although not until he came of age in 1313.<sup>34</sup> The younger Geoffrey was succeeded by his brother Robert (d. 1351) in 1319.<sup>35</sup> It was this last-named member of the family whose interests appear to have conflicted with, or impacted upon, those of Strata Florida. It was hard on his succession (in 1320) that an unnamed abbot requested royal confirmation of the abbey charters.<sup>36</sup> The coincidence of the date suggests that there may have been more

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<sup>32</sup> For brief discussion of the family see John Wiles, 'Later medieval lordly seats in Cardiganshire: a re-examination of Castell Gwallter (Llandre) and Caer Penrhos (Llanrhystud)', *Ceredigion*, 18 (2017), 39–73 (pp. 59–61).

<sup>33</sup> Wiles, 'Lordly seats', pp. 59–61.

<sup>34</sup> Writ to Roger de Mortimer to take proof of age, 30 March 1313, and proof of age of Geoffrey son of Geoffrey Clement who is in the wardship of Margery his mother by the late king's commission, Thursday before the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary 7 Edward II [6 September 1313]. Geoffrey the younger was said to have been 22 years of age on the previous feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, V (1908), no. 418, p. 239.

<sup>35</sup> Writ to Roger Mortimer of Chirk, justiciar of Wales, 20 January, and inquisition, 24 February 12 Edward II [1319], recording that the commote of Pennardd and a moiety of the commote of Geneu'r Glyn were held in chief and that Robert Clement, aged 25 and more, was next heir of his brother: *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, VI (1910), no. 149, p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> TNA SC 8/87/4334, a request for the king as lord and founder, from his chaplain the abbot of Strata Florida, to confirm his charters: 'Prie a son seigneur et fundur Rey Dengleterre son chapeleyn le abbee de Strattefluyr en Galees qu'il veoyle par charite confermer ceos chartes...'; *Cal. Ancient Petitions*

behind his request than a routine confirmation. It was a decade later, probably in 1331 and in connection with a complaint raised against him, that Robert Clement petitioned the king for a copy of the letters patent of Edward I granting the commote of Pennardd (in which Strata Florida lay) to his father, Geoffrey Clement.<sup>37</sup> The occasion may have been the seizure, by Roger Mortimer – presumably acting during Edward III’s minority – of the Clement lands in Penardd into the king’s hand on a false suggestion concerning Elene, verch Meredydd Vauwhan, or Fychan.<sup>38</sup> Nothing more is said of this ‘false suggestion’ but in another petition it becomes clear that Elene was the daughter and heir of Gwenllian verch Mereduk from whom she inherited land in Gwynfil in Pennardd.<sup>39</sup> At the same date there was clearly conflict between Robert Clement and the monks, for in 1331 the (unnamed) abbot petitioned the king for a writ to prevent Robert Clement from distraining the monks to answer in his court, whereas they and their people had always been impleaded at the king’s court at Llanbadarn.<sup>40</sup> A similar petition was made in 1334 – the abbot perhaps redoubled his efforts because in 1332 Robert Clement had obtained confirmation of his lands and rights in Gwynfil in the commote of Pennardd against Elene vergh Wenthlina

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*Wales*, pp. 128–9; *Cal. Pat. R. 1317–21*, pp. 527–8, was probably issued in response to this petition. See also TNA SC 8/87/4336, 4337.

<sup>37</sup> TNA SC 8/98/4851.

<sup>38</sup> TNA SC 8/98/4852. For a petition of Elene see TNA SC 8/98/4853.

<sup>39</sup> See TNA SC 8/49/2410, an undated petition in which Gwenllian, daughter of Meredith, requests that as she is old and feeble she may be allowed to grant the land she holds in Cardiganshire to her two daughters, and if it is the king’s wish that the land not be divided, she might grant it to whichever of the two she wishes. See also TNA SC 8/73/3611.

<sup>40</sup> TNA SC 8/240/11951 (undated but assigned the date range 1331–32).



vergh Meredith ap Oweyn.<sup>41</sup> It was in this context that Abbot Maredudd sought confirmation of the abbey charters in 1336, and the confirmation stated that the monks were to answer pleas before the court in Llanbadarn.<sup>42</sup> Clearly there were local troubles from 1320 to the early to mid-1330s. Moreover, Abbot Maredudd was excommunicated in 1338. How long the abbey was then vacant is not known – there is no recorded abbot between 1338 and the disputed election which had begun at least by September 1343. Was the disputed election a product of these local circumstances? Might there have been a connection between the Clement family and Clement ap Rhysiart who fought so hard for the headship of Strata Florida? Even if not, it is plausible to see the contested election in the context of the uneasy relationship between the abbey and the Clement lords of Pennardd.

Abbot Llywelyn Fychan and the Clement family, even if they were of different ethnic origins, moved in the same circles: a poetic reference suggests that we may be able to locate Abbot Llywelyn Fychan in the class of *uchelwyr*, the social and political elite. Llywelyn Goch ap Meurig Hen, the poet who hailed from Meirionydd, wrote a poem praising Abbot Llywelyn Fychan and giving thanks for his recovery from illness. Part of the poem reads:

Llywelyn wiwbarch, lluniaidd abad,  
Fychan, gŵr difan Garwy dyfiad,  
Llin, llyw cynefin, llew cynifiad,

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<sup>41</sup> TNA SC 8/98/4851; see also *Cal. Cl. R. 1330–1333*, p. 486; *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous (Chancery)*, II (1916), no. 1292 (p. 316).

<sup>42</sup> *Calendar of Charter Rolls 1327–41*, pp. 382–86.

Llywelyn arall, dedwyddgall dad.<sup>43</sup>

(The venerable Llywelyn Fychan, handsome abbot, a big man of the stature of Garwy, ruler of a region, lion in battle, of the line of another Llywelyn, wise happy father.)<sup>44</sup>

Dafydd Johnston notes that this is probably the earliest surviving Welsh poem relating to an abbot,<sup>45</sup> and Strata Florida under Abbot Llywelyn Fychan was clearly on the circuit through Wales of another bard as he travelled in search of patronage. This was Iolo Goch, who wrote a heartfelt elegy for Llywelyn Fychan ap Meurig Hen.<sup>46</sup> As Daniel Huws has shown, these two poets are the earliest known to have received the patronage of a Cistercian abbot – Llywelyn Fychan – as the heads of Cistercian abbeys took over this role from the remnants of the *uchelwyr*.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Dafydd Johnston, ed., *Gwaith Llywelyn Goch ap Meurig Hen* (Aberystwyth, 1998), poem 2, pp. 18–19: ‘I ddiolch i Dduw am arbed bywyd Llywelyn Fychan ap Llywelyn, Abad Ystrad-fflur’, lines 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> I am most grateful to Professor Dafydd Johnson of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies for supplying me with this translation. I am also grateful to Professor Jane Cartwright for the information that ‘Garwy’ refers to the legendary figure of Garwy Hir.

<sup>45</sup> D. Johnston, ‘Monastic patronage of Welsh poetry’, in ed. Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (ed.), *Monastic Wales: New Approaches* (Cardiff, 2013), pp. 177–90 (p. 178).

<sup>46</sup> D. R. Johnston, ed., *Gwaith Iolo Goch* (Cardiff, 1988), p. xi.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* (Aberystwyth, 2000), pp. 217–18. Huws deems it unlikely (*ibid.*, pp. 220–21, note) that Llywelyn Fychan, abbot of Strata Florida, was the same Llywelyn Fychan, described by Loomis as ‘a soldier and patron of poetry’ from the Aeron valley, who was the subject of an elegy written by Dafydd ap Gwilym which survives in *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (The White Book of Rhydderch). See *Dafydd ap Gwilym, The Poems*, trans. R. M. Loomis (Binghamton, 1982), poem 17, pp. 78–9, and Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 250.

There is, accordingly, plausible contextual evidence to suggest that the election of the 1340s, disputed between two internal factions that supported rival monks for the headship of Strata Florida, both of whom appealed to external authorities, secular and ecclesiastical, for support, might have been rooted in rivalries among local political and social elites. However, before we turn to the second recorded dispute, it is worth placing the conflict of authority in the 1340s on the wider canvass of Welsh events. Between 1327 (the death of Edward II) and 1330 the government of Wales had largely been in the control of Roger Mortimer of Wigmore. In 1330 the minority of Edward III came to an end, and that year also saw the birth of his eldest son, Edward, and the execution of Mortimer. In 1343 the younger Edward, the 'Black Prince', was invested with the Principality, and his advisers, in the words of John Lloyd, 'sought to recreate the supremacy once enjoyed by Roger Mortimer'.<sup>48</sup> The reaction to the renewed flexing of English muscles was a series of revolts and attacks on princely officials – in Rhuddlan in 1344 and Carmarthen in 1345, as well as in Gwynedd, for instance.<sup>49</sup> Such may have provided the occasion for the fierce and prolonged struggle for the headship of the premier Cistercian abbey of mid Wales; and, as we have seen, it is clear that both parties sought the support of the English Prince of Wales who, moreover, took a keen interest in the progress and outcome of the episode.

### **'Father' and 'Son': Abbots John and John ap Rhys**

Our starting point – and indeed the only documentary evidence – for the second conflict is an undated petition to the English king from Abbot John (Johan) of Strata Florida. Such

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<sup>48</sup> Lloyd, *History of Wales*, p. 183.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

petitions, which came to be used routinely by Welsh monasteries, acquired a common form, 'a well-defined set of linguistic and rhetorical conventions, and they followed a standard type of structure'.<sup>50</sup> They were designed to appeal to the sympathies of the king, to obtain justice against perceived injuries, or to secure the king's favour.<sup>51</sup> In this instance Abbot Johan described his monastery as being of the foundation of the ancestors of the king and of his patronage ('de la fundacioun les progenitours nostre dit seignur le roi et de son patronage').<sup>52</sup> His complaint was against John (Johan) ap Rhys [Rees], abbot of Conway (Aberconwy) in North Wales, one of two daughter houses of Strata Florida.<sup>53</sup> John ap Rhys, it is alleged, had come to Strata Florida with a great host of armed men and archers and had held the abbey by force for forty days. This was in mid Lent in the sixth year of the king's reign. Johan ap Rhys and his men had then committed the atrocities described above, theft of goods and animals – the latter to the value of 2000 marks – imprisonment, and misuse of the abbey seal. The petitioners claimed that all this has been to 'the great destruction and prejudice of the said house and the said suppliants' ('grand anyentisement & destruccioun de la dicte meason & les ditz suppliantz'), and begged for royal aid as an act of charity because they are unable to obtain redress under the common law of England, or indeed under the laws and customs of Wales, since the abbot of Aberconwy in North Wales had no

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<sup>50</sup> Dodd and McHardy, *Petitions to the Crown*, p. xvii.

<sup>51</sup> Dodd and McHardy, *Petitions to the Crown*, p. xiii.

<sup>52</sup> See above, p. 00.

<sup>53</sup> TNA SC 8/139/6928; *Cal. Ancient Petitions Wales*, p. 235. Rees does not include the name of the abbot of Strata Florida, 'Iohan', in his calendar. Aberconwy was the dynastic abbey of the rulers of Gwynedd, and after the defeat and death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (1282) Edward I relocated the abbey to Maenan. It retained its former name. Various forms of the name of the abbot of Aberconwy are used in the documents; the spelling 'John ap Rhys' is used here.

possessions in South Wales with which the monks of Strata Florida might be recompensed. No reason is given for John ap Rhys's invasion of Strata Florida, nor of what he hoped to achieve.

There is no date on the document, which has sustained damage on its top right-hand corner, resulting in some loss of text. Yet, the date is critical to understanding the context. The only clue is the reference to Lent in the king's sixth year. In his *Calendar of Ancient Petitions* William Rees dated it to 1442–3, on the grounds of the record, in the patent rolls for 26 March 1442 and 18 March 1443, of damage sustained by the abbey in the course of a disputed election.<sup>54</sup> Rees also noted the occurrence of John ap Rhys in another petition, which he also dated to 1442 to 1443, relating to Strata Florida in which he is described as abbot of Cymer.<sup>55</sup> However, these dates fall not in the sixth but in the twentieth and twenty first years of the king, Henry VI, which would mean a gap of some fifteen years between the alleged offence and the second petition. It was for this reason that David Smith, paying rather more attention than did Rees to the date buried in the text, suggested that the first petition belonged to c. 1428, the sixth year of Henry VI, which ran from 1 September 1427 to 31 August 1428.<sup>56</sup> Easter Day 1428 fell on 4 April, so 'mid Lent' would have been in the middle of March. This is Abbot John's only occurrence in Smith's list of abbots of Strata Florida at around this time. At Aberconwy, Smith places John ap Rhys after Abbot Hywel ap Gwilym (whose last documented occurrence comes in 1415) and before David (sic) who occurs in January 1431.<sup>57</sup> As with Abbot John at Strata Florida, this is John ap Rhys's only

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<sup>54</sup> *Cal. Ancient Petitions Wales*, p. 235. See below.

<sup>55</sup> *Cal. Ancient Petitions Wales*, p. 503. Cymer, near Machynlleth, was the only daughter house of Cwmhir.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, pp. 284, 334.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, p. 284.

appearance in the list of abbots of Aberconwy, and Smith's sole reference is to the petition which he dates c. 1428. Like Rees, Smith draws attention to the later occurrence of John ap Rhys as abbot of Cymer, asking 'was he indeed the later abbot of Cymmer [sic] and Strata Florida?'. In his monograph on Aberconwy, Rhys Hays also saw the significance of the regnal year and like Smith, suggested 1428 for the petition.<sup>58</sup> If we follow this, and take 1428 as the year in which Abbot John ap Rhys of Aberconwy made his alleged attack on Strata Florida, and we further assume that the same man launched a second attack, this time with an eye to making himself abbot, in 1442–3, then his interest in and ambition for the headship of Strata Florida stretched over a fifteen year period.<sup>59</sup> Another possibility was that there were two abbots named John ap Rhys, one of Aberconwy and the other of Cymer.<sup>60</sup>

There is however, a third explanation: that is that the petition belongs to the sixth year not of Henry VI, but of another king: Henry V, Henry IV, or Richard II. Let us examine these possibilities one by one. The sixth year of Henry V ran from 18 March 1418 to 20 March 1419, the sixth year of Henry IV from 30 September 1404 to 29 September 1405, and the sixth year of Richard II from 22 June 1382 to 21 June 1383. We are thus looking at

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<sup>58</sup> Rhys W. Hays, *The Abbey of Aberconway 1186–1537* (Cardiff, 1963), pp. 132–3. This date is not questioned by David M. Robinson, *The Cistercians in Wales: Architecture and Archaeology 1130–1540* (London, 2006), p. 269.

<sup>59</sup> As suggested by Hays, *Abbey of Aberconway*, p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> There was also a John ap Rhys who in 1398 was assigned the archdeaconry of Anglesey by papal mandate: Hays, *Abbey of Aberconway*, p. 129. It is by no means unlikely that there were two abbots named John ap Rhys. The abbots of Whitland in the fifteenth century include Dafydd ap Rhys, Maurice John ap Rhys and Thomas ap Rhys: Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, p. 350.

possible dates for the alleged incident of early March 1418 or mid to late March 1419, late March 1405, or late February or early March 1383.<sup>61</sup>

What we know in general terms about the context of the episode would seem to offer support for the possible dates in the reigns of Henry V and Henry IV, 1405, 1418 or 1419. The abbey sustained considerable damage in the campaigns of Owain Glyn Dŵr in 1401. It was briefly occupied by an English garrison in that year and taken into royal custody in 1402. It was occupied again by the English in 1407 and once more in 1415.<sup>62</sup> To describe these years as unstable would be to understate the case. As it stands, however, we have no record of Abbot John at Strata Florida or John ap Rhys at Aberconwy in any of these years. It is suggested below that Abbot Reso of Strata Florida, who occurs in 1416 may be the same man as Rhys, who is recorded abbot in the 1430s; and at Aberconwy Abbot Hywel ap Gwilym last appears in 1415. The evidence is not conclusive, however, and 1418 or 1419 are therefore possible dates. What about March 1405? We know that Richard ap Gruffudd was abbot of Strata Florida in 1407 and he may have been in office in 1405.<sup>63</sup> However, Hywel ap

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<sup>61</sup> These suggestions are based on the dates of Easter in these years; I have offered a broad margin for 'mid Lent'. As Henry V's regnal year began (18 March) close to Easter, which fell on 27 March in 1418 and 16 April in 1419, I have offered possible dates in both 1418 and 1419.

<sup>62</sup> See Jonathon Riley, 'The military garrisons of Henry IV and Henry V at Strata Florida, 1407 and 1415–16', *ante*, 27, 4 (2015), 645–71.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses*, III, p. 334. Smith gives as his only reference for Richard ap Gruffudd *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, III (1848), 376. This is a review of T. O. Morgan, *Aberystwith [sic] and its Environs* (Aberystwyth, 1848), and no reference is given to a primary source. However, this detail derives from Thomas Walsingham's *St Albans Chronicle*. Abbot Richard ap Gruffudd was present when Aberystwyth castle was surrendered to Prince Henry (later Henry V) by Rhys ap Gruffudd ap Llywelyn ap Ieuan (Rhys Ddu) and was among those offered 'without ... being coerced or compelled' as hostages for

Gwilym is likely to have been abbot of Aberconwy in that year, and this seems to preclude 1405 from the argument.<sup>64</sup> There are, however, strong grounds for suggesting that the most promising date for the petition, and the ‘invasion’ of Strata Florida, is March 1383. This offers a credible context, and is supported by the existence, known from other sources, of an Abbot John at Aberconwy.

At Strata Florida Abbot Llywelyn Fychan, whose own election had – as we have seen – been contested in the 1340s, disappears from the scene in 1380, and Smith recorded no further abbot until Richard ap Griffith in 1407. If for the sake of argument we remove Abbot John from the sequence of Strata Florida abbots that covers 1428, it is quite possible that Abbot Reso (1416) was the same man as Abbot Rhys (1433), and Abbot Richard (in Welsh Rhysiart), who occurs on various occasions from 1435 to 1440.<sup>65</sup> Abbot John would accordingly slot into the sequence after Llywelyn Fychan. At Aberconwy John ap Rhys can be taken away from 1428 – leaving a long gap between Hywel (1415) and David (Dafydd) (1431) – and identified with Abbot John who is recorded in 1378–9, 1390 and 1398–9, and who was very probably the immediate predecessor of Abbot Hywel.<sup>66</sup> In office by at the end of the 1370s, he is a prime suspect for having attacked Strata Florida in 1383, and was still abbot of Aberconwy in the last year of the fourteenth century.

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ensuring that the terms of the agreement were held. He was also one of those whose request for pardon the prince granted. See John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs and Leslie Watkins (ed. and trans.), *The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronica Majora of Thomas Walsingham*, vol. 2, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 2011), pp. 526–7. I find no support for Riley’s suggestion (‘The military garrisons’, p. 468) that English troops occupying the abbey in 1407 replaced the abbot with Richard ap Gruffudd.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses*, III, p. 284.

<sup>65</sup> For Reso see TNA 67/37 (letters patent for pardons), mem. 8; no details are given.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses*, III, p. 284.



Moreover, the argument for a late fourteenth-century date for the petition is strengthened by the fact that it is in French rather than English. A petition at that date would almost certainly have been in Anglo-Norman; as we move into the fifteenth century we meet a period of transition when both languages are in use, and the use of English for petitions was complete by the mid fifteenth century.<sup>67</sup> This is not conclusive, but the National Archives website questions Rees's date of 1442/3 on the grounds that the document appears to be earlier in handwriting and form, and indeed suggests a date of 1385.<sup>68</sup>

As noted above, there are no hints in the petition as to the root cause of John ap Rhys's assault on Strata Florida, but the newly assigned date of 1383 provides an important clue. Coming as it seems to have done shortly after the end of the abbacy of Llywelyn Fychan it may represent faction within the community or, more likely, the ambition of the head of a daughter house to assume control over the mother. Moreover, it is likely that John ap Rhys, abbot of Aberconwy, had been promoted to that office from the mother house of Strata Florida. Certainly, on 9 March, 30 March, and 13 April 1370 a monk of Strata Florida of that name (John Aprees / ap Rees) was admitted to the orders of subdeacon,

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<sup>67</sup> Dodd and McHardy note that Anglo-Norman remained the dominant language of the petition until the mid-fifteenth century when English became more widely used: *Petitions to the Crown*, p. xvi. See also Gwilym Dodd, 'The rise of English, the decline of French: supplication to the English crown c. 1420–1450', *Speculum*, 86 (2011), 117–50.

<sup>68</sup> The arguments of this article were reached independently of the National Archives website. See <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9209112>. The year 1385 does not take account of the internal reference to the sixth year of the king.

deacon, and priest, in the cathedral church of London.<sup>69</sup> There is nothing to suggest ethnic tension, and it is quite possible that the 'lohan' of the petition is an English rendering of the Welsh 'leuan'. Re-dating the petition makes it certain that the John ap Rhys of the conflict to which we now turn was a different man from the abbot of Aberconwy in 1383.

### **The ambitions of a second John ap Rhys**

If, as argued above, Abbots Reso, Rhys, Richard, and Rhysiart of Strata Florida are one and the same, then his was a long abbacy stretching from c. 1416 to c. 1440 – in the region of twenty-five years but a decade shorter than the period achieved by Llywelyn Fychan.<sup>70</sup>

Abbot Rhys was much heralded by the poet Guto'r Glyn, who among other things praised his building work at the abbey, his hospitality and charity, and his engagement in education

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<sup>69</sup> R. C. Fowler and C. Jenkins (ed.), *Registrum Simonis de Sudbiria, Diocesis Lundoniensis, AD 1362–1375*, 2 vols, Canterbury and York Society, 34, 38 (1927, 1938), II, pp. 77, 80, 82. I owe this reference to D. H. Williams, 'Fasti cistercienses cambrenses: addenda and corrigenda', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, XXV (1973), pp. 156–7. Williams does not link the monk of this name with the abbot of Aberconwy.

<sup>70</sup> Ralph Griffiths, 'The poet as social observer: Guto'r Glyn in west Wales', in Dylan Foster Evans, Barry J. Lewis, and Ann Parry Owen (ed.), *Gwalch Cywyddau Gwŷr Ysgrifau ar Guto's Glyn a Chymru'r Bymthegfed Ganrif / Essays on Guto'r Glyn and Fifteenth-Century Wales* (Aberystwyth: Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru, 2013), pp. 135–47, notes that Rhys succeeded Abbot John soon after 1428 (p. 137, note 6). However, this is following the date of 1428 for the petition discussed above.

and music.<sup>71</sup> It is from Gutor'r Glyn that we know of Rhys's social and geographical origin: he hailed from Caeo (Carmarthenshire), and was the son of Dafydd ap Llywelyn Fychan.<sup>72</sup> His abbacy did not end well, for at the time of his death, which had taken place by 1442, Rhys[iart] was in Carmarthen jail, having been imprisoned by the king's officers for debt. The sorry tale is told – in part at least – in a representation made to the king by the monks of Strata Florida. We know only of this petition through the king's response in letters patent of 26 March 1442. Abbot Richard (Rhysiart) had been collector, for the archdeaconry of Cardigan, of the tenths and subsidies granted to the king on various occasions in 1429/30, 1430/1, 1433, and 1439/40, by which time he was in prison for the recovery of debts he owed ('occasione diuersorum debitorum versus eum recuperatorum').<sup>73</sup> The reasons for the monks' approach to the king become clear. First, the monks reminded the king that their abbey 'is situated in the mountains and in desolate regions' ('in montibus et partibus

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<sup>71</sup> Griffiths, 'Poet as social observer'; Karen Stöber, 'The Cistercians and the bards – praise and patronage in fifteenth-century Wales', in Foster Evans, Lewis, and Parry Owen, *Gwalch Cywyddau Gwŷr Ysgrifau ar Guto's Glyn*, pp. 305–26. For the poems to Abbot Rhys see [www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=005-009](http://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=005-009); last accessed 8 October 2018. Some of the praise poetry of Gutor'r Glyn is recorded in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS Peniarth 57, which seems to have been compiled at Strata Florida in the 1430s, that is, in the time of Abbot Rhys: Johnston, 'Monastic patronage of Welsh poetry', pp. 178–9, 185. See also Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 93.

<sup>72</sup> [www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=008](http://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=008); last accessed 8 October 2018; see especially lines 37 and 73. While it is possible that he is the same abbot as Reso (1416) he cannot be the same man as Richard (1407) who was the son of Gruffudd.

<sup>73</sup> TNA C 66/453, mem. 19; *Cal. Pat. R. 1441–1446*, pp. 95–6. The form of the name in the Patent Roll is the anglicized version, Richard. Interestingly it has been interlined, but in the same hand. As Griffiths notes ('Poet as social observer', p. 137, note 6, English chancery clerks sometimes rendered the Welsh name 'Rhys' as 'Richard).

dissolatis situata'), and that it was still recovering from its spoliation by Owain Glyndŵr at the time of the Welsh rebellion ('tempore rebellionis Wallicorum'). The king's aid is needed if the abbey – which had been wasted, burnt, and destroyed, only the walls of the church being spared – is to be repaired ('spoliata arsa vastata et destructa extitit muris ecclesie predicte dumtaxat exceptis'). Their misery has been compounded by the fact that after the abbot's death certain people ('diverse persone') came to the abbey, despoiled it, and took from there all the tenths and subsidies that had been collected by the late abbot – and all the evidences related to them. In short, the monks could not pay the king's tenths and subsidies and their goods have been distrained. The monks were fortunate that their pleas received a sympathetic hearing: the current abbot – here unnamed – and the convent were pardoned their debts.<sup>74</sup>

It is around this time that conflict once again hit the abbey in relation to the election of its head, and here we must turn to another undated petition to the king. The petitioner in this case was John Cobbe, abbot of Cymer near Dolgellau which, unlike Aberconwy, was not of the direct affiliation of Strata Florida, being the daughter house of Abbey Cwmhir, a 'sister' abbey of Strata Florida.<sup>75</sup> Abbot John Cobbe claimed that his immediate predecessor as head, John ap Rhys, had resigned to become abbot of Strata Florida. John Cobbe duly succeeded him 'by way of compromys' and was installed. John ap Rhys returned, however, and took possession of the goods of the house 'by force of diuers misdoers of his affinitee' and its common seal which he used to lease, grant, and mortgage land. Moreover he

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<sup>74</sup> TNA C 66/453, mem. 19; *Cal. Pat. R. 1441–46*, pp. 95–6.

<sup>75</sup> TNA SC 8/336/15974; calendared in Rees, *Cal. Ancient Petitions Wales*, p. 503. The incident is discussed briefly by Huw Pryce, 'The medieval church', in J. Beverley Smith and Llinos Beverley Smith (ed.), *History of Merioneth, II, The Middle Ages* (Cardiff, 2001), pp. 254–96 (pp. 284–5).

‘occupies the abbey by divers riotours misdoers’ and John Cobbe claimed that he ‘dare not approche for drede of dethe to þe said house’. In his note to his calendar of this petition, Rees related John Cobbe’s petition to the earlier one, now re-dated to 1383, and assumed that the reference to John ap Rhys as abbot of Aberconwy was an error for Cymer. As argued above, we can now accept that there were two Cistercian abbots bearing the same name.

As Rees correctly noted, however, this conflict can be dated with reference to a further entry in the patent rolls. On 18 February 1443 it was recorded that the immediate successor of Abbot Rhys of Strata Florida, William Morys, had been elected abbot by the monks. Abbot William was installed by Abbot David / Dafydd of the mother house of Whitland and John ap Rhys, abbot of Cymer, and confirmed by two visitors, Abbot John of Buildwas (Shropshire) and Abbot Thomas of Margam.<sup>76</sup> It is instructive to note the weight of Cistercian authority that accompanied this Strata Florida election. The letters further indicate that William enjoyed possession of the abbey for two years – so 1441 and 1442 – after which John ap Rhys brought a false charge against him. Such was William’s complaint. John ap Rhys’s counter claim was that William Morys had been deposed, that he himself had been elected, and that William was now occupying the abbey unjustly. As we have seen, in March 1442 an unnamed abbot was pardoned of the debts incurred by Abbot Richard who died while in prison, and this man can now be identified as Abbot William Morys.

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<sup>76</sup> TNA C 66/455, mem. 6; *Cal. Pat. R., 1441–1446*, pp. 151–2. The abbot of Whitland was Dafydd ap Rhys, abbot of Buildwas John Gnoweshale, and the abbot of Margam Thomas Frankelen, for references to whom see Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, pp. 276, 310, 350.

Although John ap Rhys is not named he may well have been one of these ‘diverse persone’ who, it was alleged, had seized the goods of the abbey after Abbot Rhysiart’s death.<sup>77</sup>

In February 1443 claim and counterclaim escalated. Abbot William Morys added that, acting on letters patent through which Strata Florida was taken into royal possession, John ap Rhys had assembled many troublemakers and with them (‘quamplurimis malefactoribus’), entered the abbey by force, despoiled it of its goods and jewels. He had also expelled William and a number of his brethren and imprisoned them in Aberystwyth Castle where they had remained until released by one William Thomas. The king had, it was alleged, appointed as custodians of Strata Florida Thomas, abbot of Margam, described as reformer of the Cistercian Order in Wales, and Abbot David / Dafydd of Whitland.<sup>78</sup> The king ordered them to ensure that neither would-be abbot enjoyed control of the abbey goods. Amidst these details it is worth stressing that William’s description of John ap Rhys’s alleged behaviour at Strata Florida is consistent with the petition of John Cobbe, that is, that he consorted with ‘divers misdoers of his affinite’.

On 30 May 1444 William Moris, described as former abbot of Strata Florida and following his resignation on the ‘counsel of several notable men’, was granted a dispensation to hold for life any benefice with or without cure of souls.<sup>79</sup> The papal letter states that he had resigned, having made powerful enemies and fearing that his abbey might suffer as a result. The same year (15 February 1444) Morgan ap Rhys, who was of illegitimate birth, being the son of a married man and an unmarried woman, received papal

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<sup>77</sup> TNA C 66/453, mem. 19; *Cal. Pat. R., 1441–1446*, pp. 95–6.

<sup>78</sup> See above, note 76.

<sup>79</sup> J. A. Twemlow (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, IX (London, 1912), p. 424.

dispensation to hold any office, including that of abbot of the Cistercian Order, and proved to be another long serving abbot of Strata Florida, ruling until 1486.<sup>80</sup> Although the monks of Strata Florida and indeed the abbot of Cymer had appealed to the king for help in resolving the situation, members of the Cistercian Order were closely involved, albeit as agents of the English Crown rather than the General Chapter, and the trigger for this third dispute, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, appears to have been the ambitions of John ap Rhys, abbot of Cymer, for headship of the more prestigious abbey of Strata Florida. Certainly, Cymer was experiencing severe difficulties both before and after the adventures of John ap Rhys. The abbot ruled over only four monks in 1379, and numbers may not have risen by the 1440s. Following John Cobbe's appeal to the Crown the abbey was placed in custody by the king, as it was again in 1453, when local rivalries were cited by the king as one reason for the hard times on which it had fallen. Strata Florida might have offered an alluring alternative.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusions

Just how significant were these three incidents and what, more broadly, does the evidence tell us of the office of abbot of a Welsh Cistercian monastery and those men who held it from the mid fourteenth to the mid fifteenth centuries? First, it should be said that Strata Florida was not unusual among Welsh or English monasteries in experiencing disputed elections. Within the period covered by this article there were recorded troubles of this kind at the English Cistercian abbeys of Bindon, Buildwas, Byland, Meaux, Roche, Kirkstead,

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<sup>80</sup> *Calendar of Papal Letters*, p. 413. For occurrences see Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses*, III, p. 335.

<sup>81</sup> Pryce, 'Medieval church', pp. 284–5, citing *Cal. Pat. R. 1452–61*, p. 65.

Stoneleigh, Beaulieu, and Rievaulx, and, notoriously at Fountains Abbey from 1410–16.<sup>82</sup>

Prolonged dissension at Basingwerk in north Wales occupied the 1430s to the 1460s.<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, three disputed elections at Strata Florida are noteworthy. Superficially they may be taken as an indication that the abbots and monks of Strata Florida were rather prone to dissension. It is more likely, however, that they indicate that the headship of Strata Florida was worth contesting. May we go further and suggest that as Strata Florida was not a particularly wealthy monastery, its attraction lay in the prestigious position it held in native Welsh society, rather than in its economic importance? There is nothing to suggest that the abbey suffered endemic problems of lack of control or indiscipline; we may here rather be looking at the ambition of a small number of men, but ones whose actions had far-reaching consequences.

Based on the evidence discussed here, their aspirations do not seem to have extended beyond the circle of Cistercian houses of what had been *Pura Wallia*. All but one of the abbots or would-be abbots were from the locality rather than outsiders from further afield. Both Llywelyn Fychan and Clement ap Rhysiart were monks of Strata Florida and there is circumstantial evidence that John ap Rhys of Aberconwy was too, and that he had thus been promoted from the ranks of the mother house to the headship of Strata Florida's elder daughter house. William Morys also seems to have been a monk of Strata Florida, as was his successor, the illegitimate Morgan ap Rhys. Only the second John ap Rhys, who tried to gain

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<sup>82</sup> See the remarks of Heale (above p. 0); Smith and London, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, pp. 263, 269, 270, 290, 293–4, 305, 311–12; Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, pp. 262, 264, 265–6, 292–3, 312, 324. On Fountains see especially E. F. Jacob, 'One of Swan's cases: the disputed election at Fountains, 1410–16', in E. F. Jacob, *Essays in Late Medieval History* (Manchester, 1968), pp. 79–97.

<sup>83</sup> D. H. Williams, 'Abbatial disputes at Basingwerk', *Cîteaux: Commentaria Cistercienses*, 29 (1978), 330–2.



for himself the abbacy of Strata Florida, appears to have been a monk / abbot from a different filiation, though still within the broad geographical orbit of mid Wales and the broader family of Welsh abbeys that derived from Whitland.

Personal ambition, however, does not seem to be the full story, and there are differences in the three episodes. In the 1340s Llywelyn Fychan and Clement ap Rhysart, both monks of Strata Florida, allegedly split the monastic community into two camps, and there are good grounds for placing their long drawn out dispute in the context of local politics – the invasive claims of the Clement family – and the broader political developments of those years, the tightening of the control of the English Crown in the person of the Black Prince. John ap Rhys, the second of that name, sought to move from a house lower in the Welsh Cistercian family, Cymer, daughter house of Abbey Cwmhir, to Strata Florida. There is no explicit evidence that the invasion of Strata Florida by the first John ap Rhys, abbot of Aberconwy, was aimed at seizing the headship of the house, but the timing – within three years of the last recorded appearance of Abbot Llywelyn Fychan – is suggestive of a bid for power by the abbot of a daughter house to return to the mother. If so, then on three occasions in one hundred years, the abbacy of this monastery was hotly contested and clearly was considered to be a prize, or at least a step up the ladder of Cistercian preferment within the heartlands of Welsh Wales.

There is nothing to suggest that there was any racial or ethnic tension behind these conflicts. Every abbot and would-be abbot of Strata Florida involved in these incidents bore a Welsh name; the names 'John' and 'John ap Rhys' occur in the documents as 'Johan' or 'Iohan', which may well be an English scribe's or clerk's way of rendering a Welsh name such as 'Ieuan'. The only undisputed English name that occurs is that of John Cobbe, abbot of Cymer. Although it is often held that it was in the wake of the revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr

rather than after the Edwardian Conquest that Englishmen began to be appointed in great numbers to high office in the Welsh church, as well as state officials,<sup>84</sup> at Strata Florida abbots with English names do not appear until after Morgan ap Rhys, whose last recorded occurrence is in 1486. It is, therefore, in the Tudor period that we find abbots of Strata Florida with names such as William Marlow, Richard Dorston, and Richard Talley.<sup>85</sup> Nor do these contested elections appear to be related to external politics, with the exception of the coincidence of the rivalry between Llywelyn Fychan and Clement ap Rhisiart, which occurred at the time in which the Black Prince took control of Wales, and he and his ministers tightened their grip on the Principality. However, the evidence – admittedly tenuous – is more suggestive of rivalry rooted in the local families of *uchelwyr*.

We may now ask what these events at Strata Florida can tell us of the operation of the Cistercian Order on a wider canvas in the later Middle Ages. Older scholarship tended to see the twelfth century as the ‘golden age’ of Cistercian monasticism. David Knowles (a Benedictine monk) and Louis Lekai (a Cistercian monk) argued, to a greater or lesser degree, that later medieval monasticism (in the case of Lekai specifically Cistercian monasticism) was but a pale shadow of what had gone before – even a period of decline.<sup>86</sup> Although Lekai did not use the word ‘decline’ in his title, implicit in it and in the thesis of the book is that,

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<sup>84</sup> Lloyd, *History of Wales*, p. 204.

<sup>85</sup> Although Richard Talley could have hailed from Talley in Carmarthenshire. Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, III*, pp. 335–6. The identity and succession of the abbots of Strata Florida in the Tudor period are also problematic.

<sup>86</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of its Development from the Times of St Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940–1215*, second edn (Cambridge, 1963), and *The Religious Orders in England* 3 vols (Cambridge, 1948–59); Louis J. Lekai, *The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality* (Kent State, OH, 1977).

although the spirit of the early Cistercians, transmitted through the rulings of successive General Chapters, remained at the heart of Cistercian identity, there was a point at which the ‘realities’ of the world made adherence to these ideals impossible. He saw the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as a crucial period, after which a fall in the number of new foundations and in recruitment, coupled with economic problems, led to degeneration.

Emilia Jamroziak has recently conveniently and convincingly summarised the scholarly status quo.

Although his [Lekai’s] interpretation is far from simplistic, it still includes the concept of ‘decline’; and it has remained so influential an interpretation precisely because it treats the whole of medieval Cistercian history in terms of one defining criterion which can be applied to the entire Order as well as individual communities: how far they remained true to the original ideal of the Order. A cruder version of this model based on the notion of a Cistercian ‘Golden Age’ in the twelfth century, and the subsequent ‘decline and corruption’ brought by growing wealth and departure from the original austerity, has been the staple of popular interpretations of Cistercian history, and still looms large in non-academic histories, both of the Order and individual houses.<sup>87</sup>

A fall in the number of new foundations – Wales’s last one was Grace Dieu, founded over a protracted period from 1217 to 1226 – and in recruitment can no longer be taken as symptoms of decline, since it could be argued that in terms of the monastic footprint ‘saturation point’ had been reached, and fashion was to a certain extent turning against the

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<sup>87</sup> Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe 1090–1500* (London, 2013), p. 2.

monastic order. There remain, however, two issues for debate. How far did individual houses appear to turn away from the observance of distinctly Cistercian practices? And how far was the 'Cistercian world' maintained? Here Jamroziak's point about the single narrative that past historians have imposed on the Cistercian Order becomes important. Monasteries were a part of the world, and when the world changed, it is reasonable to expect that they changed with it. Jamroziak draws our attention to the developments that faced late medieval Cistercians. First there was the growth of regional and local networks that cut across traditional filiations, such as that which existed between Strata Florida and its mother house (Whitland), sisters (Strata Marcella and Cwmhir) and its daughters (Aberconwy and Caerleon) – not to mention the daughters of its sisters, Valle Crucis and Cymer. Second, the rise of universities drew some White monks from their cloisters. Third, material expectations of late medieval society impacted on the cloister, and this was manifest in the physical environment of the monasteries, the appearance of their cloisters, and the status of abbots. Finally, Cistercian monasteries, like others, were subject to 'pressures from external events that affected not just the church generally (like the Great Schism), but society as a whole – wars, famines and plague'.<sup>88</sup>

In what ways can this series of incidents at Strata Florida cast light on these more general concerns? It is worth remembering that throughout their history Cistercian houses, from Wales to Catalunya, from Scandinavia to Italy and beyond, must have, to a greater or lesser extent, developed layered identities. Monasteries did not exist in a bubble but were part of broader communities. How did the White Monks negotiate often delicate paths between their obligations as members of a monastic order that spread across Christendom with the demands of those on their doorsteps, their patrons, benefactors, neighbours, and

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<sup>88</sup> Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, pp. 238–9.

friends? This tension is highlighted in two of the three cases discussed in this article. The first mention of Llywelyn Fychan's election comes in the records of the Cistercian General Chapter, and the Chapter appointed delegates from among its number to investigate. However, as subsequent events demonstrate, the English Crown, the English episcopate, and the papacy also became involved. William Morys was installed as abbot by his father abbot of Whitland and by the abbot who then sought to overturn and replace him, in a ceremony attended by two further abbots as 'visitors'. The ultimate decision about the future of the headship of the house was to lie, however, with the king.

How far the Welsh Cistercians approached different roles can be seen from two final incidents. The General Chapter of 1352 reprimanded an unnamed abbot of Strata Florida for presuming to transgress the institutes of the Order that forbade the transfer of abbots from one monastery to another without licence. This must have been Llywelyn Fychan, and the offence of which he stood accused was the removal of the abbot of Cwmhir to the same post at Strata Marcella.<sup>89</sup> Both these monasteries were daughter houses of Whitland and thus 'sisters' of Strata Florida. At face value it might seem as if this is a case of a powerful Cistercian abbot exercising power on a local level among his immediate 'family'. However, a letter written by Simon Islip, archbishop of Canterbury (1349–66), to the bishop of St Asaph in November of that same year, 1352, implicated a number of other parties. Islip was prompted to write in response to the complaint of John, abbot of Cîteaux and other diffinitors of the General Chapter, that although Strata Marcella was subject to the authority of the abbot of Clairvaux as father abbot, without any intermediary, nevertheless the abbots of Strata Florida, Abbey Cwmhir, and Valle Crucis, had compelled Abbot John Wade to resign the headship of Strata Marcella, and had then imprisoned him. They had then replaced him

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<sup>89</sup> Canivez, *Statuta*, III, 525 (1352/14).

with David (Dafydd) Las, abbot of Cwmhir and had expelled monks who refused to obey the intruded abbot.<sup>90</sup> Abbot Llywelyn Fychan was operating in a local but also in an international Cistercian context.

The abbot of Strata Florida was also part of a world that required him to accommodate the preservation of Welsh historical and literary culture, and hence identity, to the realities of life in a post-Conquest world. There is no indication that these disputes compromised his position in either regard. As has been discussed elsewhere, heads of monastic houses in Wales took up the role as patrons of the poets that had formerly been the preserve of the Welsh rulers. Abbots of Strata Florida stand supreme as patrons of Dafydd ap Gwilym, Iolo Goch, Guto'r Glyn, and Dafydd Nanmor. They were crucial agents, too, in the preservation of Welsh literary manuscripts such as the *Hendregadredd* manuscript and the *White Book of Rhydderch*, which Daniel Huws suggests was compiled under Abbot Llywelyn Fychan.<sup>91</sup> However, as the evidence discussed here indicates, abbots were far from reluctant to use the device of the petition to request help from the English king, addressing him as their founder and patron. Was this done through gritted teeth, a recognition of the realities of a colonial existence? Perhaps: it can be difficult to read behind the formality of legal and political language. However, one document suggests that such accommodation might not have been painful. The death of Edward, prince of Wales, the

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Heads of Religious Houses, II*, pp. 258, 313. For the letter of the archbishop of Canterbury, see London, Lambeth Palace Library, Register of Archbishop Simon Islip, fols 60v–61r. Smith incorrectly identified the abbot of Clairvaux as one of those who deposed John Wade. It is noteworthy that the abbot of Clairvaux (the ‘grandfather’ abbot of Strata Marcella) claimed to be the mother house, and this may well be related to the attempts, by the Charlton family, to sever the links between Strata Marcella and Whitland, and to control abbatial elections. See Burton, ‘Tensions in a border abbey’.

<sup>91</sup> Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, p. 252–4; Johnston, ‘Monastic patronage of Welsh poetry’.

Black Prince, on 8 June 1376, a year before his father, ensured the succession of his own son as Richard II on 22 June 1377. A little over a month later (2 August 1377) the young king made a grant to Abbot Llywelyn and the convent of Strata Florida of the church of Pencarreg (Carmarthenshire), with licence to appropriate.<sup>92</sup> The condition was that the monks should pray for the soul of Richard's father, the late prince, for the king's welfare during his lifetime, and for his soul after his death. The king further stated that this grant was made in fulfilment of the intention of his father and in consideration of the high place that the abbot held with him, and now holds with Richard II himself. Abbot Llywelyn had clearly wasted no time in approaching the new king to ensure his late father's generous intentions did not disappear with his death.

As we saw earlier, petitions to the king acquired a common formula and were intended to elicit royal sympathy or support. One problem in interpreting them is that we are not always certain who drew them up and where.<sup>93</sup> There are some indications that they were penned at religious houses themselves; this is most likely when they deviated from common formulae.<sup>94</sup> Recent research, however, has reinforced the view that petitions were not drawn up by Chancery clerks (unless they were freelancing); they were 'probably written by a much wider selection of clerks, scriveners and lawyers based both in and

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<sup>92</sup> *Cal. Pat. R. 1377–1381*, pp. 14–15. That Strata Florida paid £20 for this licence suggests its value to the community.

<sup>93</sup> Dodd, 'Rise of English', p. 119. As Dodd states: 'they fit comfortably neither into the category of records produced by the Crown nor into the designation of "local" documents written independently ... the underlying problem is that we do not know who was responsible for the contents of these documents'.

<sup>94</sup> Dodd and Harvey, *Petitions to the Crown*, p. xxii.

around Westminster and in the localities'.<sup>95</sup> Whether the Strata Florida monks in 1383 and 1442 drew up their own petitions, using a template, or instructed a clerk or scrivener working either locally or in London, we cannot tell. The abbot and monks would have furnished such a legal agent with full details, but it remains possible that complaints of the lasting effects of damage and destruction were exaggerated for effect, and indeed followed a common form.<sup>96</sup> Thus, the description of Strata Florida 'situated in desolate mountains' as having been 'so despoiled by Owain Glyn Dŵr at the time of the Welsh rebellion' that 'it cannot be repaired without the king's aid', is not necessarily to be taken literally.<sup>97</sup> It is not entirely consistent with the description by Guto'r Glyn of Abbot Rhys's rebuilding of the monastic church and refectory.<sup>98</sup> Such physical enhancement of Cistercian cloisters was not uncommon in the later Middle Ages. Nor it is a sign of decadence but, as Jamroziak points out, a sign of changing times, and of Abbot Rhys's assurance of his status in local, and

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<sup>95</sup> Gwilym Dodd, 'Kingship, parliament and the court: the emergence of 'high style' in petitions to the English crown c. 1420–1450', *English Historical Review*, 129 (2014), 515–48 (p. 517, note 13).

<sup>96</sup> There is no doubt as to the damage wrought on Strata Florida during the Glyn Dŵr rebellion when the abbey was occupied by royal troops. This is attested in the chronicle of Adam of Usk, as well as numerous records of the Crown. It is, however, possible to read complaints of destruction and violence as part of the rhetorical devices employed in petitions to the Crown.

<sup>97</sup> See above, note 00.

<sup>98</sup> See [www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=008](http://www.gutorglyn.net/gutorglyn/poem/?poem-selection=008) See also Griffiths, 'Poet as social observer'; Stöber, 'Cistercians and the bards', pp. 316–7; Johnston, 'Monastic patronage of Welsh poetry', pp. 182–3. Johnston suggests that the debts on account of which Rhys was imprisoned arose from his expenditure on building, but the entry in the patent rolls suggests a failure to pay the tenths and subsidies he had collected for the king.



Cistercian, society.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, given the potential for physical and psychological damage to the abbey and its inhabitants from the loss of Welsh independence in the 1280s, rebellion, the death and decline of its hereditary patrons in the 1290s, accommodation to a new political regime, plague in the fourteenth century, to the revolt of Glyn Dŵr and its aftermath at the beginning of the fifteenth, what is perhaps more striking than three disputed elections are the long periods of stability under long-lived and capable abbots: Llywelyn Fychan, Rhys[iart] and Morgan.

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<sup>99</sup> See above, note 00. Glanmor Williams (*Renewal and Reformation Wales c. 1415–1642* (Oxford, 1993), p. 119) draws attention to Rhys's 'furious quarrels' with the abbot of Vale Royal over Llanbadarn Fawr, which resulted from his 'desire to assert what he considered to be Strata Florida's rightful position of leadership in Ceredigion'; also Griffiths, 'Poet as social observer', pp. 140–1.