

Assignment Two - Women in the Middle Ages: Sources From the Celtic Regions (HPCS7004)

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Portrait of Gwenllïan De Lacy (ferch Llywelyn ap Iorwerth)

The Normans arrived in England in Britain two decades prior to William the Conqueror's well-known success of 1066, where their presence was recorded along the Welsh border.¹ A century after the conquest the Anglo-Normans made a move on Ireland between 1167-1169.² By 1254, Henry III had granted Ireland to his fourteen year old son, Edward on the condition that it could never be 'separated from the crown of England', and by 1282 Llywelyn the Last was dead, the Welsh hope lost to the Anglo-Norman force.³ This period of history was one of high drama and shifting alliances in which elite families on all sides jostled to secure their economic and political positions. One of the daughters of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth lived on both sides of the Irish Sea amid these changing times.⁴ Her name was Gwenllïan de Lacy. A detailed biography, c. 1205 to c. 1281, is impossible to construct.⁵ Despite her noble status, like many women she is only mentioned in a few legal documents and genealogies of the time, and it is in these metaphoric and literal footnotes and afterthoughts that a portrait of Gwenllïan is sought.⁶ The context for her story is presented via the relevant family history of both the Gwynedd dynasty into which she was born and of the de Lacys into which she married. Gwenllïan then comes to life as a woman with agency, relative power and independence, albeit in part through the histories of men she lived alongside.

The sources present a challenge in their scarcity for Gwenllïan. Unlike Ireland which had tracts known as the *Banshenchas* or Women's History there are no lists specific to women for Wales in the High Middle Ages.⁷ Women are present in the Welsh genealogies, because they are essential to proving legitimate rights to inheritance or rulership for their children.⁸ This means that their appearance in the lists as mothers was even more important than as wives, with second wives or childless wives sometimes absent.⁹ In this way the social status and presence of women is determined via the father, the husband, and the son essentially, unless the woman was of a higher social status than the man in which case there may be a degree of elevation for him.¹⁰ Consequently, there is more work involved in ascertaining the maternal line. Peter Bartram's genealogies demonstrates that the 'names and descent of female family members' can be traced, and he diligently cross-referenced where he could to give them the 'appearance of the same worth, or consequence, as family members who are men

¹ Christopher Snyder, *The Britons*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 228-229.

² Goddard Henry Orpen, *Ireland Under The Normans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911-1920), pp. 144-145.

³ Colin Veach, 'From Kingdom To Colony: Framing the English Conquest Of Ireland', *English Historical Review*, 140.604-605 (2024), 557-590 (p. 587) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceae210>> [accessed 20th April 2026]. For the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in December 1282, see Snyder, *The Britons*, p. 244.

⁴ Gwennyth Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative: Welsh Noblewomen In The Thirteenth Century*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005), p. 48.

⁵ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, pp. 48 and 50. Gwenllïan's death must have occurred prior to 14th November 1281, because Reginald de Grey is appointed as Justice of Chester and is also granted custody of the county of Chester, including the 'lands and tenements late of Wentheliana de Lacy'. Public Record Office, *Calendar Of The Patent Rolls Preserved In The Public Record Office - Edward I. A.D. 1272-1281*, ed. by J. G. Black (London: Public Record Office, 1901), p. 464.

⁶ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 3.

⁷ Danna R. Messer, *The Uxorial Lifecycle And Female Agency In Wales In The Twelfth And Thirteenth Centuries*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Bangor University, 2014), p. 66.

⁸ Messer, *The Uxorial Lifecycle And Female Agency In Wales In The Twelfth And Thirteenth Centuries*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Bangor University, 2014), p. 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and boys'.¹¹ Fortunately, with regard to Gwenllïan, during the reign of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth the *Achau Brenhinoedd at Thywysogyon Cymru* was compiled, which does contain the 'pedigree of the mothers of various rulers' and includes the 'illegitimate children', of which she was one.¹² For Gwenllïan's adult life it is in the Anglo-Norman records for the lords in Ireland that she is to be searched for, but they are 'haphazard in their survival'.¹³ Much could have been found in the 'English chancery rolls', but a fire at Four Courts in Dublin in 1922 destroyed nearly all the 'original government records', leaving documents like 'The Record Commission calendars', for court cases involving land, being the only record for some lives or for filling in the blanks of others.¹⁴ It is this combination of, sometimes incomplete or damaged, 'genealogical charts, printed legal records and chronicles', that provide access to women like Gwenllïan.¹⁵ An additional problem when searching all these documents lies in the inconsistency in the spelling of names. Gwenllïan is also referred to as Wenteliana, Wentliana, Wentheliana, Gwendoline and Winnifred, and the name de Lacy appears as both de Lassy and de Lascy.¹⁶ Finally, caution has to be exercised when examining later compilations of family lore or family trees, because their 'facts' do not always tally nor are they always clearly referenced. However, despite the lack of or difficulties presented by the sources, Gwenllïan's life can be pieced together.

Gwenllïan's great-grandfathers, on her father's side, were Madog ap Maredudd and Owain ap Gruffudd.¹⁷ One was the king of Powys and the other the king of Gwynedd and the first self-styled ruler of all Wales. By 1150 during the reign of her grandfather, Owain Gwynedd, the Welsh 'no longer called themselves Britons', but '*Wallenses* and *Kyrmry*', and the title king was replaced by the term prince, their power and advancement checked by Henry II.¹⁸ At a young age, her father Llywelyn defeated his uncle Dafydd and eventually 'restored the undivided sovereignty of his grandfather over the whole of Gwynedd, including Merioneth and Penllyn'.¹⁹ He became known as Llywelyn Fawr or Llywelyn the Great.²⁰ King John recognised Llywelyn as the 'rightful successor to the principality of Gwynedd' in 1201.²¹ A few years later, Gwenllïan was born. Her mother was Tangwystl ferch Llywarch Goch, but the union between her and Llywelyn was deemed illegal under English law and their

¹¹ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 14.

¹² Messer, *The Uxorial Lifecycle And Female Agency In Wales*, p. 70.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 13

¹⁶ For Wanteliana, Wentliana and Wentheliana de Lascy see Public Record Office of Great Britain, *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland, Preserved In Her Majesty's Public Record Office ... 1252-1284*, ed. by H. S. Sweetman (London: Longman & Co, 1877) pp. 277, 353, 436-437 and 455. Gwendoline and Winnifred are used in *The Roll of the House of Lacy*, see De Lacey-Bellingari, *The Roll Of The House Of Lacy* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1928), pp. 21, 63, 69 and 82.

¹⁷ Iorwerth Drywndwn was the son of Owain ap Gruffydd ap Cynan and he married Marared ferch Madog ap Maredudd. Together they had one son, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth. He died around the same time that his illegitimate half-brother, Dafydd usurped power in Gwynedd in 1174. Thomas Jones Pierce, 'Iorwerth Drwyndwn (The Flat-Nosed) (Died Probably C. 1174), Prince Of Gwynedd', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary Of Welsh Biography*, (1959) <<https://biography.wales/article/s-IORW-DRW-1174>> [accessed 18th April 2026].

¹⁸ Snyder, *The Britons*, p. 231.

¹⁹ Thomas Jones Pierce 'Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Or 'Llywelyn The Great', Often Styled 'Llywelyn I'... 1173-1240, Prince Of Gwynedd)', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary Of Welsh Biography*, (1959) <<https://biography.wales/article/s-LLYW-API-1173>> [accessed 18th April 2026].

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Huw Pryce, 'Negotiating Anglo-Welsh Relations: Llywelyn The Great And Henry III', *England And Europe In the Reign Of Henry III (1216-1272)*, ed. by Björn K. U. Weiler and Ifor W. Rowlands (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 13-30 (p. 16).

children illegitimate.²² Llywelyn had already looked elsewhere for legitimate heirs. He 'abandoned plans to marry the daughter of the Irish king of Man' when he realised that his betrothal to Joan, the illegitimate daughter of King John, would be far more politically beneficial for him.²³ He wed Joan in 1205, around the same time or not long after Gwenllïan arrived.²⁴ Joan brought with her lands in Shropshire and she elevated his status above the Welsh lords, aiding him to rally their support and gain even more control of Wales by the time her father died in 1216.²⁵ Henry III inherited a very powerful and senior brother-in-law.²⁶

Between Tangwystl and Joan, Llywelyn became father to two sons and six daughters.²⁷ The timings of their births indicate that Tangwystl was possibly not fully out of the picture by the time Joan came to Wales. It appears that Llywelyn transferred land to Tangwystl, a 'parting gift' perhaps or security for the wellbeing of his illegitimate children Gruffydd, Gwenllïan and Anghared.²⁸ Although the elder of the two sons, Gruffydd, was replaced by his half-brother, Dafydd, as Llywelyn's heir, and this was legitimised in 1226, with Henry III granting Joan's son £40 per year and land in 1229.²⁹ Llywelyn went on to use the marriages of all his children, apart from Gruffydd, in a similar way to his own, to gain political advantage and manipulating his standing with specific Anglo-Norman neighbours: the marcher families of Braose, Mortimer, Clifford and de Lacy.³⁰ He literally created an allied buffer zone on the border between Gwynedd and England in an attempt to keep Wales a unified entity and the advance of the English at bay.³¹ Llywelyn used this network of created connections to 'draw power from the crown', in addition to asserting himself over his fellow Welsh lords.³² Through his illegitimate daughter Gwenllïan, Llywelyn he sought to form an alliance based in Ireland with the half-Irish son of Hugh I de Lacy. It is thought that Gwenllïan married William Gorm de Lacy in 1222.³³

Llywelyn ap Iorwerth was not the only one to see the benefit in a marriage between his daughter and a de Lacy. The Normans consistently used marriage to legitimise their power and authority, with the taking of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish wives as part of their conquest process.³⁴ From the 'Anglo-Norman viewpoint', the daughters of Llywelyn Fawr were ideal candidates for their own integration

²² Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 48

²³ Abigail Cengel, 'Bridging The Gap: Marriages Between Welsh And Anglo-Norman Aristocracies, 1066-1282', *Wittenberg History Journal*, 41 (2012), 59-68, (p. 60).

²⁴ Pryce, 'Negotiating Anglo-Welsh Relations', p. 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ Pierce, 'Llywelyn ap Iorwerth', 1959.

²⁸ 'Moreover, the entry for Dincadfel reveals Llywelyn ap Iorwerth as an active participant in a transfer of land which had formerly belonged to a clan. It is stated that 'Hoydilo' ap Ithel mortgaged the rights which he held in a portion of land belonging to the clan of Ithel ap Cadwgan ab Ystrwyth to Llywelyn ap Iorwerth. He handed the mortgage over to Tangwystl Goch, the mother of his eldest son Gruffydd, and she, in turn, sold the rights to Cynan ap Llywarch, a member of the Braint Hir clan.' D Huw Owen, 'Tenurial And Economic Developments In North Wales In The Twelfth And Thirteenth Centuries', *Welsh History Review = Cylchgrawn Hanes Cymru*, 6 (1972), 117-142 (p. 130).

²⁹ Pryce, 'Negotiating Anglo-Welsh Relations', pp. 21-22.

³⁰ Pierce, 'Llywelyn ap Iorwerth', 1959.

³¹ Cengel, 'Bridging The Gap', p. 60.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 49. The Irish nickname *Gorm* refers to the swarthy or dark appearance of William, possibly his hair or complexion, taking after his father. Seán Duffy, 'The Problem of Degeneracy', *Law And Disorder In Thirteenth-Century Ireland: Essays Celebrating the Dublin Parliament of 1297*, ed. by James Lydon (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 1997) pp. 87-106 (p. 91).

³⁴ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 9.

and a legal means of access to land and local alliance.³⁵ Anglo-Norman literature of the time indicates their practical outlook towards the matrimonial 'contract' deemed it 'fundamental to social order' and a mutually beneficial arrangement that exchanged their military strength or the stalling of aggression for real estate and advancing the English boundary.³⁶ The marriage of William Gorm de Lacy to Gwenllïan was mutually advantageous, and one of relatively equal societal standing, both being illegitimate offspring within high status families. There was little land to be gained but there were also valuable networks and alliances to be had.

The family de Lacy (de Lascy) originated in Lascy or Lassy in Normandy, and from there a certain 'Walter de Lacy accompanied the Conqueror to England and acquired large estates on the Welsh border, the principal being Ewyas Lacy, Staunton Lacy, and Ludlow'.³⁷ His great grandson Hugh I, the fifth Baron de Lacy, holder of lands in Herefordshire and Shropshire on the Welsh border, arrived in Ireland with Henry II in 1171 with a view to conquer.³⁸ For his endeavours, in 1172, the king granted Hugh I 'the land of Meath, with all its appurtenances by the service of 50 men to him, and his heirs, to have and to hold of me and my heirs, as Murchad-Hua-Melaghlin held it'.³⁹ Hugh I subsequently married Rose, the daughter of the high-king of Ireland, Ruaidrí Ó Conchobair.⁴⁰ Rose Ni Conchobair was the second wife, and became mother to William Gorm de Lacy, but like Gwenllïan's mother she too was not recognised under English law.⁴¹ His Irish life and 'wife' and his 'mild administration and firm adherence to treaties' afforded Hugh I many Irish allies, but his allegiance to the crown and sceptre was questioned, and not all the locals liked him.⁴² When one chose to take his head off with

³⁵ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, pp. 9-10.

³⁶ Cengel, 'Bridging The Gap', pp. 61-62.

³⁷ Nicholas J. Synnott, 'Notes On The Family Of De Lacy In Ireland', *The Journal Of The Royal Society Of Antiquaries Of Ireland*, 9.2 (1919), 113-131 (p. 118) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25514534>> [accessed 9th April 2026].

³⁸ Hugh I went to Ireland with Henry II as one of the five hundred knights with an army of four thousand men. *Ibid.*, p. 119. For the army numbers, see John M. Thunder, 'The Kingdom Of Meath', *The Journal Of The Royal Historical And Archaeological Association Of Ireland*, 8.77 (1889), pp. 507-525 (p. 516) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25506494>> [accessed 13th April 2026].

³⁹ 'Murchadh O'Melaghlin was king of Meath on the arrival of the Normans, but was deposed to make way for Hugh de Lacy', see Thunder, 'The Kingdom Of Meath', pp. 515-516. The lands given to Hugh I comprised 'not only the present county of Meath but also Westmeath and parts of Longford and Offaly'. B. J. Graham, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement In County Meath', *Proceedings Of The Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature*, 75 (1975), 223-249 (p.225) <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/25506310>> [accessed 13th April 2026].

⁴⁰ Colin Veach and Freya Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy: Chiefest Champion In These Parts Of Europe', *Princes, Prelates And Poets In Medieval Ireland: Essays In Honour Of Katherine Sims*, ed. by Seán Duffy (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd, 2013), pp. 63-84 (p. 65).

⁴¹ William Gorm 'bore no claim to the lordship of Meath or, later, the earldom of Ulster'. Duffy, 'The Problem of Degeneracy', p. 91.

⁴² Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Historical Works: Containing The Topography Of Ireland And The History Of The Conquest Of Ireland and The Itinerary Through Wales and The Description Of Wales*, ed. by Thomas Wright, trans. by Thomas Forrester and Richard Colt Hoare (London: George Bell & Sons, 1905), p. 289. Hugh I de Lacy's second marriage to Rose Ni Conchobair and his manner were described as 'secundum morem patriae illius', meaning that he acted according to the customs of the land he now found himself in. He adopted some Gaelic practices, mixed well with the Irish, and 'went to great trouble to conciliate those who had been conquered by others and forcibly ejected from their lands', all much to Henry II's displeasure. Duffy, 'The Problem of Degeneracy', p. 90.

an axe while he was inspecting some building work in 1186, his eldest son Walter, who was only fourteen or fifteen at the time, inherited the lands in Britain, Normandy and Ireland.⁴³

Walter and his brother Hugh II were two of the legitimate de Lacy children.⁴⁴ Walter entrusted his brother to take care of the Irish 'operation' and sibling rivalry spurred Hugh II on.⁴⁵ In 1205 the king rewarded Hugh II's loyalty and his acquisition of 'lands in Connacht, Uriel and Ulster', by investing him as the first Earl of Ulster.⁴⁶ However, unchecked and far away from the "'golden circle' of men surrounding the king', Hugh II's 'relentless pursuit of power' meant he became a liability.⁴⁷ After the personal assertion of Hugh I, King John was keen to avoid a repeat with his sons, who were suspected of being involved in a 'plot to overthrow the king'.⁴⁸ In 1210 he arrived in Ireland and drove the de Lacy brothers out of Meath.⁴⁹ Walter and Hugh II became fugitives, fleeing via Carlingford Lough, then Carrickfergus onto Scotland, and finally France.⁵⁰ After working as gardeners at the Abbey of Saint Taurin, Evreux, the Abbot pleaded their case with the king and Walter was restored to all his lands, except Ludlow, c. 1213-1215.⁵¹ Hugh, however, did not make full peace with the king and Walter's previous willingness to offer up 'his younger brother in order to divert the king's anger from himself' didn't help familial harmony either.⁵² Meanwhile the remaining de Lacy half-brother, the future husband of Gwenllïan, had also been gaining a reputation.

William first appeared in legal documents c. 1189-1191, aged eleven or younger, bearing witness to the signatures of his brothers Walter and Hugh II.⁵³ He may have gained military experience when the de Lacys brought down a former ally John de Courcy, between 1203 and 1204, but was certainly part of the active force they mustered between 1207 and 1210.⁵⁴ Up until 1210, William held the castles of Kilmore and Belturbet, but after supporting his brother, Hugh II, he was incarcerated in Gloucester and his land confiscated.⁵⁵ He was only released in 1215, imprisoned for the duration his brothers were on the run and restoring themselves.⁵⁶ Apparently in the confusion over the restoration of Meath, William then waged war with the 'Irish justicar', re-taking the previously confiscated castles of Carlingford in County Louth and Dundrum in County Down.⁵⁷ This war brought him into conflict with the O'Reillys and the Ua Conchobair kings of Connaught, some of which were his Irish kin. He was ordered to restore the lands to Walter in 1217, but it was noted that he had been alone in fighting to

⁴³ 'Hugh de Lacy did not return to England, but was slain on the 25th of July of this same year; while superintending the erection of one of his castles, an Irish workman came behind him while he was stooping, and struck off his head with an axe', Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Historical Works*, p. 294.

⁴⁴ Hugh I de Lacy was married to 'Rose of Monmouth, daughter of the Welsh marcher lord Baderon of Monmouth and Rose de Clare'. Their sons included Walter, the eldest, and Hugh II. Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 65.

⁴⁵ Daniel Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, First Earl of Ulster: Rising and Falling in Angevin Ireland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁸ Colin Veach, 'King And Magnate In Medieval Ireland: Walter De Lacy, King Richard And King John', *Irish Historical Studies*, 38.146 (2010) 179-202 (p.200).

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 200-202.

⁵⁰ Thunder, 'The Kingdom Of Meath', p. 518.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, First Earl of Ulster*, p. 14.

⁵³ Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 67.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

regain or keep the family's territory for the previous two years.⁵⁸ William gained an 'appanage' and the stronghold of Ug Ragallaig for his efforts.⁵⁹ Hugh returned from exile in 1221, and one of his first moves was to create an alliance between himself, Llywelyn ab Iorwerth and Ranulf, earl of Chester and Lincoln.⁶⁰ William married Gwenllïan, and the nephew of Ranulf married her half-sister.⁶¹ William gained lands and contacts from Gwenllïan's family in Flintshire and Denbighshire.⁶² Gwenllïan left her father's carefully engineered situation between himself and the Norman neighbours and swapped it for the rebellious ambition of the de Lacy's versus the crown of England and the Irish nobility.

There is no indication as to where Gwenllïan grew up. Her mother had the land given to her by Llywelyn, but she sold half of it.⁶³ Her father's principal court was at Aberffraw, the capital for the kings of Gwynedd, and his primary or preferred residence was the *Llys* at Abergwyngregyn.⁶⁴ With an itinerant court system in which there was no single fixed residence, Joan and her children undoubtedly moved around with Llywelyn. It can be assumed that Gwenllïan was maintained and educated at one of his many *Llys* sites, especially when older and in preparation for adult life. She may have even been part of the main familial unit, learning the ways of both Welsh and Norman nobility in the company of the French-speaking Joan and her daughters.⁶⁵ Upon her marriage, Gwenllïan received land as dowry from Llywelyn, including parcels in 'Tegeingl and Dyffryn Clwyd and possibly in Rhufoniog', all in the Perfeddwlad district, the 'coveted region between the Conway and the Dee', otherwise known as the Four Cantrefs around Denbigh.⁶⁶ It appears that she held these lands until her death.⁶⁷ When she relocated Ireland, William appears to have held lands in east Bréifne, whilst Hugh II held Ulster, both independently of Walter's lands.⁶⁸ The brothers' three main seats were the castles at Killmore, Carlingford and Trim, respectively. Her husband had a close and loyal connection to his half-brother Hugh II, this afforded him access to several of the castles in Meath, but William was also active in the counties 'Cavan, Leitrim and Longford'.⁶⁹ A manor at Ballymagarvey near Duleek, part of William's personal de Lacy inheritance assigned to him by Walter, is known to be one place that he and Gwenllïan made their home.⁷⁰ It is in the region where William grew up.⁷¹ William also spent time

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ 'Tebrith was the central township of the progeny of Pithle ap Llywarch... Ystrad Cynan of his brother Cynan'... This clan then extended into Ystrad Cynon, where pastus principis was rendered, and purchased one-half of Dincadfel from Tangwystl Goch'. Owen, 'Tenurial And Economic Developments In North Wales', p. 122.

⁶⁴ For Aberffraw as the chief seat of Gwynedd, see Robin Stacey Chapman, 'King, Queen, And Edling In The Laws Of The Court', *The Welsh King And His Court*, ed. by T. M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen and Paul Russell (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 29-62 (p. 35). For Abergwyngregyn, see John G. Roberts, *A Walk Through Royal Aber*, (Snowdonia National Park Authority, 2012) pp. 1 and 4

<https://cadw.gov.wales/sites/default/files/2019-05/North%20Wales%20Snowdonia%20National%20Park_EN.pdf> [accessed 19th April 2026].

⁶⁵ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49. For the location between the Conway and Dee, see Owen, 'Tenurial And Economic Developments In North Wales', p. 117.

⁶⁷ Public Record Office, *Calendar Of The Patent Rolls Preserved In The Public Record Office - Edward I. A.D. 1272-1281*, p. 464

⁶⁸ Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 72.

⁶⁹ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 52.

⁷⁰ Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, First Earl of Ulster*, p. 14.

⁷¹ Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 67).

at Carlingford Castle and was custodian of the mighty Trim Castle for many years, so Gwenllïan may have had rooms at either of these for a while too.

Whilst many of the Norman castles had been built by the time Gwenllïan arrived in Ireland, the upgrading of the buildings and the development of the lands around them continued. The castles obviously had a defensive function, but they were also status symbols. Many Anglo-Norman castles in Ireland followed the English fashion of ‘deliberately-created, designed landscapes’, which may have included deer parks and other impressive features, alongside the lands dedicated to arable and pastoral farming.⁷² There would have been considerable staff and tenants to manage the day to day operation of the estates.⁷³ Inside the castles, the luxury goods and elite services deployed messages of social and political power.⁷⁴ Additionally, the finer wares ‘acquired through the market or through inheritance’ were an important means of ‘portable wealth’ in any politically and economically difficult situation.⁷⁵ The environment in which Gwenllïan found herself mistress would have been provisioned with a full range of personalised livery, stables, horses, silver utensils, gold plates and costly fabric furnishings.⁷⁶ The de Lacy’s ownership of the trading routes between Drogheda and Chester meant that meant that imported foodstuffs such as spices, rice, and almonds were possible supplements to the local game, dairy produce and harvest at her table.⁷⁷ Her wardrobe would have similarly been non-utilitarian, one of silk, brocade, jewels and fur.⁷⁸ Her brother-in-law, Walter, was describe as ‘the most bountiful foreigner in studs, attire, and gold, that ever came to Erin’.⁷⁹ The de Lacy’s were ambitious and bold, and Gwenllïan would have been expected to dress and at accordingly. During her life in the Welsh courts, she would have been encouraged in cultural pursuits such as appreciating the talents of the bards, reading and writing.⁸⁰ She may have even acquired a very small personal library of one or two books, that she added to in Ireland. Gwenllïan’s life was privileged and well serviced by staff and tenants.

Whether Gwenllïan and William had children is questionable. *The Roll of the House of Lacy* does mention a Nicholas born at Carrickfergus Castle, but does so with reference to William being at the castle in connection with the events of 1210.⁸¹ Another William de Lacy of Castlemahon, appearing in 1295, in the same document is assumed several pages later to be the brother of Nicholas, therefore named after his father.⁸² However, this document was compiled in 1928 and it is not clear as to its original sources for the brothers. It is entirely possible that these were not Gwenllïan’s children even if they were her husband’s. They don’t appear in any medieval sources in connection with her. Moreover, the Delacy Chronicles have the sons as Thomas and Henry, and again the sources are not

⁷² Kieran O’Conor, ‘Gaelic Lordly Settlement In 13th And 14th Century Ireland’, *UBAS International* 1 (2005) pp. 209-221 (p. 213).

⁷³ Emma Cavell, Aristocratic Widows And The Medieval Welsh Frontier: The Shropshire Evidence’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 17 (2007), pp. 57–82 (p. 71) <doi:10.1017/S0080440107000539> [accessed 13th April 2026].

⁷⁴ Margaret Murphy, ‘Possessions, Luxury Objects, And Identity In Late Medieval Ireland’, *Rethinking Medieval Ireland And Beyond: Lifecycles, Landscapes, And Settlements: Essays In Honor Of T.B. Barry*, ed. by Victoria L. McAlister and Linda Shine (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2022), pp. 125–143 (p. 126).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 128-130.

⁷⁷ For Walter de Lacy’s ports Drogheda and Chester, see Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, First Earl of Ulster*, p. 18. For likely imports, see Murphy, ‘Possessions, Luxury Objects, And Identity In Late Medieval Ireland’, p. 134.

⁷⁸ Murphy, ‘Possessions, Luxury Objects, And Identity In Late Medieval Ireland’, pp. 127 and 134.

⁷⁹ Thunder, ‘The Kingdom Of Meath’, pp. 518-519.

⁸⁰ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p. 63.

⁸¹ De Lacey-Bellingari, *The Roll Of The House Of Lacy*, p. 46.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 76-77 and 82.

evident.⁸³ The number of de Lacy offspring in Ireland in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries appears to have caused some genealogical confusion regarding which de Lacy brother was responsible for who. With or without children, Gwenllïan's domestic peace, if there was such a thing, was short lived, for between 1223 and 1224 William wholeheartedly joined in with his brother Hugh II's 'Irish rebellion'.⁸⁴ Together they 'forcibly occupied Walter's lordship of Meath'.⁸⁵ It was reported that the law had trouble chasing them to Ulster because of the 'densities of mountains and woods'.⁸⁶ Gwenllïan and William's mother had to take refuge in the 'castle on Ua Ragallaig's crannock' where they were later captured.⁸⁷ It was only down to the negotiation skills of the latter that both women avoided a longer imprisonment.⁸⁸ Whilst William continued with his campaign to assert his personal and familial dominance in the troubled region, he also served with Henry III in France and aided the extension of a 'truce' between his father-in-law Llywelyn and the king. For many years he split his time between England, Wales and Ireland.⁸⁹ In 1233 he returned to Ireland for good, where shortly after he was 'hurt in a skirmish in the Brenie [Bréifne], came to his house, and there died of the wound'.⁹⁰ As the grandson of the last high king of Ireland, Gwenllïan's husband had been vital force for the de Lacy's agenda and he was well-loved of the Irish.⁹¹ He was probably the first Anglo-Norman-Irish baron to be given a 'complimentary obit' given by an Irish annalist.⁹² In the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* reads: William Delacy, chiefest champion in these parts of Europe, and the hardiest and strongest hand of any Englishman from the Nicene seas to this place, or Irishman'.⁹³

Aged about twenty-eight Gwenllïan was now the widow of a 'champion' she may have seen very little of over the years. That description indicates the 'measure of the man's status among the native Irish' and the extent to which he, and perhaps his wife too, were 'part of that society'.⁹⁴ Gwenllïan did not remarry. Her father may have been eager to gain a second marriage alliance out of his daughter, as he had done with Gwladus and Margaret, but she was across the sea from her father which would have lessened his influence.⁹⁵ Moreover, although Welsh, Gwenllïan was not the widow of a Welsh man living in Wales, she was the widow of an Anglo-Norman-Irish lord living in Ireland, and independent noble widows who 'preferred to remain single' were common under the laws of thirteenth-century England.⁹⁶ The *Magna Carta* of 1215 guaranteed Gwenllïan's 'right to dower without paying a fine, and it prohibited forced remarriages'.⁹⁷ Gwenllïan didn't choose the nunnery either, which was an option for those not seeking a second husband. Her brother-in-law Walter de Lacy had founded the 'Cistercian nunnery of Loughsewdy or Plary' in 1218, so there was opportunity and protection there if

⁸³ Roy A Lacy, *De Lacy Chronicles*, (2026) <<https://www.delacychronicles.com/irish-castles-of-the-de-lacy-family-648851-927059.html>> [accessed 15th April 2026].

⁸⁴ Brown, *Hugh de Lacy, First Earl of Ulster*, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 74.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 75

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 75-78.

⁹⁰ Duffy, 'The Problem of Degeneracy', p. 91.

⁹¹ Veach and Verstraten Veach, 'William Gorm de Lacy', p. 64.

⁹² Duffy, 'The Problem of Degeneracy', p. 91.

⁹³ The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* are a seventeenth century translation of lost Irish annals. Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Gwladus was first married to Reginald de Breos and then as a widow to Ralph Mortimer. Margaret was married to John de Breos and afterwards to Walter Clifford. Pierce, 'Llywelyn ap Iorwerth', 1959.

⁹⁶ Linda E. Mitchell, 'The Lady Is A Lord: Noble Widows And Land In Thirteenth-Century Britain', *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 18.1 (1992), 71-97 (p. 72) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298944>> [accessed 22nd April 2026].

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

she had wished it.⁹⁸ Under law in Ireland, when the 'marriage ended whether through death or separation the Gaelic Irishwoman was once again subject entirely to the will of her own family', but as the wife of an Anglo-Norman, Gwenllïan's rights were even 'more fully protected' as a widow'.⁹⁹ Her own lands in Wales that had been under husband's control whilst married, now reverted to her charge. Additionally, she gained the control of Ballymagarvey as part of her dower, a third of William's estate.¹⁰⁰ She became independently wealthy and single at a relatively young age.

In her new managerial and administrative role, Gwenllïan would have become conspicuously active within the local community of both tenants and gentry. Without the legal need for a guardian, she was fully at rights to buy, sell, rent, or otherwise acquire property; take matters to court; hire attorneys; and send levies to the king.¹⁰¹ Although, widows could become warrantees or warrantors, they could not become judges or members of the jury under English law.¹⁰² However, the level of cultural exchange between the Irish and Anglo-Normans and the fact that in Ireland women could become receivers or financial bailiffs, even on behalf of other women, may have opened Gwenllïan's eyes to even greater senses of freedom, literary and mathematical education, and other ways of living.¹⁰³ She would have gained 'extensive experience of estate management' whilst William was alive, but now she effectively acted as the interim lord, 'caretaker of the patrimonial third'.¹⁰⁴ Protection of her lands, both from her father's and husband's side, was her responsibility, and as part of this role Gwenllïan took steps to do just that in 1241. She travelled all the way from her home in Ireland to London to plead her case in the court of the king.¹⁰⁵ Her half-brother Dafydd had taken four of her vills, 'Aberwhyler, Penpedow, Ystrad Melened and Tretowr' in Wales, after their father's death in April 1140.¹⁰⁶ This appearance in court, without attorneys appearing on her behalf, is recorded in the *Curia Regis Rolls of the Reign Henry III* on exactly the same day that her sister-in-law, Senana, also made an appeal for the release of her husband Gruffydd (Gwenllïan's brother) from imprisonment by Dafydd.¹⁰⁷ It appears that the two women organised the trip together and supported one another in consecutive complaints and pleas, with Dafydd as their grievance in common. The journey was a

⁹⁸ Dianne Hall, *Women And The Church In Medieval Ireland, c. 1140-1540*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), p. 84.

⁹⁹ Gillian Kenny, 'Anglo-Irish And Gaelic Marriage Laws And Traditions In Late Medieval Ireland', *Journal of Medieval History*, 32 (2006), 27-42 (p. 41) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2005.12.004>> [accessed 13th April 2026].

¹⁰⁰ Public Record Office of Great Britain, *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland, Preserved In Her Majesty's Public Record Office ... 1252-1284*, pp. 353, 436-437 and 455.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell, 'The Lady Is A Lord', p. 80.

¹⁰² For warrantees and warrantors, see Stephen Hewer, 'Legal Identity And 13th-Century English Ireland', *Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History*, 29 (2021), 211-221 (p. 216) <<https://doi.org/10.12946/rg29/211-221>> [accessed 13th April 2026]. For limitations on judges and members of the jury, see Mitchell, 'The Lady Is A Lord', p. 81.

¹⁰³ Hewer, 'Legal Identity And 13th-Century English Ireland', pp. 217-218. By the mid to late thirteen century the breakdown between the cultural differences between the Irish and the Anglo-Normans was full underway. Irish 'customs, speech, pastoralism, laws, literature and dress' was adopted by many Anglo-Normans, and vice versa with certain foreign 'traits' taken up by the Irish. O'Connor, 'Gaelic Lordly Settlement In 13th And 14th Century Ireland', p. 211.

¹⁰⁴ Cavell, *Aristocratic Widows And The Medieval Welsh Frontier*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ Richards, *From Footnotes To Narrative*, p.55.

¹⁰⁶ Ystrad Melened is probably the same *Llys* or manor at Ystrad Owain, also known as *Llys Gwenllïan*. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

partial success, the lands secured and Gruffydd was transferred from Dafydd to the king and the Tower of London, where Senana could visit.¹⁰⁸

Gwenllïan next appears in the record in 1278. There she is exporting 'corn, victuals, and other goods from Ireland into Wales and England' well into her seventies, and the king commands protection for 'her, her men, lands, and chattels in Ireland and elsewhere'.¹⁰⁹ It is difficult to tell if this venture mentioned in the *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland* is for trade purposes only or to support her *Llys* in Wales. The dual destinations for her goods indicate is probably both. *Llys* is the term for a royal court, made up of halls, stables and barns, with an adjacent *maerdref* or specialised settlement.¹¹⁰ These were bonded townships populated by unfree tenants who worked the land producing crops and dairy products.¹¹¹ The 'castle' of *Llys Gwenllïan* is recorded as having a *maerdref*, called 'Ystrad in the commote of Ceinmeirch', so, like Ballymagarvey, no small dwelling or operation for Gwenllïan to manage.¹¹² The earthworks relating to her royal court are still found south of Avon Ystrad below Denbigh.¹¹³

In August 1280 Gwenllïan is mentioned as 'Wanteliana de Lacy' when the king appointed attorneys to act on her behalf in the Irish courts, but by May 1282 there was a 'dispute' over who was the 'rightful heir' to her dower property of Ballymagarvey in Ireland because 'Wentliana de Lascy' had died.¹¹⁴ These dates are found in the *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland (1252-1284)*, but by looking for her in documents covering Wales during a similar time frame, Gwenllïan is found in the *Calendar Of The Patent Rolls (1272-1281)*. She had clearly deceased by 14th November 1281, because Reginald de Grey is appointed as Justice of Chester and is granted custody of the county of Chester, including

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Entry number 1463 on 11th June 1278. Public Record Office of Great Britain, *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland, Preserved In Her Majesty's Public Record Office ... 1252-1284*, p. 277.

¹¹⁰ Owen, 'Tenurial And Economic Developments In North Wales', pp. 118-130.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 119.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ From the testimony of the Survey of Denbigh it is evident that this clough must be the wooded and steep-sided valley or ravine immediately to the west of the ramparted site known traditionally as *Llys Gwenllïan* (Figure 13.1). Along the clough a tributary flows northwards to join the *Afon Ystrad*, which, in turn, flows eastwards along what is called in 1334 'the long clough'. Here, evidently in the angle between the two cloughs, is the manor whose 'capital messuage contains 1 acre 1 rod 36 perches (1.8 statute acres) in which are two granges, one cattle-shed, one sheep-house, and one house for the hired workers (*famuli*) and also one sheep-house, whence the profits of the houses and the court (*curia*) are worth per annum 40d'. The area within the surviving ramparts amounts to only about one acre;50 and accordingly some at least of these court components are likely to have been outside the *llys*, probably on its south-eastern flank. As the Survey also records, 'there is no dovecot or garden but there are two crofts enclosed around the manor which contain 4 acres 3 rods 4 perches'. The gate of the manor is said to open on to the Greenway and is probably represented now by the break in the ramparts on the north-eastern side of the enclosure. Within the *llys* and far removed from the gate was a small motte; this, however, was not recorded in the Survey of 1334.' See also Fig. 13.1 'The site of the *Llys* at Ystrad Owain'. Glanville R. J. Jones, 'Llys And Maerdref', *The Welsh King And His Court*, ed. by T. M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen and Paul Russell (Cardiff: University Of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 296-318 (pp. 305-306).

¹¹⁴ For 30th August 1280, in the *Calendar of Documents relating to Ireland*, entry number 1732 reads, 'The K. notifies to his bailiffs, &c. of Ireland that Wanteliana de Lacy had attorned before the K. Amaun le Waleys and Henry Fingal in plaints and pleas in Irish courts. Grant that Amaun and Henry may make attorneys for Wantelliana in the K.'s Chancery of Ireland. To endure until the feast of All Saints next ensuing, and thenceforth for 1 year.' The dispute after Wentliana's death is regarding the 'manor of Ballimacgarvi [Ballymagarvey]'. The first entry, number 1927, for the dispute is on 20th May 1282 and then 'soon after' 23rd October 1282 as entry number 1988. Public Record Office of Great Britain, *Calendar Of Documents, Relating To Ireland, Preserved In Her Majesty's Public Record Office ... 1252-1284*, pp. 353, 436-437 and 455.

the 'lands and tenements late of Wentheliana de Lacy'.¹¹⁵ Gwenllian is thought to have lived out her last years at *Llys Gwenllian*, and it is not possible to tell whether she stayed in Wales after her court appearance or went back to Ireland, returning to Wales later. Her final resting place is not confirmed, although *The Roll of the House of Lacy* states 'Sir William, his mother, and wife were interred at Bective Abbey in Meath'.¹¹⁶

Gwenllian lived a long life, exercising agency and autonomy for about fifty of her years. She witnessed many dramatic events and changes in Ireland and Wales during that time. The documental trace appears faint, but when examined more closely and carefully cross-referenced a portrait of Gwenllian and the shape of her life does form. However, the bare factual bones are clad in considered conjecture. There are too many unknowns: was she fully or partially fluent in all four languages she encountered; was she at ease, adapting to her fate and ways of the Irish, Welsh and Anglo-Norman gentry; was she considered a successful and assertive landowner in the male sphere; and least perceivable of all, what was her personal experience of these things? Whether she became a mother or deliberately avoided re-marriage after the early loss of William, with a mind to enjoy her singledom in peace, remain a mystery. The portrait as it is does distinguish her from the other Gwenllians she is often confused with: her great niece, Gwenllian ferch Llywelyn, the last princess of Wales, and Gwenllian ferch Gruffudd, the warrior princess.¹¹⁷ Perhaps Gwenllian de Lacy deserves an epithet of her own. Searching for her demonstrates that at first glance medieval women can appear vague and undefined in their historical context in comparison to their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, but with perseverance the scant or damaged sources do reveal some insights into how they conducted their lives. The facts suggest that despite living amongst rebels, lords, kings and princes on both sides of a thirteenth century Irish Sea, Gwenllian had the privilege of relative freedom and security in her widowhood.

¹¹⁵ Public Record Office, *Calendar Of The Patent Rolls Preserved In The Public Record Office - Edward I. A.D. 1272-1281*, p. 464.

¹¹⁶ De Lacey-Bellingari, *The Roll Of The House Of Lacy*, p. 68.

¹¹⁷ The current Ballymagarvey Manor House is a wedding venue, but the Tower (turret) and the nearby Church date from Gwenllian's time. On their website they mistakenly call Gwenllian, the manor's thirteen century occupant, the 'last true princess of Wales'. Ballymagarvey Village, *Ballymagarvey Village 1854*, (2026) <<https://www.ballymagarvey.ie/>> [accessed 24th April 2026]. The epithet 'last princess of Wales' generally refers to Gwenllian ferch Llywelyn ap Gruffudd. Her mother Eleanor de Montfort died in childbirth in June 1282, and her father was killed in December 1282. She was placed in a Sempringham priory by Edward, where she remained for the rest of her life. Danna. R. Messer, 'Eleanor De Montfort (c. 1258-1282), Princess And Diplomat', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary Of Welsh Biography*, (2017) <<https://biography.wales/article/s11-ELEA-WRL-1200>> [accessed 18th April 2026]. Gwenllian, the 'warrior princess' refers to Gwenllian fer Gruffydd, led an attack on the Norman fortress of Kidwelly, in her husband's absence, and was killed fighting outside the town in 1136. Thomas Jones Pierce 'Gwenllian (died 1136)', *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig / Dictionary Of Welsh Biography*, (1959) <<https://biography.wales/article/s-GWEN-FER-1100>> [accessed 18th April 2026].

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