

IOLO GOCH (c. 1325 - c. 1400), poet


Name: Iolo Goch
Date of birth: c. 1325
Date of death: c. 1400
Gender: Male
Occupation: poet
Area of activity: Poetry
Author: Dafydd Johnston

Iolo Goch was a poet from the Vale of Clwyd, son of Ithel Goch ap Cynwrig ab Iorwerth ap Cynwrig Ddewis Herod from the lineage of Hedd ab Alunog of Uwch Aled, one of the Fifteen Tribes of Gwynedd. His mother was Ithel Goch's second wife, and is not named in his genealogy [?]. The names of two brothers are recorded, Gruffudd and Tudur Goch.

Iolo was originally a hypocoristic form of Iorwerth (the name of his great-grandfather), but there is no evidence that Iorwerth was Iolo Goch's baptismal name. It is possible that Coch had become a family surname, but Iolo refers to himself in one of his poems as *cadno coch* ('red fox'), so it is likely he did have red hair.

According to the survey of the lordship of Denbigh of 1334, the patrimony of Ithel Goch and his cousin Dafydd was the *gafael* or holding of Cynwrig Ddewis Herod and Iorwerth Ddu in Lleweni, on the valley floor near the town of Denbigh. But in accordance with the post-Conquest land policy, five sixths of that holding were forfeit to the lord, and the sixth part had been exchanged for a less favourable holding in Llechryd on higher ground to the north-west of Denbigh. In one of his poems Iolo recounts his journey home to Llechryd on a new horse, and he is referred to later as 'Iolo Goch of Llechryd'.

Iolo's wife's name was Margred ferch Adda Fychan. One daughter of that marriage is named in the genealogy, Nest, but it is likely that Dafydd ab Iolo Goch and Iolyn ab Iolo Goch, whose names occur as witnesses in a number of documents from Maelor around the end of the fourteenth century, were also their sons (or Iolo's illegitimate sons).

Iolo Goch's earliest poems date from the 1340s, and he is thought to have been born about 1325. Nothing is known about his bardic training, but the title 'Herod' describing one of his ancestors is interesting in light of the prominence of heraldry in some of his poems. There is evidence in one of his poems to his third cousin [Ithel ap Robert](#) of Coedymynydd, archdeacon of St Asaph's, that Iolo was educated as a church chorister, most likely at St Asaph's Cathedral. That education would have included reading and writing Latin and Welsh, and in a contemporary fragment of a grammar book he is described as a poet who could 'write poetry correctly'. It is possible that the lines from his ode to the Virgin Mary which were inserted on the margin of the [Book of the Anchorite of Llanddewibrefi](#)  are in his own hand.

Iolo Goch received patronage from churchmen of the diocese of St Asaph's throughout his career, including two bishops, [Dafydd ap Bleddyn](#) in the 1340s and [Ieuan Trefor](#) in the 1390s, Archdeacon Ithel ap Robert and Dean Hywel Cyffin. Other prominent patrons of his were the Penmynydd family (see [Ednyfed Fychan](#)) in Anglesey, [Sir Hywel y Fwyall](#), constable of Cricieth Castle, and [Owain Glyndŵr](#). Towards the end of his career, in 1394, he composed an advice poem to [Sir Roger Mortimer](#) which demonstrates detailed knowledge about the political situation in Britain and Ireland. His only surviving poem to a patron from south Wales is his elegy to [Sir Rhys ap Gruffudd](#) which describes his funeral in Carmarthen in 1356, and it was probably that powerful nobleman who encouraged him to address a poem to king Edward III. But a poem in the form of a dialogue between his body and his soul maps out a bardic circuit to the south-west of the country naming a number of patrons there, including the abbots of Whitland and Strata Florida and [Rhydderch ab Ieuan Llwyd](#).

Iolo Goch was one of a group of poets who were the first to employ the *cywydd* metre, and his elegy to [Ddafydd ap Gwilym](#), about 1350 perhaps, testifies to the influence of that great poet on him. Later in the century he composed an elegy to his bardic companion [Llywelyn Goch ap Meurig Hen](#). The most recent canon of his work contains a total of 39 poems (although many more are attributed to him in manuscripts), and this is a very varied body of poetry. He has a few love poems, including an elaborate description of a girl which is the only *cywydd* in the Red Book Hergest. A good deal of *dychan*, or satirical poetry has been preserved by him, some being ritual entertainment between poets and some more serious, including two poems attacking a Grey Friar from Chester for his sermon criticising churchmen for fornication. Iolo's religious poetry reveals his devotion to the Virgin Mary, [Saint David](#) and other saints. He composed a lengthy poem seeking the blessing of Mary and the apostles on the Day of Judgement, and his prayer to Christ and the saints for protection from death perhaps reflects anxiety caused by the Black Death during his lifetime.

Iolo Goch's most significant contribution to the bardic tradition was establishing the *cywydd* metre as a medium for praise poetry, carrying over some of the eulogistic modes of the Poets of the Princes. He was in his element celebrating the military exploits of his patrons, and there is a suggestion in one of his poems that he may have done military service

himself. The stability of the social order is an important ideal in his poetry, as seen in his depiction of [Owain Glyndŵr](#)'s court at Sycharth and in 'Cywydd y Llafurwr' which praises the ploughman for humbly accepting his role in society - a response perhaps to social unrest at the time of the Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381.

The evidence of his poems indicates that Iolo Goch's bardic career extended over a period of fifty years and more, until 1397 at least, and he is thought to have died in his old age before the Revolt of Owain Glyndŵr. However, a strong argument has been made for the authenticity of one of the poems rejected from the canon which belongs to the period of the revolt about 1403; if that is accepted as the genuine work of Iolo Goch then the date of his death must be moved a little later.

Author

Dafydd Johnston

Sources

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Iolo Goch](#)

Additional Links

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