

Summary of the contents of the Gesta Herewardi

At the age of eighteen, Hereward was declared an outlaw by Edward the Confessor and exiled for disobedience to his father and disruptive behaviour. He went north, with a single servant named Martin Lightfoot, to stay with his godfather Gisbert de Ghent. Whilst there he killed a captive Norwegian bear which had the head and feet of a man, and which had broken free of its chains. He was offered a knighthood by his godfather as a reward but declined it saying he ought to “make a better trial of his courage and spirit.” His actions promoted the envy of the other knights in the household who tried unsuccessfully to kill him. He decided to leave the household and travel to Cornwall.

While staying with a certain prince of Cornwall, he incurred the wrath of a man named Rough Scab, who hoped to win the hand of the prince’s daughter. Hereward mocked the man in front of the girl who burst out laughing, and led Rough Scab to threaten to kill him. eHereward, being unarmed, asked for time to make arrangements to bequeath his property to the church, so that he could get his sword. On his return he fought with the man, who was known as the best fighter in the land, and fatally stabbed him in the groin, an action which led to his being imprisoned.

The daughter of the household enabled him to escape and make his way to the King of Ireland where he distinguished himself in battle. On one occasion he was venturing into Cornwall when he message from the Cornish princess to ask for his help. *He returned to her household in disguise after having dyed his hair black, and attended her wedding feast. Whilst there he played the harp and sang so magnificently, much to the annoyance of the jester. When the bride and her husband left he rescued her and handed her over to an Irish prince who she wanted to marry.*

Hereward was now determined to return home, but he was shipwrecked in Orkney, and again in Flanders where he was honourably detained by the count, changing his name to Harold. He fought on behalf of the Count of Flanders against the neighbouring Count of Guines, and his true name was revealed. Whilst he was in Flanders, Turfida, an enterprising Gallo-Germanic woman from a wealthy family in Saint-OmerSaint fell in love with him before she met him, having heard of his heroic exploits. He met and fell in love with her, despite the violent opposition of another knight. During the first night in the same household as her, he awoke just in time to turn over to avoid an axe which was embedded in his pillow. The perpetrator was seized and had his arm chopped off in punishment.

Hereward then took the central role in two campaigns against rebellious Frisian armies and while in Frisia he acquired a particularly swift mare which he named Swallow, and her colt Lightfoot.

He then returned home with Martin, leaving his new bride in the care of his cousins. In disguise, he visited a soldier a short distance from his home and was informed that his family’s lands had been taken over by the Normans and his brother killed whilst trying to protect his mother. He also heard that his brother’s head had been placed on a spike at the gate to his house.

That night when the soldier and all the household were asleep, Hereward heard drunken revelry from the direction of his own mead hall. He and Martin got up, left the house and went to investigate. He saw his brother’s head, took it down from the post, kissed it, wrapped it up carefully in cloth and then stormed into the hall where he te ook revenge on the drunken Normans who had killed his brother and

seized his land. He allegedly killed fifteen of them with the assistance of Martin, who was waiting at the door.

After this many local people praised Hereward and many of the dispossessed flocked to join him. Alongside this, many Frenchmen left the area. Hereward then went to Peterborough Abbey to be knighted by his uncle Abbot Brand. After this he heard that a man called Frederick de Warenne was trying to capture him and take him to the King. He sought out and killed this man and then returned briefly to Flanders to allow the situation to cool down before returning to England.

In 1070 Hereward came home to receive a letter from Abbot Thurstan of Ely, asking him if he would lead the anti-Norman insurrection centred around the Isle of Ely. He took a ship from Bardney but on the way he was attacked by William de Warenne, brother of Frederick. Hereward managed to shoot him with an arrow through his protective mailcoat, but not to kill him.

When Hereward reached the camp on the Isle of Ely he was welcomed by the monks and the rebels which included Morcar, the former Saxon Earl of Northumbria who had been ousted by William.

William sent an army to deal with the rebels by constructing a huge, mile-long timber causeway, made with tree trunks floating on inflated sheepskins. When the Normans tried to cross this it sank under the weight of their armour and horses. Only one soldier, named Deda, survived to reach the Isle of Ely. He was captured and treated well. On his release he was told to tell the truth to King William; that he had been well treated, that the rebels had plenty of food and were well armed and organised.

When William heard this, followed by the news that his soldiers, who had been sent to build a dyke at Reach had been ambushed by Hereward and his followers, he seriously considered making peace with the rebels. However, one of the Normans, Ivo Taillebois suggested that they summon "a certain old woman who could by her art alone...crush all their courage and defence and drive them all out of the island in terror."

William ordered his men to surround the Isle of Ely but Hereward, once again in disguise, this time as a potter, with his beard and his hair cut, escaped to Brandon, where the King and his court were staying. Hereward happened to stay the night in the same house as the old woman, and overheard her conversations in French. He also witnessed her carrying out a ritual of communicating with a local water spirit during the night.

The next morning Hereward went to the court to sell his pots but he was almost recognised, but judged too small of stature to be the mighty rebel leader. He went into the kitchen but soon became involved in a fight and was captured, only to escape yet again! This time he is said to have travelled through the night via Somesham to reach the camp on Isle of Ely at first light.

This time the King tried once again to thwart the rebels, this time by collecting materials to build ramparts. He sent an order for fishermen to take their boats to Cottenham to help transport the materials. Hereward, with a shaved head, joined this venture and each night set fire to the work completed during the day.

After eight days a wooden tower had been constructed from which the old woman, sufficiently protected on all sides by the army would try to intimidate the English with curses. "Once mounted, she

harangued the Isle and its inhabitants for a long time, denouncing saboteurs and suchlike, and casting spells for their overthrow; and at the end of her chattering and incantations she bared her arse at them. Well, when she had performed her disgusting act three times as she wished, those who had been concealed in the swamp all around to right and left among the sharp reeds and brambles of the marshland, set fire to part of it so that, driven by the wind, the smoke and flames surged up against the king's camp.”

In despair, the Norman King then decided to seize the lands of the church to give to his follows. The Abbot and some of the Earls had fled in disguise to Bottisham with the ornaments and treasures from the abbey. On their return they asked the King, who was at Witchford, to negotiate peace terms and revealed to him a safe route across the marshes, that he could use when Hereward was out foraging. However one of the monks, a man named Eadwine informed the rebel leader of the plot

Hereward was furious and threatened to burn down Ely and the abbey, however the monk begged him not to. Instead, the remaining rebels, with Hereward escaped into the wild fenland, to a mere called Wide near Upwell. At about this time Hereward had sent some of his men to lay waste to Soham, as earlier they had burnt the town of Burwell. He met the returning followers at Stuntney and they headed north and then west across Brunneswold to Lincolnshire. At about this time, Hereward decided to kill his horse rather than risk it being captured by the Normans.

The remaining rebels continued their resistance as outlaws in the woods of Northamptonshire, still laying waste to the land with fire and the sword. The king called on men from all the surrounding counties to join his army and so fearful was Hereward of being captured that he ordered his men to fit their horseshoes on back to front.

At this point, according the Gesta, Hereward heard that Turolde, the Norman Abbot of Peterborough and Ivo Taillebois had joined the approaching army. At one point Hereward managed to capture the Abbot and ransom him for £30,000. After this, the Abbot started to give away the church lands, and in anger, the rebels stormed and sacked Peterborough Abbey as they wished to save the treasures and relics from the rapacious Normans. That night Hereward had a vision of Saint Peter asking him to return the looted treasures. The following day he and his men got lost in the forest trying to find their way to Stamford and a wolf, along with will o' the wykes, helped lead them to safety. Seeing this as a sign from Saint Peter, Hereward is said to have returned the treasure to the abbey

By this time, Turfrida had 'turned away' from Hereward, to become a nun, as he was receiving envoys from another woman who wished to be his wife. This woman, named Alfruda, the widow of Earl Dolfin asked Hereward to negotiate peace with the king.

In the process of attempting to negotiate with William, Hereward was provoked into a fight with a man named Ogger. The fight led to his capture and imprisonment. His followers, however, liberated him when he was being transferred from one castle to another. Hereward's former gaoler persuaded the king to negotiate once more, and he was eventually pardoned by William and lived the rest of his life in relative peace.

A partial translation of the Gesta can be found using the link below:

<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hereward-the-wake>