

A Note on Gherbod the Fleming, Earl of Chester

By A. J. FARRINGTON, B.A., Research Assistant, India Office Records.

AFTER his famous harrying of Yorkshire in 1069, William the Conqueror crossed the Pennines into Cheshire, the major remaining centre of resistance, and early in 1070 he granted the city and county of Chester to Gherbod the Fleming. From the strategic importance of this position entrusted to him, Gherbod must certainly have been the most outstanding of the Flemish contingent which had taken part in the conquest.¹ He returned to Flanders with William's permission less than twelve months later, and died there after being taken prisoner by his enemies; Hugh, son of Richard, *vicomte* of the Avranchin, was then called in as Earl of Chester. Local historians have either tended to ignore Gherbod completely² or to merely paraphrase, often with fanciful additions, the brief account of his career given by Ordericus Vitalis, writing *circa* 1125.³

Ordericus stated that: "*Cestram et comitatum eius Gherbodo iam dudum rex dederat; qui magna ibi et difficilia tam ab Anglis quam a Guallis adversantibus pertulerat. Deinde legatione coactus suorum, quos in Flandria dimiserat, et quibus hereditarium honorem suum commiserat, eundi, citoque redeundi licentiam a rege acceperat; sed ibi adversa illaqueatus fortuna in manus inimicorum inciderat, et in vinculis coercitus, mundanaque felicitate privatus, longae miseriae threnos depromere didicerat*".⁴ These few lines are the only significant chronicle reference to Gherbod's career.

In 1845 the remains of a certain Gundred, wife of William de Warenne, first Earl of Surrey, and co-founder of Lewes Priory,⁵ were discovered in the priory ruins during railway excavations. A controversy immediately arose over the slumbering problem of her exact parentage. Most previous historians had accepted the unfounded Lewes claim that she was a daughter, or step-daughter, of the Conqueror's wife Matilda, but in a series of learned articles lasting from 1846 to the 1930's, this was absolutely demolished.⁶ A stray reference in the Hyde Abbey chronicle reveals, however, that she was Gherbod's sister, a reflection of his standing among the new Anglo-Norman aristocracy: "*Quo tempore Comes Cistrensis decessit Gerbodo, frater Gondradae Comitissae, Flandriamque veniens, inimicorum praeventus insidiis miserabiliter periit*."⁷

¹"William the Conqueror" D. C. Douglas, (1964) pp. 266-7.

²"Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor Reigns" R. H. Morris, p. 3. "Chartulary of St. Werburgh's, Chester" Vol. 1, ed. J. Tait *Chetham Soc. N. S.*, Vol. 79 (1920) p. iii, n. 8.

³Leycester's 'Prolegomena' in Ormerod, ed. T. Helsby (1882) Vol. 1, p. 9.

⁴Ordericus Vitalis "Historia Ecclesiastica" ed. A. Prevost, Paris (1840) Vol. 2, p. 219.

⁵"Monasticon Anglicanum" W. Dugdale, 1846 edn. Vol. 5, p. 1.

⁶*Archaeological Journal* Vol. 3. (1846) pp. 1-26.

Archaeologia Vol. 32 (1847) pp. 108-25.

"Gundrada de Warrenne" R. E. C. Waters, Exeter (1884).

Yorks. Arch. Journal Vol. 31 (1933) pp. 112-3.

"Early Yorkshire Charters" Vol. 8 ed. C. T. Clay in *Yorks. Arch. Soc. Record Series: Extra Series Vol. 6.* pp. 40-46.

⁷"Liber Monasterii de Hyda" ed. E. Edwards, *Rolls Series* (1866) p. 296.

The detailed discussion of the origins of the family of Warenne also revealed the existence of Frederic, brother of Gundred, who can reasonably be identified with a Frederic who witnessed next after Baldwin VI, Count of Flanders, to a charter of Guy, Count of Ponthieu, dated 1067, in favour of St. Ricquier abbey, in the diocese of Amiens.⁸ It is interesting that in Domesday Book a caracute in Palgrave, Norfolk, held by 'Sanctus Ricarius' of William de Warenne, is listed as 'de fedo Federici'.⁹

The parentage of Gherbod, Gundred and Frederic cannot be established, but they were possibly the children of a Gherbod, *advocatus* (i.e. patron) of the abbey of St. Bertin¹⁰ at St. Omer, who appears as a witness to two of the abbey's charters *circa* 1026 and in 1056; the latter date may even refer to Gherbod, Earl of Chester. In a note to his edition of Ormerod,¹¹ Thomas Helsby states that there were 15th century Counts de Gherbode in Flanders, claiming descent from the Earl of Chester; this is not proven.

As a final speculation, why did Gherbod return to Flanders so quickly? The answer must lie in the political situation there. Baldwin VI, Count of Flanders died in 1070, leaving two young sons under the care of his widow Richildis. Immediately the coastal regions rose in revolt under Robert de Frison, who decisively defeated a coalition French and Norman army at Cassel on 22 February 1071.¹² William Fitz-Osbern, Earl of Hereford and a leading architect of the Anglo-Norman kingdom, was killed during this battle, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Gherbod was captured then, or soon afterwards, when Robert had successfully established himself as the new Count of Flanders.

⁸"Recueil des Actes des Comtes de Ponticu, 1026-1279" ed. C. Brunel, Paris (1930) p. 5.

⁹Domesday Book Vol. 2, f. 167b.

¹⁰"Cartulaire de l'Abbaye de Saint-Bertin" ed. M. Guerard, Paris (1840) pp. 176, 187.

¹¹*loc. cit.*

¹²"Histoire de Belgique" Vol. 1, H. Pirenne, Brussels (1900) pp. 95-6.