

Saint Edmund the King

anon

from the fourteenth century South English Legendary, a compilation of saints' lives in verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

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This saint's life has been translated and retold from: Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J Mill (eds), 1956, reprinted 1967. The South English Legendary, Volume II. Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. Story taken from British Museum MS Harley 2277.

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Saint Edmund the King

anon
thirteenth century

Saint Edmund þe holi king · of wham we makieþ gret feste · of þat on ende of Engelond · kyng he was
her bi est –

The holy king Saint Edmund, whom we honour with a great feast day, ruled over the very eastern side of England, for there were many kings in England at that time and he was king of Suffolk and of the countryside thereabouts. Saint Edmund was a fine knight and a very brave warrior, mild-mannered, courteous, intelligent and full of mercy. But two foreign princes had taken council together, pooled their evil thoughts and devised a plot to bring England to her knees. One of these rogues was called Habba and the other Hinguar. They came to England with a great army before anyone knew anything about it. In Northumberland they cut men to the ground, pillaged and burnt farms and monasteries to ashes, destroying everything they came to. And when they had taken Northumberland, they thought they had better not leave out the rest of England either! So leaving Habba behind, Hinguar went east to destroy everything he could find there. For he had heard a great deal spoken about the goodness of King Edmund, so he went into his land searching for him, intent upon taking his life.

Saint Edmund the King, or Saint Edmund the Martyr, was an early English ruler of the kingdom of East Anglia in the ninth century AD. When a Danish army invaded that region in 869, Edmund gave battle near Hoxne in Suffolk, according to the early-twelfth century foundation charter of Norwich Priory, and was spectacularly martyred.

The life of Saint Edmund is found in the South English Legendary, a compilation of saints' lives and other material that was added to throughout the fourteenth century, deriving partly from the Legenda Aurea, a Latin work dating to around 1267. The version of the story here is identical to that found in the South English Legendary as it occurs in British Museum MS Harley 2277, dating to the very early-fourteenth century.

Hinguar entered the largest town in East Anglia with complete surprise and stripped it bare. All those he caught, he slew without mercy. Young and old, women, children, he killed them all. Babies he tore from their mother's breasts and mutilated them so cruelly that it is distressing to have to think of it even; then the mothers were put to death – it was horrible. He burnt the town to ashes and killed everybody in it. But first he forced them to tell him where their king was; and they told him readily enough since they were all so terrified and King Edmund happened to be in the town of Hegelisdun, which was a



long way away. When the wicked prince heard this he did not set out at a slow pace! He hurried there as swiftly as he could, with his entire army.

When Hinguar arrived at the town of Hegelisdun he met King Edmund alone outside the walls. Realising who he was, Hinguar took the king prisoner immediately and laid siege to the town. Saint Edmund was quickly taken and led naked before the prince with his hands tied behind his back; just as men led Our Lord Jesus before Pontius Pilate to receive His judgement. When sentence had been passed, Saint Edmund was taken at once to some dense woodland where they beat him with sticks and many other things and gave him some grievous wounds. Then they tied him to a tree; for having begun their cruelty they had no intention of stopping now. They all went some distance away,



took hold of their arrows, bent their bows and shot at him as though he was a target, as though they were practicing at hitting a mark! Soon his body was so thick with arrows that there was not a single space for another one to penetrate. But he continued to stand on his feet as they tried to kill him, although the arrows sticking in him were beyond counting. There were so many arrows they stuck out of his body like the prickles on a hedgehog. But since there was no room for any more to wound him, they took to hacking at him with their swords instead, cutting great chunks of flesh off, as happened during

the martyrdom of the holy Saint Bastian. In like manner they hacked and cut and shot at him until his body was hanging in pieces, but still he refused to die. Instead, he stood there crying praises to God! When Hinguar saw that Saint Edmund was not going to be overcome in this way, he ordered that his head be cut off. So as this holy man sang at his beads, they cut off his head. But Saint Edmund's body had been so shattered and hacked to pieces already that they left it lying where it was and took the head to a part of Hegelisdun Woods where nobody would find it, a place thick with thorn bushes and rank shrubs and trees, and hid it there.

When they had thus taken all the pleasure they could from this holy king's martyrdom, they returned in good spirits, for they were evil men. They had hidden that head in a secret place so that none of King Edmund's men would be able to find it, even if a few of them somehow escaped death and would be able to search for it. But soon a wild wolf came to the place where the head was. And against its own nature, against its instinct which should have been to have tried to eat it, the wolf at once stood guard over this head, protecting it from all the other animals in the forest, licking the head and nuzzling up to it as though it was one of its own pups.

A little while later some Christian men came into the forest in some number and quickly came across the holy body, for it had not been hidden. And when they saw that the head was missing they scoured the woodland looking for it, each man taking a separate part of

the forest to search. But they could find no sign of it; until one day, beside the thicket of thorns, the head began to cry out: 'Here! Here! Here!' in English, as though it was alive. The men had no idea that it was there but those who heard this ran into the thicket at once and found the head, just where it had been proclaiming its own presence. Lord! Praised be Your power! Here was a fair miracle!

They took this head to where the body had been left, placed it with care and carried both away with great solemnity. And the wolf followed along as they transported this body and the head, and as they went it howled and looked so grief-stricken that it seemed as though it had lost its wits. This wolf followed them for as long as it could, barking and whimpering; but then it disappeared and nobody saw it again.

They carried the body to Bury Saint Edmunds, as the town is called, laid Saint Edmund down there and found that his corpse was once more complete! So they placed him in a noble shrine and there he lies still, as those who go there can see for themselves; for his body, that was so torn apart, had healed together again until he looked just as he did when he was alive! His head was attached as firmly to the rest of his body as it had been in life. His body was without blemish, both in flesh and bone, as many people have since witnessed. But where his head had been cut off, as Our Lord willed, a small red line could be seen, shining like gold.

Many pilgrims come to view this shrine, to honour this holy body that has been lying there for so long now. God, for the love of Saint Edmund, who was a noble king, grant us the joy that he is in, after our own ending.

Amen

