



Who was Saint Alban ?

St Alban was a Roman soldier venerated as the first Christian martyr in Britain. He was scourged and beheaded on 22 June 303 AD (but see below) for sheltering and changing clothes with a fugitive Christian priest who had converted him to Christianity. King Offa of Mercia founded a monastery on the site of his execution in 793, and the place was renamed St Albans.

Alban was a Romano-British pagan living in the city of Verulamium sometime during the 3rd or 4th century. During a religious persecution of Christians, he sheltered a Christian priest (traditionally called Amphibalus) in his home, hiding him from the Roman soldiers. Alban was so inspired by the priest's teaching that, when the soldiers arrived in pursuit, he put on the priest's robes and handed himself over. Challenged and sentenced to death he declared "I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things." The priest also gave himself up, inspired by Alban's faith and courage. He was led out of the city, across the river Ver and up a hillside where he was beheaded.

As with all good stories, the legend grew with time. Bede, writing in the 8th century, describes the river miraculously dividing to let Alban pass and a spring of water appearing to provide a drink for the saint. Observing this, the executioner was so moved that he cast down his sword and fell at Alban's feet, praying that he might suffer with Alban or be executed in his stead. A second executioner was called, and both Alban and the first Roman soldier were beheaded. Bede adds that the executioner's eyes dropped out as he beheaded the saint. According to legend, Alban's head rolled down the hill on which he was executed, and a well sprang up at the point where it stopped. A well does indeed exist today, and the road up to the modern cathedral is called Holywell Hill.

The judge who ordered Alban's execution was so astonished by these heavenly miracles that he immediately ordered the persecutions to cease, and began to honour the death of the saints. The reputed place of the beheading is where St Albans Cathedral now stands.

Alban was probably buried in the Roman cemetery to the south of the present abbey church. Recent finds suggest an early basilica over the spot. At the time of Bede there was a church and shrine nearby, pilgrims travelled to visit and it became an established place of healing. Later a Saxon Benedictine monastery was founded, probably by King Offa around 793, but this was probably sacked and destroyed by the Danes c. 890. In 1077 the Normans built a large monastery and church, the remains of which are still partly visible in the tower and central part of the present cathedral.

The site of Alban's martyrdom soon became a cult centre. A memoria over the execution point and holding the remains of St. Alban existed at the site from c. 300, possibly earlier. In 429, Bishop Germanus of Auxerre visited and is said to have taken away relics of the still bloody earth at the site. Gildas (c. 570) mentions a shrine, and Bede (c. 720) mentions a church.

The main account of Alban's life and martyrdom is found in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, although Alban is mentioned in many different sources. The date of Alban's execution has never been firmly established. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lists 283, but Bede places it in 305, "when the cruel Emperors first published their edicts against the Christians", that is, sometime after the publication of the edicts by Eastern Roman Emperor Diocletian in 303 and before the proclamation of toleration in the Edict of Milan in 313. English historian John Morris suggests that Alban's martyrdom took place during the persecutions of Emperor Septimius Severus in 209. Morris bases his claims on earlier manuscript sources, unknown to Bede, in particular a 3rd century manuscript found in Turin which states: "Alban received a fugitive cleric and put on his garment and his cloak (habitu et caracalla) that he was wearing and delivered himself up to be killed instead of the priest ... and was delivered immediately to the evil Caesar Severus." As Morris points out, Diocletian reigned only in the east, and would not have been involved in British affairs in 304; Emperor Severus was, however, in Britain from 208 to 211. Morris thus dates Alban's death to 209. Subsequent scholars have argued that such a single, localized British martyrdom in 209 would have been unusual, and have suggested the period 251–259 (under the persecutors Decius or Valerian) as being more likely.

The connection with Denmark goes back to the Middle Ages, when a church dedicated to Saint Alban was built in Odense. Supposedly, Canute of Denmark (Knud den Helige), nephew of Canute the Great, King of England, moved Alban's remains in 1075 to the Church of St Mary at Odense, Denmark, a small wooden church which was consequently renamed the Church of Saint Mary and Saint Alban. It was in this church that King Canute IV of Denmark (Saint Canute) was murdered in 1086. The original church no longer exists, but in 1908 the Roman Catholic parish church of Odense, St. Alban's Church, was consecrated.

The feast day of St Alban is 22 June.