

SAINT ALBAN, PROTO-MARTYR OF GREAT BRITAIN (3rd or 4th century). There were probably already Christians in the British Isles in the first century. In fact, by the end of the second century a great many of the inhabitants of southern England were Christians. However, Alban is the first recorded Christian martyr of the island. The traditional date of his death is 304, during the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian; but many scholars now date it as early as 209, during the persecution under the Emperor Septimus Severus. This date was derived from a study of the Turin manuscript of a *Passio Albani*.

The first known reference to him, outside the Turin manuscript, is in the 5th century life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre. Gildas, writing c. 540, gives the core of the tradition. Saint Bede gives an amplified account, which includes a lively description of the beheading and more details of signs from heaven.

Alban was a pagan, a Roman soldier, who, during the persecution of Diocletian, took pity on a fleeing Christian priest and sheltered him in his own home. When he saw that the priest spent day and night in prayer, he was moved by the grace of God. They spent several days talking together and Alban was so impressed by the priest's sanctity and devotion that he became a Christian and wanted to imitate the piety and faith of his guest. Encouraged and instructed by the priest, Alban renounced his idol worship and embraced Christ with his whole heart.

He was a leading citizen in the old Roman city of Verulamium (Verulam), Hertfordshire, England, now called Saint Albans. The town was originally a collection of huts of wattle and daub that stretched along Watling Street, and later destroyed by the army of Boadicea, the warrior queen.

The history continues that the Roman governor of the city, hearing a rumour that a priest was hiding in the house of Alban, sent a search party of soldiers to find him. Seeing them approach, Alban took the priest's cloak and put it over his own head and shoulders, and helped him to escape. Thus disguised, Alban opened the door to the soldiers and was arrested in mistake for the priest. He was bound in fetters and brought before the governor, who was attending a sacrifice to the pagan gods. When the cloak was removed and his true identity was discovered, the governor was furious. He then declared himself to be a Christian, whereupon the governor angrily ordered him to be taken before the altar. He was threatened with all the tortures that had been prepared for the priest if he did not recant.

Alban faced his anger calmly and, ignoring his threats, declared that he could not sacrifice to the gods. Upon Alban's refusal to deny his faith, the governor enquired of what family and race he was. "How can it concern you to know of what stock I am?" answered Alban. "If you want to know my religion, I will tell you--I am a Christian, and am bound by Christian obligations." When asked his name, he replied: "I am called Alban by my parents, and I worship and adore the true and living God, who created all things." He was then commanded to sacrifice to the Roman gods, but he refused and was cruelly scourged. Alban bore the punishment with resignation, even joy. When it was seen that he could not be prevailed upon to retract, he was sentenced to decapitation.

On the way to his execution on Holmhurst Hill, the crowds that gathered to honour his heroism were so great that his passage was delayed because they could not reach the bridge over the river. Alban, who seemed to fear that any delay might deprive him of the martyr's crown, decided to cross at another point, and going down to the water's edge he prayed to God and stepped into the river which he then forded without difficulty. Both Gildas and Bede have accepted the tradition that this was a miracle and that the waters dried up completely in answer to the saint's prayer.

They add that a thousand other people crossed over with him, while the waters piled up on either side, and that this miracle converted the appointed executioner. Still accompanied by a huge throng of people, Alban climbed the hill to the place of execution. But, on his arrival there, the executioner threw down his sword and refused to perform his office. He said that if he were not allowed to take Alban's place then he would share his martyrdom. Confessing himself to be a Christian, the soldier was replaced by another. Then he took his stand beside Alban, and they faced death together. Alban was beheaded first, then the soldier, Saint Heraclius, was baptized in his own blood to share the glory of martyrdom. The third martyr was the priest, who when he learned that Alban had been arrested in his place, hurried to the court in the hope of saving Alban by turning himself in.

According to Bede, the governor was so impressed by the miracles that followed Alban's martyrdom that he immediately ended the persecutions, and Bede states that these miracles were still occurring in his lifetime at the intercession of England's protomartyr.

On the hill where these martyrdoms took place a church was later erected, and, 400 years later, Offa, the King of Mercia, founded on the same site the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Albans. According to Constantius of Lyons, Saint Germanus of Auxerre, at the end of a mission to England to combat the Pelagian heresy, chose the Church of Saint Alban as the place in which to thank God for the success of his mission. He brought back from England a handful of earth from the place where Alban, the soldier, and the priest were martyred.

The Proto-Martyr of England is portrayed in art as a warrior with a cross and shield. He may be depicted (1) crowned with laurel; (2) with a peer's coronet, holding a crossing; (3) with his head cut off; (4) with his head in a holly bush; (5) spreading his cloak under the sun; or (6) as his executioner's eye drops out. Alban is especially venerated in Saint Albans and Angers.

SAINT AARON OF BRITTANY, ABBOT (Died after 552.) The Briton Saint Aaron crossed into Armorica (Brittany) and lived as a hermit on the island of Cesambre, called Saint Aaron until 1150 and now Saint Malo. The island was separated from Aleth by an arm of the sea, which the tide at low water left dry twice daily. Eventually Aaron was joined by a group of disciples and became their abbot. Among the disciples was Saint Malo, who arrived from Wales about the middle of the 6th century and was warmly welcomed. A parish church in the diocese of Saint Briec bears Aaron's name.