Germanus, Alban and Auxerre

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Our earliest information on the cult of Romano-British martyr Alban is to be found in the *Vita Germani*. According to Constantius, Germanus, together with his companion Lupus of Troyes, visited the site of the saint’s burial in the course of his first visit to Britain, generally dated to 429. Constantius provides no detail of the visit, but this is supplied by early versions of the *Passio Albani*, the fullest of which is the so-called T version – named after the fact that it survives in a Turin manuscript. This recounts shows Germanus took relics of the apostles and various martyrs to the basilica where Alban was buried: perhaps significantly nothing is said of the whereabouts of the basilica. Equally important, the text also reveals that Germanus knew nothing about the British saint before his visit: it was only while he was at the basilica that Alban appeared to him, in a vision, revealing the tale of his persecution, so that it might be written down on tituli: *Sed cum ad basilicam ipsius noctuvigilasset, matutinis transactis, dum se sopori dedisset, sanctus Albanus adfuit, et, quae acta fuerant de persecutionibus eius, revelata tradidit utquet titulis scripta retinerentur publice declaravit*. As a result Germanus had the saint’s tomb opened, and had relics which he had brought with him inserted into it. He also gathered some earth stained with the saint’s blood to keep.

This text is remarkable for a number of points. First, although Germanus went to the basilica where Alban was buried, he clearly did not go because of the existence of the cult of a known saint. He only finds out about Alban in a vision while he is there. And as a result, he has the story of the saint’s Passio written down on tituli.

It is worth noting that this is not the only example from the fifth and sixth centuries of a nameless saint revealing himself to a bishop. A very clear parallel can be found in the account of the identification of the tomb of Benignus in Dijon. Gregory of Langres had tried to stamp out a popular cult at the site, but was unable to do so. The martyr then appeared to him in a vision, identifying himself. Subsequently a copy of the saint’s Passio was brought to Dijon by travellers from Italy.

It has been suggested that the cult of Alban was already known to Victricius of Rouen, who visited Britain shortly before the year 400. In his *De Laude Sanctorum*, he refers to the
story of a British martyr who walked through a river. This parallels a well-known episode in the martyrdom of Alban: the crowds of people were such that he could not cross the bridge leading to the site of his martyrdom, so he walked into the river, which parted to allow him through. Although there are clear similarities between the story in the Passio of Alban and that related by Victoricus, it is important to note that Victoricus never names the martyr, nor does he say which river he crossed. In other words, it is not clear that Victoricus is referring to Alban: and if he is, it is notable that, like Germanus before his vision, he appears not know the martyr's name.

A second important point to be noted in the T version of the Alban Passion is that the martyr tells Germanus the story of his persecution, and that this was then set down on tituli. Clearly the T text cannot have been the version of the Passio which Germanus had written down. The fact that it records the story indicates clearly that there must have been an earlier version. The possibility that the version set down by Germanus might have survived was obscured by Wilhelm Meyer in his edition of the Alban legends, because he concluded that the T text was the earliest of those in existence. Recently, however, Richard Sharpe has demonstrated that the so-called E text is earlier than the T recension. Unfortunately, Meyer did not edit the E text, assuming that it was merely an abridgement of his Turin version. The E version is easily the shortest of the early recensions of the Passio Albani. It does conclude with an account of Germanus' visit to the basilica where Alban was buried, but it does not mention the vision of Alban or the setting down of the martyr's passion on tituli. In the British Library manuscript the episode is described as follows: Ad cuius basilicam cum beatus Germanus episcopus cum omnium apostolorum diuersorumque martyrum reliquias peruenisset, in eundem locum pretiosa munera conditus reuelli sepulchrum iubet, ut membra sanctorum ex diuersis regionibus collecta, quos pares merito receperat caelum, sepulchriunius teneret hospicium. Quibus honorifice depositis atque eleuatis, de loco ipso ubi martyris sanguis effuderat, massam cruenti pulueris rapuit uiolenta quidem deuotione, sed pioeffectu, in cruore apparebat seruatumerubuisse martyris cedem persecutorum pallentem. Quibus rebus manifestis atque patefactis hominum ingens eadem die ad deum turba conversa est. It is perfectly possible that this was added to the text that Germanus had set down: certainly it is unlikely that the epithet beatus was used to describe the bishop of Auxerre during his lifetime. This addition apart, it is perfectly possible that the E text is indeed the version of the Passio Albani set down on tituli: its brevity is such that it could have been painted onto placards, as Sharpe suggested, or, perhaps more easily, onto the walls of a building.

Germanus visited Britain in order to combat the Pelagians, who were making considerable headway on the island. With this in mind, it is worth noting the emphases of the Passio. The basic narrative is simple: it is the story of a pagan Briton who decides to protect a Christian priest and changes clothes with him: he then defies the governor, insisting that he is a Christian, and as a result is executed. This could have been presented as the story of a man who saves another by his good works. This, however, is not how the hagiographer chooses to tell the tale: Alban simply acts, apparently irrationally. The crowd that gathers to see him executed behaves equally strangely: it acts gratia ineffabili. The use of the word gratia in a fifth-century text inevitably has anti-Pelagian overtones. If the text were first set down in the context of Germanus' visit to Britain, it would seem to be a propaganda document for use against the Pelagians. So too, one may interpret Germanus' actions at Alban's tomb in the same light: he opens the tomb of a
British saint and places in it relics of saints of the universal Church. At the same time he
gathers earth stained with the martyr’s blood to take back to the continent with him. All
of this looks to be propaganda: it is part of Germanus’ anti-Pelagian work, and not some
unrelated episode indicating his piety. And there is one other crucial point: it is
Germanus who gives Alban a name. If Victricius does indeed refer to Alban, it is striking
that he leaves him unnamed. Equally Germanus learns the martyr’s name in a dream. But
the name is supremely important: it is Alban, that is simply the man from Albion: the
native of Britain. The episode of Germanus’ visit to the tomb of the martyr is both an
aspect of his anti-Pelagian activities and also symbolic of the reintegration of Britain into
the Roman Church.

With regard to the composition of the Passio, there is, however, a further important
question, and that is the place of composition, and of its original display on tituli. Sharpe
is inclined to associate it with Auxerre itself, noting the reference in the Gesta pontificum
Autissiodorensium to Germanus building a basilica dedicated to Alban, with in the walls of
his city. Wolfert van Egmond, who has written the fullest recent study of the early
hagiography of Auxerre, is inclined to question whether Germanus did indeed found such
a church, given the absence of any reference to it in earlier sources. It does, however,
remain unlikely that the Passio Albani was written to be painted on tituli intended for the
place where the martyr was buried. Since Germanus’ visit seems to have been brief, the
logistics of composing a text and having it painted seem a little daunting.

Although it is true that there is no early reference to a basilica dedicated to Alban in
Auxerre, or indeed to the cult of the martyr, it may be that the Passio provides some
crucial clues. As Sharpe pointed out, the Passio was written to be set out on tituli. This
word he translated as tituli. It is certainly true that the E text of the Passio is extremely
short. It would still have required a large number of placards. But tituli could equally
have been painted on the wall of a basilica, perhaps even underneath paintings of the
story. That substantial pieces of prose and verse were placed on the walls of fifth- and
sixth-century churches is clear from the collection from Tours known as the Martinellus.
Indeed, some of the Martinellus texts are no longer than individual sections of the E
version of the Passio Albani, only one section of which, the description of the martyr site
as a locus amoenus, is in any way expansive.

The Martinellus provides us with evidence for substantial texts being put on the walls of
late antique churches in Gaul. The crypt of S. Germain in Auxerre provides us with
evidence for the painting of texts on the walls of an early medieval church. None of these
texts can be date dearlier than the ninth century. What they do show, however, is that
there was an early medieval tradition of painting quite long texts on the walls of the
basilica of S. Germain. One should perhaps ask whether the Passio Albani lies right at the
beginning of this tradition. Were major texts painted on the walls of the churches of
Auxerre from the days of Germanus himself? Indeed, was it the bishop’s vision of the
British martyr, and his subsequent decision to have the story painted on the walls, that
led to the tradition of painting substantial texts on the walls of S. Germain.

What all this suggests is that the earliest Passio of Alban needs to be considered in the
context of Germanus’ work in Britain and in Auxerre. The story of the saint’s martyrdom
seems to have been revealed to, or invented by, Germanus in the context of his anti-
Pelagian mission to Britain. The earliest written version of the story would seem to have
been commissioned by Germanus almost immediately after his visit to the shrine of
Alban. It would seem to have been intended for the walls of a church in Auxerre. Perhaps
the text alone was painted on the walls: but perhaps there were illustrations that went with it. Finally, it would seem that the texts which are still to be seen on the walls of the crypt of S. Germain mark the continuance of a tradition which began at least as early as the days of Germanus himself.

ANNEXES

[191v] Tempore persecutionis s(an)ct(us) alban(us) quantu(m) antiquitas tradidit adhuc pagan(us) clericu(m) persecutores fugiente(m) hospitio recept. Ipsiusquis(e) habitu id e(st) caracalla qua ipse uestie bat(ur) indut(us) p(er) eodem se obtulit. Stati(m)q(ue) iudici oblat(us) est. Q(ui) cu(m) ante chr(isti) anitatis agnitione(m) chr(ist)ianum se e(ss)e i(n)vesti gatione fateret(ur). gladio p(er)cuti iubet(ur). Cumq(ue) eu(m) ad uictima(m) ducerent, p(er)uenit ad fluuiu(m) q(uo) muru(m) & harena(m) ubi feriend(us) erat meatu rapidissimo diui debat, uidit ingente(m) hominu(m) multitudine(m) utri(u)sq(ue) sexus c(on)ditionis & etatis que sine dubio diuinitatiss instincu ad obsequiu(m) martyr is uocab(u)Ut occupasse ponte(m) ut intra uesp(er)a(m) uix transire posset. Deniq(ue) cunctis p(a)ene egressu iudex obsequ(u) o in ciuitate substiterat. Tunc beatissim(us) alban(us) confert se ad tor-rente(m) cui diu inerat deuotio m(it)is ad ad martyr ium oci(us) p(er)uenire . et dirigenti ad caelu(m) lumina ilico sic-cato alueo successit. Immo p(er)cessit unda uestigiis. Cu(m)q(ue) ad locu(m) destinatum morti uenisset. occurrit ei stric-tcto gladio carnifex precans p(ro) martyr se puniri precans q(ue) martyr(m) p(er)cussur(us) erat. proiectoq(ue) a se impio gladio ad s(an)c(t)i albani pedes aduoluit(ur) et repente fact(us) e(st) ex p(er)-secutore collega. Cu(m) q(uo) is ex p(er)secutore fact(us) e(ss)e collega ac iacenti ferro e(ss)e et int(er) carnifices iusta cuncatiao: montem cum turb(is) s(an)c(t)i martyr ascendit, siqu(i) mons oportu nue et eeditor letus gr(ati)a ineffabili : quingentis fere passib(us)
ab harena situs e(st) : uariis floribus pictis atque uestate:
in qu(o) nichil e(st) arduum nichil p(ere)cps . nichil abruptum
que lateribus longe lateunt . in quo nihil est arduum nihil preceptum .
nihil abruptumque lateribus longe lateunt : a facie equoris
natura complanat . Cui autem dubium e(st) huic martyri
e(ss)e p(ere)paratum qu(a)e iam prius quam sacro consecraretur cruo :
sacrum similis fecerat pulchritudo . in cuibus vertice
dari sibi beat(us) alban(us) aquam rogavit . statimque incre-
dibili meatu ante martyr pedes fons perennis
exortum e(st) ut omne(s) cognoscerent : etiam torrentem martyri
obsequium dedisse ; Ne quisque fieri poterat ut in arduis montis
cacumine aq(uam) martyr peteret quam utiq(ue) flumen
reliquar at sic ut fluvium(s) non uidetur . Qui denique martyr
p(er)soluto deuotione completa officii testem con receu(us)
reus e(st) ad naturam . Nec illud pretererundum putau
quod carnifici illi radicet ad tera lumina ceciderunt .
[191r] qu(uo) piis ceruicibus intulit impias manibus . Tu sancti martyris
caput abscederat : ibique etiam carnificem illi celebra
materiae aq(uam) sacrum commodum d(e)um d(e)u(e)re
noluerant laute et ipse per(cussam) e(st) . Tunc iudex animi
tanta noutate per(culsa) iniustas etiam principem
persecutiones ibuet cessari, referens augeri potius reli
zione(s) s(an)c(tu)m deuotionem ibuet cessari, referens augeri potius reli

Ad cuius basilica cu(m) benedictus episcopus cu(m) omnibus .
locu mundae conditura, reuelli sepulchrum ibet
ut mebra s(an)c(tu)m ex diuer(sis) regionibus collecta . Qu(uo)s pa
res merito receptae at ceu(m) sepulchri unius tenens hospici
mum . Quibus honorifice depositis atque sociatis . de loco
ipso ubi martyris sanguis effusus esse massam cruent
Uiolenta quidem deuotione . Sed
pio affectu . Quibus(us) rebus manifestatis atue(patefactis
ingens hominum multitudo eadem die ad duum convenerant .
Regnante domini nostro ihesu christo .

Bibliographie
NOTES

3. GREGORY OF TOURS, Liber in Gloria Martyrum, 50, ed. B. KRUSCH, Monumenta Germaniae Historica 1, 2, Hanover, 1885.
7. For a transcription of the earliest manuscript of the E text, see I. N. WOOD, « Levison and St Alban », forth coming. It should be noted that the four surviving manuscripts of the E version contains trikingly different readings.
8. R. SHARPE, « The late antique... », op. cit., p. 36.
9. I. N. WOOD, « The End of Roman Britain : continental evidence and parallels », in M. LAPIDGE and D. N. DUMVILLE (ed.), Gildas : New Approaches, Woodbridge, 1984, p. 1-25, at p. 12-14. It should be noted that I was then following Meyer’s opinion as to which of the versions of the Passio Albani was the earliest.
12. W. VAN EGMOND, Conversing with the Saints : Communication in Pre-Carolingian Hagiography from Auxerre, Turnhout, 2006, p. 90-96. Unfortunately van Egmond was not aware of Sharpe’s work : he does not, therefore, discuss the E text of the Passio Albani.
13. R. SHARPE, « The late antique... », op. cit., p. 36.

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Mots-clés : Germain (saint), Alban (saint)