

Amphibalus – the cathedral's patron saint who wasn't

Was there a predecessor to Swithun as a patron saint of the Old Minster? The cathedral's patron saints are SS Peter, Paul and Swithun now but for nearly nine hundred years there has been a claim that a legendary saint identified with St Albans Abbey (a cathedral since 1877) may have set aside and replaced as patron by St Swithun.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), says that around 440, the Romano-British King Constantine 'handed his first-born over to the church of Amphibalus in Winchester so that he might enter a monastic order'.¹

Over time, the story grew wings. There are claims, which can be found online, that the cathedral 'had been under the patronage of St Amphibalus' before the enshrinement of St Swithun in the Old Minster in 971.² Also, it is mooted that one of the statues on the Butter Cross in Winchester High Street is not of St John the Evangelist, as long thought, but of St Amphibalus.³

The story of Amphibalus is rather convoluted and is linked to St Alban who was martyred, it is believed, in an amphitheatre near Verulamium in modern-day Hertfordshire. This occurred in late Roman Britain and three dates are suggested c. 209, c. 254 or c. 305, all of them periods when Christians were persecuted for their beliefs.

Bede's *A History of the English Church and People*,⁴ the first great martyrology which is dated to 731, says that Alban sheltered a priest who converted him to Christianity. Soldiers came to search his house and Alban protected the unnamed priest by dressing in his gowns. Alban was arrested and after refusing to offer sacrifice to the

¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of England*, translated by Lewis Thorpe. London: The Folio Society, 1969: 130.

² www.thenewadvent.org (Catholic Encyclopedia)

³ <https://www.cityofwinchester.co.uk/Cathedral/See/see.html>

⁴ Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, translated by Leo Shirley-Price. London: Penguin, 1968 44-47.

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Roman gods was tortured and then beheaded. Before he died, one executioner was converted by his example. The executioner who completed the task was punished instantly when his eyes fell out at the moment of Alban's bloody death.

The name of the priest, whom some accounts say was later caught and executed, was unknown. It was Geoffrey of Monmouth who gave him the name of Amphibalus which means cloak or vestment and is not a known first name. One definition of an *amphibalus* is as a chasuble,⁵ the long vestment worn by clergy as their outermost liturgical gown. In Roman times, it was similar to a poncho – an oval piece of cloth with a round hole which passed over the head and fell below the knees on all sides.

The name may have come as a result of a mistranslation, but the cult of St Amphibalus took off after his supposed body was discovered at St Albans in 1178. It remained closely associated with St Alban in written accounts, notably by the monk Matthew Paris in the thirteenth century, and in artistic representations.⁶ The photo (R) is of Amphibalus' tomb recently reinstalled at St Albans.



The publication of Geoffrey of Monmouth's history in c.1136, and the formation of the cult of St Amphibalus after 1178 took place in a very turbulent century. During this time, there was a civil war fought between the crowned King Stephen and Empress Matilda, a resurgence of the cults of English saints after their suppression in the Norman invasion, and the murder of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury in 1170. Becket's rapid canonization in 1173 led to his shrine quickly becoming the prime place of pilgrimage in England, with other cathedrals and abbeys scrambling to revive cults of local saints. The installation of Amphibalus' relics in St Albans Abbey soon after Thomas of Canterbury's enshrinement may have been one of those promotional responses to retain and attract pilgrims.⁷

⁵ The Reverend Canon Frederick Chasuble D.D. is a comic character in Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1885).

⁶ David Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th edition, revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 17.

⁷ Diana Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*. London: Hambledon and London, 2000, 58.

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The accuracy and validity of Geoffrey's history has long been questioned. One of his translators Lewis Thorpe says that it is 'strange, uneven and yet extraordinarily influential'.⁸ Recently, John Gillingham commented that in the early to mid-twelfth century 'there was a rising tide of nonsense, much of it the responsibility of Geoffrey of Monmouth'.⁹

There is also no record of a church dedicated to Amphibalus in Winchester to be found in Derek Keane's great survey of churches in medieval Winchester. It was probably a figment of Geoffrey of Monmouth's vivid imagination.

Despite a well-founded critique, Geoffrey's tales still appeal to those for whom facts get in the way of a good story. The claims that the unnamed Amphibalus was a patron saint of the Old Minster is one of those odd legends that hasn't quite disappeared.

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⁸ Lewis Thorpe, "Introduction", in Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of England*. London: Folio Society, 1966, 9.

⁹ John Gillingham, "Richard of Devizes and 'a rising tide of nonsense': How Cerdic met King Arthur". In Martin A. Brett & David Woodman, *The Long Twelfth Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past* (p. 143). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.