

ST AMPHIBAL: THE PATRON SAINT OF MINERALOGY?

Fishermen have St Peter, blacksmiths have St Dunstan, but who oversees mineralogists as we work in the field or attend our analytical instruments? Geoscientists in mining have sometimes adopted patron saints, such as St Bridget, but I would like to propose that we adopt a figure from Romano-British history. You'll see my reasons below.

The history of our proposed saint begins around 300 AD in Verulamium, then one of the most important social centres in Roman Britain. This was a time of persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian, and in the far-flung parts of the empire, even in the wilds of Britain, explicit instructions were given to root out and execute Christians. Against this backdrop, a Briton in Verulamium named Alban gave shelter to a Christian preacher who was fleeing the authorities. During the evening, the priest made such a strong impression that Alban was converted to Christianity. When soldiers came for the preacher in the morning, Alban took the man's cloak and presented himself as the priest they sought. This event is celebrated in the annals of the early British church – Alban was subsequently executed and thus became the first British martyr. The site of Alban's shrine became a place of pilgrimage, and the town and Abbey of St Albans now occupy the site.

But what of the priest? There was no other record of him for 800 years, until Geoffrey of Monmouth described Alban's martyrdom in 1130 in his *History of the British Kings*. Geoffrey provided the priest with a name – Amphibal – a name mineralogists will readily recognize. Geoffrey was repeating an account written in the fifth century by the historian Gildas. Rather embarrassingly for Geoffrey, he misread the reference to Alban taking the priest's cloak (in Latin *amphibalus*) as a reference to the priest himself. Thus, however inaccurately, the priest who had been central to one of the most celebrated events in early English Christian history now had a name. With late medieval efficiency, Amphibal was soon furnished with other trappings of sainthood. He was given a detailed life history, published as the *Acts of Saints Alban and Amphibal*. And the final requirement for any medieval saint – a shrine – was provided around 1178 when Abbot Robert of St Albans declared one morning that he had been visited in a dream by St Alban who had divulged to him the resting place of St Amphibal. Subsequent excavations led to the discovery of several skeletons, the central of which was buried with a sword. The abbot's forensic team, fuelled by expectation, declared the site the resting place of Amphibal and his followers, slain and buried with the fatal sword in a mass grave. In all likelihood, the site of the discovery – the 'Mound of the Banners', in Redbourn just outside St Albans – was an Iron Age burial mound in which modern archaeologists would expect several burials with grave goods including swords and knives. The bones attributed to Amphibal were moved to St Albans Abbey, placed next to his convert, and a small monastery dedicated to his memory was established at the site of the discovery.

Amphibal's meteoric rise from unnamed priest to a major member of the calendar of British saints was fuelled by more than just heated imagination. In the economic conditions of the late 12th century, St Albans was losing pilgrims (and therefore income) to the new shrine of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury, and the arrival of a headline saint to rank alongside Alban was potentially important to buck the financial decline. It also had another significance for the Abbey – the Mound of the Banners on Redbourn common was land whose ownership had been the subject of dispute between the Abbey and the Earl of Warwick. The fact that Amphibal's bones had been found on the common was taken as a divine indication that the land should be under the Abbey's jurisdiction – not even the Earl of Warwick could argue with the word of Alban himself.

Therefore in medieval England the name 'Amphibal' was well known, albeit for different reasons than we might expect. He was a central figure among the English saints, and his feast day, June 24, was widely celebrated. Amphibal was not an uncommon Christian name in England.

And that would have remained the case had it not been for the English reformation. Henry VIII of England broke links with the Roman Catholic Church, and in 1539 he seized all ecclesiastical possessions, among them the lands of St Albans Abbey. The monks who tended the monasteries at St Albans and Redbourn were evicted, and church lands, including St Amphibal's monastery, were sold off at bargain basement prices. Henry's son Edward VI further enforced Protestant philosophies as all the major shrines in the churches of England and Wales were systematically destroyed. Among them were the shrines of Alban and Amphibal: in a few hours the hammers of Edward's soldiers reduced one of the most holy sites in England to rubble. With pilgrimage now frowned upon and the reverence of saints too close to idolatry for the tastes of the time, one of the most important figures in English church tradition was consigned to obscurity.

Two events have since helped restore the name of Amphibal. In the late 19th century, construction work in the Abbey's south chapter revealed parts of the shrines of Alban and Amphibal, broken but still recognizable, filling the walls of the church. From these parts, both shrines have been largely reconstructed. Neither is entirely complete, probably since the faithful of the time sneaked in to take pieces as a personal talisman. If you ever visit St Albans, the shrine to St Amphibal is in the south nave.

About the same time, French mineralogist René-Just Haüy identified a dark mineral with two excellent cleavages that closely resembled pyroxene. Haüy was trained at the college of Navarre in Paris in classical languages and theology. He was commonly called Abbé Haüy after he was made an honorary canon of Notre Dame in Paris by Napoleon. Haüy's choice of new mineral names reflected his classical education in Greek and Latin. However, it is also highly likely that he was familiar with the legend of St Alban, which was widely recounted across continental Europe. Indeed there are several churches dedicated to St Alban in France and Germany and there is a St Alban's cathedral in Odense, Denmark. Haüy's official etymology of the mineral name 'amphibole' is from the Greek ἀμφίβαλος (*amfibalos*) meaning 'ambiguous' because of its similarity to pyroxene, but forgive me if I like to think he also named it after the saint.

So if your mass spectrometer or electron probe is not functioning, if your fieldwork is going badly or if your students cannot identify feldspar in thin section, say a short prayer to St Amphibal. He is well placed to help and probably feeling largely forgotten.

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