

The Hagiographical Tradition: Bede's and Foxe's Accounts of the Martyrdom of St. Alban

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Abstract

By comparing the accounts of the martyrdom of the English proto-saint Alban written by Bede (c. 673-735) and John Foxe (1516/7-1587), this essay aims to analyse how the sixteenth-century author reworked the medieval genre of the *passio* to create a new history of the English Church that incorporated the martyrs of the Reformation movement.

Keywords: Hagiography; Martyrdom; Bede; John Foxe; Reformation

Resumo

Através da comparação das narrativas do martírio do santo inglês Alban escritas por Beda (c. 673-735) e John Foxe (1516/7-1587), este ensaio procura analisar como o autor do século XVI recuperou o género medieval da *passio* para criar uma nova história da Igreja da Inglaterra que incorporava os mártires da Reforma Protestante.

Palavras-chave: Hagiografia; Martírio; Beda; John Foxe; Reforma

Introduction

Western biography has its origins in educational stories of remarkable men from the Classical period. These had moral purposes and often a political agenda but were also written to entertain (Lee 22-5). These characteristics were inherited by the literature of the Medieval Ages, dominated by religious texts written in monasteries throughout

all Christendom in the first centuries of the period. The most popular were the saint's lives, or hagiography ("holy writing"). Much like classical life-writing, which emphasised traits and provided models of behaviour, hagiography displayed prototypical virtues that should be imitated by fellow believers (Lee 25). It followed a standard pattern and structure and did not change much since its emergence in the fourth century until the end of the Middle Ages, although, over time, they became more complex and interested in the saint's conversions and self-doubts than in listing the miracles performed (Lee 25).

After a period of long decay, hagiography was recovered in England by authors of the sixteenth century who wanted to write a history of the English Church that incorporated the persecution and martyrdom of Protestants by Henry VIII (1491-1547) and Mary I (1516-1558). Although some innovations were introduced, the genre remained identical, with the Protestant martyrs being used as examples of faith and devotion in contrast with the evil and tyranny of the members of the Roman Catholic Church. The best example of the appropriation of hagiography in the period is John Foxe's (1516/7-1587) *The Acts and Monuments of the Church*, a vast collection of persecutions. First published in England in 1563, the book popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs* became well-known and ultimately found its place next to the Bible in English churches. To understand how Foxe reworked the medieval hagiographic model to fulfil certain religious and political purposes, we are going to compare his text about the martyrdom of St. Alban, considered the first English saint and martyr, with his main source for the story, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731), by Bede (c. 673-735).

We will start by looking at *The Ecclesiastical History* and to what Bede wanted to achieve with it. Also, in the first part of this essay, we will briefly analyse the main aspects of the martyrdom of St. Alban as told by the Northumbrian monk, which stands here as a typical example of hagiographical production in the early Middle Ages. This will allow us to explore several aspects of hagiography and understand better Foxe's recount of the story and his approach to Bede's narrative. Foxe's version will be addressed in the second part. We will look at some passages from the 1583 definitive edition of *The Acts and Monuments* and highlight aspects that will reveal Foxe's conception of martyrdom while comparing it with Bede's views on the subject. We will conclude with some final remarks that we hope will highlight the differences and the similarities between the two texts that are part of the same ancient literary tradition.

I. The martyrdom of St. Albans in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731)

Bede's account of the martyrdom of St. Alban occupies all Chapter 7 of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Finished in 731, in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria, the book was intended as an account of the history of the Christian Church in British territory, starting with the Roman conquest of the British Islands and ending with the consecration of the ninth archbishop of Canterbury, Tatwine (c. 670-734), in 731. Bede's literary effort should be understood within a wider cultural, religious and political movement of attempting to connect the history of the Church with the story of his people, whose acceptance of Christianity happened later (mid-seventh century) than on the continent. Hagiography of the early Anglo-Saxon period presented the first English saints as prominent members of the growing international Christian community while proclaiming "to all of Christendom the place that the English had carved out for themselves" in the same group (Anderson 135). Complying with the spirit of the time, Bede included stories about those figures in *The Ecclesiastical History*. Not all were technically English, like St. Alban, but Bede and consequent writers seem to regard them as such since they place them in the territory.

The story of St. Alban, as told by Bede, can be classified as *passio* or *martyrion*, one of two primary models of hagiographical narrative. A *passio* is focused on the suffering and death of a saint or martyr and usually omits other details about his or her life, developed in the *vita*, which narrates his or her whole existence, from birth to death (Palmer 20). It is characteristically set in the age of persecutions and divided into three main moments: interrogation by the authorities; refusal to renounce the Christian faith and worship pagan gods, followed by torture; and martyrdom, usually by decapitation, following the example of St. Paul (Anderson 134). In both the *passio* and the *vita*, death is the climax of the story. It is generally described as a moment long-awaited by the "true" believer, who accepts it with undisturbed peace of mind. Gregory of Tours emphasised its importance in shaping the cult of saints, saying that no one should be called a saint until he is dead (Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* 245).

Bede places the martyrdom of St. Alban in modern St. Albans, in the time of the Great Persecution of the fourth century, ordered by the Roman emperor Diocletian. An obscure figure before his election in 284, Diocletian took action against Christians in 301, when he demanded the surrender of scriptures and the demolishing of churches. Subsequent edicts dismissed all Christians in state service and subjected them to legal

disabilities. Finally, he ordered the arrest of the clergy (Kazhdan 626). Bede describes the Diocletian Persecution, “the tenth persecution after Nero”, as the cruelest, saying that innocent people were outlawed and martyrs were slaughtered (16). The historical introduction in Chapter 6 prepares the ground for the story of the martyrdom of St. Alban that comes next and contextualises the saint’s death. It also makes him look more real and his story more believable.

The liveness of the historical moment contrasts with the flatness of Alban’s personality. The evident aim of hagiography was to promote the cult, attract adherents, and empower the religious institutions that grew around the saints’ remains. This led to the emergence of a literary model that smoothed their particularities to render their appeal as ecumenical as possible (Anderson 133). The desire to foster the cult also led to a movement of intense copying and adaption of the best texts and ideas, which generated “bland stories about saints who were just like other saints - sometimes to the extent that the stories were virtually the same, only with the names and a few key details changed” (Palmer 21). The approach was conscientiously decided by many hagiographers that sought “to make their subject as much like a generic saint as possible” (Palmer 21). In the story of St. Alban, not much is told about him or his family, not only because these details are usually addressed in the *vita*, but also because they were not relevant to the story - Alban’s single function as a literary character is to provide an example for others to follow. Bede’s saints were not different from other saintly figures, for he resorted to the old literary mechanisms as others.

The cruelty of the actions taken by Diocletian is demonstrated at the beginning of Chapter 7, when Bede tells that, during the persecution, “St. Alban suffered” (16). This is the first reference to Alban, who is right from the start presented as someone who “suffered”, *i.e.*, a martyr. To Augustine, “the martyrs were *the membra Christi* par excellence. The hand of God that had rested with unshakable constancy above Christ rested also above his elect” (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 72). Martyrs and saints were thus often identified with the sufferings of Christ, “but also with the unmoved constancy of his election and the certainty of his triumph” (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 72). They were shaped in his example (*imitatio Christi*) and presented as individuals capable of following the teachings of Christ more perfectly than others and could therefore be used as patterns of Christian living (Cubitt 33-4). “It has long been recognized that the point of a saint is that they are a role model, an exemplar, somebody whose piety, charity, and continence anyone might aspire to match. Texts were explicitly designed to carry such examples of behaviour” (Palmer 28-9).

Bede then tells how the saint converted to Christianity inspired by the example of a cleric to whom he “gave hospitality” (16). The man, who was fleeing, was eventually discovered by the Romans. When the soldiers arrived to take him, St. Alban offered himself in his place and was presented before the judge. The Roman tried to make Alban worship pagan gods, but the saint “declared himself a Christian before the enemies of the faith and was not all afraid of the ruler’s threats” (17). Bede tells that although he was subjected to the worst tortures, the stubborn saint “bore them patiently and even joyfully for the Lord’s sake” (17). “I am now a Christian and am ready to do a Christian’s duty”, he declared, referring to the fact he was ready to be executed and to die for his faith (17), an attitude towards death defined by Augustine as *donum perseverantiae* (preservation of the state of grace till the end of one’s life).

The way Alban endured physical pain can be interpreted as the first of three miracles he performed. According to Peter Brown, the sufferings of the martyrs were miracles in themselves (*The Cult of the Saints* 79). They were a point “in a long chain of manifestations of the power of God throughout their lives, continued up to the present at their shrines” (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* 79). For Augustine, miracles are “acts of God, not subject to the laws of nature or the usual way in which man acts within nature, while nature and mankind are themselves subject to the ‘miraculous’ power of God” (Ward 5). It means saints do not have any miraculous power in themselves, being only agents through whom God signifies His power: “It is their special proximity to God because of the sanctity of their life that naturally explains the transference to and recapitulation in them of God’s own virtue” (Fadda 61).

The second miracle, the drying-up of a river, happened when Alban was being led to the place of execution. Bede makes clear that it was performed through the direct intervention of God after he “raised his eyes towards heaven” (18). On seeing the miracle, his executioner “cast himself down at the saint’s feet, earnestly praying that he might be judged worthy to be put to death either with the martyr whom he himself had been ordered to execute, or else in his place” (18). The sudden conversion of this man is a reminder of the true purpose of *mirabilia Dei* – to inspire “greater faith a devotion, to prayer and almsgiving and to the offering up to sacrifices to God in the holy oblation, for the deliverance of their kinsfolk” (Bede 209). There are not many early accounts of conversion in which miracles represent an instrumental part (Rosenthal 333), but in Bede’s text, they are crucial.

With his executioner turned into “a companion in the true faith” (Bede 18), Alban climbed the hill where he was to die. As Catherine Cubitt has pointed out, topography and geography were important in early Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives (40). In

Bede's work, the description of the place of execution of Alban coincides with the early-Christian imagery of Paradise, and its flourishing vegetation emerges as a symbol of the vigour of the blessed soul of the saint. Bede says its "natural beauty had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr" (18), which suggests predestination, as if Alban was destined to die there and be remembered for centuries to come.

When St. Alban reached the top of the hill, he asked again for God's intervention and a third miracle was performed: "a perpetual spring bubbled up, confined within its channel at his very feet" (18). "The river, when it had fulfilled its duty and completed its pious service, returned to his natural course, but it left behind a witness of its ministry" (18). Alban was beheaded on the spot and the ones responsible for his death were punished by God (their eyes fell to the ground together) (19). "Astonished by these strange heavenly miracles", the Roman judge ordered the end of all persecutions and "began to respect the way in which the saints met their death, though he had once believed that he could thereby make them forsake their devotion to the Christian faith" (19) - another reminder of the power of *mirabilia Dei*.

II. The martyrdom of St. Albans in *Acts and Monuments* (1583)

The Acts and Monuments of the Church, popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*, is a vast collection of accounts of religious persecution against British Protestants collected by John Foxe. It was "conceived as a new ecclesiastical history of the English Protestant Church and as a repository for the documentary evidence for that story" (Steward 57). Published in England in 1563, it had several editions. In the later ones, Fox expanded his chronology to incorporate the martyrdom of early English saints, setting the story of persecution and martyrdom in England in a much larger framework. In one of the prefaces, Fox explained his decision: "If Martyrs are to be compared with Martyrs, I see no cause why the Martyrs of our tyme deserue any lesse commendation, then the other in the primatiue Church, which assuredly are inferiour vnto them in no poynt of prayse" (qtd. in Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian" n.pag.). For him, these early stories were a way of authorising contemporary martyrdom and integration of Protestant martyrs in a long dynasty of noble figures that suffered and died for the 'true' faith.

The first saintly figure he chose to recover was St. Alban because he was "the first Martyr that euer in England suffered death for the name of Christ" (Fox 111). Fox tells the story of his martyrdom in the first book of the 1583 edition, the final one he published, about the ten first persecutions against Christians, during which an

“infinite” number of people were killed, including “certain particular Martyrs ... worthy of special memory ... for the more edification of other Christiās, which may and ought to looke vpon their examples” (111). Foxe’s account follows closely Bede’s version, except in the events leading to Alban’s execution. Contrary to Bede, Foxe did not think miracles were crucial, so he opted to offer a very summarised version of the extraordinary acts performed by the saint while calling the reader’s attention to the unreliability of the original story: the “prodigious miracles in his story ... seeme more legēdlike, then truthlike”, he says, admitting not seeing “great profit, nor necessitie in the relation thereof” in telling them. “I leaue them to the free iudgement of the Reader, to thinke of them, as cause shall moue him” (111).

One of Foxe’s intentions in recovering the early stories was to fight the “partial dealing and corrupt handling of histories” of the old writers and replace them with “the plain truth of times lying long hid in obscure darkness of antiquity” (qtd. in Collinson, “John Foxe as Historian” n.pag.). He argues that many aspects of the original story, including the “Monkish miracles and grosse fables”, do not make sense and were assembled by “Abbey monks . . . to beguile the whole world for their owne aduātage” (112). Foxe explains that he is not trying to degenerate “the blessed and faithful martyr of God”, no doubt worthy “of condigne commendation”. He only wishes his and others’ martyrdoms might have been delivered “simply as they were, w[t]out the admixture of all these Abbey like additiōs of Monkish miracles” (112).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the attitude towards the miraculous in England was very different from that of the Middle Ages. Protestants believed sainthood was accessible to any believer and was not dependent on the ability to perform marvelous deeds. Protestant ministers also maintained that miracles had long ceased. They did not deny they had taken place in biblical times but considered God no longer worked wonders. They were no longer necessary. This religious concept was explored in sermons and tracts, and by the early seventeenth century it had become a “cultural commonplace” (Walsham 274). But the reality was much more complex than implied. As Alexandra Walsham has shown, the question of miracles, which was connected with the discussion of the precise mechanisms by which Providence worked, occupied a “grey area” in Protestant theology, but ministers were not interested in exposing those ambiguities to the laity. Instead, “in a context of confessional rivalry, they often glossed over the technical, polemically driven distinction between a miracle and a providence” (Walsham 287). Like other Roman Catholic opponents, Foxe tried to decentralise the role of the miraculous, calling attention to what, in his view, really meant to be a martyr: risking life to testify on behalf of Christ. All the stories of

Protestant martyrs he collected are focused on the attitude of the accused against the accusers and on how those people stood bravely against authorities without denying their faith, even when subjected to the most violent tortures, and not on the marvellous deeds they performed. This is one of the main differences between his work and Bede's, but both authors follow the same old literary tradition.

The Acts and Monuments is a reworking of the medieval *passio*, following the same three-part structure of interrogation, refusal to recant, often followed by torture and execution accepted with cheerful readiness to die. Foxe's martyrs are also depicted as following the example of Christ and as examples themselves or as seeing their suffering as a means of attaining union with Jesus after death (King xxxvii), and their words were understood as being important, namely their final ones, pronounced at the stake. The political aspect is also present. Various authors have called attention to how "the militant anti-Catholicism in this book was fundamental to the emergence of an English nation and an insular identity" (Hattaway 110) after the ups and downs of the Reformation movement in England. Considered the most relevant collection of life-writing in early modern England and the second most important book of the period after the Bible, Foxe's book created a model for the Protestant suffering under the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church (Steward 13) whose representatives are described as cruel and devilish. By redefining the past and designing the present, Fox contributed, like Bede before him, to the birth of a new national identity forged from the history of the Church.

Fox then goes on to give other details he found out during his research (or by one of his collaborators) and tries to clarify some points he considers nebulous, like the name of the clerk and spiritual guide of Alban and the time of the saint's martyrdom. Foxe's preoccupation with historical accuracy makes it impossible for him to add much more to the story, so he turns his attention to the historical aspects of the episode. He ends the chapter with information about the ten persecutions and their impact on the Christian population in Britain and on the continent (112), demonstrating, once again, his preoccupation with historical rigour that is present throughout his book, which is full of quotes from sources he "faithfully collected" to write the "full and complete story" (qtd. in Collinson, "John Foxe as Historian" n.pag.) of the persecution in England. The compilation of original documents which is at the base of his work brings it much closer to the great encyclopaedic works of the Middle Ages than to what we can call an "original work". This characteristic is not unique to Foxe's work. As stressed out by Daniel Woolf, "there is a high degree of continuity between late medieval and Tudor historical writing", namely "the dominance of the standard form

for the recording of stories about the past” that we find in Foxe and that “continued well into the century” (417-8).

Conclusion

Although written centuries apart, the accounts of Bede and John Foxe of the martyrdom of the English proto-saint Alban share similar characteristics. They both imitate the old hagiographical model of the *passio*, established in Late Antiquity, without introducing much innovation. Both texts follow a specific religious and political agenda. They were written “to make a claim for a legacy”, one of the goals of early modern life-writing identified by Alan Steward (9) that can also apply to other historical periods and authors. In both cases, they were trying to link the foundation of the English Church to the long history of the Christian Church, validating its claims as the most distinguished member of the Christian community. In doing so, they were carving a sense of national identity that was closely connected to the history of the Church itself: for both authors, being English meant to be a Christian (although not the same kind of Christian); and to be a ‘good’ Christian, meant to be willing to suffer and even to die for the faith, following the example of Christ. St. Alban is the perfect representation of someone capable of following the teachings of Christ, and his story can therefore be used as a pattern of living for others. It was one of the purposes of hagiographical narrative: to provide a model of behaviour that others might aspire to match. Because of that, these authors were not interested in individualising the saint: he represents a “type”, not himself.

The main difference between the two texts has to do with the miraculous. For Bede, miracles were acts of God performed by martyrs by His direct intervention to win the hearts of men to Christianity; for Foxe, they were “grosse fables” (112), introduced by monks for their advantage, that distracted the reader for what in his opinion really mattered: the exemplar behaviour and suffering of the martyr. Besides these and other small differences, such as the branch of Christianity professed by the authors, both texts belong to the same literary tradition of life-writing, which Foxe and other English Protestant writers tried to rehabilitate in the seventeenth century to answer to the religious, social and political convulsions of the time, in an age when the dominance of hagiography had long faded away (Lee 25). The popularity of Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* attests to the success of his enterprise that was only possible because, like Bede before him, he followed a model well established and much loved: many readers acknowledge the effect it had on them (Steward 726) and the book continued to be printed, revised and adapted in the next century (Collinson 384; Hattaway 110).

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