At some point, probably in the ninth century – the exact date remains uncertain – Danish raiders attacked the English Benedictine abbey of St Albans in Hertfordshire. They carried off not only worldly treasures, but also the relics of the abbey’s patron saint, and brought them to a place called Owense (Odense). Distraught, the monks embarked on a penitential campaign of praying and begging, in the hope that God would allow the relics to be restored. One of those participating most fervently was Egwin, the abbey’s sacristan (and so in charge, among other things, of the relic collection). One night, while asleep, Egwin experienced a vision. In it a man of noble appearance, with the long flowing hair and beard that – the text stressed – made him easily identifiable as one of the ancient Britons, prodded the monk awake with a golden staff. Once assured of Egwin’s attention, the apparition revealed himself to be none other than St Alban, who told Egwin that God would grant the monks’ wishes. Egwin then set out to find the place where Alban’s remains were kept. On reaching Owense, he abandoned his monastic habit, and sought to make friends with the monks he found already resident there. Egwin eventually earned such respect for his morality, prudence, eloquence and knowledge, that the Danish brethren asked him to join their community. This Egwin did, and after a few years became their sacristan. He showed particular devotion to the shrine in which not only St Alban, but also the monks’ treasure was kept. He spent many a night praying there in solitude in order to prepare a casket in which to hide the bones of St Alban. Eventually, Egwin managed to retrieve the remains. Without revealing its content, he passed the casket to an English merchant he had befriended, with strict instructions to bring the chest to St Albans. The merchant, unaware of the nature of his cargo, delivered it to England safely. Once news reached Egwin that Alban was securely back in Hertfordshire, he asked for leave to visit his native shores. After a most festive welcome at St Albans, Egwin informed the monks of Odense as to what he had done, and his English brethren rejoiced at the miracles Alban immediately began to work.1

The incident is related in the mid-thirteenth-century redaction of the *Gesta Abbatum*, produced by St Albans’ most famous historian: Matthew Paris (c. 1200–c. 1259).² In fact, Matthew identified the passage specifically as his addition to the earlier text.³ It is difficult to determine how far the episode reflects actual events. Matthew claimed that raid and recovery had taken place during the time of the fourth abbot of St Albans, but gave no date. Following the *Gesta*, which takes the – entirely legendary – foundation of St Albans in 793 as its starting point, this would locate the Egwin episode in the beginning or middle of the ninth century, just after the Christianization of Denmark had begun, and about a century before a bishopric was established at Odense.⁴ That is, Egwin’s adventures are chronologically impossible. The tale may, however, echo later events. A Danish tradition maintained that in the eleventh century, relics from St Alban had been acquired during a raid and brought to Odense Cathedral.⁵ The Peterborough Chronicle similarly reported Danish raids in the 1080s,⁶ while well into the twelfth century the monks of Ely disputed St Albans’ possession of the relics, claiming that they had been brought to Ely for safekeeping during a Danish raid in the previous century.⁷ Collectively, these accounts raise the possibility that relics from St Albans may indeed have been acquired through plunder, though, as we have seen, no firm evidence exists to link Egwin’s adventures to a concrete, independently attested event.


³ *Gesta abbatum*, 1.19. The *Gesta* were initially written c. 1178. The original text is, however, lost, and Matthew’s remains the earliest surviving manuscript.


⁵ *Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, ed. M. Cl. Gertz (3 vols.; Copenhagen, 1908–12), 1.60. The story was repeated in the *Passio: Vitae Sanctorum Danorum*, 1.60–70. I am grateful to Thomas Foerster and Paul Gazzoli for their help with the Danish evidence. For the cult of Cnut see also Haki Antonsson, *St Magnús of Orkney. A Scandinavian Martyr-Cult in Context* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 127–129.
