

Saint Theobald

The story of Saint Theobald has been handed down to us thanks to a precious fourteenth-century parchment scroll, which can be found in the Archivio Capitolare library.

Saint Theobald was born at Vicoforte di Mondovì in about **1100** and he and Saint Lawrence are co-patrons of Alba. Leaving Vicoforte in search of work, the young Theobald settled in Alba and began working as a cobbler, a trade he practised until he went on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela carrying only a staff and bundle.

When he returned to Alba he began tending to the town's poor and served as the verger in the cathedral. There is a famous episode in his life known as **the miracle of the flour**. One day the owner of the shoemaker's shop where he had been working asked him to take a sack of wheat to the mill to have it ground into flour for the family. Theobald agreed to do so but ended up giving away handful after handful of the contents to the poor he met along the way. Lacking the courage to return empty-handed, he filled the sack with sand, left it on the woman's doorstep and ran away. Nobody understood why he had fled, for the woman had found the sack filled with flour! Only later did she learn of Theobald's generous gesture. He was called back to Alba where he was joyously welcomed by the woman. Not long afterwards he died (in **1150**).

Soon afterwards the news of his saintliness spread and numerous pilgrims flocked to Alba. Their donations were so generous it was possible to finance four major construction projects, namely to connect the church of San Silvestro to the cathedral and build the bell tower, adding the "volte" (a sort of arcade on the side of the cathedral, where local community held the meetings, and the hospital now named after him.

In accordance with his wishes, Theobald's body was buried in the bare earth, in a hidden spot between the cathedral and the church of San Silvestro, where it was found centuries later.

Chronicles report that in **1429** Bishop **Alerino Rambaudi**, struck by divine inspiration, exhumed the remains of the patron saint and to this day they are preserved in a precious reliquary in the chapel dedicated to him. When the remains were found on 31 January, the miraculous sound of bells was heard and from that day on his feast day was rung in by bells. Celebrations in honour of Saint Theobald have always been sponsored mainly by the **Shoemakers' Guild**.

Reliquary bust of Saint Theobald, 1429-c.1450

Embossed, chiselled, engraved and gilded silver, rock crystal

This precious piece of metalwork was made to store the head of Saint Theobald, following the discovery of his remains in 1429 by the Bishop of Alba, Alerino Rambaudi. A carved memorial stone, embedded in the chapel dedicated to the saint in the Cathedral of Alba, commemorates the date of the memorable event: the 31st of January, 1429.

The reliquary is made of thin sheets of embossed and chiselled silver, with the hair, beard and moustache softly sculpted in gilded spiralling curls. The features are rather stylized and severe, giving the face a solemn, somewhat archaic appearance.

The head is attached to the very simple bust, unadorned except for an oval rock crystal at the neck.

As previously mentioned, this splendid object was produced after Bishop Rambaudi's discovery of the saint's remains in 1429, probably some time before the prelate's death in 1456.

Documents show that the saint's bust has been kept with the cathedral's other relics since the early 16th century. It was mentioned for the first time in an inventory dated 7 May, 1500. Its presence among the relics stored in the sacristy continued to be noted in later inventories, at least until the "*recognitio*" of Bishop Luigi Maria Grassi in 1946. In other archival documents, we have found evidence that it was often displayed for public worship, as the generous offerings left by the faithful on those occasions were recorded.

At the end of the 1960s, we can also find mention of the last of the pilgrimages that the inhabitants of Vicoforte had been making to Alba every 25 years since 1711 to pay their respects to the reliquary of "their" saint.

Since the remains were discovered, the head has been solemnly displayed twice a year almost without exception: on 1 June, during the liturgical feast, and on the night of 31 January, accompanied by the sound of the cathedral bells.

It was carried in a procession on special occasions, like calamities, visits from sovereigns and religious holidays. According to ancient tradition, when the new Podestà of Alba took office, he had to pay tribute to the saint. It was also displayed for dying people in need.

Due to theft, all traces were lost at the start of the 1980s, and the bust was only rediscovered in October 2011 in Minneapolis in the United States, thanks to information from an individual.

