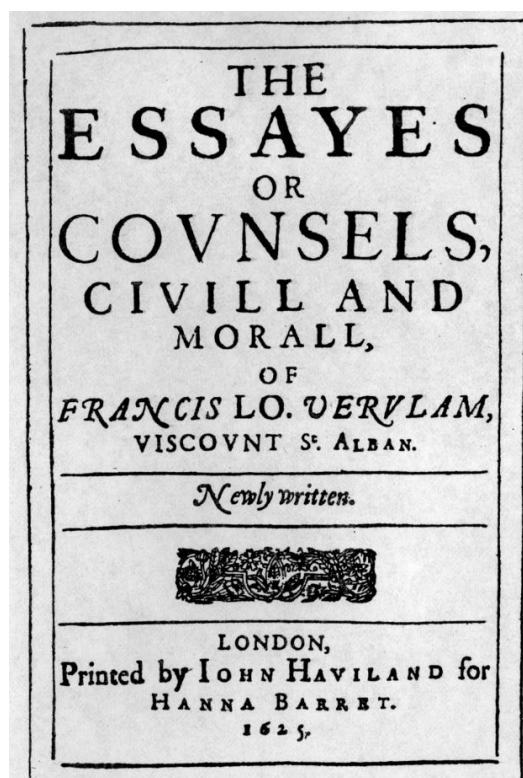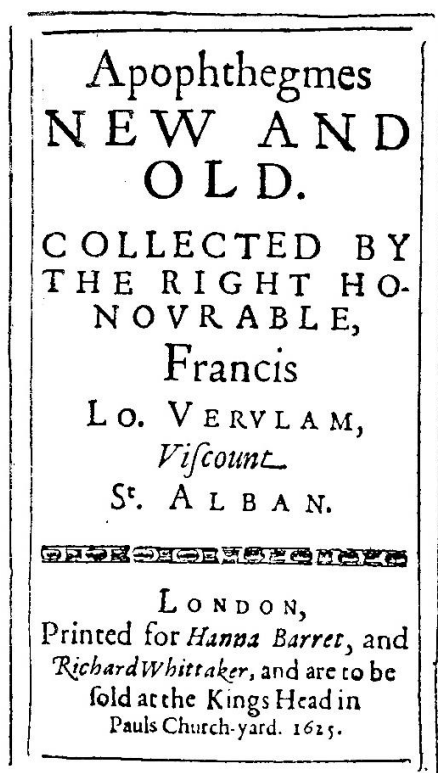# Francis St Alban

An elucidation of Sir Francis Bacon's title of Viscount Saint Alban, which deliberately references the saint, St Alban, and not the place, St Albans.
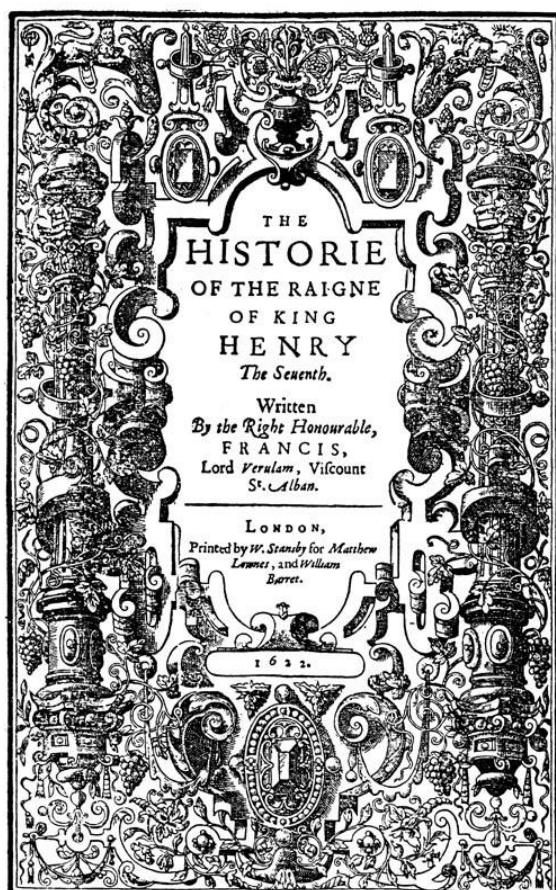
Author: Peter Dawkins

It is important to note that the title given to the Lord Chancellor, Sir Francis Bacon, by King James I in January 1621, was Viscount St Alban. It was *not* Viscount St Albans as commonly, but erroneously, used. Bacon's title references the saint, St Alban, and not the place, St Albans.

After he was given the title, Bacon was referred to in letters as "Lord St Alban" or "Lord Viscount St Alban", and signed himself as "Fr. St Alban". His correct title was also printed on the title pages of his books published in English, including: -

- *The Historie of the Raigne of King Henry The Seventh. Written By the Right Honourable, Francis, Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Alban* (1622);

- *Apophthegmes New and Old. Collected by the Right Honourable Francis Lo. Verulam, Viscount St. Alban* (1625);

- *The Essayes or Counsles, Civill and Morall, of Francis Lo. Verulam, Viscount St. Alban* (1625);

- *Sylva Sylvarum or A Naturall History in Ten Centuries. Written by the right Honble Francis Lo. Verulam, Viscount St Alban* (1627).

Because a noble title normally referenced a place, it eventually became fairly common for publishers, writers, editors, scholars, artists and others to erroneously, and ignorantly, alter Bacon's title to Viscount St Albans—a practice that still continues to be repeated today. However, if the title had been intended to reference the place, Bacon's title would have been Viscount of St Albans; but there is no "of" in Bacon's title.

The accurate recognition of Bacon's true title was, perhaps, not helped by the Latin publications of his works,[1] in which the authorship attribution on the title pages, "Francisci Baconis de Verulamio, Vice-comitis Sancti Albani," is usually mistranslated as "Francis Bacon of Verulamium, Viscount [of] St Albans", instead of the more grammatically correct translation, "By Francis Bacon of Verulamium, Viscount St Alban".
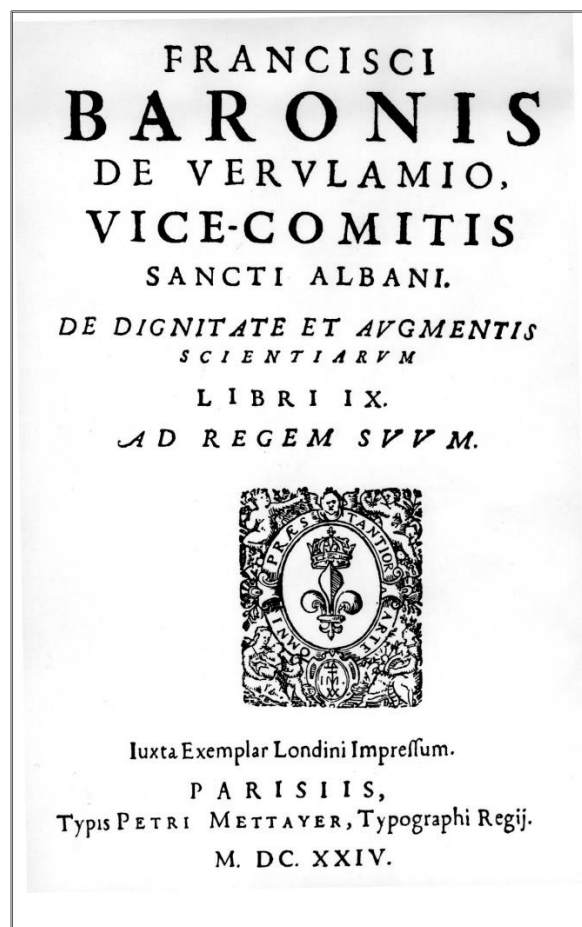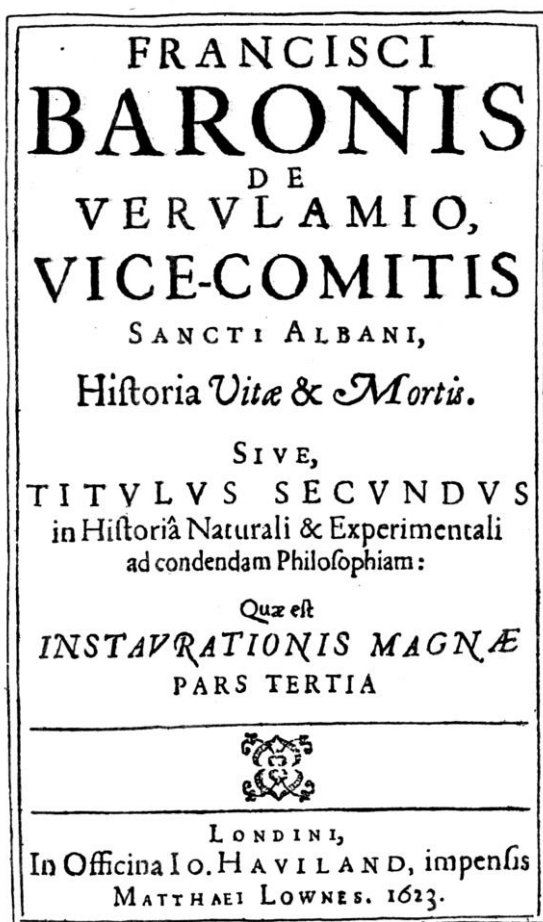
The fact that the earlier title bestowed on Bacon in July 1618 was Baron Verulam of Verulam should have provided the clue to those who erroneously 'corrected' Bacon's Viscount St Alban title. The Baron Verulam of Verulam title contains the word 'Verulam' twice. The second 'Verulam' comes after the word 'of', following the usual practice of a title referring to a place, which, in this instance, was the Roman town of Verulamium, part of the ruins of which underlie Bacon's family home and estate, Gorhambury, which neighbours the town, St Albans.

Normally the Verulam title would have been simply Baron of Verulam, which many people since Bacon's time have assumed is the case, perhaps because Bacon, as the baron, used to sign his letters as "Fr. of Verulam", and his publications named him as "Francis Lo. Verulam" or "Francis, Lord Verulam", following common practice. However, his full title was Baron

Verulam of Verulam. The first Verulam, therefore, is not a place-name but a description of Bacon himself, just as St Alban is in the later title. 'Verulam' roughly translates as 'Spear-shaker'; 'St Alban' likens Bacon to the saint of that name, who sacrificed his life in order to save the life of another—and the lives of many others, as it turned out.

The name 'Alban' is a pseudonym given to the saint as a descriptive term, thereby concealing his real name. The Latin form of the Romano-British saint's name was Albanus, a name derived from the Latin word 'albus', meaning 'white', 'pure', 'holy' or 'innocent'. The ecclesiastical white garment known as an alb is similarly derived.

Naturally, there was a very good reason why Francis Bacon was associated with the saint rather than the place.

Endnotes

[1] e.g. *Historia Naturalis et Experimentalis* (1622); *Historia Vitae & Mortis* (1623); *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* (1624).