

THE ALTUS OF ST. COLUMBA

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The Altus of St. Columba by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

**THE ALTUS OF
ST. COLUMBA**

THE
A L T U S

OF

St. Columba.

EDITED

WITH A PROSE PARAPHRASE AND NOTES

BY

JOHN,
MARQUESS OF BUTE,
K. T.

"Mo Altus ainglidhe go naoimh."

My Altus angelic and holy.

(Gaelic Poem attributed to St. Columba.)

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS,
EDINBURGH AND LONDON.

MDCCLXXXII.



P R E F A C E.

THE work in which the editor is often engaged has suggested to him that there may be many persons who will hail with pleasure a new and handy edition of the *Altus* of St. Columba, as well from veneration for the memory of the author, as from appreciation of the intrinsic merits of the work and of its interest as a specimen of the antient Celtic Latin poetry.

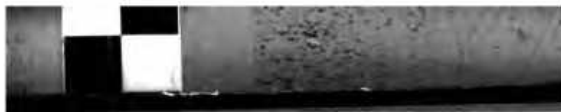
What follows does not pretend to offer a critical text, as the object is to call attention to the great hymn itself, rather than to the minor peculiarities of its form. The spelling is therefore given in its ordinary shape, and one or two corrections have been made of what seem to be simply copyists' blunders. Some conjectural emendations are suggested in the notes. The text has been taken from the (unhappily uncompleted) edition of the *Liber Hymnorum*, prepared for the Irish Archæological and Celtic Society, by the late Dr. Todd, who includes in his notes a reprint of Colgan's edition of the *Capitula* now missing in the Codex he used; and the information and observations contained in his notes have been freely used in preparing the present edition.

The words of the poem are accompanied by a double commentary, viz. first, a paraphrastic translation into English prose, and secondly, a series of notes designed chiefly, though not exclusively, to assist the reader, by placing before him the passages

of Scripture cited or alluded to in the text, as far as this can be done for the work of a writer who was using a Latin version other than the present.

The authorship, ascribed by an apparently unbroken tradition to Columba, does not seem open to any serious doubt; and may be held confirmed by what little internal evidence the poem itself offers. The tendency to expatiate upon the creatures of the Angelic world will not seem unnatural to any who have read the Third Book of Adamnan, and a certain proclivity to dwell upon the terrible, recalls that element in Columba's character which sometimes threw shadows on the brightness of his life, and infused with a certain awe the veneration which surrounded his memory after death.

The intrinsic merits of the composition are undoubtedly very great, especially in the latter *Capitula*, some of which the editor thinks would not suffer by comparison with the *Dies Irae*. It is by these that he hopes the poem will commend itself to those to whom it may have hitherto been unknown, and he has not thought it worth while to refer to the different legends regarding the circumstances of its composition, or the supernatural advantages claimed for its recitation.



ALUTUS

ALTUS Prosator, Vetustus
Dierum, et Ingenitus,
Erat absque origine
Primordio et crepidine,
Est et erit in sæcula
Sæculorum infinita ;
Cui est Unigenitus
Christus et Sanctus Spiritus
Co-æternus in gloriâ
Deitatis perpetuâ :
Non tres deos depromimus
Sed unum Deum dicimus,
Salvâ fide in Personis
Tribus gloriosissimis.

PARAPHRASE.

The Most High, the Father of all, the Antient of days, and Unbegotten, without origin, without beginning, and without limit, was, is, and will be for ever and ever ; with Whom is co-eternal in everlasting glory of Godhead the Only-Begotten Son, Who also is the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We set not forth three gods, but say that God is One, still holding ever the faith in Three most glorious Persons.

NOTES.

Altus. The commencement recalls very strongly the words of Eccles. i. 8. "Unus est Altissimus Creator Omnipotens—There is One Most High Creator Almighty." The word *Altus* itself is never employed in the Vulgate to indicate God, but *Altissimus* very frequently.

Prosator. *Sator*, a sower or planter, hence poetically transferred to a begetter, father. (*Hominum atque deorum. Virgil.*) The force of *pro* indicates the Supreme or original Father (cf. *proavus* &c.) The idea here intended to be conveyed is doubtless that enunciated by St. Paul. 1 Cor. viii. 6. "Deus Pater ex Quo omnia—God the Father, of Whom are all things." And again, Eph. iii. 14, 15. "Flecto genua mea ad Patrem Domini nostri JESU Christi, ex Quo omnis paternitas in cœlis et in terrâ nominatur—I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord JESUS Christ, of Whom all fatherhood in heaven and in earth is named." And iv. 6. "Unus Deus et Pater omnium—There is one God and Father of all."

Vetustus dierum. This evidently represents the *Antiquus dierum* of Dan. vii. 9, 13 and 22.

Ingenitus. This expression is not found in Scripture. The doctrine is stated in the Athanasian Creed:—"Pater a nullo est factus, nec creatus, nec genitus—The Father is made of none, neither created, nor begotten," and the word occurs in Church Offices, e.g. the Trinity Sunday Antiphon at *Magnificat* in the Roman Breviary:—"Te Deum Patrem Ingenitum confitemur &c—We acknowledge Thee, O God the Father Unbegotten!"

Erat &c. There might be some question whether *erat* should be translated in conjunction with *est* and *erit*, did it not appear evident that the whole of these four lines are meant for a poetical paraphrase of Apoc. i. 8. "Ego sum A et Æ, principium et finis, dicit Dominus Deus, Qui est, et Qui erat, et Qui venturus est, Omnipotens—I am A and Æ, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord God, Which is, and Which was, and Which is to come, the Almighty."

Absque origine &c. This phrase has considerable resemblance to the words applied to Melchisedec, Heb. viii. 3. "Sine patre, sine matre, sine genealogiâ; neque initium dierum, neque finem vitæ habens—Without father, without mother, without descent; having

neither beginning of days nor end of life," for which reason he is compared to the Son of God Himself.

Primordio seems to be meant to be pronounced as a trisyllable.

Crepidine. This word in the Vulgate seems always to mean a brim, edge, or boundary; of a river, Ex. ii. 5; of an Altar, Lev. i. 15; of a place, Judges vii. 23; of an hill, Judith vii. 3; &c., &c., &c.

The rest of this chapter calls for little comment, except as regards its remarkable coincidence with the actual words of the Athanasian Creed. This coincidence is so striking as almost to force upon the mind the conclusion that Columba must have been acquainted with the hymn in question.

Besides the use of the word *Ingenitus*, already pointed out, mark the following,

Cui est Unigenitus
Christus et Sanctus Spiritus
Co-æternus in gloriâ
Deitatis perpetuâ.

Non tres deos depromimus
Sed unum Deum dicimus,
Salvâ fide in Personis
Tribus gloriosissimis.

Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus
Sancti una est Divinitas, æqualis
gloria, co-æterna Majestas,
...Totæ tres Personæ co-æternæ
sibi sunt....

Sicut singillatim unamquamque
Personam Deum ac Dominum
confiteri Christianâ veritate com-
pellimur, ita tres deos aut Do-
minos dicere Catholicâ Religione
prohibemur.

This chapter alone consists of fourteen instead of twelve lines.

BONOS creavit Angelos—
 Ordines et Archangelos
 Principatum ac Sedium,
 Potestatum, Virtutum ;
 Uti non esset bonitas
 Otiosa ac Majestas
 Trinitatis in omnibus
 Largitatis muneribus,
 Sed haberet caelestia
 In quibus privilegia
 Ostenderet magnopere
 Possibili fatimine.

PARAPHRASE.

He created the Angels in original goodness ; the Orders, and Archangels of every Principality and Throne, Might and Power ; that the goodness and Majesty of the Trinity might not be inactive in any gift of bounty, but might have heavenly creatures wherein to show graces as great as any utterance can express.

NOTES.

After the first chapter, in which God is praised as He is in Himself, the thought of the author of the *Altus* passes through three phases, in each of which he praises the Most High for a special class of His works. Chapters B to H are dedicated to the Angelic world, I to P to the material cosmogony as understood by the writer, and after Q, which is introductory to the last part, the rest speaks of those things which shall be hereafter. Each section thus comprises seven chapters.¹

¹ It is perhaps unnecessary to remind the reader that in the Latin language, in its ancient form, I stands for both I and J, and V for U, V, and W.