

ALTUS PROSATOR

IN 1967, Professor Carney published a small and elegant volume, *Medieval Irish Lyrics*. Like so many of his contributions to Celtic studies, this was a signpost to future trends in early Irish scholarship, in that it prints Hiberno-Latin and Irish verse in the same context, recognising them as products of the same cultural milieu, albeit in different modalities.¹ Translation, especially at the level of grace which Professor Carney brought to it, is highly individual: another Irish translator, Helen Waddell, in her classic *Medieval Latin Lyrics*, confesses that her selection is based on what she felt able to render, rather than on providing samples across the whole range of possible material.² It may conceivably be for some such reason that Carney did not include any of the early Hiberno-Latin hymns in his collection,³ even though they include some notably fine poems, ranging from the quiet *gravitas* of ‘Sancti, venite’ to the passionate intricacies of ‘Altus prosator’, the greatest of them all.⁴ The interest of ‘Altus prosator’ considered purely as a poem is very considerable, but its extrinsic interest also gives it a claim to attention. There are all too few Hiberno-Latin hymns and poems which can be dated with any degree of precision, and only one or two which can successfully be placed in the sixth century. So if ‘Altus’ were by St Columba, which I hope to demonstrate is impossible as well as unlikely, then we would have a very valuable piece of evidence for the learning, culture and poetic practice of a major Irish monastery in the Age of the Saints. As it is, the poem must be interrogated to make it reveal its proper placement in time and space; which may incidentally shed light on Insular culture. Its sources, language and style tell us something about its author’s library and intellectual training; the traces of its use by later writers tell us something of the interactions between Irish scholars, the English, and Europe.

The power of ‘Altus prosator’ as poetry has been recognised since the middle ages, not least by its medieval attribution to the most bardic of the early Irish saints, Columba himself, friend and patron of poets,⁵ subject of the *Amra Choluim*

¹ James Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics* [Dublin 1967], selected and translated, with *The Irish Bardic Poet* [Dublin 1967] (new ed. in one vol. Portlaoise 1985).

² *Medieval Latin Lyrics* (London 1929) vi: ‘a man cannot say “I will translate” any more than he can say “I will compose poetry”. In this minor art also, the wind blows where it lists.’ Helen Waddell, incidentally, translated Stanza R of ‘Altus’ superbly (*ibid.*, 68–9).

³ Carney himself comments at the end of his Introduction (p. xxxii), ‘many of the poems are poems with which as a scholar I had a particular association. It will not be equally obvious that sometimes a poem was translated because it seemed at one point or another in my life to have relevance to my own experience or feeling’.

⁴ ‘Altus prosator’ has been frequently edited. Throughout this discussion, I shall quote from the edition of Clemens Blume, based primarily on the relatively early continental manuscripts, in ‘Hymnodia Hiberno-celtica’, *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* 51 (1908) 257–365, pp. 271–83. The Insular manuscripts are so late in date that I am not convinced that their orthographic and other peculiarities are any guide to the original appearance of the poem. An edition based primarily on the Irish witnesses may be found in J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson ed., *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, 2 vols (London 1898), i pp. 68–83.

⁵ Witnessed as early as Adomnán’s *Vita S. Columbae*, 1.42, ed. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh 1961) 196–98.

Chille attributed to the *primfíle* of all Ireland,⁶ and focus of a vast quantity of subsequent poetic endeavour.⁷ It has been translated many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though never with any great success.⁸ The poem is outstandingly ambitious in its content: the twenty-three stanzas begin with God and the Creation, and end with the Apocalypse. No other Hiberno-Latin poem has anything like its range and originality. Two long hymns in the seventh-century Antiphonary of Bangor offer a possible point of comparison: 'Audite omnes' and 'Precamur patrem'.⁹ The first is given its shape by recounting the life and work of St Patrick, and the second, more ambitiously, moves from an account of the crossing of the Red Sea to the life of Christ, utilising the natural and metaphorical senses of the word 'light' as its central image. 'Altus prosator' describes the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity to each other, the relationship of God to the universe, the place of sin, how the 'machina mundi' was set up, how it works, and how it will end, ranging through the Bible from end to end (Genesis to Apocalypse) for its material. It compresses into its twenty-three stanzas all the most essential information about the world, as an early medieval Christian saw it. In that sense, it may be classed as a didactic hymn of a kind which is characteristic of the Gallican church, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁰

The attribution of 'Altus' to St Columba goes back only to the eleventh-century vernacular prefaces in the two copies of the Irish *Liber hymnorum*; but it is still widely accepted as 'probable', though not, of course, certain.¹¹ Since the poem is more ambitious and wide-ranging in its content than any other Hiberno-Latin hymn, structurally complex, and confident in its handling, the question of its date of composition is thus a matter of considerable interest for the history of Hiberno-Latin.

The textual history of 'Altus prosator' is curious. The four earliest manuscripts are continental, the earliest dating from the ninth century. All these are manuscripts containing the *De uita contemplatiua* of Julianus Pomerius, a priest of Arles in the early sixth century, to which Prosper of Aquitaine's *epigrammata*

⁶ V. Hull, 'On Amra Choluim Chille', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 28 (1961) 242–51, and see also M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Oxford 1988) 9–12.

⁷ J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland I: ecclesiastical* (New York 1929) 263–5, 436–41.

⁸ Richard Sharpe knows of eight translations (pers. comm.), but more are doubtless to be found.

⁹ C. Blume (ed.), 'Hymnodia Hiberno-celtica', 340–45, 271–75; the 'Antiphonary of Bangor' ff. 13v–15v, 3r–4v, and 4v–6v, ed. F. E. Warren, *The Antiphonary of Bangor*, 2 vols (London 1893–95), ii pp. 14–16, 3–5, and 5–7. There are important, recent articles on both these hymns, which include extensive bibliographies, A. Orchard, 'Audite Omnes Amantes', 'A Hymn in St Patrick's Praise', in D. N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge 1993) 153–174; and M. Lapidge, 'Columbanus and the "Antiphonary of Bangor"', *Peritia* 4 (1985) 104–16.

¹⁰ 'Venantius Fortunatus, Poitiers, and the hymnody of early medieval Ireland', in J.-M. Picard (ed.), *Aquitaine and Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin 1995) 75–107. Some specific early Gallican hymns may have been known to the author of 'Altus prosator', on grounds of slight resemblances of diction and approach, for example 'Apparebit repentina', and 'Deus qui caeli lumen es.' (see p. ?? below) (printed in A. S. Walpole [ed.], *Early Latin Hymns* [Cambridge 1922], 380–4 and 219–21).

¹¹ For example, in the most recent book published on Irish hymnody, M. E. Curran, *The Antiphonary of Bangor* (Dublin 1984) 199, n. 2.

are sometimes appended.¹² In all four, the poem follows immediately on from *De uita contemplatiua*, and in two, the Milan and Montpellier copies, it is followed by the *Epigrammata*. The poem is not associated in these manuscripts with Columba, or even with Ireland.¹³ The most reasonable explanation for the linking of the two texts is to hypothesise a manuscript in which 'Altus prosator' was compressed to fill up the remainder of the last quire of a copy of *De uita contemplatiua* by some scribe who wished to have a copy of the poem, but who was inclined to be economical with parchment; this (hypothetical) manuscript does not survive. Such a compression would have given 'Altus' the appearance of pertaining to *De uita contemplatiua*, and so the two works were treated as belonging together by the various later scribes who copied the work. The popularity of *De uita contemplatiua* is witnessed by its more than ninety surviving manuscripts, the earliest of which is from the seventh century.¹⁴ The only early Insular author who certainly used it was Boniface, in a letter of 747, but he was working on the continent.¹⁵ It may possibly have been known to Columbanus, but he, again, was labouring in Frankia rather than in England or Ireland.¹⁶ Thus, the textual history of *De uita contemplatiua* suggests that the milieu in which 'Altus prosator' was appended to it was continental rather than Irish or English.¹⁷

There are some signs in the four continental manuscripts of the poem itself, as distinct from the treatise, that an Insular exemplar might underlie them. The most notable of these is a tendency to write a single vowel for a doubled one, reflecting the pronunciation,¹⁸ e.g. *promontoris* for *promontoriis* in the Milan, Montpellier and Orléans copies of M, 9. Löfstedt comments in his study of Hiberno-Latin

¹² *Patrologia latina* LIX.415–520. See E. Dekkers (ed.), *Clavis patrum latinorum* (Steenbrugge 1961), no. 998, p. 220, and M. L. W. Laistner, 'The Influence during the Middle Ages of the Treatise *De uita contemplatiua* and its Surviving Manuscripts', in his *The intellectual heritage of the Early Middle Ages*, ed. C. G. Starr (Ithaca, New York 1957) 40–56.

¹³ The four continental manuscripts of 'Altus' are Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana M.32 sup. (Bobbio provenance, s. ix), ff. 83–85, printed by A. Riefferschied, in 'Die Ambrosianische Bibliothek in Mailand', *Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Klasse 67 (Wien 1871), 467–568, pp. 544–46; Montpellier, Ecole de Médecine 218 (s. ix), ff. 79–81, printed by A. Boucherie, 'Hymne abécédaire contre les antitrinitaires', in 'Textes latins et bas-latin', *Revue des langues Romanes*, 3rd series 7 (1875) 12–26; Orléans, Bibliothèque municipale 169 (146) (Fleury provenance, s. xi), ff. 300–08, printed by C. Cuijsard, 'La prose de Saint Columba', *Revue Celtique* 5 (1882–3) 205–212, and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm. 18665 (Tegernsee provenance, s. x/xi), f. 229, the only one not to be separately edited.

¹⁴ Wolfenbüttel, Codex Weissenburgensis 76, in E. A. Lowe (ed.), *Codices latini antiquiores: a palaeographical guide to Latin manuscripts prior to the ninth century (CLA)*, 10 vols (Oxford 1934–3) IX.1391–2.

¹⁵ Laistner, 'The influence', 53. See also J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books known to the English, 597–1066* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1967) 187.

¹⁶ The fifth letter of Columbanus (G. S. M. Walker (ed.), *Sancti Columbani opera* (Dublin 1957) 36–56, especially p. 40) and *De uita* i.20 (cols 434–45) share imagery of shepherds and watchmen, though they do not draw on the identical range of Biblical texts for support – the resemblance may be purely coincidental.

¹⁷ Laistner, 'The influence', 43, in describing the manuscripts, notes that in two Munich manuscripts (he lists four), *incertos* is written for *incestos*. He does not, unfortunately, state which two, and it is therefore not clear whether one of them is the manuscript containing 'Altus'. As he himself says, 'confusion of r and s suggests a possible Insular exemplar in the background'. This small palaeographical clue may hint at the existence of an Insular scribe on the continent with access to the poem.

¹⁸ Synzesis in 'Altus' is discussed below (p. 344).

orthography, die Schreibung ‘i’ für ‘ii’ is in hibernolat. Texten so häufig, dass man sie als spezifisch irisch bezeichnet hat’.¹⁹

Another potential ‘Irish symptom’ in the orthography is the substitution of ‘ae’ for ‘e’, which Bieler has observed as common in the Irish penitentials, and which (he suggests) may indicate an open pronunciation of Latin ‘e’.²⁰ Neither of these features is peculiar to Irish manuscripts; and Bieler stresses that it is extremely difficult to identify Irish orthography underlying a continental manuscript of an Irish text;²¹ the most one can say is that the type of spelling found here is at least consistent with an Insular exemplar for the poem.

A clear *terminus ante quem* for the poem’s arrival on the Continent, and indeed for its existence, is provided by Hrabanus Maurus (786–856), the pupil of Alcuin, who incorporated thirteen stanzas of ‘Altus’ into his long poem *De fide catholica* some time in the first half of the ninth century.²² His use of the poem concentrates on its most orthodox side: he omits the stanzas dealing with the physical makeup of the world, an approach which is entirely opposite to the concentration on its peculiarities of vocabulary and content in purely Insular contexts. The main interest of Hrabanus’s use of the poem is that it implies that this careful teacher saw more than half of it as a guide to the Catholic faith so well and concisely expressed that it was worth his while to adapt it rather than writing his own verses.²³

It is possible that Hrabanus was introduced to the poem by Alcuin, since I hope to show that the poem was known in England in the seventh century, and thus conceivably available to him in the late eighth. The reason for suggesting this possibility is the hymn ‘Altus auctor omnium’, one of three poems from the circle of Alcuin written s. viii/ix in rapid Caroline minuscule showing Anglo-Saxon influence added to a manuscript of Sedulius’s *carmen paschale*.²⁴ Apart from the opening line which immediately recalls ‘Altus prosator’, it includes the following stanza:

Ter cum Deum dicimus
non tres Deos credimus

¹⁹ B. Löfstedt (ed.), *Der hibernolateinische Grammatiker Malsachanus* (Uppsala 1965), orthography section pp. 86–107, at p. 95.

²⁰ L. Bieler (ed.), *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin 1963) 30.

²¹ Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials*, 28–3.

²² E. Dümmler (ed.), *Poetae latini aevi Carolini II* (Berlin 1884) 197–204. The text-type of ‘Altus’ that Hrabanus was working from was that of the continental manuscripts: a crucial point is at A, 10, where all four, and the English manuscript, read ‘deitatis perpetua’, but the three Irish manuscripts have ‘diētatis perpetuae’. In general, wherever the text of ‘Altus’ presents a difficulty in expression, language or subject-matter, Hrabanus replaced the offending line or lines with lines of his own, which has resulted in the smoothing over of most of the potentially decisive cruxes.

²³ Hrabanus’s compositional methods have come under scrutiny. J. McCulloh, ‘Hrabanus Maurus’s Martyrology: the method of composition’, *Sacris Erudiri* 23 (1978–9) 417–61, p. 459, states, ‘detailed studies have shown that [Hrabanus] was capable of independent judgment. Instead of being slavishly bound by his sources, he was both able and willing to adapt or go beyond them when it seemed necessary’. His use of ‘Altus’ is in keeping with such conclusions.

²⁴ This is part of a composite manuscript, Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek mbr. 1.75 (CLA VIII.1206–8). The poems are edited by Blume, ‘Hymnodia Hiberno-celtica’, 304–5, and by Karl Strecker, *Poetae latini aevi Carolini IV.2* (Berlin, 1923) 904–7. Strecker attributes this hymn to Alcuin himself. The *carmen paschale* was a favourite work of the Anglo-Saxon schools, extensively used by Aldhelm and by subsequent writers. See Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English*, 79–80 (no. 695).

Sed unum inuisibilem
in maiestatis gloria.

The first two lines in particular recall 'Altus prosator' s

Non tres deos depromimus,
sed unum Deum dicimus (A, 11–12).

The word *maiestas* appears in B, 6. In addition to its points of contact with 'Altus prosator', 'Altus auctor' also shows traces of contact with other Insular hymns, particularly the Anglo-Saxon 'Sancte, sator',²⁵ 'Hymnum dicat', known in both England and Ireland from at least the seventh century,²⁶ and 'Precamur patrem', probably by Columbanus.²⁷ Whether the hymn 'Altus auctor' is by Alcuin or not, it is certainly from his circle so its use of Insular models is important. It provides, at the very least, a context for Hrabanus Maurus's use of the poem 'Altus prosator', showing that Insular hymns were read and used in the learned circles in which Hrabanus was educated. It should also be remembered that Alcuin remained in contact, both by correspondence and in person, with both Irish and English scholars. Hrabanus, therefore, may have read the poem knowing that it was Insular in origin, rather than coming across it as an appendix to *De uita contemplatiua*.

There are also three Irish manuscripts of the poem and one English one, none earlier than the eleventh century.²⁸ The two eleventh-century manuscripts of the Irish *Liber hymnorum*, attribute the poem to Columba, and so does the *Leabhar breac*; the English manuscript does not. Unlike other Hiberno-Latin sacred poetry, for instance hymns preserved in the Antiphony of Bangor or the *Liber hymnorum* which we find prescribed for use in the Rule of Tallaght and other early Irish sources,²⁹ there is not a single reference to the existence or use of this hymn in

²⁵ Blume, 'Hymnodia hiberno-celtica', 299–300. The apparently Anglo-Saxon character of this hymn has been discussed by M. Lapidge, 'The school of Theodore and Hadrian', *Anglo-Saxon England* 15 (1986) 45–72, p. 47, who emphasises its *trochaic* rhythm, found in demonstrably Anglo-Latin octosyllables, and not in demonstrably Hiberno-Latin octosyllabic poems, which have an iambic rhythmic pattern. I know of only one possible exception to this, the two-line verse in Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, *Epitome* IV, 2: 'Phoebus surgit, caelum scandit / polo claret, cunctis paret (G. Polara [ed.], *Epitomi ed epistole* (Naples 1979) 18).

²⁶ Blume, 'Hymnodia hiberno-celtica', 264–71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 271–5. compare Stanza I of 'Altus auctor', and Stanza 20 of 'Precamur patrem'. For the authorship of this poem, see M. Lapidge, 'Columbanus and the "Antiphony of Bangor"', *Peritia* 4 (1985) 104–16.

²⁸ Dublin, Trinity College Library E.4.2 (s. xi), ff. 11–13, printed by J. H. Todd *Leabhar imuinn: the Book of Hymns of the Ancient Irish Church* 2 vols (Dublin 1855–69), ii, pp. 201–51; Killiney, Franciscan House of Studies A.2 (s. xi/xii), ff. 2–8, printed by J. Colgan (ed.), *Triadis thaumaturgae, seu diuorum Patricii Columbae et Brigidae, trium ueteris et maioris Scotiae, seu Hiberniae sanctorum insulae, communium patronorum acta* (Louvain 1647) 473–5; and by J. Gilbert, *Facsimiles of the National Manuscripts of Ireland*, iv.2 (London 1884), appendix xxi, pp. 131–33; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy 23.P.16 (s. xv in), printed in facsimile by B. O'Looney (ed.), *The Leabhar Breac* (Dublin 1876) 237–38, and London, British Library Cotton Galba A.xiv (Winchester provenance, s. xiⁱⁿ – xiⁱ), ff. 7–19, printed by B. Muir, *A Pre-Conquest English Prayerbook* (London 1988) 32–9.

²⁹ 'Hymnum dicat', 'Cantemus in omni die' and 'In trinitate spes mea' were used at Tallaght in the eighth century. The first is in the Antiphony, and all three are in the Irish *Liber hymnorum*. See E. J. Gwynn (ed. and transl.), *Teagasg Maoil Ruain*, §86, in 'The Rule of Tallaght', *Hermathena* 44 (1927), second supplemental volume, pp. 50–51.

any Irish context before the eleventh century. The sources for the history of the Columban foundations are particularly good, and it is therefore surprising that the poem is not mentioned in any of the Columban material collected by his successors until the scholarly Modern-Irish *Betha Colaim Chille* completed in 1532, which comments on it as follows:

And anon he [Columba] set to making a hymn of praise to God. And the *Altus* of Columcille is the name of that hymn of praise. And it is a composition passing lofty, and passing noble, but passing hard of understanding; for therein he giveth from his knowledge of the secrets he had from God. And in especial he speaketh much of the meaning of the Trinity, and he revealeth much secret knowledge therein, touching the earthly elements.³⁰

As a judgment on the character and literary quality of the poem, this is by no means unfair. Outside the dossier of material on Columba, the poem is mentioned in the story of Mael Suthain (ob. 1010), the *annchara* of Brian *bóroimbe*, not associated with Iona, which stresses the efficacy of reciting 'Altus' for the benefit of one's soul,³¹ and in *mesca Columcille*, a twelfth-century political 'prophecy' covering the period from the saint's own time to the coming of the English.³² It is thus clear that the text was known and valued in the Norman period and later, but before that, we know absolutely nothing of its history in Ireland, or even if it had one. The dating and localising of 'Altus prosator', therefore, is entirely dependent on the internal evidence of the poem's language, style, metre and sources.

The English manuscript stands to some extent between the Irish and continental text-types. It shares with the Killiney manuscript (the only Irish witness at this point, since the other two are lacunose) the reading *liquescentia* for *lucescencia* at T, 6, and with all three, *zabulus* for *diabolus* at G, 3. Yet it has the continental version of A, 10, *dietatis perpetua*, not *deitatis perpetuae* and the Milan text's non-rhyming '*mare et aquas condidit*' at E, 4. A very significant way in which it resembles the Irish group is that it ends the hymn with a collect (or doxology), 'Deum patrem ingenitum', also found in the *Liber hymnorum* manuscripts, and does not associate it with any works by Julianus or Prosper. Another link is the relationship between our hymn, and another, 'Adiutor laborantium', which survives only in the Cotton manuscript. This hymn is associated with the composition of 'Altus' in the prefaces of the three Irish versions, though no copy of it survives in Ireland.³³ The linking

³⁰ A. O'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle (ed.), *Betha Colaim Chille: life of Columcille compiled by Manus O'Donnell in 1532* (Urbana, Illinois 1918), pp. 206-09; and see Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, 129.

³¹ Kenney, *Sources* i, no. 620, p. 743.

³² *Ibid.*, no. 220, p. 439. Columba is made to say,

'my *Altus* angelic and holy
my *Easparta* for Thursday
my *Amra* with the king of the pure, bright moon
here I leave after me . . . '

(translation in Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, ii, p. 146. Further evidence for medieval Irish interest in the poem is collected by E. O'Curry, *Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history* (Dublin 1861) 76-79.

³³ This is the *Leabhar breac* version, translated in Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* ii, 23-4: 'as he was going to the mill, Colum Cille composed this little hymn *Adiutor Laborantium*; and

of these two hymns in both the Irish and the English witnesses suggests that there may have been a single source ancestral to both traditions.

STYLE

'Altus prosator' has often attracted attention for its style and diction. Bernard and Atkinson, for instance, describe it as 'rude and barbarous, though vigorous'.³⁴ The description acknowledges its unclassical character, but also gives some hints of its positive qualities. It is an outstandingly ambitious work, dense and convoluted both in its expression and in the actual movement of the thought.

The density of ideas is paralleled stylistically by the richness of the vocabulary. The author goes to considerable lengths to avoid repeating words, which is the more remarkable because he unifies his far-ranging subject-matter by repeating themes from one part of the poem to another. The effect of a hymn is cumulative, but within it, there is often some element of parallelism. For example, stars appear more than once, as *sidera*, *astra*, or specifically named. The world is *terra*, *tellus*, *orbis*, or *mundus*. The concepts 'prison' and 'hell' are evoked in several separate places: Stanzas D and G use the words *barathrum*, *carcer* and *ergastulum*, but when the theme resurfaces in Stanzas N and O, the word used in N is *infernum* and in O it is expressed by implication. Similarly, both Moses and God are pictured as judges, but though Moses is described as 'iudex populus Israhelitici', the idea of God as a judge is expressed in more indirect terms, by reference to the 'tribunal Domini'. These thematic links from one part of the poem to another help to establish the pattern of sacred history which the poet is creating. Near the beginning, in D, a third part of the stars (which are also angels, a standard patristic identification) are said to fall before the creation of the world.³⁵ Near the end, in X, the rest of the stars fall at the end of the world. The *tuba* sounded by the archangel as the graves give up their dead in T recalls the *buccina* which was heard as Moses spoke with God on Sinai in Q. The poet does not engage in typological parallelism between Old and New Testaments, since he makes no direct reference to any part of human history between Exodus and the Apocalypse. The texture of his writing, however, which requires slow and meditative reading, suggests a mind trained in awareness of correspondences. It is probably no accident which places Lucifer in Stanza C and uses Vesper, the same star under an opposite aspect, as a type of Christ in Stanza U.³⁶ This is to have moved some distance from naive repetition: it has much more to do with ideas of repeating and mirroring and corresponding, in

it is in alphabetical order. So when Colum Cille put the first feed into the mouth of the mill, he then began upon the *Altus*, and the composition of the hymn and the grinding of the corn were completed together, nor was it as the fruit of meditation but *per gratiam Dei*.

³⁴ Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* ii, 143.

³⁵ The proportion of fallen angels to unfallen here is unusual in the light of patristic tradition, which more often produces a figure of one-tenth. It is, however, also found in a later Irish work, the *Saltair na Rann* (lines 1837–40), D. Greene and F. Kelly (ed.), *The Irish Adam and Eve story* (Dublin 1976) 81. This, then, may be another indication that the poet was drawing on materials available in an Irish milieu, later also available to the Irish author of the *Saltair*.

³⁶ The typology is an old one: the fourth- or fifth-century Gallican hymn 'Deus qui caeli lumen es' (probably a source for 'Altus') includes the verse,

iam noctis umbra linquitur,

the sense in which these are used by students of the *visual* arts. Hymns, which appear cyclically in the lives of individuals, in the form of 'a book of hymns for the week',³⁷ or year, are artefacts designed for the quintessentially monastic activity of *ruminatio*: going over and round a theme. They characteristically explore the resonances of their chosen theme, whether this be the hour of the day, the day of the year, or the life of a saint. Their peculiar function is to link the intellectual and the spiritual: facts, and their significance, within the context of a Christian world perceived as intrinsically full of meaningful correspondence.

The syntactic structure of the poem is relatively simple. A particularly noticeable aspect of the poet's style is his preference for nouns. An appearance of complexity is given by the characteristic dense knots of appositional clauses, which tend to be interlaced with one another. Many of his sentences have several nouns in apposition, for example

Mare, aquas condiderat
Herbarum quoque germina,
Virgultorum arbuscula,
Solem, lunam ac sidera,
Ignem ac necessaria,
Aues, pisces et pecora,
Bestias, animalia. . . (E, 4–10)

This is an extreme case, but the poem provides many examples of double subjects or objects. He is also very prone to using one noun to qualify another rather than an adjective, as in 'uirgultorum arbuscula', or 'auctoris cenodoxiae'. This repetition, variation, and heavy weighting with named, concrete objects contributes to the slow-moving, ponderous quality of the verse. In essence, each stanza consists of a simple sentence, separate from the contiguous stanzas.

A delight in variation of vocabulary is characteristic of poets in general, but it is also characteristic of the *Hisperica famina*, with which 'Altus' has often been associated, on very slight grounds. There is, in fact, very little overlap of vocabulary. A principal distinguishing feature of the *Hisperica famina* is the use of interlace. The *Famina* are particularly given to lines on the pattern, 'frondicomas auitica orbat latebras turma' (A-Text, 149)

Adomnán is also fond of this decorative device, which he uses either in the simple form of an adjective and noun separated on either side of a verb or participle, or as two interlaced adjective/noun pairs, for example, 'in aquilonem conuertit flatum', and 'praemisis multorum cyclis annorum'.³⁸ The second, more emphatic pattern is rare in Adomnán's writing, but the first is quite common. This tendency towards interweaving substantives round a central verb is also found in the sixth-century

polum caligo deserit,
typusque Christi Lucifer
diem sopitum suscitans.

(Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns*, 219–221, p. 221).

³⁷ Columba had such a book on Iona, as we learn from Adomnán, Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae* ii.9, p. 342.

³⁸ Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae*, ii.15, and second preface, pp. 358 and 182.

writer Columbanus, as in ‘quam alacer annos superuenit pater post multos’.³⁹ It is characteristic of Hiberno-Latin style in general, though by no means confined to it.⁴⁰

‘Altus prosator’ appears to be quite different from the *Famina* in this respect. Syntactic patterning, of course, is necessarily subordinated in a poem to the demands of rhythm and rhyme. In this case, the poet’s tendency to use a large number of nouns is not accompanied by any tendency to group them round a central verb. When the main verb of a stanza is near the middle, it is more likely to be preceded by ablative absolute clauses, as in F and G, and there is absolutely no sign of any striving for an approximation of the hexameter ‘golden line’ which is such an important model for the faminators. The second of the interlace patterns noted in Adomnán is much better represented, perhaps because it creates a double assonance: e.g. ‘trinitatis in omnibus largitatis muneribus’ (B, 7–8). ‘claritate praefulgoris uenustate speciminis’ (C 3–4), ‘auctoris cenodoxiae peruicacis inuidiae’ (C 9–10). The poet’s choice of eight-syllabled rhymed lines creates a natural environment for this type of interlace, as two words with the same ending, thus separated from each other, can be used as the rhyme words. Its presence in this poem is thus not necessarily dependent on its use in Hiberno-Latin prose, though the fact that the poems’s verbal patternings are closer to those of Adomnán than to the *Hisperica famina* may have some significance.

Another noticeable feature of the poem’s style is that it contains few comparatives and superlatives, which where they occur, are clearly used with their full value. There are no diminutives at all. This is in sharp contrast to Adomnán, who uses many superlatives and diminutives merely for emphasis, and without any particular force (so for instance, the same building may be a *tegorium*, or a *tegoriolum*, and Columba’s own *digituli* were presumably of ordinary size).⁴¹

The vocabulary of ‘Altus prosator’ is an aspect of the poem which has attracted scholarly attention. To F. J. E. Raby, it was ‘hisperic’, and to W. M. Lindsay, it was basically ‘glossary-Latin’.⁴² Both statements are less than adequate even as generalities. The basis of the author’s latinity is undoubtedly the language of the Bible and ecclesiastical Late Latin.⁴³ He was familiar with both *Vetus Latina* and Vulgate Bible-texts, and probably knew some parts of the Bible off by heart: he conflates Genesis and Apocalypse in Stanza P in a way that suggests utter familiarity with both, and his choice of words and expression throughout the poem shows his thought to be permeated by that of the Pauline Epistles. The Bible, in other words,

³⁹ Walker *Opera*, 56.

⁴⁰ See further, M. Winterbottom, ‘Columbanus and Gildas’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976) 310–17 and ‘A “Celtic” hyperbaton?’ *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 27 (1976–8) 207–12; and M. Niedermann, ‘Les dérivés latins en -osus dans les *Hisperica famina*’, *Bulletin du Cange* 23 (1953) 75–101.

⁴¹ Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae*, i.25; iii.23, and iii.8, pp. 258, 524, and p. 342.

⁴² F. J. E. Raby, *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse* (Oxford 1959) 458; W. M. Lindsay, ‘Columba’s *Altus* and the “Abstrusa” glossary’, *Classical Quarterly* 17 (1923) 197–9.

⁴³ Ludwig Bieler commented on early Hiberno-Latin in general that it was ‘the language of late Christian antiquity’ (in Walker, *Opera*, p. lxxviii). Which is to say, that Hiberno-Latin writers modelled their writing on the language of the Vulgate and the Latin fathers of the Church rather than on either classical Latin or the rapidly evolving vernacular Latin of contemporary continental writers.

is the main source not only for the content of the poem, but also for its expression, diction, and vocabulary. For example, Job 38 is of particular importance to the author as a source of information about the physical universe; but as well as shaping his ideas, it shaped his vocabulary. The words *'basis'* (M, 11), *'signaculum'* (Q, 7) *'specus'* (X, 11) and *'uctis'* (M, 7), scattered about the poem in a variety of contexts, are all to be found in this one chapter.

The next most important influence on the vocabulary of 'Altus prosator' is ecclesiastical Latin. This provided him with his technical vocabulary: *'ingenitus'*, *'coaeternus'* and *'unigenitus'*, from the Athanasian Creed, are obvious examples, but *'apostata'*, *'cenodoxia'* and *'prostoplastus'* also come into this category. Most of the grecisms such as *'cenodoxia'* used by this writer are, from his point of view, Latin: they will have come to him through Christian Latin literature where they had been naturalised for centuries. They must not be interpreted as implying any acquaintance on the author's part with the Greek language itself.⁴⁴

There is a small Classical element to the vocabulary of 'Altus prosator'. The phrase *'immensae molis'* (F, 5) is Virgilian, and *'mundi machinam'* (E, 1) Lucretian in origin.⁴⁵ Words like *'brumalis'* and *'praeifulgeo'* are highly literary. They do not form a large part of the author's vocabulary, but they contribute substantially to the sense that he used words skilfully and with a sense of their full meaning, overtones, and register. There appears also to be some use of words derived from the late Latin glossaries, 'Abstrusa' and 'Affatim'. 'Abstrusa' has a very close relationship with the Hiberno-Latin *Explanatio in Bucolica* which may have been composed in Iona,⁴⁶ and was also used in seventh-century Southumbria.⁴⁷ Its closest point of contact with 'Altus' is the gloss *'scylla: saxa latentia in mari'*, which may explain the use of plural *scyllae* with generalised meaning in K, 11. 'Abstrusa' is also the parent of a somewhat later glossary, 'Affatim', to the extent of about half its glosses.⁴⁸ Several of the glosses and lemmas in 'Affatim' seem to underlie the way in which the author of 'Altus prosator' uses particular words. *'Tinnio'* in Y, 2 seems to mean 'sound, resound', with if anything, the connotation of a loud noise rather than a soft one. 'Affatim' has *'tinniens: sonans'*.⁴⁹ Its *'depromit: profert aut proferit'* similarly explains the meaning 'set forth' required by 'Altus' A, 11. The most significant

⁴⁴ C. Mohrmann has written on grecisms in the early Latin-speaking church in her *Études sur le latin des chrétiens*, *Storia e letteratura* 65 (Rome 1958) 109.

⁴⁵ A. Campbell, 'Some linguistic features of early Anglo-Latin verse and its use of Classical models', *Transactions of the Cambridge Philological Society* (1953) 1–20, p. 5, comments that *'machina mundi'* had become a 'stock expression' by the time of Aldhelm.

⁴⁶ D. C. C. Daintree, *Explanatio in Bucolica: a new edition of an Early Medieval scholar's notes on the eclogues of Vergil* (MLitt. thesis, Cambridge University Library, 1983), p. 11.

⁴⁷ H. J. Thomson (ed.), *Glossaria Latina* III (Paris 1926) 1–90. The main contributors to 'Abstrusa' are Vergil scholia, the Bible (partly in Vetus Latina versions) and the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Rufinus (Thomson, pp. xv–xxi). W. M. Lindsay has suggested in 'The Abstrusa glossary and the liber glossarum', *Classical Quarterly* 11 (1917) 119–30, p. 122, that Isidore also contributed to the formation of the glossary as we now have it, putting its date, therefore, in the later seventh century. The earliest manuscript of 'Abstrusa' is eighth century, Roma, Vat. Lat. 3321 (CLA I.15). Isidore, however, is not a primary source for the glossary which is mostly dependent on much older material.

⁴⁸ H. J. Thomson, 'A new supplement to the Berne Scholia on Virgil', *Journal of Philology* 35 (1919–20) 257–86, p. 272, demonstrates the extent of 'Affatim's dependence on 'Abstrusa'. 'Affatim' is printed in G. Goetz, *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum* 7 vols (Leipzig 1888–1923), iv, pp. 471–581.

⁴⁹ Goetz, *Corpus Glossariorum* iv, p. 503.5.

gloss is '*donaria: munera*'.⁵⁰ 'Altus' uses *donarium* in F, 12 to mean 'gift'.⁵¹ In contrast, 'Abolita' and other glossaries, more correctly, have '*donaria: loca donorum*'.⁵² 'Affatim' also has the gloss '*pontiae: aquae*',⁵³ a word used in an actual literary context only by the author of 'Altus' and by Aldhelm, as far as I can discover. These few words, particularly *donarium* in this particular sense and *pontia* because of its rarity, suggest that part of 'Affatim' or a related glossary was among our author's literary resources.

The vocabulary of 'Altus' also contains artificial elements characteristic of early Hiberno-Latin writers who strove for aesthetic effect. A love of Greek words, poetical terms, rare words and neologisms can be found in many writers from the Briton Gildas, who may be an important model, through Columbanus and Adomnán to the Irish Augustine and the author of *De ordine creaturarum*.⁵⁴ Other features of the Hiberno-Latin 'high style' are complex sentences with a tendency towards interlace, and a liking for certain tricks of word formation, such as adjectives in *-osus* and substantives in *-men*.⁵⁵ These tendencies are found to some extent in 'Altus prosator'.

In all these respects, the diction of 'Altus prosator' resembles that of demonstrably seventh-century Hiberno-Latin works. The Latin writing of Irish authors of the sixth and seventh centuries is correct rather than colloquial. In addition, when a Hiberno-Latin writer sought to impress, he adopted a high style characterised by a florid and unusual vocabulary and elaborate, somewhat poetic syntactic structures. The better writers, such as Adomnán and Columbanus, commanded more than one level of style.⁵⁶ Hiberno-Latin writers aiming at impressiveness tended to mine the works of their predecessors for interesting vocabulary. The author of 'Altus' displays the same tendency. Six of his most unusual words are also to be found in Gildas's *De excidio Britanniae*,⁵⁷ and the two texts additionally have in common an extended use of the 'dies irae' passage in Zephaniah.⁵⁸ We cannot necessarily deduce that the author of 'Altus prosator' had read Gildas. Since it is only individual words that we are dealing with, there is always the possibility that it was glossary lists rather than actual texts which circulated between the centres of learning involved, perhaps resembling the Leiden Glossary compiled in

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 508.14.

⁵¹ The other main possibility here is that this usage comes from the Vulgate: Exod. 36:3 uses the word to mean 'votive offering'.

⁵² 'Abstrusa' does not have '*donaria*'. 'Abolita' (W. M. Lindsay [ed.], *Glossaria Latina* iii (Paris 1926), pp. 93–183, p. 120) is closely associated with 'Abstrusa', and often found paired with it: see E. A. Lowe, 'The oldest extant manuscript of the combined Abstrusa and Abolita glossaries', *Classical Quarterly* 15 (1921) 189–91.

⁵³ Goetz, *Corpus Glossariorum* iv, pp. 554.38.

⁵⁴ M. Winterbottom, 'Columbanus and Gildas', pp. 310–17.

⁵⁵ M. Niedermann, 'Les dérivés latins en *-osus*'.

⁵⁶ See C. Mohrmann, 'The earliest Continental Irish Latin', *Vigiliae Christianae* 16 (1962) 216–33; and G. Brüning, 'Adamnans *Vita Columbae* und ihre Ableitungen', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 11 (1916–17) 213–304.

⁵⁷ '*Lampas*', '*tithicus*', '*grassator*', '*thesaurizo*', '*zabulus*', '*barathrum*': *De excidio Britanniae* 10.12; 19.1; 21.1; 32.4; 34.6; 34.6 (ed. M. Winterbottom [London and Chichester 1978] 92, 94, 102, 103); 'Altus' Q, 9; U, 5; G, 1; I, 10; G, 3; D, 8.

⁵⁸ Winterbottom, *De excidio* [55] p. 144; 'Altus' R, 1–8.

seventh-century Canterbury with its batches of lemmata from different curriculum authors.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the same word could appear in the works of several different writers potentially or certainly accessible to our author. For example, 'Altus prosator' and the works of Columbanus have in common the words '*cenodoxia*', '*ergastula*', '*dodrans*', and '*tithis*'.⁶⁰ The first of these occurs in Gildas and in Cassian's *conlationes*, and '*ergastulum*' and '*dodrans*' in the *commentarium* of Philip the presbyter,⁶¹ one of 'Altus prosator's' most important patristic sources.

The vocabulary of 'Altus prosator' in every way upholds the thesis that it is a Hiberno-Latin poem of the seventh century or earlier, but not that it is 'hisperic'. The element of neologism, grecism, archaism and obscurantism in 'Altus' is small. The only recherché words found in **both** 'Altus' and the *Hisperica famina* are '*dodrans*', which derives from an earlier writer, probably Columbanus, and '*iduma*', an inexplicable bit of bad Hebrew.⁶² There are few examples of characteristically 'hisperic' word-building. 'Prosator' (A, 1) is the only *-tor* formation, but the word is attested in patristic Latin.⁶³ Other words of characteristically 'hisperic' shape are '*fatimen*', '*praesagmen*' and '*flammaticus*', all of which are extremely rare and unusual, but which do *not* appear in the *Famina*.⁶⁴ All that this shows is that when the demands of rhythm, rhyme or aesthetic preference led the author to coin neologisms, he used ways of doing so similar to those used by other Hiberno-Latin authors, not only the famimators. The often-stated opinion that the language of 'Altus' is very peculiar is in fact based on the mere five or six words which really are bizarre, even

⁵⁹ See M. Lapidge, 'The School of Theodore and Hadrian' (above, n.), pp. 54–55.

⁶⁰ Walker, *Opera*, 54, 76, 48, 22; 'Altus' C, 9; G, 12; I, 4; U, 5.

⁶¹ *Patrologia latina* XXVI.626 and 752.

⁶² Two further points of connection were noted by M. W. Herren (ed.), *Hisperica famina I: the A-Text* (Toronto 1974) 37, the correspondence of the phrases 'immensae molis' (F, 5) with 'inmensi . . . globi' (A-text, 453), which seems rather tenuous, and 'fornacis incendium' (X, 10) with 'fornacis incendio' (A-text, 350), which is much closer. Another point of comparison is that the famimators were quite fond of using enclitic *-que*, used seventeen times in 'Altus', twelve times in the (probably) sixth-century hymn 'Audite omnes', and hardly at all in any other Hiberno-Latin hymn. As far as the word *iduma* is concerned, all glossators agree that it means 'hand'; a possible derivation is from *yadaim* (Heb. plural), 'the forearms' (Herren, *Hisperica famina I*, 125); another, from *iamin* (Heb.), 'right hand'. Both are etymologically dubious, the latter would give a better fit with meaning, especially since the context here in 'Altus' is that it means the 'dextera Dei', the Hand, or Power, of God (on which see W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Etymologiae*, 2 vols (Oxford 1911) VII.ii.23; and J. D. Maclsaac, 'The Hand of God', *Traditio* 31 (1975) 322–28). The latest attempt to solve this mystery is that of A. Breen, 'Iduma ('*idouma*)', *Celtica* 21 (1990) pp. 40–50.

⁶³ It appears in the patristic period, used for instance by Julian of Aelclanum, in Augustine's *contra secundam Iuliani responsionem imperfectum opus*, I, p. 90 (*Patrologia latina* XV.1049–1608, col. 1108). More significantly, the first stanza of the Gallican hymn 'Deus, qui caeli lumen es' (on which see note ??, above) runs:

Deus, qui caeli lumen es
satorque lucis, qui polum
paterno fultum bracchio
praeclara pandis dextera.

This offers the word *sator*, of which *prosator* is simply a three-syllable variant), and a source for the M stanza's 'suffultu Dei iduma / omnipotentis ualida' (M, 6–7). Note *fultum* / *suffultum*.

⁶⁴ These words are not to be found in any surviving source which appears to pre-date the poem. '*Praesagmen*', '*prosator*', and '*pontia*' are used by Aldhelm, who may well have derived them from the poem. The only other attestations of '*flammaticus*' are in Hrabanus Maurus and the Harley Glossary, both of which are directly dependent on 'Altus'.

by the standards of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin: ‘*dodrans*’, ‘*iduma*’, ‘*pontia*’, ‘*fatimen*’, ‘*flammaticus*’, and ‘*praesagmen*’. What is much clearer and more significant about the poet’s vocabulary is that a number of his words and expressions have obvious affiliations with texts known to be seventh-century Insular Latin. It is links between the vocabulary of the poem and the works of Adomnán, the faminator, Aldhelm and others which begins to clarify the question of when and where it might have been written.

Since ‘*Altus prosator*’ seems from its language and style to have been written in the seventh century, and the Irish *liber hymnorum* associates it with Saint Columba, it is interesting that there is some overlap in vocabulary between this poem and the works of Adomnán, abbot of Iona from 679 to 704. Furthermore, the points of resemblance between Adomnán’s prose and the *hisperica famina* may suggest that there was a recension of the *famina* at Iona in the second half of the seventh century⁶⁵ – a not implausible conjecture, since Iona was a major centre of learning and culture.⁶⁶ Adomnán’s works contain several of the more unusual words in ‘*Altus*’: ‘*carubdis*’, ‘*protoplaustus*’, ‘*lampas*’, ‘*edax*’, ‘*gigas*’, ‘*dialis*’, and ‘*globus*’,⁶⁷ the last in the sense of ‘mass’: ‘*globum niuis mollem*’, which is between the usual sense of the word, and its usage in ‘*Altus*’. ‘*Dialis*’ is a rare word, but one which Adomnán uses six times in the *Vita S. Columbae*: it may be peculiar to Adomnán and the author of ‘*Altus*’. ‘*Carubdis*’, on the other hand, occurs in Muirchú’s *Vita S. Patricii*, and so was evidently in circulation in seventh-century Northern Irish cultural centres.⁶⁸

The most significant parallel between Adomnán’s work and ‘*Altus prosator*’ is in the use of a specific section of the so-called Hegesippus’s *Historiae*, II, 27, a description of Pharos and the dangerous waters round it:⁶⁹

unde fit ut illidentibus se in partem insulae fluctibus et recurrentibus in
aduersum inter scrupeas rupes molesque. . .

Lines K, 11–12 run

⁶⁵ This was suggested by P. Grosjean, ‘*Confusa caligo*, remarques sur les *Hisperica famina*’, *Celtica* 3 (1956) 35–85, p. 79. A particular point of contact is the use of *ansportare* for *asportare* by Adomnán, in the *Hisperica famina*, and by Aldhelm (p. 52). This orthographic variant also appears in the Epinal glossary, Goetz, *Corpus Glossariorum* V, 345.37.

⁶⁶ I have argued in ‘Bangor and the *hisperica famina*’, *Peritia* 6–7 (1990) 202–16, that a recension of the *Famina* was known and used in seventh-century Bangor, geographically not far from Iona. The friendly relations of the monasteries are suggested by Adomnán’s presentation of a cordial relationship between Comgall and Columba, e.g. in Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbani* i.49, pp. 314–6. Grosjean commented on the ‘traces d’hisperique’ in the work of Adomnán, as well as in ‘*Altus*’, in ‘*Confusa caligo*’, p. 69: ‘peut-être découvrirait-on quelque lien entre une “édition” des *Hisperica famina* et Iona: langue spéciale qui rassemblerait, en latin et dans la manière ecclésiastique, à la langue special des poètes irlandais anciens dont S. Colum Cille est réputé le protecteur, peut-être une langue spéciale fabriquée par quelqu’un de ces poètes devenu moine . . .’.

⁶⁷ *Vita* i.5, (p. 222); D. Meehan [and L. Bieler] (ed.), *De locis sanctis* (Dublin 1958), II.x.5 (p. 80); 3 times in *de locis* (see *index uerborum*, p. 134); *ibid.* II.xxx.29 (p. 104); II.viii.1 (p. 78); 6 times in *Vita* (see *index uerborum*, p. 585); *de locis* II.iv.: ‘*Altus*’ K, 9; E, 12; Q, 9; N, 6; L, 10; M, 2; H, 5.

⁶⁸ Muirchú, *prologus* 2, in L. Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979) 62.

⁶⁹ V. Ussani (ed.), *Hegesippi qui dicitur historiae libri V, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL) 66, 2 vols, (Vienna 1932/60) i, p. 285.

Scyllis obtecti fluctibus
eliduntur et scrupibus.

Hegesippus's work was not widely known in early Ireland. *De locis sanctis* was not the source for 'Altus', though, since the use of the passage made by the author of the poem does not overlap completely with its use by Adomnán. This same section of 'Hegesippus' contains three further words common to Adomnán and the *Hisperica famina*: 'anfractus', 'strues', and 'offensos scopulos'.⁷⁰ There are no apparent further correspondences between any two of these three texts. Since the work of 'Hegesippus', or at least Books III and IV, was clearly available to Adomnán in Iona, and there is no trace of its presence at any other Irish centre of learning, the fact that the author of 'Altus' appears to use it at first hand and not by way of *De locis sanctis* is an argument for the poem's having been written at Iona, or in a centre closely connected with it (if it is Irish at all, as its diction and style strongly suggest). The verbal overlap between these texts also strengthens the link between Iona and the *Hisperica famina*.

The metre of 'Altus prosator' is also relevant to establishing its date and place of composition. The model for the composition of hymns in sixth- and seventh-century Ireland was naturally the work of the Late Latin hymnodists. Two quantitative metres are of outstanding importance. The first was based on the classical trochaic septenarius, often used for non-literary purposes; riddles, popular satiric pieces, soldier's songs and the like, in which context it is referred to as *uersus quadratus*. Because hymns were intended to appeal to the widest possible audience, they tended to use verse-forms more demotic than the hexameter. In later Latin, this demotic metre was used for the hymns of Hilary of Poitiers in the fourth century, and Venantius Fortunatus's 'Pange, lingua' in the sixth.

The other important hymn-metre is the iambic dimeter. Although this is very rarely seen in the survivals of Classical Latin popular literature, it was adopted by Ambrose in the fourth century for his enormously influential hymns, and became common in the Christian tradition after his time. This is an example from Ambrose:

Deus creator omnium
polique rector, uestiens
diem decoro lumine
noctem soporis gratia⁷¹

Both these metres were known in seventh-century Ireland. The Antiphony of Bangor contains a text of 'Hymnum dicat turba fratrum', in *uersus quadratus*, a Gallican hymn wrongly attributed to Hilary; and another Gallican hymn, 'Ignis creator igneus', in iambic dimeter.⁷²

⁷⁰ Noted by Bieler, in Meehan [and Bieler], *De locis sanctis*, p. 18. See further L. Bieler, 'Adamnan und Hegesipp', *Wiener Studien* 69 (1956) 344–9.

⁷¹ Walpole, *Early Latin Hymns*, 44–49.

⁷² This hymn is discussed by W. Bulst, 'Hymnologica partim hibernica', in *Latin Script and Letters, 400–900*, ed. J. J. O'Meara and B. Naumann (Leiden 1976) 83–100, pp. 92–93. His conclusion is, 'Ein Grund, für "Ignis creator" (und "Sancti, uenite") continentale Herkunft zu vermuten, besteht nicht.' The crux here is how far we are able to accept the thesis that any sixth-century Irish scholars cultivated metrical verse.

There is no secure evidence that any early Irish centre of culture cultivated metrical verse, which is the main reason why one is reluctant to assign ‘Ignis creator’ to Ireland. And to readers unfamiliar with the controlling principles of metrical verse, the structure of a metrical hymn was not immediately obvious. Instead of analysing the hymns into feet, they seem to have interpreted the structure as controlled by the number of syllables, and to a certain extent, by stress.⁷³ *Versus quadratus* such as ‘Hymnum dicat’ tends most characteristically to produce a fifteen-syllable unit, divided into eight syllables with paroxytone stress before the caesura, and seven syllables with proparoxytone stress after it (for which the shorthand is 8p + 7pp). Iambic dimeter similarly reads as stanzas of eight-syllabled lines with proparoxytone end-stress (8pp).⁷⁴ The rhythm, especially at the end of the line, is (as the name suggests) likely to be iambic.⁷⁵

‘Altus prosator’ is octosyllabic, with either two or three stresses in each eight-syllable unit, of which only the last three are fixed (proparoxytone). The poem does not appear to demand heavy stressing, but rather a regular and even treatment of the syllables;⁷⁶ structurally, it appears to conform exactly to a syllabic reinterpretation of iambic dimeter.

The relationship between Classical metrics, stress, and syllable-counting is complex. Vroom notes:

d’ailleurs, cette évolution de la coïncidence régulière de l’accent de mot et des ictus du vers ne s’accomplit pas dans les hexamètres rythmiques, mais dans d’autres mètres, iambiques et trochaïques, qui, à cause du nombre plus fixe des syllabes, parurent plus aptes à la poésie rythmique.⁷⁷

It is precisely a trochaic and an iambic metre which form the base for Christian Latin syllabic hymns. It is possible that syllabic regularity was early established even in genuinely metrical hymns for musical reasons. Allowing one note per syllable, and repeating the tune with each stanza tends to enforce isosyllabism:

⁷³ One might compare Praecilius, a third-century African, who read Virgil by accent, not quantity. What he seems to have perceived was first the caesura, or what he took to be the caesura, and secondly, the dactylic fall of the end of the line, read accentually. He had much less perception of structure in the half-line before the caesura. This naive reading of a metrical work in accentual terms seems comparable with the reading implicit in the development of Hiberno-Latin poetry. H. A. J. Munro, ‘On a metrical Latin inscription copied by Mr Blakesley at Cirta and published in his “Four months in Algeria”’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 10/2 (1864) 374–408, p. 397.

⁷⁴ The relationship between iambic dimeter, trochaic tetrameter and non-metrical hymns was analysed by Bede, *De arte metrica* 24, ‘de rhythmo’: ‘quomodo et ad instar iambici metri pulcherrime factus est hymnus ille praeclarus: “Rex aeternae Domine”. . . item ad formam metri trochaici canunt hymnum de die iudicii per alphabetum: “Apparebit repentina”’. He comments that such compositions are ‘non metrica ratione, sed numero syllabarum ad iudicium aurium examinata’.

⁷⁵ D. S. Raven, *Latin metre: an introduction* (London 1965) 38, noted that, ‘of the classical metres, only the iambic and the trochaic lent themselves easily to accentual metres’. This is because the number of syllables almost always remains constant.

⁷⁶ See W. Beare, *Latin verse and European song: a study in accent and rhythm* (London 1957) 264: ‘Altus prosator’ ‘forces us to set accent at defiance in order to keep an even movement’.

⁷⁷ Vroom, *Le psaume abécédaire de Saint Augustin et la poésie latine rythmique*, *Latinitas Christianorum Primaeva* 5 (Nijmegen 1933) 40.

some English hymns (for instance the ‘Old Hundredth’: ‘All people that on earth do dwell’) are regularly octosyllabic for this reason.⁷⁸

Syllable-counting in itself has a long and respectable history as an Indo-European poetic technique. Calvert Watkins extracted the structural features of an Indo-European short (syllabic) line from a comparative study of Greek, Vedic Sanskrit and Slavic verse-forms,⁷⁹ and also from the very similar structure of Old Irish heptasyllabic verse.⁸⁰ He pointed out that a poem such as *Amra Choluim Chille* (written c.600)⁸¹ is distinguished both by isosyllabism and by stress. The line is fixed at seven syllables, of which the first four are entirely free as to the position and number of stresses, while the fifth must be stressed, and the sixth unstressed. Thus here, as with Hiberno-Latin syllabic hymns, we find a fixed syllable count, and a fixed stress-pattern at the end only of the line. This, naturally, raises the vexed question of the relationship between developments in Hiberno-Latin verse and in Irish itself.⁸² Watkin’s belief that syllable-counting, only partly modified by stress-accent, is the primary form of archaic Irish verse was challenged by Carney, who described syllable-counting as ‘an upper-class aberration’, and insisted that it was accentual metres that were truly archaic in Irish.⁸³ The most relevant aspect of this ongoing debate on vernacular poetry for the present discussion is that both syllabic and accentual verses were flourishing in Ireland by the end of the sixth century, suggesting that early medieval vernacular poets were flexible and tolerant of innovation.⁸⁴

Within Latin itself, native Latin-speakers gradually ceased to distinguish between long and short vowels from the third century AD onwards.⁸⁵ Stress accentuation had not been alien to the language before that time, though it was not used as

⁷⁸ Halporn *et al*, *The meters* 116, note of Ambrose’s iambic dimeter that, ‘while a longum may replace a breve in the odd feet, there are few resolutions. This would indicate that one syllable was to be sung to one note.’ P. Wagner, *Einführung in die Gregorianische Melodien: ein Handbuch der Choralwissenschaft* 3 vols (Leipzig 1911–21) i, p. 48, states: ‘Die Teilung des Gedichtes in gleich gebaute Strophen, der Strophen in gleich viele gleich gebaute Verse, ein solcher Bau ist in hohem Grade volkstümlich. Er bedingt eine Melodie, die für alle Strophen wiederhold werden kann, in ihrer Ausdehnung und Gliederung genau die einzelnen Verse widerspiegelt. Im allgemeinen wird jede Textsilbe nur einen Ton erhalten haben; das ist die Norm für das Volkslied aller Zeiten, und für Melodien, die von grösseren Mengen vorzutragen sind, ist eine solche Melodiebindung eine Art Notwendigkeit’.

⁷⁹ C. Watkins, ‘Indo-European metrics and archaic Irish verse’, *Celtica* 6 (1963) 194–249, p. 210.

⁸⁰ ‘Indo-European metrics’, 218–19.

⁸¹ Hull, ‘*On Amra Choluim Chille*’.

⁸² R. Thurneysen, in ‘Zur irische Accent- und Verslehre’, *Revue Celtique* 6 (1883–85) 309–47, pp. 336–47 put forward the theory that Irish syllabic poetry was developed on Latin models. He was followed in this by Kuno Meyer, *A primer of Irish metrics* (Dublin 1909) 5. Carney’s view of the place of syllabic poetry in Irish is associable with this view. Dissenting voices include Watkins, in the article cited above, and J. Travis, *Early Celtic versecraft* (Shannon 1973) 99–108.

⁸³ ‘Three Old Irish accentual poems’, *Ériu* 22 (1971) 23–80, p. 53. There has, of course, been a very similar debate on the status of metrical verse within Latin itself.

⁸⁴ See further D. Greene, ‘Archaic Irish’, in *Indogermanisch und keltisch*, ed. K. H. Schmidt (Wiesbaden 1977) 11–33, p. 13; K. Meyer, ‘Über die älteste irische Dichtung, I’, *Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, phil.-hist. Klasse 6 (Berlin 1913); and R. Thurneysen, ‘Colman mac Lénéni und Senchán Torpeist’ *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 19 (1931–33) 193–209.

⁸⁵ Beare, *Latin verse and European song*, 56.

an articulating feature by Classical authors.⁸⁶ Augustine, in the fourth century, sometimes uses metrical and sometimes rhythmic *cursus* to end his sentences, as if the difference was unimportant to him.⁸⁷ And from that time on, spoken Latin had a stress accent, whatever it may have had earlier. This stress accent, however, did not immediately replace the old metrical system, because the *intellegentia*, like English public-schoolboys of the last century, continued to be taught how to write metrically correct verses. But stress begins to become more significant in some fifth-century verse; for example, the hymn 'A solis ortus cardine', by Caelius Sedulius, is written in iambic dimeter, but also carries a regular stress.⁸⁸

The 8pp form of 'Altus prosator' which (I suggest) is based on the iambic dimeter, is perhaps the single commonest Hiberno-Latin verse form. Of the hymns in the Antiphonary of Bangor, three out of twelve, together with a set of ten rhymed collects, are 8pp, as are ten of the seventeen hymns in the Irish *Liber hymnorum*. Since both these collections were made in Ireland, they confirm the popularity of this metre there.

Another frequent characteristic of Hiberno-Latin verse composition is the use of alphabetic constructions. Sedulius's 'A solis ortus cardine', already mentioned, is alphabetical, as is Augustine's *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, a panegyric poem by Venantius Fortunatus (*De Leontio episcopo*) and two of the three fragmentary hymns attributed to Hilary, 'Ante saecula qui manens' and ' . . . Fefellit saeuam uerbum factum te caro' (the first five stanzas of this are missing). All these but Augustine's self-consciously demotic, syllabic poem are metrical. The form, which goes back to the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament (e.g. Ps. 118) has the advantage of keeping the stanzas in the right order and making sure that none drops out – it is also mnemonic.⁸⁹ Whatever its precise origins in the context of Latin poetry, alphabetic poetry was enthusiastically adopted by Hiberno-Latin hymnodists. Four out of twelve poems in the Antiphonary have this form, and five out of seventeen in the Irish *Liber hymnorum*. Thus the alphabetic mode, like the 8pp syllabic metre, is another respect in which 'Altus' is completely in line with seventh-century Hiberno-Latin hymnody.

Another characteristic of 'Altus', and other early Hiberno-Latin hymns, is that it is rhymed. Rhyme is not unknown in Classical poetry. An inflected language naturally produces homoioteleuton, which may be either avoided or exploited. Norberg comments, 'dans la poésie classique, les assonances et les rimes sont plus ou moins accidentelles ou souvent a un effet spécial'. He considered Caelius

⁸⁶ W. M. Lindsay, *The Latin language* (Oxford 1894) 150: 'while the Latin grammarians often speak of their accent in terms properly applicable only to a pitch-accent, all the features of their language point to its having been a stress-accent' – in particular, the syncope of unaccented vowels.

⁸⁷ Vroom, *Le psaume abécédaire*, 16. D. Norberg, in his *Introduction à la versification latine médiévale* (Stockholm 1958) 87, is still more categorical: 'Du temps de Saint Augustin, selon le témoignage de celui-ci, la différence entre syllabes longues et syllabes brèves avait totalement disparu'.

⁸⁸ Walpole, *Early Latin hymns*, 149–58.

⁸⁹ An interest in initial letters, though in the form of acrostics rather than alphabetical arrangements, goes back in Latin as far as Ennius. See Beare, *Latin verse and European song*, 186. Alphabetic poetry in Hebrew is discussed by Jerome, *Epistola* 30, in I. Hilberg (ed.), *Epistolae* CSEL 54–56, 3 vols (Vienna 1910/1912/1918), i, pp. 243–49.

Sedulius an important figure in the serious development of rhyme.⁹⁰ Sedulius's hymn 'A solis ortus cardine' is ornamented by rhyme in every stanza but one, though in irregular patterns. His rhyme is one-syllable, e.g. 'induit . . . condidit'; 'limitem . . . principem'. Nearly all the words at the ends of lines are trisyllabic, producing proparoxytone stress, as in the Irish eight-syllable line. Similarly, Venantius Fortunatus's 'Vexilla regis prodeunt', an iambic dimeter hymn of the sixth century, uses rhyme freely, though with no consistent pattern. Thus in the developing tradition of hymnody in the fifth and sixth century, rhyme was increasingly used as ornament, though not yet as a structural element.

Sixth- and seventh-century Irish versifiers, both in Latin and Irish, developed an interest in rhyme. The *Amra Choluim Chille*, written at the end of the sixth century, makes some use of rhyme as well as of alliteration.⁹¹ It is no more possible to tell whether the development of rhyme came from Latin and spread to Irish than it is to decide which of them first developed syllabic verse. Some seventh-century Hiberno-Latin poems display sophisticated rhyme patterns, with full, two-syllable rhyme, such as the *uersiculi familiae Benchuir*:

Nauis numquam turbata
quamuis fluctibus tonsa
nuptiis quoque parata
regi Domino sponsa.⁹²

The hymns in the Antiphony display the wide range of poetic forms known in an Irish monastery by the end of the seventh century. They range from the genuinely metrical 'Hymnum dicat' and 'Ignis creator' to the *uersiculi* quoted above, including octosyllabic poems with no rhyme, such as 'Audite omnes', and octosyllabic poems with one-syllable rhyme, such as 'Audite pantes ta erga'.⁹³ It is possible to impose order on this chaos to some extent, since a hymn from the Antiphony, 'Precamur patrem' can be dated to the sixth century by its connections with Columbanus.⁹⁴ It uses rhyme freely, but not consistently, and so may point to the conclusion that the development of rhyme as a fully-fledged structural ornament in Hiberno-Latin took place during the hundred years or so which separate its composition from that of the *uersiculi*.

The rhyme scheme in 'Altus' is consistent with a seventh-century date for the poem. It rhymes the eight-syllable units, using the last, unstressed syllable only, so that although the rhyme is consistent, it is not obtrusive. The most common rhyming syllable is *-us*, followed by *-is*, *-os*, *-as-*, *-es*; then *-um*, *-am*, *-erat*, and finally *-a*, *-e*, *-o*, and *-i*. The normal concordance of noun and adjective or appositional phrase substantially lessens the effect of this one-syllable rhyme. But since no

⁹⁰ Norberg, *Introduction à la versification*, 38. Such a special effect is Ovid's playful, 'quot caelum stellas, tot habet tua Roma puellas'. quoted in Halporn *et al*, *The meters*, 71.

⁹¹ G. Murphy, *Early Irish metrics* (Dublin 1961) 18. Carney discussed the importance of alliteration in early Irish poetry in 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', 55.

⁹² Warren, *The antiphony of Bangor* ii, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–7. Verbal correspondences between Columbanus's first *epistola* and the hymn suggest that he wrote 'Precamur patrem', on which see M. Lapidge, 'Columbanus and the Antiphony of Bangor', *Peritia* 5 (1987), 104–116.

rhyme at all, one-syllable, two-syllable, and elaborate rhyme-schemes could, on the evidence of the Antiphony, co-exist as contemporary literary modes in the same milieu in the later seventh century, the level of rhyme cannot be used as a dating criterion with any greater precision than this.⁹⁵

Alliteration is another feature of 'Altus prosator' which is also characteristic of seventh-century Hiberno-Latin. Alliteration is a structural principle of archaic Irish verse,⁹⁶ and thus it is reasonable that Irish writers should retain a feeling for it even while engaged in experimentation with alien verse-forms in a foreign language. Hiberno-Latin hymnodists used alliteration at irregular intervals and without any obvious pattern; for example,

Sancti, uenite
Christi corpus sumite
Sanctum bibentes
Quo redempti, sanguinem.⁹⁷

This has a primary alliteration on S, and a secondary one on C. No pattern is established for succeeding stanzas. Alliteration was also used as a decorative flourish in ornamental passages of prose, such as the opening of the first book of Adomnán's *Vita S. Columbae*:

Vir itaque uenerandus qualia uirtutum documenta dederit. . .⁹⁸

The author of 'Altus prosator' is similar in his usage. A line such as 'regis regum rectissimi' (R, 1) is used to heighten the aural effect of the stanza, but there is no consistent pattern across the poem as a whole.

Another way in which 'Altus' resembles seventh-century Hiberno-Latin poems is that there is no elision. The line 'Ubi ignis sulphureus' (N, 5) is a clear example of hiatus. On the other hand, the author sometimes permits the synizesis of adjacent vowels, so that, for instance, 'mulieres' becomes a three, not a four-syllabled word. This is a Late Latin symptom.⁹⁹ Augustine's syllabic *psalmus* requires synizesis if the number of syllables is to come out right: 'ueniat' and 'iudicio' must have been pronounced 'uenyat' and 'iudicyo'.¹⁰⁰ Synizesis in general has been discussed by Norberg, who noticed it as a characteristic of Insular writings.¹⁰¹ A particularly common contraction is the pronunciation of 'ii' as 'i', found in 'Altus' in 'tripudiis' (three syllables), and also to be seen in 'Precamur patrem' and the *uersiculi familiae Benchuir*. The existence of this particular synizesis outside the field of syllabic

⁹⁵ However, extremely elaborate rhyme effects, such as Cú-Chuimne of Iona (*ob.* 747) displayed in his 'Cantemus in omne die' (Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber Hymnorum* i, pp. 32–34) are not found before the eighth century.

⁹⁶ Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', 55; and Watkins, 'Indo-European metrics', 219.

⁹⁷ Warren, *The antiphony* ii, 10.

⁹⁸ Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae*, i.1, p. 194.

⁹⁹ Raven, *Latin metre*, 24, notes that synizesis only occasionally occurs in Classical poetry, normally in such contexts as the oblique cases of 'meus', 'tuus', etc., rather than in principal words.

¹⁰⁰ Vroom, *Le psaume abécédaire*, 20–21, notes 'mais surtout le nombre de synizeses est très grand. *ia, io, ium, ius*, sont presque toujours monosyllabiques'. Moreover, so meaningful a word as 'Deus' may be treated as a monosyllable or a disyllable, depending on Augustine's convenience.

¹⁰¹ Norberg, *Introduction à la versification*, 29–31.

poetry is suggested by Hiberno-Latin orthography, which frequently spells 'ii' as 'i'.¹⁰²

The homiletic quality of 'Altus prosator' is enhanced by the use of the first person towards the end of the poem. This is not unique among early Latin hymns written or used in Ireland: both 'Hymnum dicat' and 'Precamur patrem' switch to the first person for the last two or three stanzas, as do other Irish hymns. Many of the surviving hymns of St Ambrose (s. iv) use this device,¹⁰³ but the fifth- and sixth-century writers Sedulius, Prudentius and Fortunatus do not favour it. The apparent intention of the use of the first person towards the end of a hymn is to make its content appear less abstract and more personally significant to its hearers.

Discussion of the style of any work must necessarily be related to its function. In the case of 'Altus prosator', this is far from clear. Western monasticism which developed the use of the iambic dimeter hymn as part of the monastic Offices. A hymnal, known as the Old Hymnal, was developed between the time of Ambrose in the fourth century, and of Benedict in the sixth. Benedict prescribes a hymn (*ambrosianum*) for each of the hours,¹⁰⁴ and the Gallo-Roman monastic leader Caesarius of Arles similarly recommends hymns for the hours, one of which ('*Mediae noctis tempus est*') is in the Antiphony of Bangor.¹⁰⁵ We can be sure that hymns were used in the Irish church, from the sixth century at the latest in the context of the Office.¹⁰⁶ I would argue that the Gallican Church also maintained a tradition of exegetic or polemic hymnody, which may have formed part of the liturgy of the Mass.¹⁰⁷

The next question which presents itself is whether 'Altus prosator' is in fact a hymn, and if it is, whether it is associable with any particular liturgical event. There is no discussion of its purpose in any of the continental manuscripts. Neither the *Leabhar breac* nor the Irish *Liber hymnorum* assign it to any point in the liturgical year or the monastic office, but give the impression that, at least in the eleventh century and later, it was used for private devotion. Since the Irish *Liber hymnorum* is an antiquarian rather than a liturgical compilation, it is not necessarily helpful on such issues. It specifies the way in which 'Altus' was recited, but not when, nor in what circumstances:

¹⁰² B. Löfstedt, 'Some linguistic remarks on Hiberno-Latin', *Studia Hibernica* 19 (1979) 161–69.

¹⁰³ Walpole, *Early Latin hymns*, 18–114.

¹⁰⁴ *Regula S. Benedicti*, 9–18. See H. Gneuss, *Hymnar und Hymnen im englischen Mittelalter* (Tübingen 1968) 13–14.

¹⁰⁵ Gneuss, *Hymnar und Hymnen*, 15–16; and Warren, *The antiphony* ii, 11–12.

¹⁰⁶ J. Stevenson, in F. E. Warren, *The liturgy and ritual of the Celtic Church* 2nd edn. (Woodbridge 1987), pp. lxxxiii–lxxxix.

¹⁰⁷ See, so far, my 'Venantius Fortunatus' (above. n.342). Interestingly, one of the early editors of 'Altus', A. Boucherie, picked up its homiletic qualities in describing it as 'hymne abécédaire contre les antitrinitaires'.

let this then be the ordinance for the recitation *huius hymni*, that ‘*quis potest Deo*’ be recited¹⁰⁸ between every two *capitula*; and it is thence its grace would be upon it, for thus they sang it *prius*.¹⁰⁹

The assertion that this method of singing is the original one cannot be supported in any way. There is nothing in the content of ‘*Altus*’ to suggest any specific liturgical use. It does not celebrate a particular saint, nor can it be readily attached to any particular festival. Although it is beyond question a work of deep piety and moral earnestness, its complexity, difficult language, and somewhat academic tone made it, by the later middle ages at least, inappropriate for collective worship, or even offputting, as the author of *Betha Colaim Chille* implies – though it is comparable with other long, complex Gallican and Irish hymns of the fourth to seventh centuries. The Irish *Liber hymnorum*, and the English manuscript, assign it both a refrain (the ‘*quis potest Deo placere*’ referred to above) and a collect or doxology, addenda which normally suggest use in collective worship. The collect, beginning ‘*Deum patrem ingenitum*’ is octosyllabic, like the poem, but metrical, which suggests that it is a later composition.¹¹⁰ The Orléans manuscript (which of course does not associate the poem with Ireland at all) follows ‘*Altus*’ with an entirely different collect, ‘*Adesto Domine*’, which is not Irish, but quite widely attested in English and continental sources, and normally associated with the *pedilavium* of Maundy Thursday.¹¹¹ This last might offer a possible clue to where ‘*Altus prosator*’ could have been used. The poem’s focus on creation might fit it for use on 25 March, the day which was associated with the Annunciation from the second century onwards. This was also the day on which the world was created, according to a number of patristic writers.¹¹² Since Easter moves with the lunar calendar, in some years, Maundy Thursday would fall on March 25. If ‘*Altus prosator*’ were

¹⁰⁸ The word is *gaibid*, a word of many meanings, which include ‘sing’, ‘chant’, ‘recite’, and ‘declare’. It does not enable us to decide whether ‘*Altus*’ was sung as a hymn, with a tune, chanted or sung, with ‘*quis potest Deo*’ as a refrain, in church, like a psalm, or simply recited like a prayer, in or out of church. Three different methods of psalmody had been developed by the end of the fourth century, *cantus responsorius*, in which a soloist gives the verses and the congregation responds with a refrain, *cantus antiphonus*, in which verses are chanted alternately by two demi-choirs and the refrain by the whole group, and *cantus directaneus*, in which the congregation simply chants through the whole psalm. Any of these could be relevant.

¹⁰⁹ Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum* ii, 26.

¹¹⁰ Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum* i, p. 81, and B. Muir, ‘Two Latin hymns by Colum Cille’, *Revue du Moyen Age Latin* 39 (1983) 205–16, p. 216.

¹¹¹ Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum* ii, p. 168; and Cuissard, ‘La prose de Saint Columba’, *Revue Celtique* 5 (1882–3) 205–12, p. 212.

¹¹² The Creation was believed by many Patristic writers, following Jewish traditions, to have occurred on the vernal equinox. The Palestinian Targums of the first century AD state that the night of Passover is also the night of the Creation, the Covenant with Abraham, the birth of Isaac, the Sacrifice of Isaac, and the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt, and the coming of messianic salvation. See G. Vermes, *Scripture and tradition*, p. 216. Cyprian, writing in 243, says that the world was created at the spring equinox (March 25) (ed. Hartel, CSEL III.3, 248ff). The second-century Hippolytus of Rome is the first Christian writer to give the dates of Christ’s birth and death, in his *Commentarium in libro Danielis* IV.23 (December 25, and March 25). Counting back nine months from December, the Annunciation was traditionally fixed at March 25, a date which the Roman church believed to be that of the vernal equinox.

paired with a Christological hymn (such as ‘Hymnum dicat’ or ‘A solis ortus cardine’) it might form part of a March 25 service. Alternatively, it could be attracted into some part of the Easter cycle: either Maundy Thursday (which does not seem, in itself, especially appropriate) or better, the Easter vigil, with its lengthy lections from the Old Testament, which locate the cosmic drama in what was understood as historical time.

The fact that ‘Altus prosator’ has a refrain and a collect aligns it with Hiberno-Latin hymns which almost certainly do have a liturgical use. Three of the hymns in the Antiphonary of Bangor, ‘Spiritus diuinae lucis’, ‘Recordemur iustitiae’ and *uersiculi familiae Benchuir* have refrains.¹¹³ There are also two sets of verses appended to ‘Audite omnes’ which appear to be collects, and three separate collects ‘super hymnus’. *A priori*, these accretions to the Antiphonary’s hymns suggest adaptation for community worship, and perhaps that the Bangor community favoured the old-fashioned *responsorius* method,¹¹⁴ with the body of the congregation or choir joining in with the refrain while the verses were sung, or chanted, by the celebrant, or cantor. Since we have no precise details whatsoever of how hymns were used in seventh-century Ireland, this is all speculation based on analogy.

The *Leabhar breac* text fails to support the idea that ‘Altus’ was thought of as a hymn. Instead, it implies that by the fourteenth century it was used as a protective prayer.¹¹⁵

Recite to seven times the Altus
Which gives no ‘law’ to hard demon;
There is no disease in the world
Nor shower that it will not drive back.

Both the *Liber hymnorum* and *leabhar breac* are centuries too late to provide any accurate guide to how the original author wished his creation to be used. The best evidence is in the poem itself. The complexities of vocabulary and style, and the slow movement of the lines encourage a meditative movement of the mind back and forth over the content, noting and appreciating parallelisms, such as those between Moses and God, or Christ and Lucifer. It is intellectually knottier than other Hiberno-Latin hymns, and provides abundant food for prolonged meditation. It may therefore have been intended as an aid to private devotion for the contemplatively-minded, though the possibility that it had a liturgical function of some kind should not be discounted.

SOURCES

There are several points in the poem where a specific source can be clearly identified. The most important, of course, is the Bible; particularly the Apocalypse, Job and the Pauline Epistles.¹¹⁶ While the whole of the Bible is obviously inspired

¹¹³ Warren, *The Antiphonary* ii, pp. 12, 16–19, 33.

¹¹⁴ Vroom, *Le psaume abécédaire*, p. 24, states that *cantus responsorius* is the most ancient, and *directaneus* the most recent method of psalmody.

¹¹⁵ *Leabhar breac*, f. 237a, quoted in Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum* i, p. 83. Geib in Altus co basecht / na dam cert do deman dur / ni-s-fil galar isin bith / na cith na cuirfe for cul.

¹¹⁶ The Apocalypse is used in seventeen different places, Job in ten, and the Pauline Epistles in fourteen.

writing, some parts of it may be held to have been more inspired than others: the author of 'Altus' leaned particularly on divine *oratio recta*: the speech of God from the whirlwind in Job 38, and sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels such as the description of Hell as a place of 'fletus et stridor dentium' (Matt. 8:12, and elsewhere). The writer was also apparently familiar with the Book of Enoch, the most nearly canonical of the apocrypha, since it is quoted with approval in the Epistle of Jude (13–14).¹¹⁷ Other works used by him were the Athanasian Creed, the eighth book of Cassian's *Conlationes*, the *Commentarium in librum Iob* of Philip the Presbyter, and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. His background reading appears to have included some major works of Augustine's, some Jerome, and perhaps Gregory, though not Ambrose. He shows no indications of familiarity with any of the Latin literature on the six days of Creation, whether Ambrose's *Hexameron*, Avitus's *De initio mundi*, or the *Liber in Genesim* doubtfully attributed to Juvencus.

Cassian is an authority on monasticism whose direct influence on early Irish monasticism has been much discussed. Columbanus drew on Cassian's *Conlationes* and *Institutiones* in his *Regula monachorum*. The *Praefatio ad Leontium* to the *Conlationes* was drawn on by several Hiberno-Latin writers, including Muirchú and perhaps Cogitosus. The preface was also known to Gildas, whose phrase, '*ingenii nostra cymbula*' is plainly an elaboration of Cassian's '*ingenii cumba*'.¹¹⁸ Cassian was also drawn on by the creators of Irish ecclesiastical legislation, since his work was used in the *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, brought together at the beginning of the eighth century.¹¹⁹ Thus, his work may have been known in Ireland from the sixth century, though the evidence of Gildas and Columbanus is indirect, since the first lived and worked in Britain (and possibly later in Brittany) and the second on the continent, in Frankia and later in Lombard Italy. 'Altus prosator', then, is probably one of the earliest works to demonstrate conclusively that any part of Cassian's work other than its preparatory letter was known and used in Ireland. If we are right in employing Occam's razor and associating 'Altus prosator' with Iona, then it may also be relevant that the Cassianic phrase '*actualis uita*' occurs in the *Vita S. Cuthberti* written at Lindisfarne, founded from Iona, which suggests that Cassian's influence was felt there also.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ This is suggested by Stanza O, with its presentation of a subterranean world of imprisoned beings never to be forgiven: in the Book of Enoch, the Watchers (the sinful stars) ask Enoch to intercede on their behalf with God. They are imprisoned in 'a chaotic and terrible place', which however is neither the hell in which they will be confined after the final judgment, nor the underworld in which the spirits of the dead are kept (*Enoch* 14: 1–8, 21: 3, 21: 7, J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha* (London 1983) 20 and 24). Similarly in 'Altus', this prison of never-to-be-forgiven beings is distinct from Hell. There is a surviving fragment of a ninth-century Breton manuscript of a Latin translation of the Book of Enoch, BL Royal 5. E. 13, ff. 79v–80r, M. R. James (ed.), *Apocrypha Anecdota I*, in J. A. Robinson *Texts and studies II* (Cambridge 1893); and there is considerable evidence for contact between Brittany and Ireland in and before the ninth century.

¹¹⁸ Gildas, *De Excidio*, §106, ed. Winterbottom, p. 138, Cassian, *Conlationes*, ed. M. Petschenig, CSEL 13 (Wien 1886), p. 4. See M. Winterbottom, 'Variations on a nautical theme', *Hermathena* 120 (1976) 55–58.

¹¹⁹ F. W. H. Wasserschleben (ed.), *Die irische Kanonensammlung* 2nd ed., (Leipzig 1885), p. xviii; XXXVII.22d, p. 137; and XLVII.5a, p. 197.

¹²⁰ B. Colgrave (ed.), *Two lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge 1940), III.1, p. 94.

The use of Cassian in 'Altus prosator' is highly distinctive: the author paraphrases extremely closely, but from Book VIII of *Conlationes* only. The earliest manuscripts of both *Conlationes* and *Institutiones* suggest that both compositions circulated in sections rather than all together.¹²¹ An example from Columbanus's monastery of Bobbio is the palimpsest Vatican, Cod. Vat. Lat. 5766, which originally contained the first ten books of *Conlationes*.¹²² Books VII and VIII, as Chadwick has pointed out, are easily separable from the main discourse of the collection, since they form 'a little book on demonology'.¹²³ It may be that the author of 'Altus prosator' had only book VIII, or VII/VIII, at his disposal. Alternatively, it may simply be that nothing else in the copy of Cassian available to him was of interest for his theme. The main content of *Conlationes* is the proper conduct of the monastic life, anecdotes from the Egyptian desert, and discussions of the eight deadly sins, their diagnosis, and treatment. The only human beings mentioned in 'Altus prosator' are Adam, Eve, and Moses: the poem sweeps from the Creation to the Last Judgment, overleaping the Christian era entirely, so none of this would have been very helpful. The usefulness of Cassian to our poet lay in his treatment of the aetiology of pride, in which he incidentally discussed the fall of Lucifer, and in his general discussion of demonology, a section which, as Chadwick noted, falls rather outside the general scope of his work.

Stanza G includes the lines

Grassatos primis duobus
 seductisque parentibus,
 secundo ruit zabulus
 cum suis satellitibus,
 quorum *horrore uultuum*
 sonoque uolitantium
consternarentur homines
 metu territi, fragiles
non ualentes carnalibus
haec intueri uisibus. . .(G, 1-10)

Cassian wrote of the demons,

aut enim terrore concursus eorum et *horrore uultuum*, in quos se pro uoluntate sua cum libitum fuerit transformant atque conuertunt, intolerabili formidine *homines consternarentur intueri*, aut certi nequiores redderentur exemplis eorum iugibus. . .¹²⁴

The resemblance of thought is clear enough, a vivid expression of the theme that devils are so horrifying in appearance that people would not be able to bear the sight of them, but the resemblance of expression is even more striking, as the italicised passages should demonstrate. The poet seems to be in two minds whether

¹²¹ W. O. Chadwick, *John Cassian: a study in primitive monasticism* (Cambridge 1950) 40.

¹²² E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini antiquiores* 12 vols., (Oxford 1934-72), I.44. Lowe describes it as 'uncial, s. viii', of uncertain origin, but presumably Bobbio. It manifests no Irish symptoms.

¹²³ Chadwick, *John Cassian* 91.

¹²⁴ Cassian, *Conlationes*, VIII.12, ed. Petschenig, p. 228.

the invisibility of devils is a good thing: if visible, they would terrify mankind, which would surely be conducive to a disinclination to sin, but on the other hand, he suggests in H that if they were visible, the example of their shameless evil-doing would lead mankind to sin even more. The fluctuation of these two thoughts is also found in Cassian: Stanza H is built up from passages immediately preceding and following the section already quoted:

Hic sublatus e medio
 deiectus est a Domino,
cuius aeris spatium
constipatur satellitum globo inuisibilium
 turbido perduellium,
 ne *malis exemplaribus*
imbuti ac sceleribus
 nullis umquam teigentibus
saeptis ac parietibus
fornicarentur homines
palam omnium oculis.

tanta uero spirituum *densitate constipatur aer* iste inter caelum terramque diffunditur, in quo non quieti otiosique *peruolitant*, ut satis utiliter hominis aspectibus eos prouidentia diuina subtraxerit . . . aut certi nequiores cotidie redderentur *exemplis* eorum iugibus *et imitatione uitati* et per hoc inter homines et immundas atque aeras potestates fieret noxia quaedam familiaritas ac pernicioosa coniunctio, qui *haec flagitia quae nunc inter homines admittuntur* uel *parietum saeptis* uel locorum interuallo et quadam uerecundiae confusione celantur, quae si aperta iugiter uisione conspicerent, ad maiorem furoris incitarentur insaniam.¹²⁵

It is easy to see that ‘Altus’ epitomises Cassian’s words, keeping the ideas in the same order. Several lines are near-quotations. Apart from the obvious lifting of phrases by the poet, ‘non quieti otiosique peruolitant’ seems connected in thought with H, 6, ‘turbido perduellium’. The ‘uolitantium’ of G, 6 is also probably related to this clause. Both the ideas and the vocabulary are following Cassian with remarkable fidelity – even including the unusual theme of the breaking-down of human modesty by the nefarious example of the demons.

Cassian may also be drawn on in Stanza C, which begins ‘caeli de regni *apice / stationis angelicae*’ (C, 1–2). This obviously refers to Isaiah 14: 12–15,¹²⁶ a passage which is quoted by Cassian, who added, ‘. . . quos tamen non solos ex illo *beatissime stationis apice* conruisse scriptura commemorat . . .’¹²⁷ Elsewhere in his works, Cassian writes

hic namque indutus diuina *claritate* et inter ceteras supernas uirtutes conditoris largitate *praeifulgens* splendorem sapientia et uirtutum pulchritudinem...¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Ibid., VIII.12, p. 227–8

¹²⁶ ‘Quomodo cecidisti de caelo, Lucifer qui mane oriebaris’.

¹²⁷ Cassian, *Conlationes*, VIII.8, ed. Petschenig, p. 225.

¹²⁸ Cassian, *Institutiones*, XII.4, ed. Petschenig, p. 207. No correspondences with the *Institutiones* have yet been mentioned, but that book XII may have been known to our writer as well as part of the

This would give the author of 'Altus' the theme of the devil's prelapsarian beauty he uses in '*claritate prae fulgoris uenustate speciminis*' (C, 3–4), two of his words – and perhaps also the idea of making a list of properties which belong to the angelic state. A similar comparison-point is B, 5–6, '*uti non esset bonitas / otiosa*': Cassian wrote

ab omnis prouidentia et dispensatione diuina fuerat *otiosus*, ac tamquam non habens in quos *bonitatis* suae exercerent beneficia solitarius atque ab omni munificentia alienus fuisse credatur.¹²⁹

The resemblance, again, is very close.¹³⁰

The author's most important non-biblical source is the *Commentarium in librum Iob* of Philip the Presbyter, a disciple of St Jerome, who died in the mid-fifth century.¹³¹ This is used in seventeen different places in the text – as often as the Apocalypse. In contrast to the way the author used Cassian, his use of Philip draws on the *Commentarium* as a whole, which he seems to have regarded as a mine of miscellaneous information. He takes single words, phrases, and ideas from this source; which is a principal influence on his angelology, his demonology, and most notably, his information about astronomy and his peculiar theories about the tides.

Philip, now largely forgotten, was an author very popular in Insular circles.¹³² His master Jerome was held in great reverence by Irish scholars: his high popularity is evidenced by the *index scriptorum* to any of the volumes of Irish exegesis printed by Corpus Christianorum. Jerome was the most philologically knowledgeable of the Latin fathers, and much of his work draws on his knowledge of Hebrew and his personal acquaintance with the Holy Land. Philip, though he does not seem to have learned Hebrew, seems to have been affected by Jerome's concern to impart practical information rather than simply to allegorise, and his *commentarium* is

Conlationes is further suggested by the correspondence of A, 8–9, '*gloria deitatis*' with Cassian's '*dum enim gloriam deitatis arbitrii libertate. . .*' (*Institutiones*, XII.5, ed. Petschenig, p. 209).

¹²⁹ Cassian, *Conlationes*, VIII.7, ed. Petschenig, p. 222.

¹³⁰ It is even closer to the formula of the fifth-century Gennadius of Marseilles (*Clavis patrum*, ed. Dekkers, no. 958 (p. 210)), in his *Liber siue diffinitio ecclesiasticorum dogmatum*, §9: '*facti sunt angeli et omnes coelestes uirtutes ut non esset otiosa Dei bonitas, sed haberet in quibus bonitatem suam ostenderet*' (C. H. Turner, 'The *liber ecclesiasticorum dogmatibus* attributed to Gennadius', *Journal of theological studies* 7 (1906) 78–99, [and 8 (1907) 103–14], p. 91). Gennadius made extensive use of Cassian, who was of course his most illustrious predecessor in the see of Marseilles (see Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 37), so it is hard to see whether the author of 'Altus' knew both these passages, or only one. There is no other apparent use of this work in the poem. The *liber* may have been available in Ireland: the manuscript Basel, Universitätsbibliothek F. III.15.1 is written in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon minuscule, but Lowe comments, 'the ms opens with the formula "in nomine dei uiui", found elsewhere only in the Irish Orosius, Milan, biblioteca Ambrosiana. D. 23 sup (CLA III.328), which suggests that the exemplar may have been Irish' (CLA VII.849).

¹³¹ *Clavis Patrum Latinorum*, no. 643, p. 149.

¹³² He was cited by name by Bede, in his *De temporum ratione* 4 (ed. C. W. Jones [Turnhout 1977] 281), quoting the very line with the word *dodrans* which forms the basis for the Irish use of the word – though Bede, unsurprisingly, understood the word correctly as a unit of measurement. There is no surviving Irish manuscript of Philip, but there is one in Anglo-Saxon minuscule of s. ix med, Oxford, Bodl. 426 (CLA II.234).

full of scraps of useful information on all kinds of topics.¹³³ The most spectacular evidence of the presence of his commentary in sixth- and seventh-century Ireland is the use of the word *dodrans* to mean ‘flood, spring tide’ in Columbanus and subsequent Insular works including ‘Altus prosator’ itself, the *Hisperica famina* and Anglo-Latin works that draw on Irish sources. Alan Brown has conclusively demonstrated that this curious usage derives from a misunderstanding of the very passage in the *Commentarium* which underlies Stanza I of ‘Altus prosator’.¹³⁴ His commentary seems to have been used by the author of ‘Altus’ as a source of miscellaneous information, so well known that his wording came half-consciously to mind. Stanza U is an example of this: Philip refers to Lucifer,

qui per occultas cursus sui metas polum circuiens, post biennium in ipsis
aurorae rutilo dicitur apparere.¹³⁵

‘Altus’ refers to *Vesperugo* (Vesper, which is also Lucifer, all names for Venus) ‘oriens post biennium / Vesperugo in uesperum’ (U, 9–10): thus, this is a fact (wrong, as it happens) taken from Philip. But the stanza begins with Orion, moving ‘per metas . . . ignoti orientalis circuli’ (U, 5–6), a description which seems to echo Philip’s ‘per occultas cursus sui metas’. The idea of ‘circling’ appears in both, as well as that of ‘unknown obscurity’, and the actual phrase ‘per metas’. Such a transference of material from the description of Venus to that of Orion strengthens the suspicion that it is the exegesis of Philip which provides the clue to both halves of the stanza.¹³⁶ Another place where Philip’s *Commentarium* may be relevant is K, 5–6, ‘ecce gigantes gemere sub aquis’. Philip commented on the word *gigas* in Job 26: 5:

gigantes autem appellat scriptura diuina homines superbos, rebelles et contumaces. Diabolus quoque, et sui, propter superbiam translato nomine gigantes nuncupantur.¹³⁷

The distinguishing characteristic of the *gigantes* is not size, but pride. This creates a much smoother link between the ‘momentanea regum praesentis gloria’ (K, 2–3) and the giants, by way of misplaced pride and confidence in earthly splendour.

Another author who seems to be important to ‘Altus prosator’ is Isidore. The use of Isidore is crucial as a dating criterion: Isidore’s works were in circulation

¹³³ See M. L. W. Laistner, ‘Antiochene Exegesis in Western Europe during the Middle Ages’, *Harvard Theological Review* 40 (1947) 19–31, for a discussion of the various forms of exegetical practice at this time.

¹³⁴ A. K. Brown, ‘Bede, a Hisperic Etymology and Early Sea Poetry’, *Mediaeval Studies* 37 (1975) 419–32, pp. 422–28.

¹³⁵ Philip, *Commentarium*, *Patrologia Latina*, XXVI.644C.

¹³⁶ Also relevant is Job 28: 31–2, in which Vesper, the Pleiades, and sometimes Orion (the Vulgate has Arcturus) appear together, and the time taken by Venus in its travels is emphasised. Orion’s belt, Venus and the Pleiades also concatenate in Plautus, *Amphitruo*, l. 275 (‘nec Iugulae neque Vesperugo neque Vergiliae occidunt’, G. Goetz and F. Schoell [ed.], *Comoediae* i, [Leipzig 1902] 14), but this work was not known in Ireland: the only connexion between an early Irish writer and Plautus’s *Amphitruo* is the singularly negative one of erasing the play in order to write something else – in Bobbio, not in Ireland (L. D. Reynolds [ed.], *Texts and transmission: a survey of the Latin classics* 2nd edn, [Oxford 1986] 303).

¹³⁷ *Commentarium*, *Patrologia latina* XXVI.688B.

in the 640's and subsequently; and thus, if they are relevant to this poem, it is a product of the seventh century rather than the sixth. Stanza I, on the tides, is one of the most original sections of the poem, and its sources have been hard to find. Isidore's exposition of the movement of waters about the world in the *Etymologiae* is nearer by far than anyone else's to the theory set forth in Stanza I. 'Altus prosator' does not appear to make any use of *De natura rerum*. In the few instances where information to be found in *De natura rerum* is also to be found in 'Altus', it also appears in *Etymologiae*, and the phrasing of the poem is always closer to that of the latter work. In one minor instance, the poet does not follow Isidore's word-usage:

Sidera uero sunt stellis plurimis facta, ut Hyades, Pleiades. Astra autem stellae grandes, ut Orion, Bootes. Sed haec nomina scriptores confundunt.¹³⁸

The author of 'Altus' is one of these errant *scriptores*, since he uses *astra*, not *sidera*, for the Pleiades.

The first area where the author of 'Altus prosator' shows the influence of Isidore is in his angel- and demonology. Isidore's views on angels are orthodox, and 'Altus' does not reproduce any of his turns of phrase, so no dependency can be demonstrated. However, when 'Altus' comes to discuss demons, his ideas seem to draw on Isidore's exposition:

Hi corporum aeriorum natura uigent. Ante transgressionem quidem caelestia corpora gerebant. Lapsi uero in aeriam qualitatem conuersi sunt, nec aeris illius puriora spatia, sed ista caliginosa tenere permissi sunt, qui eis quasi carcer est usque ad tempus iudicii.¹³⁹

'Altus' focuses on the invisibility of demons, their presence in the air and, at the same time, their imprisoned state.

A much clearer case for dependence on Isidore can be made with respect to two of the poems most unusual themes: the treatment of tides, sea, winds and rain, and the use of astronomical information. The sea and its movements were of enormous interest to Irish scholars from the seventh century onwards,¹⁴⁰ and a particular interest of St Columba himself.¹⁴¹ The theory of the movement of water about the world set forth in 'Altus prosator' is highly original. Stanzas I, K and L declare that the clouds draw up water from the three deeper floods of the ocean, the winds drive this water over the land in whirlwinds, and lay bare the marshes at the edge of the sea. The clouds are carefully controlled by God,

¹³⁸ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, III.lx.1–2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII.xi.17.

¹⁴⁰ According to the end of the first section of *Salúair na Rann*, every educated person ought to know five things about each day: the day of the solar month, the age of the moon, the state of the tide, the day of the week, and whether it was a saint's day (and if so, whose). The scholar is therefore required to concern himself both with the heavens and the sea: two notable preoccupations of 'Altus' (E. Hull, *The Poem-book of the Gael* 10). See further M. Smyth, 'The Physical World in Seventh-century Hiberno-Latin Texts', *Peritia* 5 (1986) 201–34.

¹⁴¹ The *Amra Choluim Chille* is a near-contemporary witness to Columba's life and concerns, and it records his interest in the sea (line 380), the course of the moon (line 392) and astronomy (line 401) (Bernard and Atkinson, *The Irish Liber hymnorum*, text i, 173–4, transl. ii, 68–69).

so that they gradually let out their water to fertilise the land, thus creating rivers. There is a circular motion envisaged, in which the clouds move water from sea to land, impelled by the wind, and the rivers return it to its source. The winds and clouds are apparently made entirely responsible for the tidal movement of the sea, though the use of the comparative in ‘profundiores dodrantes’ (this writer does not use comparatives and superlatives casually) suggests that he is also involving the abyss of waters beneath the ocean implied in the account of the Flood in the Book of Genesis, though it is not at all clear how this fits in with the rest of his theory.

The seeds of this original idea are to be found scattered among the writings of Isidore. The most important passage is in *Etymologiae*:

Ideo autem mare incrementum non capere, cum omnia flumina, omnes fontes recipiat, haec causa est: partim quod influentes undas ipsa magnitudo eius non sentiat: deinde, quod amara aqua dulce fluentum consumat; uel *quod ipsae nubes multum aquarum ad se attrahant, siue quod partim auferant uenti*, partim sol exsiccet; postremum, quod per occulta quaedam terrae foramina percolatus, et ad caput amnium fontesque reuolutus recurrat.¹⁴²

Isidore also discusses the sucking up of water into the sky, again in *Etymologiae*:

Pluuiae dictae quod fluant, quasi fluuiae, nascuntur enim de terrae et maris anhelitu. Quae cum altius eleuatae fuerint, aut solis calore resolutae, aut ui uentorum compressae, stillantur in terris.¹⁴³

The oceanic tides are related in the *Etymologiae* to the winds:

[Oceanus] iste est qui oras terrarum amplectitur, alternisque aestibus accedit atque recedit; respirantibus enim in profundum uentis aut reuomit maria, aut resorbet.¹⁴⁴

The most economical explanation of the idea in ‘Altus’, then, is that the author considered these passages, and took from them what he wished, creating a theory unique to himself but composed of Isidorean elements.

The other area where Isidorean influence may be seen on ‘Altus’ is with the astronomical data of Stanza U. It is very hard to say what astronomical texts other than the *Etymologiae* might have been available in seventh-century Ireland.¹⁴⁵ The

¹⁴² *Etymologiae*, XIII.xiv.3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, XIII.x.2.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII.xv.1.

¹⁴⁵ Texts deriving from Aratus represent the principal medieval Latin source for Greek astronomy. Their history between the Late Antique and Carolingian periods is entirely obscure. The same is true of the *astronomica* of Hyginus. See Reynolds (ed.), *Texts and transmission*, 18–24 and 187–89. Both were known, at least by name, to Isidore himself (*De natura rerum* XVII.1, (ed. F. Arévalo, *Opera omnia* [Rome 1797–1803] vii), p. 28. Another possible source of astronomical information for seventh-century Ireland is suggested by a computistical manuscript, Wien, Nationalbibliothek lat. 15269 + ser. nov. 37 (Caroline minuscule, s. viii ex) containing geographic and astronomical information from Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*, Solinus, and Gregory of Tours’s *De cursu stellarum*, written at Salzburg, where the Irish Vergil was bishop in the later eighth century, and apparently copied from an Irish exemplar (CLA X.1510). But there is no direct indication of the use of any of these writers in ‘Altus prosator’.

author of 'Altus' informs us that Orion makes a circle, leaving the Pleiades (which he refers to as the Vergiliae) behind, disappears for a time, and returns to its accustomed place. Vesper also takes two years to return to its original position. Leaving Vesper aside, in my view the two constellations are used to indicate the circle of the year. Orion is, according to the *Etymologiae*, a winter group:

tempore autem hiemis, obortus mare et terras aquis ac tempestatibus turbat.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, Isidore states that the Pleiades are a spring constellation.

Has Latini *Vergilias* dicunt a temporis significatione, quod est uer, quando exoriuntur. Nam occasu suo hiemem, ortu aestatem, primaeque nauigationis tempus ostendunt.¹⁴⁷

The point of the stanza appears to be that although the movements of the stars are secret and mysterious, the return of a star can be looked for with confidence at the appropriate season, which makes it an appropriate image for the Second Coming of Christ. The information on the synodic time of Venus (Vesper) in this stanza does not derive from Isidore, but from Philip the Presbyter.¹⁴⁸ However, Isidore, but not Philip, noted that 'fertur autem haec stella oriens luciferum, occidens uesperum facit'.¹⁴⁹ Since the poet used Lucifer as an expression for Satan in Stanza C, there is probably a deliberate antithesis based on this knowledge.

It is well known that Isidore was much used in Ireland.¹⁵⁰ His work is a main source for the *Hisperica famina* and other works connected with them.¹⁵¹ The *Etymologiae* were once known in Ireland as the *culmen*, a title which demonstrates the honour in which they were held.¹⁵² The book reached Ireland surprisingly quickly after its publication, to judge by the writers who use it, and the survival of a fragment in Irish script, possibly written on the Continent, which is one of the earliest Irish manuscripts.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁶ *Etymologiae*, III.lxxi.10.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III.lxxi.13

¹⁴⁸ Discussion of Job 38: 32, *Commentarium, Patrologia latina* XXVI.760C. The synodic period of Venus is in fact 584 days. Lucifer is a type of Christ in the hymn 'Deus qui caeli lumen es', discussed above, n.63.

¹⁴⁹ *Etymologiae*, III.lxxi.19.

¹⁵⁰ See B. Bischoff, 'Die europäische Verbreitung der Werke Isidors', in *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literatur* (3 vols, Stuttgart, 1966–81) I, 171–94; J. N. Hillgarth, 'Visigothic Spain and Early Christian Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 62 C (1962) 167–94 and 'Ireland and Spain in the seventh century', *Peritia* 3 (1984), 1–16; and M. Herren, 'On the earliest Irish acquaintance with Isidore of Seville' in *Visigothic Spain: new approaches*, ed. E. James (Oxford, 1980), pp. 243–50.

¹⁵¹ M. W. Herren, *Hisperica famina I: The A-text* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 20–22.

¹⁵² T. Ó Máille, 'The authorship of the *Culmen*' *Ériu* 9 (1921–23), 71–76, and see also T. F. O'Rahilly, 'A note on the *Culmen*', *Ériu* 10 (1926), 109.

¹⁵³ A. Dold, *Neue St Galler vorhieronymianische Propheten-Fragmente*, Texte und Arbeiten 1, Abteilung 31 (Beuron, 1940), pp. 89–94, prints the earliest surviving fragment of the *Etymologiae*, written in Irish minuscule, Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 1399 a 1 (*CLA* VII, 995). This is as likely to have been written in an Irish centre on the Continent as in Ireland itself. See further Bischoff, 'Die europäische Verbreitung der Werke Isidors', and T. J. Brown, 'The oldest Irish manuscripts and their late antique background', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (ed.), *Ireland and Europe: the early church* (Stuttgart 1984) 311–27, pp. 312–3.

The last of the sources of 'Altus prosator' which is indisputable is the *historiae* of the so-called Hegeppus, from which the author has borrowed several words in Stanza K, discussed earlier. No other evidence of knowledge of this work is visible in 'Altus', but the dramatic description of the rough waters at the mouth of the Nile must have appealed to the author's manifest interest in the dramatic evocation of natural phenomena, particularly watery phenomena. The same passage is used by Adomnán, and was thus evidently available in the library of seventh-century Iona.¹⁵⁴

There is a further group of writers with whom our author almost certainly had some familiarity, though this is not demonstrable by precise verbal parallels in specific passages of the poem. The most important of these is Augustine. There are several points in the poem where Augustine's thought seems to have exerted a general influence without impelling the poet to direct quotation: in particular, he seems to draw on Augustine's analysis of the devil's double sin of envy and pride in Stanza G.¹⁵⁵ The two works which appear to be the most significant for 'Altus prosator' are *De ciuitate Dei* and *De Genesi ad litteram*. The latter provides a supplement to Cassian's *Conlationes* VIII on demonology: in particular, there are two passages in Bk XI of *De Genesi ad litteram* which discuss the nature of the devil. Some comments on demons, for instance on their airy dwelling-place, in *De ciuitate Dei*, also confirm Cassian's remarks and thus may be seen as supplementary sources. Augustine had an interest in natural science, and makes a number of parenthetic remarks about the rain, tides, the sea, and other subjects of interest to the author of 'Altus', but unlike Isidore, he does not formulate a theory of their interrelations which could have been of direct help. But Augustine's example provides a justification for combining information about spiritual and physical matters in the same work. *De Genesi ad litteram* is known to have been available in seventh-century Ireland. An epitome of it, called the *Exhymeron*, was created, possibly in Ireland, before the end of the century.¹⁵⁶

One of the stranger things about 'Altus prosator' is the failure to draw on certain sources which to a modern reader appear obvious, and which are likely to have been available to him. There is no unambiguous use of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*, even though the book of Job is one of the poet's most important Biblical sources, and the *Moralia* were available in Ireland from an early date.¹⁵⁷ For whatever reason, the poet seems to have valued Philip far above Gregory as a guide to the intricacies of Job. There is no sign that he knew Ambrose's *Hexameron*, with its wealth of cosmological information, which may have been known to the seventh-century Irish author of *De ordine creaturarum*.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ L. Bieler, 'Adamnan und Hegepp', *Wiener Studien* 69 (1956), 344–9, and see Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, (ed. Meehan [and Bieler]), pp. 16–18.

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, (ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 28 [Vienna 1894] II.14), p. 346.

¹⁵⁶ M. Gorman, 'An unedited fragment of an Irish epitome of Augustine's *De genesi ad litteram*', *Revue des études Augustiniennes* 28 (1982) 76–85; and also his 'The oldest manuscripts of St Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram*', *Revue Bénédictine* 90 (1980) 7–49, particularly pp. 46–47. It should be said that there is no direct proof that the *Exhymeron* is Irish in origin.

¹⁵⁷ The Munster exegete Laidcenn mac Baith, who died in 661, wrote an abridgement, the *Egloga de Moralibus Iob*, (ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 145 [Turnhout 1969]).

¹⁵⁸ See the edition of M. C. Díaz y Díaz (Santiago de Compostela 1972), notes pp. 105, 147.

Another very strange omission from the poet's sources is Jerome, so admired in Irish circles. His particular appeal to the Irish was as a source for the other two of the 'tres linguae sacrae', since his writings are liberally sprinkled with the Greek and Hebrew equivalents to Latin words.¹⁵⁹ There is one possible instance in the poem of the author's using philological information derived from Jerome, his explanation of the word *poliandria* in his commentary on Ezekiel.¹⁶⁰ 'Altus prosator' contains very few grecisms, and its only real hebraism is the inexplicable *iduma*, which I have not managed to find anywhere in the works of Jerome or in any other source.

THE LATER HISTORY OF 'ALTUS PROSATOR'

One important starting-point for a poem so often described as 'hispanic' is the relationship between it and the *Hisperica famina*: there is a connexion, certainly, but which is indebted to which? The tendencies of Hiberno-Latin style in the sixth and seventh centuries have already been discussed: intentionally rhetorical writing is characterised by recondite vocabulary, hyperbaton and sometimes, complex sentence structures. The relationship between the vocabulary and syntax of the *Famina* and 'Altus' has also already been discussed, and found to be minimal. There is some resemblance of subject matter: both show a marked interest in the physical world, astronomy and the sea in particular. This they share with other seventh-century Hiberno-Latin writers.

Neil Wright has demonstrated that the *modus operandi* of the faminators was to take concepts and an occasional word or phrase from their source-texts and to recast them in hispanic diction.¹⁶¹ If we bear this principle in mind, we have some reason to suspect a direct relationship between the A-Text and 'Altus'. The 'lex diei' section contains the following lines

titaneus occiduum rutilat arotus *pontum* roseos imam curuat radios sub
speram . . . *fulgoria* pliadum uariant *spicula* horanum¹⁶²

In 'Altus prosator' we find the word *pontia*, and a similar suggestion that the world is curved or round in U, 6–7

per metas thetis ignoti
orientalis circuli.

In Stanza Q, 7–9,

¹⁵⁹ B. Bischoff, 'Das griechische Element in der abendländischen Bildung des Mittelalters', *Mittelalterliche Studien* II, 246–75, p. 249. See also R. E. McNally, 'The "Tres linguae sacrae" in early Irish biblical exegesis', *Theological Studies* 19 (1958) 375–403.

¹⁶⁰ The word *Polyandria* is used in the Septuagint version of Ezek. 39: 11, and also in the Vetus Latina version used by Ambrose (P. Sabatier [ed.], *Bibliorum sacrorum uersiones antiquae*, 3 vols [Rhiems 1743], ii, p. 832). It is explained in Jerome's *commentaria in Ezechielem* XI.39, *Patrologia latina* XXV.15–490, col. 364. The first six books of this commentary were known to Columbanus, on his own showing in *Epistola* I, written to Gregory the Great around the year 600 (Walker, *Opera*, 10). It is thus possible that this work was available in seventh-century Ireland.

¹⁶¹ N. Wright, 'The *Hisperica famina* and Caelius Sedulius', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 4 (1982) 51–76.

¹⁶² A-Text, lines 303–4, 306, ed. Herren, p. 284.

quis quoque uidit *fulgura*
 in gyro coruscantia,
 quis lampades et *iacula*

recalls the A-Text's *fulgoria . . . spicula* above. The Pleiades appeared in this passage: they are one of several constellations named by the *Hisperica famina*, together with Orion, the Hyades, Bootes and the Triones. The Pleiades and Orion are, of course, found together in 'Altus'. *Orion* means the constellation in 'Altus', but has typically been generalised to mean 'star' in the *Hisperica famina*.¹⁶³ Other similarities of phrase include *uasta mole* in the A-Text, line 362, and *immensae molis* in F, 9, and the description of sun and moon as *gemellos arotos* in the A-Text, 363, and *luminaribus duobus* in X, 5–6. The word *metae* for the tracks of the stars is used in both:

titanus diurnas rutilat *orion metas* (A-Text, 364)

Orion . . .

per *metas* thetis ignoti (U, 2; U, 5).

Girus appears both in A-Text, line 374 and in Stanza Q, 8. These parallels give an impression that the faminators might be paraphrasing from 'Altus prosator', using a more affected vocabulary, with an occasional takeover of actual words and expressions.

Three possibilities present themselves. The first is that the faminators and the author of 'Altus prosator' worked in the same milieu, and that their ideas on physical geography were separately derived from some other work now lost or as yet unidentified. The second is that 'Altus' is one of the sources for the *Hisperica famina*, and the third that the relationship is reversed. The second seems the most likely: 'Altus' is so much more coherent and intellectually original than any of the *famina*, and the correspondences in expression between the two militate against the first hypothesis. Since both seem on internal evidence to be written after the publication of Isidore's works and before those of Aldhelm, they must be nearly contemporary. There are many indications, for example the preface to *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae*, that communications between centres of learning were lively and sometimes quite swift in seventh-century Ireland. There is reason to believe that hisperic writing was known and cultivated at Bangor in the seventh century, and that Bangor and Iona were on friendly terms.¹⁶⁴

Another place where traces of a knowledge of 'Altus prosator' may be found is in Latin-Latin glossaries of English origin. 'Altus prosator's' debt to certain pre-existing glossaries, 'Abstrusa', 'Abolita' and 'Affatim', has already been discussed.

¹⁶³ Jerome's *Commentarium in Isaiam libri octo et decem* V, 3, *Patrologia latina* XXIV.9–678, col 157, may be relevant here: 'uerbum Hebraicum CHISILE LXX *Oriona* transtulerunt. Hebraeus, quo ego praeceptore usus sum, Arcturum interpretatus est. Nos generaliter, sequentes Symmachum, stellam [al. stellas] diximus'. Orion thus gives the impression of being synonymous with *stella*, which may be why both the *Hisperica famina* and the Old Irish treatise on the Psalter use the name in this way (P. Ó Néill, 'The Old-Irish Treatise on the Psalter', *Ériu* 30 (1979) 148–64, p. 152).

¹⁶⁴ See above, p. 338, n. 66.

The glossaries which show traces of borrowing from the poem are the group connected with seventh-century Canterbury, Epinal, Erfurt, Corpus and Erfurt 2,¹⁶⁵ and the much later Harley Glossary.¹⁶⁶ The earliest of these is the Epinal glossary, recently argued by Julian Brown to have been copied in Mercia at the end of the seventh century, so it is therefore the most important for dating and localising 'Altus'.¹⁶⁷ The first Erfurt glossary is a slightly shorter version of Epinal: the two derive from a common exemplar. Both are glossed in Latin with occasional glosses in Old English. The source of the common ancestor of these glossaries appears to be Canterbury.¹⁶⁸

There are not very many words in common between 'Altus prosator' and this group of Anglo-Saxon glossaries. Lindsay pertinently comments that *iduma*, clearly the most outlandish word in 'Altus' should logically be the most likely to be glossed, and it is therefore strange that we do not find it. But there is a group of words, some relatively rare, common to Epinal-Erfurt, Corpus and 'Altus' which merits consideration.¹⁶⁹

Altum: mare uel caelum (345.6) ('Altus' A, 1)¹⁷⁰

Coenodoxia: uana gloria (349.43) ('Altus' C, 9)¹⁷¹

Creprat: siftid (351.11) ('Altus' L, 2)¹⁷²

Dodrans: aegur (355.61) ('Altus' I, 4)¹⁷³

¹⁶⁵ Three of the above are printed in B. Bischoff et al (ed.), *The Epinal, Erfurt, Werden and Corpus Glossaries*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 22 (Copenhagen 1988). Both Erfurt glossaries are printed in full in Goetz (ed.), *Corpus glossariorum Latinorum*, V, 337–401 and 259–337. There is an earlier facsimile edition of Epinal by H. Sweet (ed.), *The Epinal glossary* (London 1883); and editions of the Corpus glossary by J. H. Hessels (ed.), *An eighth-century glossary* and W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *The corpus glossary*. The principal sources for this group of glossaries were set out by K. W. Gruber, *Die Hauptquellen des Corpus-Epinaler und Erfurter Glossares*. The most important source by far is Jerome (p. 62–95), but others, in order of importance, are the Vulgate (pp. 19–50), canons, councils and decretals (pp. 54–59), the *Regula S. Benedicti* (pp. 60–61), and the *Vita S. Eugeniae* (pp. 61–62).

¹⁶⁶ London, British Library Harley 3376, a late tenth- or eleventh-century fragment (A-1) of a glossary which must originally have been very large, ed. R. T. Oliphant, *The Harley Latin-Old English glossary, edited from B. L. ms Harley 3376* (Den Haag 1966). It contains material from Epinal-Erfurt and Corpus, but also makes unequivocal independent use of 'Altus prosator' (see C.702, *ceruleis turbinibus*, and D. 404, *dealibus*), first pointed out by O. B. Schlutter, 'Lexical and glossographic notes, I', *Modern Language Notes* 15 (1900) 206–11, p. 210.

¹⁶⁷ T. J. Brown, 'The Irish element in the Insular system of scripts to circa A.D. 850', *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, (ed. H. Löwe, 2 vols [Stuttgart 1982]), i, pp. 101–19, p. 109, n. 12.

¹⁶⁸ H. Bradley, 'Remarks on the Corpus Glossary', *Classical Quarterly* 13 (1919) 89–108, pp. 101–2 suggested that the archetype might have derived from Aldhelm's school at Malmesbury: Aldhelm, however, received part of his education in the school of Theodore and Hadrian and maintained contact with Hadrian, so the accuracy of the Aldhelmian glosses is just as explicable if the archetype was created at Canterbury. Lapidge, 'The school of Theodore and Hadrian', p. 58, discusses the relationship of the various witnesses to the Canterbury *glossae collectae* and the reasons for connecting them with the school of Theodore and Hadrian.

¹⁶⁹ My examples are taken from Goetz's edition of the first Erfurt glossary in *Corpus glossariorum Latinorum* V.337–401, which prints Epinal variants as footnotes, identified by his page- and line-numbers. Variants from the Corpus glossary are taken from Lindsay's edition and follow his numbering, which takes the initial letter of the lemma, rather than the page, as their unit.

¹⁷⁰ *Corpus* A.479.

¹⁷¹ *Corpus* C.275.

¹⁷² *Corpus* C.872.

¹⁷³ *Corpus* D.343.

- Ergastula: ubi damnati aut marmora secant aut aliquid operentur (358.52) ('Altus' G, 12)¹⁷⁴
 Gigans: terrigena (363.8) ('Altus' K, 5)¹⁷⁵
 Hymnus: laus carminum (364.53) ('Altus' Y, 1)¹⁷⁶
 Metas: terminos (371.2) ('Altus' U, 5)
 Prosator: genitor (380.6) ('Altus' A, 1)¹⁷⁷
 Peditemptim (sic): paulatim (381.31) ('Altus' L, 7)¹⁷⁸
 Scilla: pars erena (392.25) ('Altus' K, 11)¹⁷⁹
 Thetis: aquis (395.29) ('Altus' U, 5)¹⁸⁰
 Tripudiante: exultantes (396.6) ('Altus' Y, 3)¹⁸¹
 Turbinae: rota uentorum (398.27) ('Altus' I, 6)¹⁸²
 Vernans: laetans (400.35) ('Altus' Y, 6)¹⁸³

For some of these, of course, there are many possible sources; but *dodrans*, with its gloss, very strongly suggests a Hiberno-Latin source, as indeed does *thetis*. *Prosator* also, though attested in patristic Latin, is far from being a common word. Some additional glosses and lemmas in *Corpus*, which derives independently from the Canterbury archetype, may also be relevant.

- Barat[h]rum: sepulchrum (B.39) ('Altus' D, 8)
 Brumalia: rosina pluuiia (B.191) ('Altus' I, 2)
 Charybdis: forago [sic] in mare (C.370) ('Altus' K, 9)
 Edax: com[m]edens (E.34) ('Altus' N, 6)
 Furibundus: ualde iratus (E.429) ('Altus' Z, 1)
 Oceanum: mare, qui circumdat omnem terram (O.125) ('Altus' I, 4)
 Orion: eburthring (O.255) ('Altus' U, 10)
 Protopla[u]stum: primus figuratum (P.588) ('Altus' E, 12)
 Vesperugo: stella uesperis (V.131) ('Altus' U, 10)
 Vexilla: seign (V.85) ('Altus' X, 4)

The important words common to all three glossaries are *cenodoxia*, *dodrans*, *ergastula*, *prosator*, *scilla*, *thetis* and *uernans*, sufficiently unusual collectively to suggest that the Hiberno-Latin work which contributed to the formation of the archetype was 'Altus prosator'. All these important words are in the nominative. The glossaries are not consistent in their practice, but the case for any one word is strengthened if it is either normalised to the nominative or is in the same case as the putative source text. The gloss *laetans* on *uernans* is particularly significant in justifying 'Altus prosator' as a source, since it is an unusual meaning for the word,

¹⁷⁴ *Corpus* E.276.

¹⁷⁵ *Corpus* G.90.

¹⁷⁶ *Corpus* H.165.

¹⁷⁷ *Corpus* P.664.

¹⁷⁸ *Corpus* P.340.

¹⁷⁹ *Corpus* S.168.

¹⁸⁰ *Corpus* T.75.

¹⁸¹ *Corpus* T.262.

¹⁸² *Corpus* T.337.

¹⁸³ *Corpus* V.128.

and the only one which will fit the context in the poem. Of the lemmas and glosses found only in Corpus, the most striking is *brumalia*, which is not found outside the Canterbury-group glossaries and 'Altus prosator'.

Two of the rarest words in this list, *prosator* and *dodrans*, are used by Aldhelm, who received part of his education at Canterbury. The word *dodrans* in the sense of 'tide' could only have reached him from a Hiberno-Latin text, whether at first or second hand.¹⁸⁴

It is hard to establish the extent of Aldhelm's acquaintance with Hiberno-Latin culture. He had some acquaintance with the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, and traces in his turns of phrase suggest that he had read the *Lorica* of Laidcenn, and some of the *Hisperica famina*. He may have known *De ordine creaturarum*.¹⁸⁵ Did he also know 'Altus prosator'?

It is perfectly possible that he could have done. It is clear that there was a great deal of movement and interaction between scholars and churchmen of the two countries in the sixth and seventh centuries. Many Englishmen, including two of Aldhelm's pupils, studied in Ireland,¹⁸⁶ and many Irishmen lived and worked in England.¹⁸⁷ Aldhelm's remonstrations with Heahfrith suggest that students mainly went from England to Ireland in search of instruction, not vice versa – unsurprisingly, since later-seventh-century Canterbury under Theodore and Hadrian was the first intellectually considerable school in the entire Anglo-Saxon polity.

The naturalness of cross-cultural scholarly contact in the British Isles can be emphasised by noting that not all communication between English and Irish took place through the medium of Latin. King Oswiu is known to have spoken Irish,¹⁸⁸ and so, doubtless, did his son Aldfrith.¹⁸⁹ The sons of Æthelfrith and their followers may also have learned Irish, and King Oswald certainly did. The impression given by casual remarks in the works of Bede and other early sources is that it was not at all unusual for individuals to be competent in two vernaculars, and that many people, not only clerics (who would also have learned Latin) but also exiled

¹⁸⁴ Another word which links Aldhelm with both the *Hisperica famina* and Adomnán is *ansportare*, a variation of *asportare* used by these three writers (Grosjean, 'Confusa caligo', 52) and in the Epinal glossary (A 599).

¹⁸⁵ M. Diaz y Diaz argued that he did, in his edition of *De ordine creaturarum*, 37.

¹⁸⁶ R. Ehwald (ed.), *Aldhelmi opera*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctores Antiquissimi 15 (Berlin 1913–19): *Epistola ad Eihfridum*, pp. 488–94, and *Epistola ad Wihfridum*, pp. 479–80. For a more general view of the English presence in seventh-century Ireland, see Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.27, p. 312. Perhaps the earliest such emigrants on record (aside from political exiles) are the Pilu saxo and Geneus saxo at Iona in Columba's time (Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae* III.22 and III.10, pp. 512 and 486).

¹⁸⁷ Those named by Bede include the well known Fursa and Dicuill, and also, C. A. Ireland suggests, Boisil ('Boisil: an Irishman hidden in the works of Bede', *Peritia* 5 (1986) 400–03). An eighth-century master scribe called Ultán working in England is mentioned in Æthelwulf's *De abbatibus*, (ed. A. Campbell, (Oxford 1967), lines 208–10).

¹⁸⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* III.25, p. 296: 'illorum etiam lingua optime imbutus'. See also H. Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty and the Irish', *Peritia* 2 (1983) 103–26.

¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, the implication of Herren's arguments about the *Hisperica famina* is that they were written by Anglo-Saxons or other foreigners resident in Ireland, not by Irishmen at all (*Hisperica famina* i, pp. 32–7).

aristocrats, spent many years living abroad.¹⁹⁰ This free movement and communication between individuals seems to reflect a lack of political tension based on considerations of ethnicity. When King Ecgrith launched a raid into Ireland and wrought considerable havoc in part of Meath, Bede reported this in strong terms of shock and indignation.¹⁹¹

Within this general context Aldhelm, conducting a one-man crusade to aggrandize the school of Canterbury, certainly had access to Irish works. This is made clear by his letters to his pupils, particularly the letter to Heahfrith, which appears to be a conscious parody of Hiberno-Latin high style.¹⁹² There are two historically-visible routes by which a poem written in Iona in particular could have reached Aldhelm: via the mediation of his godson, King Aldfrith of Northumbria, or via his pupil Pehthelm, the first English bishop of Candida Casa in Galloway,¹⁹³ who must have had some reputation as a scholar, for Boniface later appealed to him as an authority on canon law.¹⁹⁴ There may have been many others who had ties of some kind both with Aldhelm and with the Irish-influenced north of England.

There are three works of Aldhelm's which reveal some trace of a possible acquaintance with 'Altus prosator', the *epistola ad Heahfridum*, already mentioned as a work in which Aldhelm exerted himself to mock and parody Irish writings, *Epistola ad Wihfridum*, and his *Carmen rhythmicum*.¹⁹⁵ Aldhelm's apparent aim in the *Epistola ad Heahfridum* is to demonstrate his complete mastery of the techniques of Irish high style, in addition to further resources which were beyond the capacity of the Irish schools. A neat example of this is in the verses with which he ends the letter. The first is a jingle based on a line from Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, which can be resolved into two seven-syllabled *rhythmical* half-lines by the excision of the syntactically-superfluous *fiat*.¹⁹⁶ Rhythmical, syllabic verse was of course the common model for most Hiberno-Latin hymnody. The next four lines are Aldhelm's own metrically correct hexameters, and form a complete contrast in style.

¹⁹⁰ Linguistic competence is an issue which surfaces repeatedly in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Agilbert was unable, or unwilling, to learn an Old English dialect alongside his own Frankish, and lost his see in consequence (III.7, and see III.25: he may, on the other hand, have been competent in Old Irish, from Bede's account *Historia ecclesiastica* pp. 234 and 300) Aidan was dependent on the offices of King Oswald as a translator until he had learned Old English – it is clear that he did learn it, but that it had not been an automatic part of his education on Iona (III.3, *ibid.*, p. 226).

¹⁹¹ Despite his own quarrel with the Irish church over the paschal question, and Ecgrith's own lavish benefactions to Wearmouth-Jarrow, Bede ascribed the king's death at the hands of the Picts to divine vengeance for his unprovoked assault on Ireland, which he describes as 'gens innoxia et nationi Anglorum semper amicissima' (*Historia ecclesiastica* IV.26, p. 426). Some reasons for Ecgrith's aggression have been suggested by Moisl, 'The Bernician royal dynasty', 123–4.

¹⁹² The Hiberno-Latin overtones of the *Epistola* are discussed by Ehwald in *Aldhelmi opera*, 487–8. The characteristic features of Hiberno-Latin high style are summed up and analysed by G. Brüning, 'Adamnans *Vita Columbae* und ihre Ableitungen', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 11 (1916–17) 213–304.

¹⁹³ Bede, *historia ecclesiastica* V.18 and V.23, pp. 512 and 560.

¹⁹⁴ Boniface, *Epistola* XXXII, in *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, (ed. M. Tangl [Berlin 1916], pp. 55–6).

¹⁹⁵ Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, 523–8. The poem has been defended as an authentic work of Aldhelm's rather than that of a pupil in M. Lapidge and M. W. Herren (transl.), *Aldhelm: the prose works*, (Ipswich 1978), 16–18.

¹⁹⁶ Aldhelm, *Epistola ad Heahfridum*, (ed. Ehwald, p.494), and Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, *Epistola* II.i. 9–12, in *Epitomi ed epistole*, (ed. G. Polara [Napoli 1979], 206).

Among the other Hiberno-Latin traces in the *Epistola ad Heahfridum*, there are a few words associable with 'Altus prosator', almost all in the first fifty lines or so. The most obvious of these is *Prosator* itself. In his elaborate treatment of that favourite Insular theme, 'sailing across the sea', he makes use of the 'Altus' words, *pontus*, *caeruleus* and *dodrans*: the verses in the poem which deal with the sea, movements of water and so forth are among its finer moments. There are also such words as *brumosus*, *protoplastus* and *ergastulum* in this section, which could conceivably have been suggested by, or taken from, the poem. The *Epistola ad Wihthfridum*, to another student whom he hoped to lure away from Irish learning, includes two words, *pontia* and *praesagmen*, which appear only in Aldhelm, 'Altus prosator', and glossaries; 'Affatim' (already mentioned as a possible source-text for 'Altus'), and the second Erfurt glossary, part of the Canterbury group. The word *prosator*, similarly, appears in 'Altus', Aldhelm, and the Canterbury glossaries, and is not otherwise attested in early Insular Latin.

The *Carmen* is a very different work from the *Epistolae*, and here the case may be stronger. Here again, the main point of contact with 'Altus prosator' is in the description of the sea in its most spectacular aspects: the overall cosmographical sweep of 'Altus' was not relevant to Aldhelm's apparent purposes in any of these works. The *Carmen* tells of a sea journey to Devon and Cornwall in the normally placid season of mid-June.¹⁹⁷ In spite of the season, a tremendous storm blew up and destroyed the roof of the church Aldhelm was visiting. The first half of the poem describes the storm at sea.

Both poems are written in octosyllabic lines, to very different effect. The lines of 'Altus' are stiff, ponderous and forceful, those of the *Carmen*, though it is also learned and allusive, much more fluent in their effects. The sentences often extend over ten lines or so, and the poem is not stanzaic, both of which help to speed the reader on his way, but the main difference is in tone. The first 115 lines of the *Carmen* make no mention of God: they are devoted to an ecphrasis of savage and untamed nature. Where the Irish poem is disciplined and compressed, the English one is lavish and verbose. But there are certain similarities of vocabulary and ideas between the two, more than can be ascribed simply to their common use of the book of Job. Both use the phrase *machina mundi*, coined by Lucretius, and after Aldhelm, an Anglo-Latin cliché.¹⁹⁸

Much more significant is the word *brumalis* in *Carmen*, line 20. It must mean 'stormy' or 'violent', since the journey took place in June.¹⁹⁹ This meaning also accords well with the use of *brumalis* in 'Altus' I, 2, which is discussing disturbances in the sea, but not apparently any particular season. The word *turbo*, which governs *brumalis* in the *Carmen*, similarly appears as part of the same sentence in 'Altus'. The word *dodrans*, which must have come from a Hiberno-Latin source, appears in both poems (*Carmen* l. 108, 'Altus' I, 4). The tremendous and complex movement of waters from sea to sky and back again in Stanza I perhaps serves as

¹⁹⁷ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, 15 (ed. C. W. Jones [Turnhout 1977], pp. 329–32) having named the Anglo-Saxon months, comments of *lida* (June and July), '*lida dicitur blandus siue nauigabilis, quod in utroque illo mense et blanda sit serenitas aurarum, et nauigari soleant aequora*' (p. 331).

¹⁹⁸ See Campbell, n.187.

¹⁹⁹ Noted by Ehwald, who also quotes a similarly metaphorical use of *hiems*, p. 525.

a starting-point for the magnificent image of upheaval elaborated in the first half of the *Carmen* in phrases like

cum bulliret brumalibus
undusus uortex fluctibus (ll. 105-06).

Apart from Stanza I, the stanza most likely to have influenced the *Carmen* is L. The image of the water in the clouds held in check by God is of course derived ultimately from Job 24:8, but it is elaborated and made more striking in 'Altus'. The sense of abundance and potential violence which lies both in the words of Stanza L and in its juxtaposition with a stanza on the Flood is also found in the *carmen* in lines such as,

cum fracti uenti federe . . .
rupto retinaculo (ll. 23 and 25)

and lines 53-5,

quae cateruatim caelitus
crebrantur nigris nubibus.

Several other words are also common to both poems, such as *furibundus* (l. 35), *pontus* (l. 112) and *grassor* (l. 52): only perhaps the first of these is unusual enough to bear any evidential stress at all.

It is very difficult to decide whether a selfconsciously Hibernophobe writer like Aldhelm modelled any part of his work on a Hiberno-Latin poem. Such similarities as occur are either a matter of unconscious influence, or the result of two contemporary writers working partly with the same material and inadvertently producing coincident work. In this case, however, the use of a small number of rare words by both writers strengthens the case for the first of these alternatives.

CONCLUSIONS

There seems good reason to assert that 'Altus prosator' is indeed a Hiberno-Latin hymn, but not that it was composed in the sixth century by St Columba. Its affiliations in style and language together with its sources and what may be traced of its early history, are entirely compatible with its having originated in Ireland in the seventh century.

The date of a given writer must normally be established in terms of the *terminus post quem* and *terminus ante quem*. In the case of 'Altus', these boundaries are provided by its most recent sources, which appear to be the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (*ob.* 636) and the 'Affatim' glossary; and its earliest users, apparently Aldhelm and the authors of the *Hisperica famina*. These narrow limits require a date for the writing of the poem of between 650 and 700.

There are a number of reasons for supporting the traditional Irish localisation so far as to ascribe the poem's composition to a writer based in Iona. There are links between 'Altus prosator' and the *Hisperica famina*. At the same time, there are links

between the *Famina* and Adomnán, our only visible seventh-century Ionan author, for instance, traces of Vergilian phraseology in both Adomnán's works and the *Famina*.²⁰⁰ The only study of Vergil apparently to emanate from seventh-century Ireland is associated with Adomnán. The A-text was written in a coastal centre, and Iona was certainly that.²⁰¹ The *Famina* must emanate from a centre which encouraged the study of secular as well as purely spiritual or theological learning, and so must 'Altus prosator'. Adomnán's works show that Iona was such a centre, as well as exhibiting actual correspondences in style, vocabulary and sources with both the poem and the *Famina*. Furthermore, if the poem came from Iona, it was as good as written by Columba to an age which was less concerned with authorship than our own and very conscious of the continued active existence of long-dead saintly founders. The association of the poem with this saint in the *Liber hymnorum* could have been completely arbitrary, but I hope to have demonstrated that there are linguistic and stylistic reasons for thinking that it is not.

Iona in the seventh century was a major cultural centre, the head of the important monastic *paruchia* of St Columba,²⁰² the home of Adomnán, as important an ecclesiastical politician as any in Ireland,²⁰³ the mother-house of the young Northumbrian church, and deeply implicated in Northumbrian royal politics.²⁰⁴ The connection between Iona and Lindisfarne continued to be active in the seventh century. For example, the same collection of saints' lives is used by Adomnán in his *Vita S. Columbae* and by the anonymous Lindisfarne author of the *Vita S. Cuthberti*.²⁰⁵ Since Lindisfarne was also in contact with Jarrow, it is likely that much of the Hiberno-Latin material which came Bede's way reached him from Iona, though perhaps indirectly.²⁰⁶ An obvious case in point is Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*, which Bede received through the mediation of King Aldfrith.²⁰⁷

This contact between Iona and Northumbrian monastic centres has long been recognised, with the testimony of Bede to guide us. 'Altus prosator' may help to shed some light on Iona's Southumbrian connections. The political defeat inflicted on the Columban church at the Synod of Whitby in 664 did not break off

²⁰⁰ Bullough, 'Columba, Adomnán and the achievement of Iona, II', *Scottish Historical Review* 44 (1965) 17–31, p. 24, and Grosjean, 'Confusa caligo', p. 69.

²⁰¹ C. E. Roth, 'Some observations on the historical background of the *Hisperica famina*', *Ériu* 29 (1978) 112–122. Other factors which may be relevant are the interest in physical geography manifest in A-text 366–80, and very clearly a preoccupation of Adomnán's from his *De locis sanctis*, with its cross referencing of written geographical sources with Arculf's eyewitness account, and the implication, brought out by Herren (*Hisperica famina* i, p. 35), that some at least of the faminators were English: we can name many Englishmen at Iona in both the sixth and the seventh centuries.

²⁰² See for example Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*.

²⁰³ This is evidenced in a number of ways, most notably his promulgation of the *Cáin Adomnáin*, on which see M. Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 178–215.

²⁰⁴ King Aldfrith made his unexpected, and successful bid for royal power from a discreet exile on Iona: see the anonymous *Vita S. Cuthberti*, III.6, (ed. B. Colgrave, *Two lives of St Cuthbert* [Cambridge 1940]) p. 104.

²⁰⁵ D. Bullough, 'Columba, Adomnán and the achievement of Iona', I, *Scottish Historical Review* 43 (1964) III–30, p. 129.

²⁰⁶ A. A. M. Duncan, 'Bede, Iona and the Picts', in R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (ed.), *The writing of history in the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford 1981) 1–42, pp. 1–2.

²⁰⁷ *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.15, p. 508.

all connection between the Columban and the English Churches. The Corpus-Epinal-Erfurt group of glossaries is based on glossarial activity at Canterbury in the seventh century,²⁰⁸ and both the glossaries and the works of Aldhelm suggest some familiarity with 'Altus prosator': Aldhelm, additionally, knew some part of the *Hisperica famina* and of the oeuvre of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus. Although the work of Virgilius is very much part of the Hiberno-Latin school, both in content and style, the earliest transmission of his work is through England, and almost the earliest authors to use him are Aldhelm and Bede.²⁰⁹ A further indication of these interconnections is the use of '*c(a)raxare*' for '*scribere*', a peculiarity of the writings of Aldhelm, Virgilius and Adomnán,²¹⁰ and the fact that Virgilius and Aldhelm are the only two seventh-century Insular writers to make use of Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*.²¹¹

There is a direct link between Aldhelm and Adomnán, in that they both enjoyed a close personal relationship with Aldfrith, king of Northumbria from 685 to 705. Aldhelm states of the king

Nam pridem, tempore pubertatis nostrae, cum septiformis spiritualium
charismatum munificentia uestra solers indolis sub manu uenerandi pontificis
ornaretur, patrem memini me nomen adeptum teque adoptiuae dignitatis
uocabula cum celestis gratiae praerogatiua sortitum.²¹²

This appears to mean that Aldhelm was Aldfrith's godfather, though the phrasing is obscure. At any rate, he is in a position to address the king as '*reuerendissime fili*', and refers to himself as Aldfrith's '*pater*' in the sentence quoted above. One would dearly like to know when, and in what circumstances, this confirmation took place. It is possible that Aldfrith spent some time in Canterbury, and that the bishop, therefore, was the venerable Theodore of Tarsus – some earlier Northumbrian rulers had found Southern England put enough of a distance between themselves and their enemies at home.²¹³ Alternatively, Aldhelm could conceivably have travelled in Ireland, and met the young prince there.²¹⁴ Baptism and confirmation, for kings, could be political matters: the patronage relationship inherent in spiritual

²⁰⁸ Bischoff et al., *The Epinal, Erfurt, Werden and Corpus Glossaries*, pp. 15–17; and see J. Bradley, 'Remarks on the Corpus glossary', p. 102; and J. D. Pheifer, *Old English glosses in the Epinal-Erfurt glossary* (Oxford 1974), p. lviii. The suggestion that there is an 'Altus'-batch in Epinal was first made by W. M. Lindsay, *The corpus, Epinal, Erfurt and Leyden glossaries* (Cambridge 1921) 85–6; and repeated by Pheifer, *Old English glosses*, p. lv.

²⁰⁹ V. Law, *The Insular Latin grammarians* (Woodbridge 1982) 49–50. M. L. W. Laistner, 'The library of the Venerable Bede', in his *The intellectual heritage of the Early Middle Ages*, (ed. C. G. Starr [Ithaca 1957]) pp. 117–49, pp. 118–19, suggested that use of the same rare authors in both Aldhelm and Bede normally demonstrated Bede's borrowings from the Canterbury library. But it may also be true that books, perhaps Hiberno-Latin books in particular, travelled from North to South.

²¹⁰ Discussed by Bullough in 'Columba, Adomnán and the achievement of Iona', i, p. 128; and by M. Herren, 'Insular Latin *c(b)anaxare* (*craxare*) and its derivatives', *Peritia* 1 (1982) 273–80.

²¹¹ Law, *Insular Latin grammarians*, 21.

²¹² Ewald, *Aldhelmi opera*, 61–2.

²¹³ For instance Edwin, in Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* II.12, p. 176. Others went to Ireland, such as the sons of Æthelfrith and their followers (*Historia ecclesiastica* III.1, p. 212), or to Frankia (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.20, p. 204).

²¹⁴ Lapidge and Herren, *Aldhelm: the prose works*, pp. 6–7.

parentage could affect other aspects of the power relations between rulers.²¹⁵ Aldfrith's contemporary, Cædwalla, went so far as to entrust his baptism only to the Pope.²¹⁶ The choice of Aldhelm, who may have been of Kentish royal blood, as a godfather is unlikely to have been fortuitous, though the reasons for it are entirely obscure.

Aldfrith, apparently the son of an Irish mother of good family,²¹⁷ spent his youth in exile in Ireland where, according to a late collection of Irish annals, he became the pupil of Adomnán.²¹⁸ He was certainly at Iona when his half-brother Ecgrith died: we are informed of this by the anonymous *Vita S. Cuthberti* written during his reign. Whatever the terms of their initial acquaintance may have been, Adomnán was certainly in contact with Aldfrith after his return to Northumbria. The king was apparently the dedicatee of Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*,²¹⁹ and Adomnán also, in the *Vita S. Columbae*, mentions visiting him (probably in 686 and again in 668), describing him as 'amicus'.²²⁰ Aldhelm seems to have lost contact with his godson during Aldfrith's sojourn in Ireland – understandably enough, for Aldfrith was more or less in hiding from his half-brother. Once he had returned to Northumbria as king, however, Aldhelm hastened to renew the old tie, and sent him the lengthy treatise on metrics known as *Epistola ad Acircium*.²²¹ Thus in the 680s Aldfrith was in contact with both his erstwhile mentors, both of whom presented him with substantial literary works. It would be natural, though not inevitable, for them to come into contact with each other, especially since Aldfrith was generous about sharing books.²²² The Irish and Hiberno-Latin material in the early English glossaries, the works of Aldhelm and Bede, and the history of Insular script all show that there were contacts between early Southumbria and Irish schools and scholars.²²³ The additional data above suggest that Iona might be particularly plausible as such a source. It is also interesting to note that the word *gergenna*, which Adomnán is the only author of a literary text actually to use,

²¹⁵ For example, Oswald, a very powerful king, became both godfather and son-in-law of Cyneigils of Wessex. The power relationship between them is emphasised by their **joint** donation of land at Dorchester, in Cyneigils's kingdom, to form a new bishopric – like Offa of Mercia in the ninth century, Oswald seems to be interfering in the internal affairs of a kingdom he regarded as subordinate (*Historia ecclesiastica* III.7, p. 232). Similarly, while Æthelbert of Kent was the most powerful king in England, he forced Rædwald of East Anglia to accept baptism which, once the latter king's power had grown, he promptly repudiated (*Historia ecclesiastica* II.15, p. 190).

²¹⁶ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* V.7, p. 470.

²¹⁷ She was the daughter of the Northern Uí Néill king, Colmán Rímid: see F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) III, and M. A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae I* (Dublin 1962) 135: 'Colmán Rímid athair Fina, mathair iside Flaind Fina meic Ossu regis Saxonum'. See, for a sceptical view, D. N. Dumville, 'Two troublesome abbots', *Celtica* 21 (1990) 146–52.

²¹⁸ J. M. Radner (ed.), *The Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin 1978) p. 54, entry §165 (the phrase is 'dalta Adamnán')

²¹⁹ This may be deduced from Bede's remark, 'porrexit autem librum hunc Adamnan Aldfrido regi' (*Historia ecclesiastica*, V.2, p. 508).

²²⁰ Anderson and Anderson, *Vita S. Columbae*, II.46, p. 460.

²²¹ Ehwald, *Aldhelmi opera*, 61–604.

²²² Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.15, p. 508. Bede says, 'scriptor [Adomnán] quoque ipse multis ab eo muneribus donatus patriam remissus est': what sort of gifts might Aldfrith have given Adomnán?

²²³ On script, see T. J. Brown, 'The Irish influence on the Insular system of scripts to c. A.D. 850', in Löwe, *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter* I, pp. 101–119.

appears in two of the later Old English glossaries, thus confirming the impression that Iona was a centre with influence on England.²²⁴

In localising 'Altus prosator', the first step was to account for a Hiberno-Latin poem's being known in Southumbria. Secondly, the centre where it was written had to be stocked with Christian Latin works including such rarities as Hegesippus. Thirdly, the milieu in which it was written had to be one demonstrating familiarity with the *Hisperica famina*. Iona fulfils all these criteria. My conclusion on the date and localising of 'Altus' is therefore that it was written at Iona in the second half of the seventh century, a view which is in accordance with all the evidence, direct, indirect, and inferential. No specific person can be put forward as the author. It is much to be regretted that we do not have any Hiberno-Latin poetry known to have been written by Adomnán, but in the absence of any grounds for comparison, it is not proper to ascribe 'Altus prosator' to his pen merely because he was the major literary figure of Iona at this time. In any case, if the poem were his, one might reasonably expect to find some trace of his idiosyncratic fondness for diminutives and superlatives in it, which there is not. There is much that we do not know about seventh-century Iona and its personnel. Bede's account suggests that Aidan was one of the community's outstanding personalities, yet Adomnán does not mention him – Adomnán's contemporaries appear in his work only in the context of stories about St Columba. As a matter of pure speculation, one might consider the possibility that the poem was written by Dorbbéne, scribe of the Schaffhausen copy of the *Vita S. Columbae*, and inferentially one of the most learned members of the community after Adomnán himself – but there are no possible grounds for testing such an idea.

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²²⁴ O. B. Schlutter, 'Some Celtic traces in the glosses', *American Journal of Philology* 21 (1900) 188–92, pp. 191–2. Both the glossaries, which are preserved in BL Cotton Cleopatra A ii (s. x/xi), printed by T. Wright, *Anglo-Saxon vocabularies* i, pp. 274.3 and 414.10, gloss the word as 'sticca'. See also K. Meyer, 'Irish loanwords', *Revue Celtique* 13 (1892) 505–06, p. 506.