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'Angelology in *Saltair na Rann*'

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ANGELOLOGY IN *SALT AIR NA RANN*

IT is the aim of the present article to discuss the sources and structure of the third canto of *Saltair na Rann* (*SR*). It is intended as a sequel to 'Cosmology in *Saltair na Rann*' (*Celtica* xvii. 33-52) and 'The Heavenly City in *Saltair na Rann*' (*ib.* xviii. 87-104): taken together, the three papers treat the section of *SR* preceding that edited by David Greene and Fergus Kelly, and analysed by Brian Murdoch.¹

The canto falls into several sections. First the sequence and characteristics of the angelic orders are specified (657-704). A brief allusion to a group of twenty-four archangels (705-12) is then followed by the poet's assertion that God has revealed the number of the angels to him; a list of their admirable qualities begins in the same quatrain as this statement, and continues as far as line 732. The enumeration proper comes next (733-88). The poem then returns to the twenty-four archangels mentioned earlier, whose names are now listed (789-804). The concluding quatrains of the canto enjoin devotion to the angels (805-12), put the number of the fallen angels at one third of the total (813-6), and praise the Creator (817-32).



The honour of founding Christian angelology unquestionably belongs to the enigmatic figure known as pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a mystical theologian believed to have lived in Syria around the year 500. In his *De coelesti hierarchia*, pseudo-Dionysius for the first time established nine as the canonical number of the angelic orders, and devised elaborate arguments to justify his placement of those orders relative to one another. His system and that of *SR* are given below; it will be noticed that they differ as to the positions of the virtues and principalities.

ps.-Dionysius	<i>SR</i>
1. Seraphim	1. Seraphim
2. Cherubim	2. Cherubim
3. Thrones	3. Thrones
4. Dominations	4. Dominations
5. Virtues	5. Principalities
6. Powers	6. Powers
7. Principalities	7. Virtues
8. Archangels	8. Archangels
9. Angels	9. Angels

¹ *The Irish Adam and Eve Story from Saltair na Rann* (Dublin 1976); Volume I: Text and Translation by David Greene and Fergus Kelly, Volume II: Commentary by Brian O. Murdoch.

SR groups the nine orders into three divisions of three orders each: a lower division of angels, archangels and virtues; a middle division of powers, principalities and dominations; and an upper division of thrones, cherubim and seraphim (661-72). This partition is not found in Gregory, nor (to the best of my knowledge) in any Irish text except *SR*; but it is one of the principal features of the original Dionysian system. What significance this may have I hesitate to say. It is tempting to imagine that some of the doctrines of *De coelesti hierarchia* may have reached Ireland independently of Gregory, but it would be hard to point to other evidence in support of this hypothesis; all indications are that Erigena, for instance, had no acquaintance with pseudo-Dionysius before he attached himself to the Carolingian cathedral school at Laon. An unimaginative but not implausible explanation would be that the tripartite grouping in *SR* is coincidental, an example of the notorious Irish pre-dilection for triads.



Lines 673-6 state that the descendants of Adam are ‘the tenth order’ (*in dechmad grád*), existing ‘in the flesh’ (*i crí*) by contrast with the nine heavenly orders. Brian Murdoch cites this quatrain as ‘making clear that the poet is familiar with the replacement doctrine’, i.e. the widespread belief that humanity was created to replace a tenth order of angels which had fallen from Heaven when Lucifer led it in a rebellion against God.¹³ On the next page Murdoch discusses the question at greater length:

Lucifer is traditionally the chief of the angels, and ruler over all the choirs. He is, however, most often chief of a choir of his own. In *SR* he is not linked with a specific choir, but rules them all, and draws his followers from all choirs. He falls in fact with a third of all the angels (*SR*1837-40). The poet knows too of only nine orders – he was presumably familiar with only nine names (less Lucifer’s choir, which was to be replaced by man).

I am not quite certain how these statements are to be squared with one another, and am in any case not conversant with the continental texts in which the ‘replacement doctrine’ is attested; I shall accordingly confine myself to considering the evidence available to me.

SR’s source for the idea of man as tenth order was, it seems to me, almost certainly Gregory, who presents it in the course of expounding the parable of the woman and the silver pieces (Luke 15: 8-10):

¹³Op. cit. 44.

The woman had ten drachmas, because there are nine orders of angels (*novem sunt ordines angelorum*). But, so that the number of the chosen might be completed, man was created as the tenth (*homo decimus est creatus*) . . .¹⁴

The idea of a tenth order runs throughout medieval Irish literature, applied always to the human race, a ‘tenth earthly grade’ (*dechmad grád talman*) contrasted with the nine heavenly orders of the angels.¹⁵ I know of no early Irish reference to a tenth *angelic* choir,¹⁶ and we may note (with Murdoch) that in *SR* itself Lucifer’s followers are stated to have been drawn from various of the nine orders (*eter angle is archangle* 1838).¹⁷ Where Lucifer is said to be jealous of Adam (1105-8), it is because he feels supplanted personally; there is no suggestion that humanity replaces any specific group of angels.¹⁸

It may be arguable that some version of the ‘replacement doctrine’ lay behind Gregory’s exegesis of the parable; so far as the Irish material itself is concerned, however, I see no reason to look farther for an explanation of the *dechmad grád*.



The section on the number of the angels has all the appearance of an insertion, made by the original poet or by some later redactor. The statement that God has revealed to the speaker ‘something of the proportions’ (*ní do thoimsib*) of the heavenly hosts immediately follows a brief allusion to twenty-four beings who lead the heavenly choir; and the end of the enumeration section immediately precedes a list of their twenty-four names. If, in other words, we were to excise lines 713-88 from the canto, the text which remained would have a tighter, more logical structure.¹⁹

After his catalogue of angelic qualities, the poet begins to run

¹⁴ *PL* 76, 1249.

¹⁵ e.g. *Ériu* xxii. 27 ‘Muintir nime noíbdai níuil/ dechmad nert talman tríuin’, *LL* 6508 ‘Noí ngrád nimi/ 7 in dechmad grád talman tilchaig’, *PH* 7159-60 ‘Noí ngráda aingel filet a nim 7 in dechmad grád talman’. In *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (51. 9-11) the *dechmad grád talman* is cited as a numerological cliché.

¹⁶ The only Irish enunciation of the ‘replacement doctrine’ which I have encountered occurs in the late and much embellished tale *Altram Tige Dá Medar* (*Ériu* xi. 191).

¹⁷ This is of course also implicit in the doctrine, to be discussed further below, that a third of the angels fell with Lucifer.

¹⁸ Cf. *Lebar Gabála*, *ITS* Vol. XXXIV. 18, 26, 66; B. McCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus*, No. 830 (Dublin 1892), 49-51.

¹⁹ This point is discussed at greater length in my paper ‘Questions of interpolation in the opening cantos of *Saltair na Rann*’, to appear in the sixth volume of the *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*.

through the number-system, first counting to ten, then by tens to a hundred, then noting that ten hundreds are a thousand. At this point the Irish numerical lexicon fails him;²⁰ in order to express the far higher quantity which he has in mind, he resorts to an unfamiliar reckoning which may be set out as follows:

10 × 1000 = 1 *legio*
 10 *legiones* = 1 *cunea*
 10 *cunee* = 1 *marés* (= *myrias*)
 10 *marés* = 1 *caterva*
 10 *catervae* = 1 *exercitus*
 10 *exercitus* = 1 *turba*
 10 *turbae* = 1 *agmen*
 10 *agmina* attend upon each archangel

Since there are seven archangels (in contrast to the twenty-four mentioned in the main body of the poem) there are accordingly seventy *agmina*, or seven hundred billion angels.

The counting system employs Latin terms, but I have so far discovered no trace of it outside Ireland. Irish sources provide two further instances: a marginal paragraph in Laud Misc. 610, attributed to the *Saltair Caisil* supposedly compiled by Cormac mac Cuilennáin (ob. 908);²¹ and one of the glosses to the poem *Duan in choícat cest*, answering the question ‘Cia lín d’agmenuib aingel/maroen la cach n-árcaingel?’²² In neither text is there other evidence of influence from *SR*,²³ so that the two passages may safely be taken to indicate the system’s existence independent of the poem.

It is difficult to say more, save by way of speculation; one might for instance note that all of the terms (except for *myrias*, a word whose use to designate large numbers would surely be familiar to any Latin-speaker) refer to bodies of soldiery, and are listed in the relevant chapter of Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (9. 3). But it is scarcely necessary to seek any derivation so clear-cut: all of the terms were current in medieval Latin, and had already become vague and often interchangeable in classical usage.

²⁰ Thus Thurneysen (*RC* vi. 373): ‘Für so grosse Zahlen hat der Ire keine Wörter; er drückt sie aus durch fortwährende Multiplication mit Zehn.’

²¹ *Celtica* vi. 148, where the sum is said to comprise the *lín na n-archangil*; *curio* appears for *cunea*, and *muries* for *marés*.

²² *ZCP* iv. 235. *Cuma* (leg. *cunia*) appears for *cunea*.

²³ The statement that Lucifer has ‘the shape of a monster named Prothimeon, i.e. it has a hundred heads and a hundred teeth in each head’ (loc. cit.) recalls *SR* 881-8, 1129-32; as I hope to show elsewhere, both texts reflect a version of the apocryphal *Visio Sancti Pauli*.

The doctrine of seven archangels goes back apparently to a list of 'angels of the powers' in *I Enoch* 20.²⁴ The seven are very much a part of the insular apocryphal tradition, and many lists of their names could be cited. M. R. James has noted such lists on St. Cuthbert's coffin (A.D. 698), in a *lorica* in the Book of Cerne (early ninth century), in the pseudo-Bedan *Collectanea*, in the Antiphonary of Bangor, and in an English MS of the early twelfth century.²⁵ To these sources may be added *Duan in choícat cest*,²⁶ the pseudo-Isidorian *Liber de numeris*,²⁷ and two poems on the tutelary angels of the days of the week;²⁸ while clearly related names appear in the Leiden Lorica²⁹ and a charm in TCD MS H.3.17.³⁰



Thurneysen recognized that many of the names of the twenty-four archangels could also be traced to *I Enoch*; it may in fact be argued that the catalogue in *SR* is a reflex (however severely garbled) of purely Enochian material.³¹ Some of the names (and the duplication of *Sarachel*) are presumably due to the attempt to generate twenty-four items from a fragmentary source: the number twenty-four itself is that of the white-robed elders of Revelation 4:4, on whom the archangels are clearly based.³²

It is evident on comparing the versions of *I Enoch* (chaps. 6 and 20) that the Greek text is for the most part closer to *SR* than is the Ethiopic; while of the Greek versions containing the relevant passages, the text of the Byzantine historian Georgius Syncellus (c. 800) is generally closer than is the Codex Panopolitanus (eighth century or later).³³ I give below

²⁴ Only six names (Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel) occur in the Greek versions, as in several of the insular lists here cited; the increase to seven was probably motivated by the desire to have an angel for each day of the week. The seventh angel in the insular tradition (*Painiel*, *Painitial*, *Phanuihel*, *Panchihel*, etc.) is *Phanuel*, drawn from sections of *I Enoch* not surviving in Greek (40:9, 54:6, 71:13).

²⁵ 'Names of angels in Anglo-Saxon and other documents', *Journal of Theological Studies* xi. 569-71. The continental parallels which he cites are interesting, but evidently reflect a different system or systems.

²⁶ Loc. cit.

²⁷ R. E. McNally, *Der irische Liber de numeris* (Munich diss., 1957), 126.

²⁸ *Ériu* ii. 92-4, v.112; *KMMisc.* 253-7.

²⁹ *ZCP* ii. 65.

³⁰ *Ériu* xvi. 31.

³¹ *RC* vi. 372-3.

³² Note that they are specifically called 'elders' (*sen*) at 708; and cf. 581-8, where they are mentioned with other figures from Revelation.

³³ For the Greek I have followed M. Black, *Apocalypsis Henochi Graece* (Leiden 1970) 21, 23, 32; for the Ethiopic I have used E. Isaac's translation in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City 1983) 1. 15-6, 23-4, 32, 38, 50.

a tabular presentation (slightly modified and extended) of Thurneysen's suggested identifications. It represents barely more than two-thirds of the names in the *SR* list; but the reader who examines the variants in the versions of *I Enoch* itself will appreciate the drastic distortions and substitutions to which the original catalogue (by now irrecoverable) has been subject in its passage through many centuries and widely divergent cultures.

<i>SR</i>	Syncellus	Codex Pan.	Ethiopic
Gabriel	Γαβριήλ	Γαβριήλ	Gabriel
Michél	Μιχαήλ	Μιχαήλ	Michael
Raphiel	Ῥαφαήλ	Ραφαήλ	Raphael
Panachel	_____	_____	Phanuel ³⁴
Babichél	Χωβαβιήλ	Χωχαριήλ	Kobabel
Raguel	Ῥαγουήλ	Ῥαγουήλ	Raguel
Rumel	Ῥαμιήλ	Ῥαμιήλ	Rame'el
Sumsagial	Σαμψίχ	_____	Samsape'el
Sarmichiel	Σαμιήλ	Σεμιήλ	_____
Sarachel (<i>bis</i>)	Σαριήλ	Σαριήλ	Saraqa'el
Urel	Ῥουριήλ	Ῥουριήλ	Uriel
Hermichel ³⁵	Ῥοραμμαμή	Ῥεαρώς	Armaros
Barachel	Βατριήλ	Βαρακιήλ	Baraqyal
Sariel	Σαριήλ ³⁶	Σαθιήλ ³⁶	_____
Arachél	Ῥαρακιήλ	Ῥαθαάκ	Arakeb
Stichiel	Ζακιήλ	Ἐζεκιήλ	Ezeqel

Since the series in *I Enoch* 6, from which most of the names derive, is specifically said to enumerate the *fallen* angels, our catalogue of twenty-four 'archangels' would appear to be the work of someone indifferent to or ignorant of the significance of the work from which he was scavenging.³⁷ The exemplar probably reached Ireland already corrupt, very possibly torn from its original context.

The statement in one of the concluding quatrains that one-third of the angels fell with Lucifer recurs at 1837-40, as well as in *Lebar*

³⁴ Cf. note 24 above.

³⁵ Cf. *Heremiel* in the Antiphony of Bangor (James, 570).

³⁶ From the Greek of *I Enoch* 6; the name Σαριήλ/*Saraqa'el* cited above occurs in chap. 20.

³⁷ This would have confirmed the suspicions of a synod convened by Pope Zacharias in 745, which condemned a list of angels containing the names *Uriel* and *Ragull*: 'Nos autem . . . non plus quam trium angelorum nomina cognoscimus, id est Michael, Gabriel, Raphael: siquidem iste, sub obtentu angelorum, daemonum nomina introduxit' (*Sancti Bonifacii . . . opera quae extant omnia*, ed. J. A. Giles, London 1844, 2. 45-6; cf. Thurneysen, *RC* vi. 373 n.1).

Gabála.³⁸ The idea was inspired by the description in Revelation 12:4 of a diabolical dragon which knocks a third of the stars from heaven with its tail. This analogy appeared first in the writings of Victorinus of Pettau, and was upheld by Cassian, Primasius and Cassiodorus;³⁹ in Ireland it is explicitly invoked in the early hymn *Altus prosator*, ascribed to Colum Cille (ob. 597).⁴⁰



In putting together a discussion of the angels, the author(s) had access to an intriguing collection of materials: the angelology of pseudo-Dionysius, as transmitted by Gregory the Great; a string of fantastic names still betraying its distant origin in *1 Enoch*; and an elaborate counting system (very possibly of Irish devising) based on Latin military nomenclature. Such sources may serve to remind us how exotic and heterogeneous was the cultural heritage available to the early Irish *literati*.

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³⁸ *ITS* Vol. XXXIV. 16, 26.

³⁹ Details in Turmel, 303-9; the doctrine was subsequently abandoned by most medieval theologians in favour of an interpretation of the fallen stars as apostatized Christians.

⁴⁰ *Lib. Hymn.* 1. 69: 'Draco magnus . . . tertiam partem siderum traxit secum in barathrum'. 'Tertiam' is glossed '.i. de omnibus angelis uel de consentientibus'.