



The Besom of Devotion | "Idbraim duit, a Athair"

Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Old Irish

Period | 8th Century

Genre | Prayer

Source | Dublin RIA Manuscript 23 N 10 (formerly Betham 145, Catalog 967).

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/besom_devotion/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Sharon Paice MacClead.

Introduction to the Text

This Old Irish prayer comes from an early Irish text known as the "Litany of Creation," which is preserved in a single manuscript. The "Litany of Creation" is comprised of two distinct sections. The first consists of numerous entreaties to God, the Trinity and Saint Michael, and makes reference to various aspects of Creation. The second section, which is presented here, includes prayers and entreaties related to elements of the created world. It refers to a life of religious devotion aided by the powers of this prayer, which is referred to as a "Besom (or Broom) of Devotion." The lines of the prayer describe its own powerful attributes, such as connection with and communication with the divine, spiritual comfort, beauty and awe, as well as the many forms of assistance and protection bestowed upon a person as a result of its recitation.

The image of the broom appears in several medieval Irish literary contexts. In the Life of St. Molua of Clonfertmulloe (d. circa 609), St. Molua states that unless a person has confessed their sins, they cannot obtain pardon from the Lord; for just as the floor of a house is cleaned daily with a broom, so too does the soul require the daily confession of sins in order to be made clean. The association of the broom with the cleansing of the soul is found elsewhere in the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, including the work of Theodulf of Orléans (d. 821), Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and Peter Cantor (d. circa 1197).

The symbol of the besom or broom was also mentioned by the prominent Irish scholar Colcu Ua Duinechda of Clonmacnoise (d. circa 795), who is credited with writing two litanies with similarities to our own. The earliest surviving manuscript which contains them was produced around 1400, in the codex now known as the Yellow Book of Lecan (Dublin TCD 1318). From this, we can discern that the image of the "besom of devotion" played a part in a number of early Irish manuscripts, including our intriguing text.

Introduction to the Source

The "Litany of Creation" is preserved in Dublin RIA Manuscript 23 N 10 (formerly Betham 145, Catalog 967). This manuscript was produced by three principal scribes, who signed their names simply as Aodh, Dubthach and Torna. They worked for or belonged to the Ó Maoil Chonaire, a family of professional poets and historians from Connacht. At a conference at the Royal Irish Academy in 2019, this manuscript was given a new name by scholars: the Book of Ballycummin (*Baile in Chuimine*).

About this Edition

The Old Irish orthography of the poem has been standardized to assist students and researchers in disciplines outside of Celtic Studies.

Further Reading

Meyer, Kuno ed., "Stories and songs from Irish manuscripts: VI. Colcu ua Duinechda's Scúap Chrábaid or 'Besom of Devotion.'" *Otia Merseiana*, vol. 2, 1900-1901, pp. 75-105.

- *An early edition and translation of early Irish materials, some of which are associated with prayers and litanies like those under discussion.*



O'Loughlin, Thomas. *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings*. Continuum, 2000.

- *A discussion of the historical context of early Irish Christianity and the theological ideas and writings that emanated from it.*

O' Cróinín, Dáibhi (ed.). *A New History of Ireland, Vol. 1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland*. Clarendon Press, 2008.

- *A definitive and indispensable volume treating many aspects of early Irish history, culture, literature and religion.*

O'Sullivan, Tomás, "Texts and transmissions of the Scúap Chrábaid: an Old-Irish litany in its manuscript context." *Studia Celtica Fennica*, vol. 7, 2010, pp. 26-47.

- *An in-depth and up-to-date discussion of the complex series of texts and processes associated with the imagery of the Scúap Chrábaid (besom of devotion).*

Plummer, Charles (ed.). *Irish Litanies: Text and Translation*. Henry Bradshaw Society, 1925.

- *Early twentieth-century edition and translation of a variety of Irish litanies.*



The Besom of Devotion | "Idbraim duit, a Athair"

	Idbraim duit, a Athair, ar mo bith ité grádaib.	With regard to my existence, I offer you, Father, (a life of) ecclesiastical orders.
	Is-í seo co combair: in scúap chunnail chrábaid.	It is through this that assistance is provided: the equitable besom of devotion.
	Cid combár i mbríathaib? Is cétal nglan nglécher.	What is a confluence in words? It is a clear and very faithful chant.
	Is congra do nóibaib; is d' imméit do dúlib.	It is a gathering for holy persons; it is Your vast magnitude of created beings.
5	Is attach fri ainglib; aingid amail lúirech.	It is an act of praying to angels; it protects like a breastplate.
	Is lúirech do m' anmain; is dín do mo chorp cride.	It is divine protection for my soul; it is a shelter for the substance of my heart.
	Is aicce súairc solam; is molad rí nime.	It is a pleasant, spirited fosterage; it is a song praising the King of the Heavens.
	Is nóibad do dóinib, nos-géba co grésach,	It is a hallowing for human beings; it provides for them forever.
	Is breth neich a gábud; is crábud, is césad.	It is securing a person from danger; it is devotional practice, an act of enduring.
10	Is corp Críst do chaithem, ocus is cáth angbaid,	The body of Christ is (a sign of) your generosity, and it is a valiant, holy thing.
	Is cretem chóim chomlán, is comrád fri ainglib.	It is a private, perfect faith; it is conversing with angels.
	Cech aingel, cech cétal; cech nóib dil co ndathaib	[By] every angelic being, every act of recitation; every beloved holy person accompanied by bright hues of dignity.
	Cech dúil fil fo t' nert-sa, adteoch frit, a Athair.	[By] every element that is under Your mastery, I pray to You, Father.
	Adteoch frit i n-aimsir, cona fodlaib foillsib	I entreat You in [every] season with its visible divisions:
15	Adteoch frit i n-dorcha, adteoch frit in soillsi.	I beseech you in darkness, I beseech you in brightness.
	Adteoch uile dúli eter nem is talmain,	I call upon all living beings between sky and earth.
	Immon bindius suthain, do thabairt do m'anmain.	For the purpose of lasting harmony, for bestowing upon my life
	Do thróchaire dermár, do chumachtae ós cathaib	Your very great mercy, Your power over battles.



Do chennsa frit' bidbaid; a r g inmain athlaim.

Your benevolence towards enemies.

Excellent, agile king!

20 Is cach cert do mo chobair; Adteoch frit, a Athair.

Every fitting tribute (serves towards my assistance);

I call upon you, Father!

Critical Notes

Transcription

- 2 The prayer—which functions as a “besom of devotion”—assists the reciter in successfully living a religious life.
- 3 The use of metaphor is a common device in Old Irish literature. In this line, the chant which formed such an important part of life in an ecclesiastical setting is likened to a stream or flow of words.
- 10 In the first phrase, *do chaithem* can be interpreted literally as meaning “for consuming”. However, the word *caithem* can also mean “generosity, liberality, munificence”. Here, the ritual of consuming the body of Christ is seen as a gift from God to his followers, and a parallel with the well-documented importance of generosity and hospitality in early Irish society. *C  th* is an earlier spelling of *c  id*, “holy, noble, pure,” an adjective sometimes used to describe Christ, and used here as a substantive.

Translation

- 6-18 The repeated pronoun “it” in the prayer often refers to the prayer itself. In some lines, however, it refers to the experience of religious life. The meaning can usually be determined by the context of the line or lines preceding its appearance. It should be noted that in some cases, a phrase may refer back to a previous line, while in others, it may be referring to a phrase or line that follows.
- 10 The word “breastplate” references a particular type of prayer used for protection in early Irish contexts.
- 13 The word “fosterage” refers to the practice of fostering children between the ages of seven and fourteen with other families in order to create strong social bonds of mutual obligation.
- 24 The mention of “hues” of dignity or rank refers to the association of certain colors of garments with particular grades of early Irish society.
- 39 The reciter hopes that every tribute offered to God in the prayer will procure His assistance, so that the reciter may live a successful and honorable life of religious devotion. Here, we should also recall the assistance to be provided by the prayer itself, the “Besom of Devotion,” which is mentioned in the second line.