

PREFACE

IN the Catholic Church, in Early Christian as in mediæval days, in England as on the Continent, the object of the church builder at all times has been to construct a shelter and shrine for the altar, on which should be performed with due ritual and ceremonial the Church's central service, the Mass, or as it was later styled among us, the Holy Communion; the altar is not there for the church, but the church for the altar. Around it clustered a group of accessories, all closely connected with the altar. Behind was the reredos; in front, at the penitential season, the Lenten veil, and, in later days, the altar rails. To the right was a single or double piscina for the disposal of ablutions at the altar, and sedilia for the use of the celebrant and his assistants. To the left was set up the Easter sepulchre, to which the Host was transferred from the altar to be watched till Easter morn, and, in churches in Scotland and on the Continent, a Sacrament house, where was reserved the viaticum. These, the contents of the chancel, are the subject of this volume.

As the history of the altar and its accessories is of the highest importance to the student of ecclesiastical antiquities, so is the study one of exceptional difficulty. In the first place, one must ascertain what are the sources and authorities for the history, which is known to few. Neither is it possible for any student to possess himself of the long list of volumes which are indispensable to the inquiry. Indeed, in only two libraries—the British Museum and the Bodleian—can the whole of the authorities which have been employed in the preparation of this volume, and which are detailed on pp. 259-261, be found. The first object, therefore, of the present volume has been to put together in reasonable compass information now almost wholly inaccessible, stored away in books, many of which have long been out of print, or in the back numbers of the *Transactions* of London and provincial archaeological societies.

The second object has been to get together a representative collection of the more important examples of the altar and its accessories in this country. These illustrations are very numerous, and not only throw light on the text, but show forth