

METRES—ANCIENT AND MODERN.—II.

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THE earliest extant Christian hymns, even of those used in Rome, were Greek. Indeed, as Dean Milman has shewn in his delightful work on "Latin Christianity"—a book which, in passing, we commend to our readers as the only readable ecclesiastical history we have yet met—the early Christians at Rome were Greek, probably Syrian or Hellenic sailors lodging in the Suburra, the cheap boarding-house quarter of Rome. Now the Asiatic element predominated among the Greek or Hellenistic Christians, and they wrote their rude attempts at hymns on the model of the Hebrew psalms, which have no metre, only a rough division into two parts, to correspond with the "Mediation" and "ending" of the ecclesiastical chant used by the Levites. The Christian church, unchanging as became the conservative East, has adhered to this system to the present day. The hymns of the Russian and of every branch of the Greek church are mere prose, with no metrical form. But the Western Intellect of Europe, used to order and law, demanded a higher and more complex form of sacred verse. At first the sacred poems were in the old classical measures—hexameters, pentameters, and sapphics. These are found in the fragments ascribed to Pope Damasus, and in the bulky volume of Prudentius, who may be considered as the earliest Christian poet. His long and dismal hexameter poems on the martyrs, I have read through. Doleful

as the east wind in winter, they contain not one breath wafted from the old summer-bloom of classical poetry, such as one meets in the latest and worst of the pagan poets of the Latin decadence. Writers of the Anglo-Catholic revival school—such as Neale, whose erudition in the study of this unpoetical poetry made him blindly partial—quote here and there a couplet from these poems. But these are no true specimens of its staple. Prudentius and his contemporary, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, perceived that there was something incongruous in the use for hymns chaunted by ascetics in the cold grey dawn of Christianity, of metres that had been sung to the sun-god and the sea-born queen in the hot noon of paganism. They fixed on a measure that had been used but seldom and sparingly by the classical writers. It consisted of four feet of the kind called an iambus, *i.e.* a short syllable followed by a long. This became the favourite metre of the Christian hymn-writers—from them this rhythm, sung by Anacreon and Horace, became that of the Latin hymn-writers of the fifth century, and at last of good Martin Luther, and of our own Evening Hymn. For Horace's line,

Ämīd | the stars | of lēs | sēr light |
is the same as Luther's

Ein fes | ten Burg | he ist | der Hey ;
or in the Evening Hymn,

Glory | to Thee, | my God, | this night | .
But at first the arrangement into long