

Object Biography: The Book of Kells

Origins and Physical Compilation

Although there has been no unanimous consensus thus far as to the specific time and place of its inception, it is generally agreed that the Book of Kells was created around the year 800 AD.¹ It was compiled by monks living on the isolated isle of Iona, which lies off the coast of Scotland, in a monastery established by St Columba (or Colm Cille, as he is known in Irish). In the year 806, a Viking raid on the island resulted in the deaths of eighty-six members of this monastic community, consequently prompting the remaining monks to journey to Kells in County Meath, Ireland, where a new 'sister monastery' had been built.² It is virtually impossible to know exactly how much of the manuscript was completed prior to the move across the water, but it is highly likely that it was initiated on Iona, and then moved to Kells Abbey, where much, if not all of the decorative and illustrative works were undertaken.

The manuscript itself was written by monks who were likely no older than eighteen years of age at the time; this is thought to have been the case due to existing knowledge about contemporary works, as well as recorded information about customary practices at coetaneous monasteries.³ The version of script used is known as 'insular majuscule'. Timothy Graham asserts that the text is thought to be the work of "no more than three or four scribal artists".⁴ Signs of the authors' youth are visible, yet scarce, and do nothing to distract from the sheer brilliance of the detailed work. Nevertheless, there exists one page which somewhat divulges some of the difficulties inevitably faced by the teenage monks, whose command of written Latin was less than perfect. This, in turn, causes an entire page to be copied anew, and the evidently inferior page is indicated by many a red crucifix sitting about its edges.⁵ This was a typical medieval practice used to denote an author's wish for that work to be disregarded. On the topic of its physical compilation, the manuscript is written on vellum, in this case, crafted from calfskin. It has been calculated that an approximate total of 185 cows'

¹ Brown, Peter, *The Book Of Kells: Forty-Eight Pages And Details In Color From The Manuscript In Trinity College, Dublin*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980)

² Alexander, J.J.G., *Insular Manuscripts: Sixth To Ninth Century*, (London: Harvey Miller, 1978)

³ De Paor, Liam, "*The World Of The Book Of Kells*" In *Ireland And Early Europe: Essays And Occasional Writings On Art And Culture*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997)

⁴ Graham, Timothy, *The Book Of Kells: A Celtic Treasure*, [podcast] (Univeristy of New Mexico, 26th June 2008) Avaialble at: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-book-of-kells-a-celtic-treasure/id556968594?i=1000119940179> [accessed 14th March 2024]

⁵ Meehan, Bernard, *The Book of Kells: An Illustrated Introduction To The Manuscript In Trinity College Dublin*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994)

worth of vellum was used in the construction of the Book of Kells.⁶ The pigments used include yellow arsenic sulphide (also known as orpiment), woad (used to create blue pigment), red lead, and copper green. To create the desired effect, the pigments were applied using a layering technique, which consisted of a foundational layer of pigment being applied first, followed by as many as around two or three additional layers.⁷ The current state of the text itself as it sits on display in the Old Library at Trinity College Dublin, is somewhat different from its original state. This is due to a process of rebinding which was undertaken in the nineteenth century, during which the surviving leaves were trimmed severely, and their edges were gilded. In 1953, it was bound again, this time into four volumes.⁸

Contents of the Manuscript

The Book of Kells is an example of an ‘Insular Gospel’ book, which means it is an illustrated (or ‘illuminated’) Gospel text, created in the Insular Celtic world at some point between the mid seventh century and the early ninth century. To this day, some thirty folios, or leaves, have been lost over time. This includes about ten folios at the beginning of the manuscript, twelve at the end, and around eight or nine at various points throughout the text.⁹ The Gospel text itself is a copy of the *Vulgate* text: a translation of the Gospel made by Saint Jerome, which was completed in 384 AD. It also includes excerpts from an earlier Old Latin Bible text known as the *Vetus Latina*, as well as *breves causae*, in which the narrative of each Gospel is summarised, and *argumenta*, which are brief characterisations of each Evangelist author. It is widely believed that the thirty ‘lost’ folios would have contained a copy of a letter known as the Epistle of Jerome to Pope Damasus I, which served as Saint Jerome’s pre-emptive explanation for the purpose of the *Vulgate* text, which was then written some years after.¹⁰ The argument that the Book of Kells had originally contained a copy of this letter is supported by its inclusion in many Gospel manuscripts written in Latin (or even Old Latin or Greco-Latin), which were compiled at the time. Such texts include, but are not limited to the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Armagh, the Book of Durrow, the Codex Benevenatus, and the Lindau Gospels.¹¹

- ⁶ Henry, Francoise, *The Book Of Kells: Reproductions From The Manuscript In Trinity College, Dublin*, (New York: Alfred. A. Knopf, 1974)

⁷ Powell, Roger, ‘The Book Of Kells, The Book Of Durrow, Comments On The Vellum And The Make-up And Other Aspects’, *Scriptorium*, Vol. 10, 1956

⁸ Meehan, Bernard, *The Book Of Kells: Official Guide*, (Thames and Hudson, 2018)

⁹ Meehan, Bernard, *The Book Of Kells: Official Guide*, (Thames and Hudson, 2018)

¹⁰ Calkins, Robert. G., *Illuminated Books Of The Middle Ages*, (New York: Cornell University Press: 1983)

¹¹ Tilgham, Benjamin. C., ‘Ornament And Incarnation In Insular Art’, *Gesta*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2016.

The canon tables in the Book of Kells are situated just before the Gospel of Saint Matthew and encompass a total of sixteen pages. They are of particular interest to many due to the system they use, known more commonly as 'Eusebian canon tables'. It was invented, rather unsurprisingly, by Eusebius, the fourth century bishop of Caesarea. Many other such Gospel books, including the Lindisfarne Gospels, use this same system.¹² The tables themselves use a system of certain roman numerals which are inserted into a particular column, which in turn, pertains to a specific instance in the life of Christ. Since many different events in Christ's life appear more than once throughout the four Gospels, the aim here is to denote to the reader which events can be found in which Gospel. A modern interpreter of this may become easily confused by this system, primarily because the system of Bible chapter numbers used today is a far cry from the one used at the time the Book of Kells was written. The version of the system used today was instead created in the thirteenth century by Stephen Langton, who taught at the University of Paris, later becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹³

From a stylistic perspective, the illustration and decoration in the manuscript is easily a most significant contribution to its consistent reverence. I would highlight two distinct folios which demonstrate the incredible detail and sheer beauty of the work in this text. The first is undoubtedly folio 34r, more widely known as the 'Chi Ro' page. It is so called because it is a page entirely dedicated to these words, which are of course, the first two letters of the word 'Christ' in Greek. At this point of the Gospel, the reader finds themselves at Matthew 1:18 (in the King James Bible), which begins the narrative of the life of Christ. It is this precise point in the Gospels that is usually made artistically marvellous in many an illuminated Gospel, and the Book of Kells is an exquisite example of this. This page most of all has garnered a great deal of attention due to the innate and undeniable talent of its craftsmanship. It also serves to highlight the inherent Celticism of the artwork in the Book of Kells, showing us the unmistakably Irish interlacing patterns and knotting designs, which are ubiquitous in artwork found all over the Celtic world.¹⁴ It is also imperative to mention folio 7v. This page is so important for one simple reason: it is the first image of the Madonna and Child to appear in a western manuscript. Its stylistic nature is a mixture of Christian tradition; the illustrated border of the folio is again a stunning example of that quintessentially Celtic interlacing, yet the portrait of Virgin and Child is said to take visual and technical inspiration from the artwork of the Byzantine or even Coptic traditions. One especially interesting point here is that a strikingly similar portrayal of this image is found on the coffin of Saint Cuthbert.¹⁵

- ¹² Brown, Peter, *The Book Of Kells: Forty-Eight Pages And Details In Color From The Manuscript In Trinity College, Dublin*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980)

¹³Graham, Timothy, *The Book Of Kells: A Celtic Treasure*, [podcast] (University of New Mexico, 26th June 2008) Available at: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-book-of-kells-a-celtic-treasure/id556968594?i=1000119940179> [accessed 14th March 2024]

¹⁴ Lewis, Suzanne, 'Sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Ro Page In The Book Of Kells', *Traditio*, Vol. 36, 1980.

¹⁵ Meehan, Bernard, *The Book of Kells: An Illustrated Introduction To The Manuscript In Trinity College Dublin*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994)

History of the Text

Like many other cases of Christianisation throughout the world, the early ecclesiastical presence in Ireland found ways to weave elements of the pre-existing belief system into the new religious order, leaving the fragments of the local pre-Christian identity within Irish Catholic practice (some of which last to this day). Such was the effect of this, that up until the mid to late seventh century, the practice of Christianity in Ireland and Scotland was considered separate from contemporary practice in the Church throughout the rest of Christendom. This was technically the case until 664 AD, when at the Synod of Whitby, the Celtic arm of Christendom agreed to become absorbed into the custom and practice of the Roman tradition. Arguably the most significant change to come as a result of this administrative gathering, was the decision that the Irish and Scottish monastic powers would now instruct the laypeople to celebrate Easter at the same time as the rest of the European Church, as per the instruction of Rome.¹⁶ It is important to note that this was only around 140 years before the Book of Kells is thought to have been written, and so the remnants of a separatist Celtic tradition could not have been completely absent in the minds of the monks at abbeys like Durrow, Iona, and Kells.

This merger of Celtic mythology with Christian theology has no doubt had a lasting impact on the historical record. When it comes to recounting the historical narrative of the Book of Kells, it is almost impossible to do so without the inclusion of the pseudo-historical account. This comes as no surprise when one considers that Ireland's mythological (and inherently pagan) past continued to loom large in the collective psyche of her citizens long after 'Mother Church' had set up a home on Irish ground. What we do know for certain, is that the manuscript was treated as a most sacred item, even being hailed as a relic of St Colm Cille. Contemporary source material does reflect this, with texts like the Annals of Ulster referring to it as "the chief treasure of the western world".¹⁷ What we do know about the life and use of the Book of Kells mainly revolves around its journey to its present-day home in Dublin. The scarce existing information about its life at Kells indicates that in the years following its inception, the text was used ceremonially for the majority of the time, being brought out for holy days in the Christian calendar such as Easter.¹⁸ Throughout much of the tenth century, the Abbey was raided by Vikings on more than one occasion, which is a fate particularly ironic when one remembers that the text was brought to Kells specifically to safekeep it from Viking raiders. The monks did successfully protect the manuscript from such attempts, until 1006 when it was stolen away from the monastery, only to be returned some two months

¹⁶ Brown, Michelle. P., *Art Of The Islands: Celtic, Pictish, Anglo-Saxon And Viking Visual Culture*, (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2016)

- ¹⁷ ed. Mac Airt, Sean and Mac Niocall, Gearoid, *The Annals Of Ulster (to 1131 AD)*, (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983)

¹⁸ Heather, Pulliam, *Word And Image in The Book Of Kells*, (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006)

later, its cover markedly absent. However, for this claim we have only the Annals of Ulster to thank, so it is worth taking this assertion with a pinch of salt.

Moreover, during the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, the book was even used for certain administrative purposes, with previously blank folios now being used to document financial transactions which had taken place at the monastery.¹⁹ From this, one could easily surmise that the use of the text was slowly falling out of favour. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that this instead is more evident of a drastic change in the environment of Kells during the Middle Ages. The various Viking sackings over the years had taken on a toll on the Abbey and in the late twelfth century, it ceased to function as a monastery and instead functioned as a parish Church. It was only until the rebellion of 1641, when the church was left in ruins, that the decision was finally taken to move out of Kells entirely. The Governor of Kells at the time, Charles Lambert, sent the manuscript to Dublin, where it remains to this day. The Old Library at Trinity College has been its home since the mid nineteenth century.²⁰

Heritage Interpretation

It is evident that admiration for the manuscript survives into the present-day, in 2008, it was recorded that some 500,000 visitors on average were journeying to view it on display at Trinity College each year.²¹ Its reproductions have also served to indicate its lasting relevance; Helen Campbell D'Olier, for example, was a significant contributor of such works during the nineteenth century.²² When considering the impact of the Book of Kells on the wider sphere of Celtic art, my first inclination is to make mention of its contribution to the argument that early Medieval Ireland and Scotland was a sophisticated society, one more culturally advanced than given credit for. Consequentially, I am inevitably drawn to the words of Christopher de Hamel, who asserts that this place was “clearly no primitive backwater”. The Book of Kells has provided a sort of ‘proof of life’, establishing that the Insular Celtic world had links with the wider Christian world at the time, more specifically with the mediterranean, where many of the pigments used in the manuscript were originally sourced from. De Hamel reinforced this belief, by telling us that “there are clearly lines of trade and communication unknown to us”.²³

¹⁹ Meyvaert, Paul, ‘The Book Of Kells And Iona’, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 1989

²⁰ Meehan, Bernard, *The Book Of Kells: Official Guide*, (Thames and Hudson, 2018)

²¹ Graham, Timothy, *The Book Of Kells: A Celtic Treasure*, [podcast] (Univeristy of New Mexico, 26th June 2008) Avaialble at: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-book-of-kells-a-celtic-treasure/id556968594?i=1000119940179> [accessed 14th March 2024]

²² Strickland, Walter, *A Dictionary Of Irish Artists*, (Dublin: Maunsell & Co., 1913)

²³ De Hamel, Christopher, *Meetings With Remarkable Manuscripts*, (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2017)

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