

The Synthesis of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Mediterranean art styles in the decorative pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The Lindisfarne Gospels represent one of the greatest achievements of what is called the Golden Age of Northumbria.¹ The manuscript was produced c. 700 on Lindisfarne, the 'cradle of Northumbrian Christianity',² and is attributed to Bishop Eadfrith (d. 722) by a colophon added during the late tenth century.³ This attribution was reinforced by Symeon of Durham,⁴ however whether Eadfrith himself was the creator or whether he simply commissioned the production of the book is debated by scholars.⁵ What is more certain is that, apart from the rubrics and some additions and corrections to the text,⁶ the whole of the Lindisfarne Gospels was written and illuminated by a single, extremely talented individual.⁷ The decorative pages of the book have come to define Insular manuscript art,⁸ and could be regarded as part of a broader 'Anglo-Saxon Renaissance'.⁹ Earlier scholars such as Sir Thomas Kendrick saw the art of the Gospels as essentially 'a continuation of the earlier Celtic style' with Roman artistic sympathies,¹⁰ however more recent scholarship argues for a more complex and purposeful amalgamation of Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Mediterranean art styles.¹¹

¹ Jane Hawkes, *The Golden Age of Northumbria* (Morpeth: Sandhill Press Ltd, and Newcastle: Tyne & Wyr Museums, 1996), p. 90; London, The British Library, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, c. 700, Cotton MS Nero D IV.

² Hawkes, *The Golden Age*, p. 90.

³ Eleanor Jackson, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Art, History & Inspiration* (London: British Library Publishing, 2022), p. 21.

⁴ Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1981), p. 13.

⁵ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality & the Scribe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 40–55.

⁶ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 14.

⁷ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 9.

⁸ Hawkes, *The Golden Age*, p. 90.

⁹ T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London: Methuen & Co, 1938), p. 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹¹ Hawkes, *The Golden Age*, p. 90.

Modern testing has shown that most of the materials used to create the paints in the Gospels could have been sourced from Britain and Ireland.¹² These limited ingredients were skillfully processed and mixed to provide a stunning array of hues reminiscent of paintings and mosaics from late antiquity. An unusual feature of the Lindisfarne Gospels' palette is the use of small quantities of gold; the name of each Evangelist and his symbol are written with gold ink at the beginning of each gospel, and pieces of gold leaf are used as infill within some of the initial letters.¹³ Janet Backhouse comments that the lack of gold in early Insular manuscripts was a matter of taste rather than due to a lack of raw materials, as gold was used lavishly elsewhere, such as in books that directly emulated earlier Italian works like the Codex Amiatinus.¹⁴ Michelle Brown elaborates that the conservative use of gold in the Lindisfarne Gospels was a purposeful attempt to create 'a new visual language' that combined the imperial splendour of Rome and Constantinople with the Celtic and Germanic appreciation of the natural world.¹⁵

The first major decoration of each gospel is a portrait of the Evangelist author. A similar feature can be found in illuminated gospel books of late antiquity such as the St Augustine Gospels.¹⁶ These images ultimately descend from the classical author portraits that headed ancient literary and philosophical texts. By depicting the Evangelists in this way, Eadfrith portrayed them as 'the authors of the late antique world'.¹⁷ While each of them are labelled with their Latin names, they are also given the transliterated Greek title *O Agios* ('Saint'). Eleanor Jackson suggests that Greek was a little known language in early medieval Northumbria, and its inclusion may be

¹² Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 35; Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 32.

¹³ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 32; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, *Codex Amiatinus*, c. 700, MS Amiatino 1.

¹⁵ Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels with Michelle Brown*, [podcast], Museum of the Bible, Unscrolled, 23 March 2020 <<https://www.museumofthebible.org/museum-of-the-bible-podcast>>.

¹⁶ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, *The Gospels of St. Augustine*, c. 500–599, MS 286.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 48.



Fig. 1. Evangelist portrait of St John (f. 209v), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 2. Evangelist portrait of St Matthew (f. 25v), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 3. Portrait of Ezra from *Codex Amiatinus* (f. 5r), from Wearmouth-Jarrow, c. 700, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, MS Amiatino 1.

intended to 'evoke the sanctity of the original language of the gospels'.¹⁸ It seems clear that Eadfrith had access to Greek sources, however Brown notes that the lettering is laid out 'in accordance with Byzantine iconic practices',¹⁹ and the Evangelists apart from John (Fig. 1) are depicted not just as authors, but specifically as scribes.²⁰ Byzantine art commonly depicted the gospel writers in this way, and it is possible that these miniatures represent the early transmission of Byzantine iconography into northern Europe.²¹ The conscious amalgamation of Byzantine and Roman styles is further supported by the fact that Matthew (Fig. 2) and Luke appear as bearded and ageing in the Byzantine style, whereas John and Mark are of the youthful and clean-shaven Roman type.²²

The Evangelist miniatures likely derive from several sources from late antiquity and have been reworked by the artist.²³ There are clear similarities between the portrait of Matthew and that of Ezra (Fig. 3) from the Codex Amiatinus, a single-volume bible made at Wearmouth-Jarrow slightly before or around the same time as the Lindisfarne Gospels. It is possible that the Lindisfarne Gospels artist based his Matthew image directly upon the Ezra from Codex Amiatinus, however it seems more likely that both images were based upon a much older portrait in a Cassiodoran manuscript, the Codex Grandior, that was housed at at Wearmouth-Jarrow.²⁴ The artist of the Ezra image uses painting techniques from late antiquity, such as basic perspective, shading, and highlighting, whereas the artist of the Lindisfarne Gospels adopts a flat and linear style with bold outlines. Jackson notes that the scene in the Matthew portrait 'does not make sense as a three dimensional space',²⁵ pointing to the floating foot rest in relation to the bench. However, the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 347.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 349.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 350.

²³ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 53; Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 47; Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 353.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 360.

²⁵ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 53.

stylized locks of hair and 'restless folds of drapery' add to an expressive and dynamic overall composition.²⁶ In addition to the Byzantine iconic style of the Matthew portrait, the Latin letters of the transliterated Greek words have stylistic features reminiscent of Germanic runes, perhaps reminding us of the Anglo-Saxon origins of its creator.²⁷

Each Evangelist is accompanied by a symbol in the shape of a beast, or in Matthew's case, an angel blowing a trumpet. These symbols are taken from the Bible (Ezekiel 1:5-28; Revelation 4:6-8), and they came to be associated with the Evangelists 'by exegetes such as Augustine, Gregory and Bede'.²⁸ A peculiar feature of the Matthew portrait is the hanging curtain with an enigmatic, bearded man peering from behind it. This figure has been interpreted in various ways, including as an inspiring muse from antiquity, Moses, St Cuthbert, or as Jesus Christ himself. Brown argues that the curtain provides a revelatory function, noting that the drawn back curtain is a recurring feature of many later Byzantine, Coptic, and Carolingian Evangelist miniatures.²⁹ The bearded man may be a symbolic figure who fulfils the function of 'revealing' the gospels in a similar way to the bookcase in the Ezra portrait or the church buildings that appear behind the Evangelists in Byzantine miniatures.³⁰ Clear stylistic similarities can be seen between the figures in the Lindisfarne Gospels portraits and those found on the coffin of St Cuthbert (Fig. 5) made at the end of the seventh century, such as the winged bull accompanying St Luke (Fig. 4) and eagle above St John. If we compare the symbols of the Evangelists found in the Lindisfarne Gospels to those found in the earlier Book of Durrow (Fig. 6) and the Echternach Gospels (Fig. 7),³¹

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 359.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 359–360.

³¹ Dublin, Trinity College Library, *The Book of Durrow*, c. 700, MS 57; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *The Echternach Gospels*, c. 700, Département des manuscrits, MS Latin 9389



Fig. 4. Evangelist portrait of St Luke (f. 137v), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 5. Fragments of St Cuthbert's coffin at Durham Cathedral showing the symbols of St John (right) and St Luke (left). From Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 51.



Fig. 6. The lion symbol of St Mark from the *Echternach Gospels* (f. 75x), c. 690, Paris. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, MS Latin 9389.



Fig. 7. The eagle from the *Book of Durrow* (f. 84v), c. 700, in this case representing St Mark. Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 57.

we see that both earlier examples lack the Greek iconographic influences as well as the Mediterranean colour palette, appearing more 'Insular' in their composition. The highly developed and artistically diverse use of figurative symbolism in the Lindisfarne Gospels speaks to a broader engagement with the rest of the Christian world.

A subtle fusion of artistic styles can be found in the sixteen canon tables that precede the gospels themselves, examples of which can be seen in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9. The inclusion of canon tables as an apparatus for which to study the gospels was developed by Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century and used by St Jerome in the first vulgate translation of the Bible.³² While canon tables appear in other early Insular manuscripts, none are as decorative as those found in the Lindisfarne Gospels.³³ The combination of 'unmistakably insular' patterns of intertwining birds and interlace with Roman arcades creates a wholly unique art style.³⁴ Backhouse comments that 'the scheme as a whole must certainly have been inspired by knowledge of a set of arcaded canon tables in one of the manuscripts brought to England from Italy',³⁵ drawing a direct line between the canon tables and the classical influences on the Evangelist portraits. However, more than simply copying a model, the decoration of the canon tables seems to be a conscious choice;³⁶ just as the drawn-aside curtain in the St Matthew miniature 'invites' the reader to partake of the gospels, so too are they invited to enter the New Testament through the arches that combine Roman architectural features with Celtic and Germanic aesthetic sensibilities.³⁷

³² Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 44; Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 41.

³³ Ibid.; Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 182.

³⁴ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 41; Hawkes, *The Golden Age*, p. 91.

³⁵ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 41.

³⁶ Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 182.

³⁷ Ibid.



Fig. 8. Lindisfarne Gospels canon table with intertwining birds in the shafts and arch and knotwork in the plinths and capitals (f. 10), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.

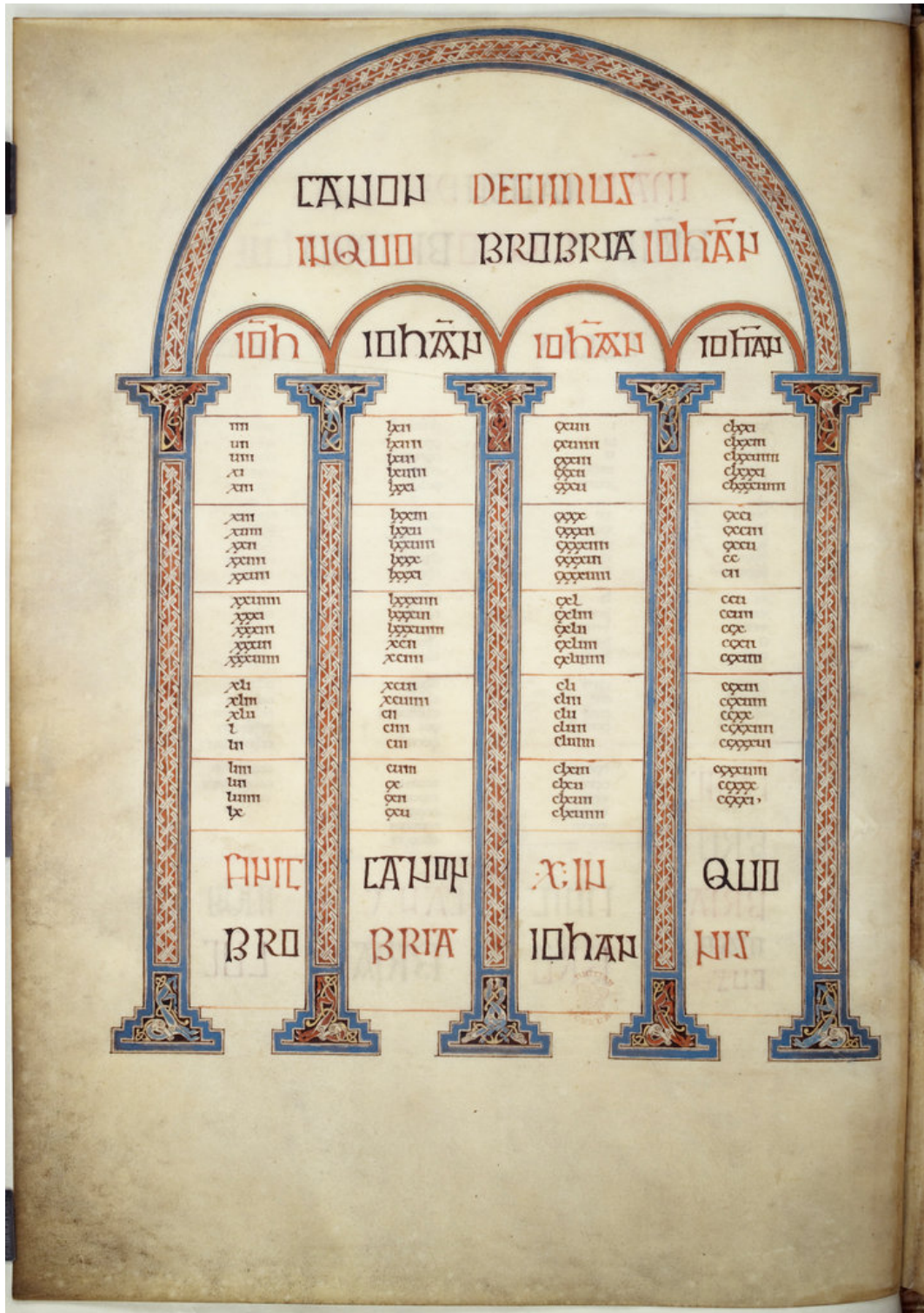


Fig. 9. Lindisfarne Gospels canon table (f. 17v) with birds in the plinths and capitals and geometric fret patterns in the shafts and arch. Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 11. Canon table from the Book of Kells, (f. 2r), c. 800, possibly developed with reference to the Lindisfarne Gospels. Dublin, Trinity College Library, MS 58.

The most expressive use of pattern can be found in the highly decorative initial pages and the splendid carpet pages. These preface each of the gospels and also include a prefatory carpet and initial page and a 'Chi-rho' page (Fig. 12) for a total of eleven pages of pure ornament.³⁸ Jackson notes that in the initial pages, 'the decorative treatment of letters is developed to the point where they become an image', with the letters seeming to metamorphose into 'living beings, reminiscent of the interlaced and contorted creatures that are so prominent in the decoration'.³⁹ Features of La Tène artwork, such as billowing spirals, trumpets, and pelta emerge from the ends of and fill the bowls of the letters, while the 'zoomorphic' interlace is adapted from ancient Germanic art. Backhouse notes that many of the patterns used by Eadfrith pre-date the Christian period,⁴⁰ however in the Lindisfarne Gospels they take on a deeply Christian meaning. There is a definitive connection between the decorative pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels and early medieval metalwork, such as the Tara brooch (Fig. 17) and Sutton Hoo grave goods (Fig. 18).⁴¹ We can see the similarities between the Latin cross of the Matthew carpet page (Fig. 14) and a processional cross (Fig. 16), which reminds us of the ceremonial use of the book as a processional object of devotion. Brown argues that each of the carpet pages in the Lindisfarne Gospels embody a different form of 'the *crux gemmata* (the jewelled cross), the symbolic representation of the godhead'.⁴² In Matthew and the prefatory carpet pages, we find the Latin cross, and in the others we find the Celtic, the Byzantine, and the Coptic crosses.⁴³ The carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels are intended to be a universal Christian language that 'transcends' all human divisions.⁴⁴

³⁸ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 47.

³⁹ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 47.

⁴¹ Jackson, *Art, History & Inspiration*, p. 59; Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, p. 71; Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, pp. 316–319.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 324.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 325–330; Michelle, P. Brown David Petts, and Jake Morris-Campbell, The Lindisfarne Gospels and new discoveries, [podcast], Arts & Ideas with Shahidha Bari, BBC Radio 3, 14 Sep. 2022
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0d04hfb>>

⁴⁴ Brown, *Society, Spirituality & the Scribe*, p. 324.



Fig. 12. Chi-rho initial page (f. 29), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 13. Matthew initial page (f. 27), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 14. Matthew carpet page (f. 26v), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 15. John carpet page (f. 210v), Courtesy British Library, Cotton Nero D. IV.



Fig. 16. Reconstruction of the great cross from the Staffordshire Hoard, c. 650, England. Birmingham City Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council.



Fig. 17. The Tara Brooch, c. 700, Ireland, Collections of the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, NMI, R. 4015.



Fig. 18. Circular enamelled escutcheon from a copper hanging bowl in the Sutton Hoo burial, c. 600, The Trustees of the British Museum.

Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Kendrick noted that 'no Celtic person, on Aldred's evidence, had anything to do with the making of the book', and that, in the wake of the Synod of Whitby in 644, the Lindisfarne Gospels is 'clearly a monument of the Roman, not the Celtic, Church in England'.⁴⁵ This view makes sense if we understand the climate of seventh century Northumbria to be primarily one of conflict between Irish Columban Christianity and the Roman Rite. However, when we study the art of the Lindisfarne Gospels in the context of the wider Christian world – the schisms of the eastern Church and debates around iconoclasm, the debate between Roman and Celtic Christianity in Britain, and the authority of the Pope within the West – we can see a different message from the artist than simply the triumph of Rome.⁴⁶ In the context of a largely illiterate but orally rich culture, the Lindisfarne Gospels tells a visual history of Britain and Ireland.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it presents us with a clear artistic message of Christian universality and the diverse strands of spiritual thought that came to be distilled on Holy Island during the Northumbrian Golden Age.

⁴⁵ T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London: Methuen & Co, 1938), p. 105; Aldred was the priest that added the colophon and Old English gloss in the tenth century.

⁴⁶ Michelle P. Brown, Claire Lees, and Richard Gameson, *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, [podcast], In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg, BBC Radio 4, 20 Feb. 2003 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548tq>>

⁴⁷ Brown, Society, Spirituality & the Scribe, pp. 407–408; Brown, et al., *The Lindisfarne Gospels and new discoveries*, [podcast] <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0d04hfb>>

Images

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