

The Book of Kells

'Turning Darkness into Light'

Schools' Junior Information Pack

Worksheet A

Early History of Ireland



Book of Dimma, folio 30



From Exploring the Book of Kells
- George Otto Simms © The O'Brien Press Limited

What was life like in Ireland when the Book of Kells was written?

The Book of Kells is a very rare treasure, not only because it is so old, but because it has such beautiful paintings in it. It is the gospel according to Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The Book of Kells was written around 800 A.D. in a monastery by monks. Two monasteries were important to the story of the Book of Kells: the monastery of Iona, near the west coast of Scotland, and the monastery of Kells in Co Meath. St Colum Cille was the founder of the monastery at Iona. We believe that Book of Kells might have been written to honour the anniversary of his death. When it was written, over a thousand years ago, there were less than half a million people living in the whole of Ireland. Life was very different then. People lived and farmed in communities. They had to defend their towns against other raiding tribes of people. Communities were made up of slaves or hostages, peasants and soldiers, nobles and tribal kings. These tribes often fought over land. The Ogham stones you see in the exhibition show a very old system of writing. Each line or group of lines and notches symbolises a letter.

The *monastery* is a group of people whose lives are spent worshipping God. Monks are men who choose to live removed from secular life. In the days when the Book of Kells was being written, young men joined the monastery when they were between fifteen or sixteen years old. People knew that these men belonged to the monastery because the fronts of their heads were shaved. This was called a tonsure. Along with prayer, monks fasted. This means they would not eat food for long periods of time while they prayed. The monks also farmed. Many did missionary work - telling others outside of the monastery about the gospel. These monks carried pocket Gospel books when they travelled. These were Gospel books small enough to carry in a satchel. A satchel is a bag that the monks carried over their shoulders - it is similar to the school bag you carry today.

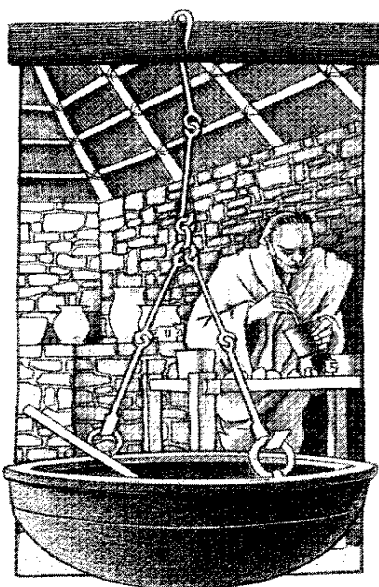
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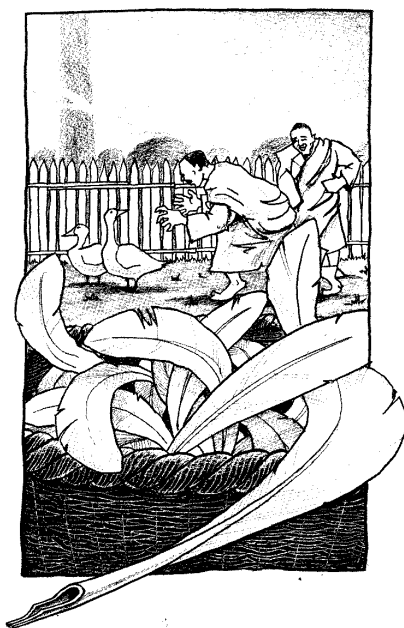
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Worksheet B

Materials and Methods



From Exploring the Book of Kells
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How was the Book of Kells made?

The printing press was not yet invented so books had to be written and decorated by hand. This was long, hard work. The monks had to make every part of the book. The pages of the Book of Kells were made with vellum (calfskin). Approximately 185 calfskins were used to make it. The monks would dip the skin in a mixture of water and lime and let it soak for a couple of weeks. Each skin has a hair side and a flesh side. When the monks took the skin out of this water they would scrape and rub it to take away the hair. Then they would stretch and flatten each skin. Next they would be cut to form the pages.

The monks also made their own inks and pigments. Pigments are the colours that make up paint. There are five main colours used in the Book of Kells: red, yellow, green, blue and purple. The Book of Durrow was made with fewer colours, mainly green, yellow and red. The pigments used to colour the drawings were created from different minerals. Some of these minerals are not found in Ireland and came from very far away, as far as Iran and Afghanistan! The monks made ink by using the juices from crushed oak apples and soot. The monks made their pens from quills. Quills are birds' tail feathers. Monks used the feathers from swans and geese. The monks would cut the tip of the quill at an angle. This would be the point of the pen. Then they would make a slit in the quill so that the ink would run more easily. Ink wells are where the monks put the ink while they were writing. They made these from cows' horns. You can see how much work went into making every part of the Book of Kells!

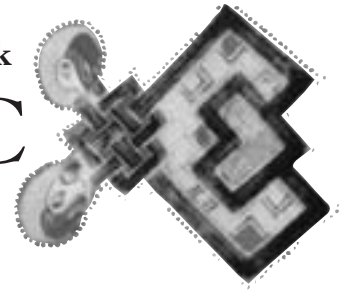
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Worksheet C

Images from the Book of Kells



Chi-Rho page from Kells folio 34r



Detail from the Book of Durrow, folio 85v

What do the drawings in the Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow and the Book of Armagh tell us?

One of the reasons why these books are so important to us is because the drawings are so beautiful. They also have lots of secret meanings and it has taken us many, many years to learn some of these secrets. Some of the pages are very colourful and were specially drawn. When these books were made most people could not read. The monks wanted to be able to help people to understand the story of the gospel. Books were so important that many people believed they brought good luck. Books are shown in thirty different drawings in the Book of Kells.

There were four authors of the gospels: Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each author was known by a symbol - Matthew is the man or angel which stands for Christ's birth; Luke is the calf which stands for Christ's sacrifice; Mark is the lion which stands for Christ's resurrection; and John is the eagle which stands for Christ's ascension into Heaven. The page 291v shows us St John. He is sitting on a throne with a book and pen in his hands. This page is one of the most special pages in the Book. You can tell that it was important because the artists used many colours and lots of different patterns. The page called the Chi Rho page is another important page in the Book of Kells. It is called Chi Rho because the Chi and Rho are letters in the Greek alphabet meaning Christ. The page is decorated with lots of animals. There are cats, mice, butterflies, a moth, and an otter with a fish in his mouth. Look at the page from the Book of Durrow. The design you see is carefully drawn so that no part of the pattern repeats itself. This is called interlace. A page which is covered in design and which has no writing on it is called a 'carpet page'; whichever way you look at it, it is never upside down.

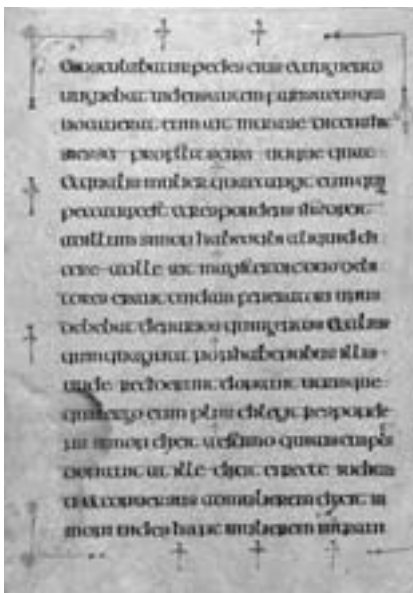
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Worksheet D

The Scribes and Their Word



Book of Kells, folio 218v



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Who were the people who made the Book of Kells?

Scribes are those monks whose special job it was to write and decorate these ancient books. The Book of Kells is written in Latin. We do not know the names of the scribes who wrote the Book of Kells but we do have information about how they worked. Scribes sometimes worked in a special writing room in the monastery. This room was called a *scriptorium*. They were trained in the art of calligraphy. Calligraphy is the art of writing in a beautiful script. It is made with a quill pen that has a sharp, angled tip to make the lettering more special looking. We believe that there may have been four scribes who wrote the Book. Scribe A wrote plainly and did not do any painting. He left that job to Scribe B who used coloured inks and liked to write in a fancier style. Scribes C and D copied the gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke. Sometimes the scribes made mistakes. They did not have Tippex or rubbers in those days so they used symbols such as red dots to point out their mistakes. There might be three main illustrators who worked on the Book of Kells. We call one 'the goldsmith' because he liked to use the golden colours and because his drawings were very detailed. Another scribe is called 'the illustrator'. He painted the page known as the Temptation of Christ. The third scribe is called the 'portrait painter.' He painted the portraits of St John and Christ.

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Worksheet E

The Long Room & Trinity College



What is the story of the building where the Book of Kells is kept?

The Book of Kells is kept in Trinity College in a beautiful building known as the Old Library. There are many, many rare books kept here. The room where the Book of Kells is kept is used for manuscripts - books written by hand. The Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow, the Book of Mulling, the Book of Dimma and the Book of Armagh are the most precious. The Long Room upstairs holds books that are also very old but that were made with a printing press. The Library is the longest room of any library in Ireland - some even believe that it is the longest library room in Europe. Three architects worked on the building. The first architect's name was Thomas Burgh. He worked on the main part of the building in 1712. Then in 1859 Sir Thomas Deane and Benjamin Woodward decided to make the building even more spacious so they created a very beautiful ceiling. The ceiling in the Long Room is vaulted - which means that it is shaped like an upside down U. In the Long Room, old and rare books are stacked in shelves made of oak. To help the librarians find the books they need, each shelf is marked with a letter. A long time ago, scholars used to be able to read at the desks under the windows. Now there is a separate room where students are allowed to read these books.

Libraries can sometimes be like great treasure houses. Aside from seeing many books, you will also notice statues of men's heads and shoulders next to each book case. These are called busts. They are sculptures of very famous men. You will also see a very old harp. Some people like to think that it belonged to Brian Boru but that is untrue. Another object to look for is the Proclamation of 1916. Imagine. All of these special objects from our past are kept right here in the centre of Dublin. You can visit any time.

