

The Book of Kells

'Turning Darkness into Light'

Schools' Senior Information Pack

Worksheet A

Early History of Ireland



Book of Dimma, folio 30



*Exploring the Book of Kells. Simms
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What was life like in Ireland when the Book of Kells was written?

The Book of Kells is a book of the four gospels. It was written around 800 A.D. nearly 600 years before the invention of moveable printing characters in China and almost 400 hundred years after St Patrick arrived in Ireland. Two monasteries are important to the story of the Book of Kells: the monastery of Iona, an island near the west coast of Scotland, and the monastery of Kells in Co Meath. St Colum Cille (or Columba) was the founder of the monastery at Iona. We believe that the Book of Kells might have been written to honour the anniversary of his death.

It is considered one of the world's greatest treasures because it tells us so much about early medieval life in Ireland and because of the quality of the beautiful artwork. When it was written, over a thousand years ago, there were less than a half a million people living in Ireland. During this period, people lived and farmed in close communities along rivers and waterways that they had to defend against raiding groups. There were three categories of social standing in a community. There were either slaves or hostages, peasants and soldiers, and tribal kings. These tribes often fought over land and Viking raids were widespread at the time of the creation of the Book of Kells. The monastery at Iona was moved to Kells some two hundred years after St Colum Cille's death because Viking raids made it too dangerous for the monks to continue living on the island.

In the days when the Book of Kells was being written, young men joined the monastery when they were between fifteen or sixteen years of age. One of the ways that people knew these men belonged to the monastery was because the tops of their heads were shaved. This was called a tonsure. Monks chose to live removed from the secular communities, but the monastery itself was a self-sufficient group. Each monk had a role within the monastery - some were farmers, others were metal workers, some taught the neighbouring children, still others were missionaries telling people outside of the monastery about the gospel. These monks carried pocket gospel books that were small enough to carry in a satchel. The Book of Mulling or Moling is one such book. We believe that this book was created in a monastery on the river Barrow in Co Carlow.

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Worksheet B

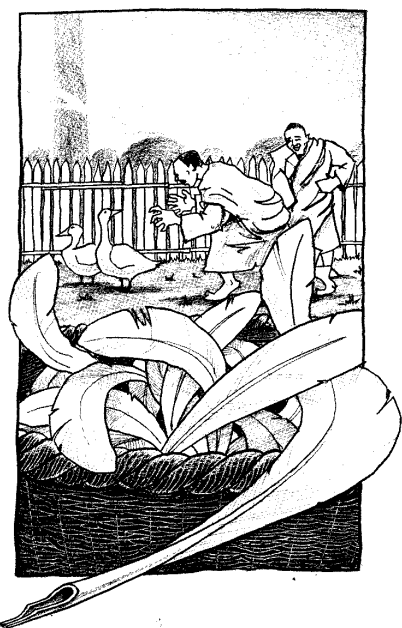
Materials and Methods



Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek MS, 4,2, folio 183v

How was the Book of Kells made?

Because the printing press had not yet been invented, books had to be written and illustrated by hand. This was a long and difficult process. The folios (pages) of the Book of Kells were made with vellum. Vellum is an animal skin, in this instance, calfskin. Approximately 185 calfskins were used to make the Book of Kells. 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. The monks would remove the skin from the soaking and then scrape and pumice it to remove the hair. Next they would stretch and flatten each skin. Finally, it would be cut to form individual folios. Recto is the Latin word meaning right; verso means left. The monks also made their own inks and pigments. They made ink from the juice from crushed oak apples, gum & water to produce a brownish colour. A mixture of lamp black or soot created the black ink. The pigments used to colour the illustrations were created from different minerals. No one is certain exactly how they were arrived at, and some of these minerals were found as far away as Iran and Afghanistan! The monks made their quills from birds' feathers - swans and geese were a favoured source. The monks would cut the base of the quill at an angle to form the nib or point of the pen. Ink wells were made from cow horns.



Exploring the Book of Kells. Simms
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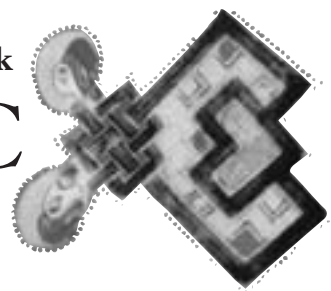
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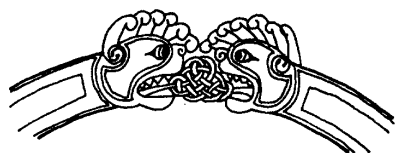
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Worksheet C

Images from the Book of Kells



Book of Dimma, folio 5r



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What do the illustrations in the Book of Kells tell us?

One of the reasons why the Book of Kells is so famous is because of the richness of the illustrations. The monks used decoration to tell the story of the gospels to those who could not read, to illustrate the lettering, and to impress people by its splendour. Monks used many decorative styles such as Celtic decoration, Greek key patterns, Roman vegetal patterns, and Germanic animal ornamentation to illustrate the Book of Kells. Symbolism, when an object represents something very different, is also a very important part of the illustrations of the Book of Kells. There were four authors to the gospels: Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each author is represented by a symbol - Matthew is represented by the man or angel which symbolises Christ's birth; Mark is represented by the lion which symbolises Christ's resurrection; Luke is represented by the calf which symbolises Christ's sacrifice; and John is represented by the eagle which symbolises Christ's ascension into Heaven. The page illustrated with the Greek letters XPI is called the Chi Rho page. The X is the Greek letter for the sound Ch; the P stands for the sound of R - the meaning of the page translates into 'of Christ.' This page was highly decorated. The monks wanted us to know how special it was so they spared no effort to make the page beautiful. One of the great surprises about this page is the animals such as the cats and the otter and butterflies that play amongst the letters. The monks also used a lot of the rare colour blue, made from lapis lazuli, to decorate the border of the page.

The illustration in the Book of Durrow shows us another type of decoration. The illustration folio 85v is called 'interlace'. Interlace is a ribbon-like design. No part of this design repeats itself and this makes it very difficult to draw. A page which is covered with ornamentation like interlace and has no text on it is called a 'carpet page'.

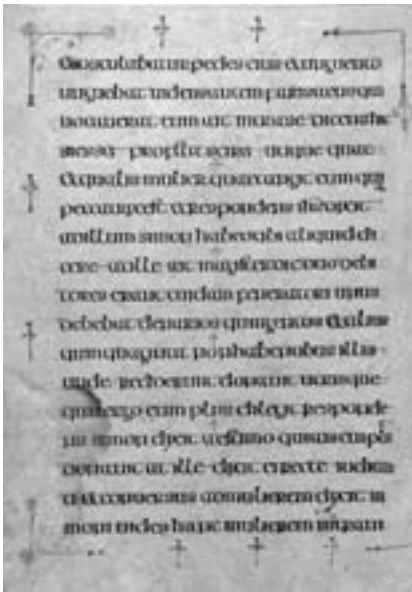
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Worksheet D

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 the monks whose special job it was to write and draw 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 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 ink flow more easily. The result is graceful, elaborate looking lettering. We believe that there may have been four scribes who wrote the Book of Kells. 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.

Obviously they did not have Tippex or rubbers in those days so they invented a clever way of correcting their mistakes - they used symbols such as small dots between letters to show that the word was written in error. One scribe copied a whole page by accident! He used red crosses around the borders and in the text to tell us he had made a mistake. There might have been three main artists who worked on the Book of Kells. We call one 'the goldsmith' because he liked to use the golden colours and because his lines and drawing were very detailed. The other 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 which you see in the exhibition.

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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 resides in Trinity College in a beautiful building known as the Old Library. It has been kept at Trinity since the 1660s. A quarter of a million books are kept here. The Book of Durrow, the Book of Mulling, the Book of Dimma and the Book of Armagh are believed to be the most precious of all the books stored on the ground floor of the Old Library (the exhibition room). Manuscripts are books written and decorated by hand rather than printed. The Long Room upstairs contains books from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The Library has the longest room in 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 began work on the building in 1712 and finished it twenty years later. Then Sir Thomas Deane and Benjamin Woodward were commissioned to alter the ceiling. In 1860 they designed and built the vaulted ceiling that we see today. Inside the Library, old and rare books are stacked in shelves made of oak. 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 repositories. In addition to seeing many books you will also notice marble busts next to each book case. These represent men famous for the contributions they made to their fields of study. You will also see an ancient harp. Some people like to attribute it to Brian Boru but that isn't true. Another object to look for is the Proclamation of 1916. It outlines the ideals some people believed were so important that they would fight for an independent Ireland to achieve them.

