The story of the Book of Kells is as interesting, and in many ways, as aloof as the swirling ornamentations and illuminations in the book itself. Its history can be traced back to an Irish Nobleman named Columba, who it is said to have relinquished his hereditary right to the Kingship of Ireland in favor of devoting himself to the spread of Christianity. Perhaps his greatest achievement is the conversion of the Scottish Pict people on the small island of Iona off the coast of Scotland where he afterwards founded a monastery in about 565 A.D. (Sullivan, 3).

Columba is also known as Colum Cille and is venerated as a Saint. At least 200 years after the monastery at Iona had been established, the monks there began work on an illuminated manuscript, which contained the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John from the New Testament. This book was known at the time as the "Gospel of Colum Cille," but today is referred to as "The Book of Kells," and is...
regarded as a relic of Saint Columba. At around 800 A.D., Iona is deemed to be too dangerous to inhabit because of attacks by the Scandinavian Vikings. The inhabitants of the monastery in Iona gradually leave with the book and establish a new Monastery honoring Saint Columba at Kells, Ireland, where the Book of Kells gets its name and where it was kept for centuries (Meyvaert, 10-11).

It is not known if the book was completed before the monastery was abandoned due to the Viking invasions or if it was finished in Kells at the new monastery, but that is where it remained until the twelfth century (Simms, xii). One notable occurrence during the time the book was kept in the monastery at Kells is when it was stolen in 1006 and was missing for almost three months. The contemporary account known as the Annals of Ulster records the incident in the following manner:

*The Great Gospel of Colum Cille was stolen at night from the western Erdomh (sacristy) of the great Church of Ceananus. This was the principal relic of the western world on account of its singular cover; and it was found after twenty nights and two months, its gold having been stolen off it, and a sod over it. (J. O’Donovan’s trans, cited in Simms, xii)*

It appears that, although there are no gold embellishments on the illuminations on the inside, that the front and back covers, which were stolen, were made from gold and very valuable (Simms, xii).

Once the monasteries were closed by the crown in the twelfth century, the book was kept at a parish in Kells until about 1660, where it was given to Trinity College in Dublin (Simms, xiii), Ireland where it remains to this day (Trinity).

There are many things that set the Book of Kells apart from art that had previously been created by other cultures. It contains many full-page illustrations without any text and also entries known as carpet pages, which resemble textile patterns with geometric and zoological diagrams on them. In addition to the images, the text and letterforms enlarged in the design with individual letters being enlarged and decorated with intricate patterns and even riddles that the initiated can ponder over and gain additional insights into the text that may not be readily available to the casual observer (Lewis, 139-140).
One example of a page that shows the uniqueness of the Book of Kells is known as the “Chi Rho Page” (see figure 1). It’s easy to look at this page and think that it’s intended simply as a decorative introduction into the Gospel of Matthew, especially in our day and age where graphic designers manipulate fonts for typographical solutions intended mainly for aesthetic purposes. But there is much symbolism and meaning behind the decorations; for example, the largest element on the page is the symbol, chi (X), from the Greek alphabet that had come to represent Christ and the cross (Lewis, 142). The large representation of this symbol on the page is a reinforcement of the belief that the Chi-cross was “the greatest symbol of power” to the Christians of that time” (143). Additionally, this Greek Chi-cross reference is reinforced on this page by the inclusion of a small Greek cross at the base of the rho symbol at the bottom of the page (144). The intertwining of man and animals in the design of this page reminds the viewer that salvation extends to all creation.

Notable in the Chi Rho page and throughout the rest of the Book of Kells is the use of fish imagery. In an Irish tract on John 21 it was taught that the fish and the bread represent the “the Body of Christ, his death on the cross, and the Resurrection.” This interpretation was so well known that no explanation would have been needed for the viewers to grasp the intended interpretation (145). And so, throughout the book, when fish accompany other images or text, the reader would immediately know that Christ was being referenced.

A casual or modern viewer of the Chi Rho page might consider the depictions of the animals as playful decorations and may not dwell on much deeper meaning than simply that of implying the breadth of
God’s creations, but if you were a contemporary of the monks that illuminated the pages of the Book of Kells, you’d be well aware of the legends and symbolism that the specific animals pictured represent. Legends taught that otters brought fish, which represent not only nourishment, but also the Body of Christ, to Paul or other monks who were alone on islands. Cats were believed to be gifts from God to bring fish to hungry monks as well, and who also rid the world of mice. If mice, then were pests that the cats rid the world of, then the mind would quickly turn to the ultimate mousetrap, the cross, which was known commonly at the time as the "devil’s mousetrap" (147).

![Figure 2 – The Madonna and Child](image)

It’s not just decorating text that sets the Book of Kells apart from other illuminated manuscripts of the day. There is also a displayed knowledge of other methods of depicting mother and child imagery from ancient times. In the image of Madonna and Child which inhabits one of the pages in the Book of Kells (see figure 2), it is apparent that the method in which the mother and child are shown draws heavily from images of early Coptic Christian depictions, and even earlier into Egyptian depictions of Isis nursing Horus. In most illustrations of Madonna and Child from the period of the creation of the Book of Kells, Christ was shown sitting upright, usually on Mary’s right knee and both showed serious expressions as the Christ child held symbolic objects while blessing those he looked upon with his fingers raised. The Book of Kells Madonna and Child instead show the Christ child laying across his mother’s lap in a reclining pose as he looks up at his mother and reaches his left hand out to her. His right hand also embraces her arm and instead of a God seated on his holy mother’s lap. Here, we have a glimpse of a tender moment between mother and child (Werner, 1-4). Either the illuminators of the Book of Kells had direct exposure to Coptic or
Egyptian works which tended towards more intimate depictions of the holy mother and child images, or there are works that they had access to which influenced them. Either way, the Book of Kells went on to influence the way the Madonna and Child were illustrated for centuries to come (3).

One other interesting element in what was included in the Book of Kells is the use of self-referential puns and hidden messages. For years, scholars studying the book believed it to have been produced at Iona because of an image on the genealogy of Christ found in the opening pages of the Gospel of Luke (see figure 3). The image shows a fish-like man pointing to some of the words on the page. Close to him is a word that is similar to Iona, which many believed was a reference to the place where the book was created—in a sense, a pun. In reality, it appears that it does reference the book’s creation, but not in the way people have often believed because the island at the time wasn’t known by the name Iona, but instead was called Hy (Meyvart, 6), or Hy-Columkille (Sullivan, 2).

There is an association with the word Iona that appears on the page, but instead of linking it to the place where the Book of Kells was created, it instead is a link to Saint Columba who founded the monastery there. The saint’s name, Columba, is the Latin version of a name that in Greek is Persistera, and in Hebrew is Iona, which appears in our Old Testament as the name of the Prophet Jonah. So the man-fish image is indeed a reference to Saint Columba himself and is making reference to his association with the Prophet Jonah of the Old Testament, an association that remained with him in his day and was passed down to his namesake, Columbanus, who lived shortly after Columba (Meyvart, 8-9). Worshippers would have been aware of the association and would have appreciated the reference to this revered evangelist in whose honor the book was made.

The Book of Kells’ current form is 339 pages, which is significantly less than when it was created. It’s possible that some of the missing pages might include more information about where the bulk of the work was completed or by whom. At the time when it was stolen, the cover was removed. Sometime since then it had been re-bound and in the process was trimmed down so that some of the details on the edges of the pages are lost. It is made from “finely glazed vellum, measuring, in their now cropped condition, 13 by 9 ½ inches” (Sullivan, 6).
It is not known how many people participated in the creation of the Book of Kells. Some speculate that there were at least four (Simms, v), but their work lives on today and can be seen as reproductions or in person at Trinity College in Dublin. It’s easy to get lost in the swirling Celtic knots in the margins, or the flowing forms of the figures who are liberated from any adherence to the ancient Greek concepts of ideal proportions or volume, but who instead lovingly flow around the words of scripture that it is their purpose to beautify. It is worth the time of anyone who is either a lover of art or scripture to spend time pondering the thought and workmanship that went into producing this masterpiece—perhaps it might be possible to catch a glimpse of the meditation and devotion of the monks who created it.

Works Cited


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ONE THOUGHT ON “THE BOOK OF KELLS, RESEARCH PAPER”

Mom
February 16, 2013 at 12:44 AM

Very interesting. I would like to see this in person.
Shakespeare Illuminated

Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?

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While the Book of Kells was nearing completion, Vikings invaded Iona. The monks deserted their monastery, escaped with the Book, and made their new home in Kells, in County Meath, Ireland, establishing themselves in a new Columban monastery between 807 and 814. While the majority of the artwork is splendid, some of the pages have been finished sparingly and in a notably inferior style by another artist or artists. It is believed the inferior work was done at Kells. The Book of Kells has been used and admired for more than a thousand years. The book has been rebound and repaired at various times.