

The Book of Kells

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Matthew & Jesus

different people. One may say, it's a sacred scripture, part of the Christian Bible and it had been prepared and created with such care and attention that you may say its very composition was an act of devotion. At another level, it's an artistic masterpiece the intricacies of which lead the mind and eyes along a path of imagination. The Book of Kells is to Dublin what the Mona Lisa is to Paris and the Sistine Chapel ceiling is to Rome. For Irish people it's a sense of pride, a link to Ireland's past reflecting its unique art. A symbol of Irishness. You haven't been to Ireland unless you've seen the Book of Kells.

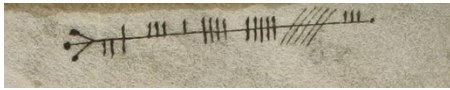
In 613, Saint Columbanus wrote to Pope Boniface IV, "We Irish, inhabitants of the world's edge, are followers of St. Peter and Paul." This remarkable statement tells us the Irish saw themselves as Christians and unique, and yet in contact with the center in Rome. This is the world in which the Book of Kells was created.

The Book of Kells is simply a copy of an earlier text – a new edition. It's what we call a gospel book. It contains the four gospels which come from the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The book is very precious to the Irish because it comes from an era in Ireland of great learning from the eighth and ninth century. The Latin text is written on vellum (dried calf skin) in very clear insular script in various colors of ink. The quality and quantity of illustrations make the manuscript exceptional. Practically every page is adorned with intricate artwork.

The name the Book of Kells comes from the Monastery of Kells in what is now modern Co. Meath. The monastery was founded in 807 by monks fleeing Viking attacks on the western Scottish island of Iona. It's thought to have been started on Iona and brought by monks to Kells and finished there. While still in Kells, the gospel book was known as the Great Gospel Book of Columcille. Columcille, also known as Saint Columba, is an early Irish saint who was born in Co. Donegal and went as a missionary to the islands off the coast of Scotland. Columcille was famous for his scribal gifts, for learning, and his creativity. By the 11th century, the gospel book was regarded as a relic of Saint Columba. In 1007, monastic chronicles record the theft of the great gospel book of Columcille, described as the most precious relic in the western world, in order to steal its jeweled cover. The manuscript was secretly hidden under sod, buried in the ground, and recovered some time later and remained in Kells during the medieval period. By the early 17th century, the manuscript, was considered miraculous and venerated by the local Catholic community. In the mid-17th century it was brought to Trinity College library, in Dublin, for safekeeping and has, remained there ever since.

Why do more than one million people every year come to look at a 1,200-year-old book? The Book of Kells sits in a darkened room encased in protective glass in the old library at Trinity College. To the Irish, it's regarded as one of the greatest cultural treasures of Ireland and described by some as the most famous manuscript in the world.

But why is it so famous and why do so many people from around the world want to see it? And, why is its artwork reproduced in such varied places as Irish national coinage and tattoos? There is no one answer to these questions but a key to understanding The Book of Kells is it always held different meanings for

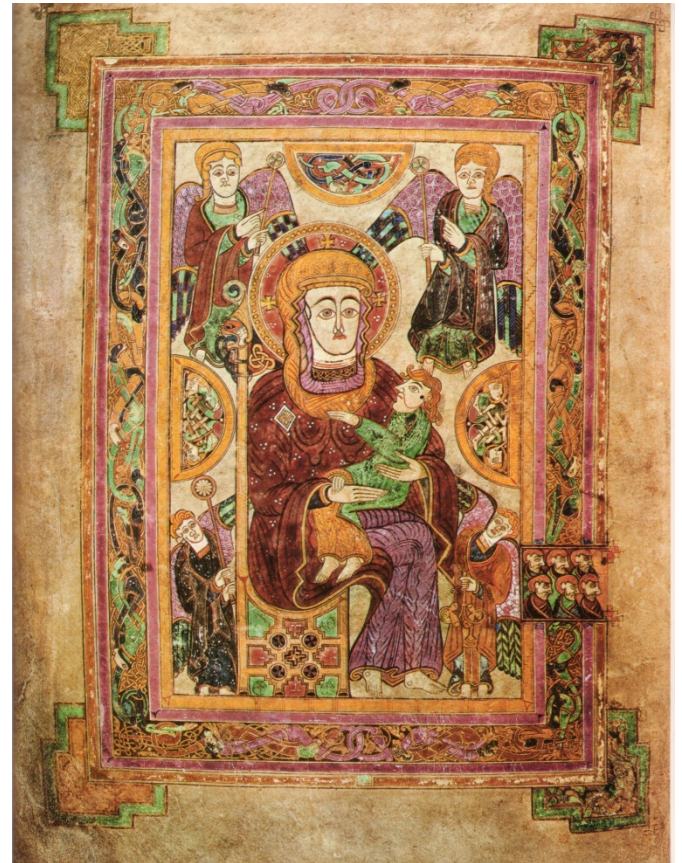


An interesting note about the Book of Kells is pages from the gospel of John are missing. This could have been due to being torn out by thieves or it was not finished, perhaps to be finished later. Either way, the 11th and 12th century addition of some land charters to the blank pages in the manuscript show the everyday spoken language of those using it is Irish. Another item of interest is one monk while composing the manuscript makes a marginal note in Ogham script that describes his ale-induced hangover (above).

The Book of Kells was created by people of faith, who believed in Jesus Christ as the living Word of God. They sought to make the manuscript as beautiful as possible in both word and image. In this way they hoped that it would invite the viewers of the text into the central mystery of the Christian faith.



Saint John holding a pen and an inkwell at his foot



Saint Mary holding Baby Jesus