

The Book of Kells

History from Ireland of the Welcomes



The Book of Kells, one of great treasures of medieval Europe, is an illuminated manuscript Gospel book in Latin, containing four Gospels of New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) together with various prefatory texts and tables. It was created by Celtic monks some time around 800 AD.

It is a masterwork of Western calligraphy, employing decoration that is not only extraordinarily rich and colorful but also, in places, deeply enigmatic. It is widely regarded as Ireland's finest national treasure. The Book is on permanent display at Trinity College Library in Dublin. The library usually displays two of current four volumes at a time, one showing a major illustration and other showing typical text pages.

The manuscript contains four Gospels in Latin based on a Vulgate text, written on vellum (prepared calfskin), in a bold and expert version of script known as "insular majuscule", referring to style of art produced in post-Roman history of Britain. The illustrations and ornamentation of Book of Kells surpass that of other Insular Gospel books in extravagance and complexity. The decoration combines traditional Christian iconography with ornate swirling motifs typical of Insular art. Figures of humans, animals and mythical beasts, together with Celtic knots and interlacing patterns in vibrant colors, enliven manuscript's pages.

Many of these minor decorative elements are imbued with Christian symbolism and so further emphasise themes of major illustrations. While book takes its name from Abbey of Kells in County Meath, its place of origin is generally attributed to scriptorium of the monastery founded around 561 by St Colum Cille on Iona, an island off west coast of Scotland. Colum, or Dove of Church, was known to Latin-speaking world as Columba, and was a direct descendant of Niall of Nine Hostages, legendary grand chieftain of Donegal. Because of his influence, priceless work is also referred to as Book of Columba.

In 806, following a Viking raid on Iona which left 68 of community dead, Columban monks took refuge in a new monastery at Kells, County Meath. It must have been close to year 800 that Book of Kells was written, although there is no way of knowing if book was produced wholly at Iona or at Kells, or partially at each location.

It was never finished, for reasons unknown, and some folios are missing. At some stage, fearing further Viking raids, monks buried it in ground. It was also stolen for a period, with its bejeweled front and back cover torn off when it was recovered. It was deposited for safe keeping in Trinity College around 1653. It has been on display in Old Library at Trinity from mid 19th century. Little did monks who labored on this magnificent masterpiece consider that, twelve centuries on, their work would be one of Ireland's top tourist attractions. It is indeed a wonderful gift from our past.



Folio 27v, the Four Evangelists (Clockwise from top left): a man (Matthew), a lion (Mark), an eagle (John) and an ox (Luke)

factus tuus filius meus dilectus mihi
bene complacuit mihi.

Quipse ihserat incipiens quasi a
horum tringinta utputabatur filius

ioseph



puteu heu

puteu macha

puteu leui

puteu melchi

puteu ianthe

puteu ioseph

puteu machathie

puteu amos

puteu pauur

puteu esu

puteu iasge

puteu enaath





Folio 2r, Eusebian Canons



Folio 291v, John the Evangelist