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The Lindisfarne Gospels

The Lindisfarne Gospels is one of the best-preserved and most famous medieval illuminated manuscripts. It is known for its beautiful illustrations and intricate decorating that places it amongst the most praised and studied manuscript masterpieces of all time. Beyond this, though, it is famous for yet more reasons. First, the Gospel was written originally in Latin, but around a century later an Old English gloss was added, and this translation is the oldest known version of the gospels in English.¹ Also, the level and amount of documentation for the Gospels is almost staggering.

To understand the Lindisfarne Gospels we must understand the context surrounding its creation. At the time of the Gospels' production Christianity had been in Britain for less than a century. Saint Augustine was the first to bring the religion to the island, but he was soon followed by others. In 601 Pope Gregory the Great sent a group to continue the work of converting the people.

¹ Janet Backhouse, 17.

Northumbria, where Lindisfarne is located, went back and forth in the beginning between Christianity and paganism, but once Irish monks from Iona founded a monastery on the Island of Lindisfarne, which is today called Holy Island, the new faith really took hold. The monks travelled through the area preaching and making converts and even establishing other monastic communities.²

The story of the Lindisfarne Gospels, though, really begins with the life of one man, St. Cuthbert. There are many legends surrounding the life of the saint beginning even with his childhood. Supposedly, his destiny as bishop was foretold to him when he was eight years old. He was a boy very fond of sports and games and other things normal for children, but one day, as he was playing, a little child about three years old began weeping and rebuking him for such idleness when he had been chosen by God for much greater things. "It does not become you to be playing among children, when the Lord has appointed you to be a teacher of virtue even to those who are older than yourself." After hearing this we are told that Cuthbert immediately stopped playing the game and began his journey to sainthood.³

The legends from his later life were often more incredible. He claimed to have been cured of lameness and a tumor in his knee by an angel. He was said to

² Janet Backhouse, 7-8.

³ Bede

have calmed a storm through prayer, and through this saved five ships and all their crew. During a journey, Cuthbert told, God once provided in the thatch of an abandoned shepherd's hut a hot meal and fresh bread for him and his horse. He was brought food by an eagle. He exorcised the wife of a prefect. Cuthbert once put out a fire started by the Devil, and put out a house fire only by the means of prayer. And he once was said to have spent an entire night standing in the sea praising God only to be escorted back to shore in the morning by two otters. But besides these extraordinary claims, he also was known for the piety and monastic discipline he brought after he was sent to the communities at Lindisfarne, where some of the brethren had not completely adjusted to the order of their new lives.⁴

After a time, however, Cuthbert withdrew into exile on an island that was supposed to be inhabited by devils, but through his piety he expelled them and enjoyed the solitude and reflection he desired. He focused entirely during this time on study, prayer, and the betterment of his soul, often neglecting his physical health (for example, not removing his boots for a year and developing a skin condition on his ankles). After his seclusion, though, he was elected to the position of Bishop of Lindisfarne. He only accepted the position reluctantly, in

⁴ Bede.

fact, the king himself had to fall to his knees and beg before St. Cuthbert would agree.⁵

While he was bishop, Cuthbert became well known and very respected as a man of great faith, and after his death people would travel to his place of burial because of some miracles attributed to relics connected with his body. Because he was considered a saint, plans were made by the monks to allow his body to decay and then they would exhume his bones to be placed in a shrine. However, after eleven years had passed, the monks opened the coffin and found the corpse completely undecayed.⁶ They placed the body in a box so that the shrine could become an object of pilgrimage, and the cult of St. Cuthbert was formed.

It was because of this cult that the Gospels was created, since he was the only person besides God to whom the book is dedicated. The book remained at Holy Island until 793 when the monastery was sacked by Vikings. The monks went searching for a safer place and tried to go as far as Ireland. However, while they were crossing a storm came up and “three great waves swept over the ship and were turned to blood, and a copy of the Four Gospels, richly bound in gold and jewels, was swept overboard and lost.”⁷ They immediately returned to shore, taking the event as a sign of the Saint being displeased, and miraculously

⁵ Bede.

⁶ Bede.

⁷ Janet Backhouse, 11.

the manuscript was found the next morning in perfect condition washed up on the beach. The book was kept at Chester-le-Street until 995 (where the English gloss was made) and then moved to Durham where it stayed until after the medieval era, with the exception of a few very brief periods in other locations⁸, although very little is known for sure. There is hardly any mention of the book on library lists or otherwise, maybe because it was considered more of a religious relic than simply a historic manuscript.⁹

During the reign of King Henry VIII all of the relics of St. Cuthbert were taken to London where they were kept in the Tower Jewel House. In the early 17th century Sir Robert Cotton acquired the manuscript and it remained in his estate until his entire collection was donated to the British Museum in 1703, where it was given the pressmark “Nero D. iv” (by which it is still referred) because in Cotton’s collection it was “the fourth manuscript on the fourth shelf under [the bust of] Nero.”¹⁰

There were four men who contributed to the manuscript’s creation, according to the colophon that introduces the book. It says,

“Eadfrith, Bishop of the Lindisfarne Church, originally wrote this book, for God and for Saint Cuthbert and – jointly – for all the saints whose relics are in the Island. And Ethelwald, Bishop of the Lindisfarne islanders, impressed it on the outside and covered it –

⁸ Janet Backhouse, 9-11.

⁹ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, 100.

¹⁰ Janet Backhouse, 87-88.

as he well knew how to do. And Billfrith, the anchorite, forged the ornaments which are on it on the outside and adorned it with gold and with gems and also with gilded-over silver – pure metal. And Aldred, unworthy and most miserable priest, glossed it in English between the lines with the help of God and Saint Cuthbert.”¹¹

Not much is known about these men besides what is said about them in the colophon, but from what has been unearthed about their biographies scholars have been able to date the manuscript to about 698, when all of the first three contributors would have been able to work on the piece at the same time.

Within the last century the Lindisfarne Gospels has been studied closely enough to reveal some facts about its creation. First, the entire manuscript was completed by one scribe, barring a few corrections that were made to the text. Also, considering that some of the illustrations were adjusted before the writing was completed, the same scribe was probably also the artist. It also seems that the manuscript was made in one long, probably two year, attempt without being broken up.¹²

As to the components of the work itself, there is much that can be said. The script that is used throughout is called insular majuscule, which was first developed in Ireland. But the real beauty of the Lindisfarne Gospels is in the illustrations. It has fifteen completely illuminated pages and many small

¹¹ Janet Backhouse, 7.

¹² Janet Backhouse, 14.

decorated initials. Immediately before the beginning of each gospel there is an illustration of the author (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) and his symbol. In addition each gospel has a page with an intricate cross design, called a cross carpet page, and a page with an elaborate initial.¹³ The amount of planning that went in to each of these is incredible, and the designs are mainly based on a tiny, slightly rectangular grid pattern.¹⁴ The drawings truly are mesmerizing, and the different interlocking motifs are both chaotic and orderly at the same time.

“The aesthetic appeal of the painting depends in part on the fact that it is somehow grasped as a whole fabric, despite the push and pull of its seemingly contradictory elements, as a world full of vibrating energy, but restrained within a logical organization that is felt rather than seen.”¹⁵

Because of this it is not difficult to see why this type of work was considered a worthy act of devotion to God.

Other, perhaps less obvious reasons for the illustrations include, simply, making the different sections easier to navigate. Without chapters and verses the large introductory pieces and the interspersed decorations made simple landmarks within the text. Also, Christopher De Hamel points out that these types of books were often used by missionaries who were usually preaching to uneducated audiences. The illiterate people of Britain would have had no use for

¹³ Janet Backhouse, 33.

¹⁴ Jacques Guilmain.

¹⁵ Jacques Guilmain, 543.

a simple manuscript, but an illuminated and illustrated Gospel could really bewitch them. “Bede describes the effect of pictures in the church at Wearmouth ‘to the intent that all ... even if ignorant of letters, might be able to contemplate ... the ever-gracious countenance of Christ and his saints.’”¹⁶ They served much the same purpose as picture books do for children today – the art creates the picture that, for them, the words are unable to create.

On a much more basic level, the Gospels is made of vellum. When a skin was used it was folded into either two or four sections and then trimmed. Even in this the attention to detail is unparalleled. During the tanning process what were once the inside and the outside of the animal were different colors in the finished product; the folding technique, then, meant that the sides that were facing each other were always the same.¹⁷

The Lindisfarne Gospels is such a wonder piece of Medieval religious art. It contradicts the ideas of the uninformed, how I used to be, who believe that the Middle Ages were purely a time of cultural decay and a lack of order. Works like this manuscript show that order, method, and learning were extremely valuable to at least some who were willing to dedicate their lives to creating these fascinating and intricate manuscripts. The amount of effort also speaks to

¹⁶ Christopher De Hamel, 40.

¹⁷ Christopher De Hamel, 89.

the cultural importance placed on religion and the ground Christianity had gained in Britain in so short a time. Also, the fact that this is the first available copy of the gospel in any form of the English language makes the manuscript extremely important to scholarship, and I wish time allowed for further investigation of this topic. Even so, the Lindisfarne Gospels are captivating and priceless and proof of the skill of the Middle Ages.

Works Cited

Bede. "The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne." Internet

History Sourcebooks. 721. Accessed April 21, 2015.

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-cuthbert.asp>.

In "The Life and Miracles of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne" Bede, one of the most famous authors of medieval England, tells about the life of St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne. It starts with his childhood, where the supernatural elements of the saint's life begin, and ends with his death. The account focuses mainly on the miracles and signs from God that were reportedly given to Cuthbert, and it was written to honor the man in light of the cult that was growing around his relics and memory.

Guilmain, Jacques. "The Composition of the First Cross Page of the Lindisfarne

Gospels: 'Square Schematism' and the Hiberno-Saxon Aesthetic" *The Art*

Bulletin 67, no. 4 (1985): 535-47.

This essay addresses one of the more complex topics connected with the Lindisfarne Gospels. Another man seems to have suggested a "square schematism" that dominates and explains the uniformity within the illustrations. However, Guilmain does not agree with this opinion and uses this essay to point out elements that contradict the schematism theory. It is all quite

complicated and rather difficult to follow without an exceptional familiarity with the document, but the descriptions and explanations of the art are wonderfully detailed.

Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S. "The Lindisfarne Gospels in the Middle Ages and Later."

The British Museum Quarterly 29, no. 3/4, 98-100.

Rupert Bruce-Mitford was an archeologist who worked at the British Museum from 1938-1977 and was also president of the Society of Antiquaries of London. His short essay, "The Lindisfarne Gospels in the Middle Ages and Later", gives an explanation for the location of the manuscript during the years when no real record of it is available. He suggests that perhaps it was thought of as more of a church relic connected with St. Cuthbert than strictly a manuscript and that is why it is not found in library records.

Hamel, Christopher. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon Press, 1994.

Dr. Christopher De Hamel is a professor of Ancient and Medieval History at Cambridge University. His book, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, as the name suggests, talks about many manuscripts and draws connections connections between some while giving the history of the genre as a whole. The section on

the Lindisfarne Gospels is rather small, understandably considering how many artifacts there are to be considered, and the description tends more toward the physical characteristics than the history or the people involved.

Backhouse, Janet. *The Lindisfarne Gospels*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Janet Backhouse works at the British Library in the Department of Manuscripts as an Assistant Keeper. Her book is an almost exhaustive reference on the Lindisfarne Gospels. It talks about the people, the text, the script, the decorations, and the history both early and later. It also provides photos of all of the large full-page illustrations and some examples of the smaller ones. The amount of information in this book about one single artifact is truly staggering.







