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Landisfarne Gospels

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Medieval Europe

Dr. Hicks

Lindisfarne Gospels

The Lindisfarne Gospels are an illuminated manuscript, written between 680 and 720 by a monk working on the island of Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, which is off the northern coast of England.¹ An illuminated manuscript is a codex, or book, that is written by hand and is richly decorated with intricate designs and pictures and was the typical way that documents were copied. Until the invention of the printing press, manuscripts were the only way that books and records were documented and distributed. The complex and beautiful designs were often complimented by a jeweled or expensive cover to the book, such as gold lined or silver bound books. These were achievements that the scribes were extremely proud of when they finished and took many years to finish, varying depending on the length of the book.

The Holy Island's monastery was most likely founded in the year 635 by the Irish missionary Aidan, who would go on to help Christianize the rest of Northumbria. It would be this plot of land that would lend the famous manuscript its name. This manuscript is one of the oldest and most well preserved documents from this turbulent time in England's history, marked by wars, raids, and death. It is not only a book filled with words, it has intricate lettering, carpet pages that are artwork on their own, and also a translation from Latin to Anglo-Saxon English. Under normal circumstances, an entire team of monks would normally be utilized to create a manuscript of such size and detail, but from the consistency of the handwriting and artwork

¹ See Appendix A for copy of Lindisfarne Gospel

displayed throughout the pages, it is evident to professionals that the Lindisfarne Gospels are the work of a single person.² Unlike most writings of this nature from this period, the who, what, when and where of the making of this document is quite clear since it was written by a single man. These questions were explicitly written down during the 10th century by a man named Aldred, who was also the same man who would give this codex its Anglo-Saxon English translation. This document shows the time and dedication that one man, most historians believe a bishop named Eadfrith, put into making a great work of art during the turn of the 8th century.

This great illuminated manuscript was made to honor St. Cuthbert, a man who was Northern England's most popular saint of the day. The text would have been for ceremonial use in the monastery, scripture reading for the monks themselves, and would have been viewed regularly by the common people due to the pilgrimages to the tomb of St. Cuthbert, who was buried on Lindisfarne. The manuscript resided within the monastery on Lindisfarne until Viking raids forced the monks to move to Durham in the late 8th century, where a man named Aldred would write an Anglo-Saxon English translation to its pages.³ The Viking raids removed the document of its jeweled cover, and caused it to need rebinding, which would have to wait for a permanent fix until the 19th century.

From the start of the Viking raids and eventual invasion, the Lindisfarne Gospels were bounced around from monastery to monastery after it had been deprived of its valuable gems. The story goes that the island community of monks had fled to England after the raid and tried to board a ship bound for Ireland. But when the ship was casting off from the docks, a storm that had been brewing sent down torrents of rain and washed the book overboard and sent the ship

² Backhouse, Janet. *The Lindisfarne Gospels*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981.

³ Brown, Michelle. *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

back to the harbor. The monks were distraught that one of their most valued possessions had been lost to the sea, but at low tide the monks found the book in the sand and rejoiced over finding it.⁴ The codex eventually found its way to the Durham Cathedral during the rule of Henry VIII after he had essentially closed all of the monasteries across England. To complete its journey, after the manuscript had been moved from its home on Lindisfarne, it eventually landed in the hands of Sir Robert Cotton, who, upon his death, had all of his extensive library sent to the British Museum's founding collection. It remains there to this day.

This turbulent time of England's history was marked by wars of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and the Viking raids that plagued Northumbria and Wessex. During the time before the raids and invasion forces landed their ships, the diversity of the Anglo-Saxon people led them to fight amongst themselves. Each kingdom sought to rule over the others and prove itself as the most powerful of the Germanic descendants that the Anglo-Saxons came from. England was under the influence of seven major kingdoms during this time: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex, and Wessex. All these kings waged war against each other and most likely would have continued to do so until they all were united against a common foe, the Vikings.⁵

The Vikings started their raids on England towards the end of the 8th century and believed that the monasteries and churches were full of caches of money and so they targeted them the most frequently.⁶ This is not too much of a stretch of the imagination seeing as how the Lindisfarne gospels were decorated with ornate jewelry. And since the monks did not have any weapons to defend themselves, the Vikings had very little trouble wreaking havoc upon the

⁴ Hamel, Christopher. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. 2nd ed. London: Phaidon Press, 1994.

⁵ Stenton, F. M. *Anglo-Saxon England*. 3d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

⁶ Brown, Michelle. *The Lindisfarne Gospels and the Early Medieval World*. London: British Library, 2011.

monasteries that they descended upon. But surprisingly, the raid on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne was the end of a seemingly regular raiding schedule by the Vikings and for the forty years after the raid, the looting of monasteries and towns became less frequent. Yet the pinnacle of these violent raids was the Iona Abbey Massacre that saw all the monks in service there meet an untimely demise. The monks were butchered and their monastery uprooted from foundation to steeple in the search of the treasure that the Vikings believed to be there. Although this raid was one of just a few in the early 800's, the Viking raids would become a staple of the 9th century and would eventually lead to the Danelaw that would be practiced in England for many generations.⁷

Despite the wealth that was generated from looting monastery like the ones of Lindisfarne and the rest of England, the Danes wanted more. So they embarked on an invasion that would see them conquer all but one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms that England had produced. Only the kingdom of Wessex had survived the Viking invasion and had brought the invaders to a halt. This was no easy task, and after a decade of fighting the Anglo-Saxons were finally ready to launch an attack of their own against the invaders. In the year 878, Alfred the Great of Wessex met the Viking leader Guthrum on the battlefield and defeated him resulting in Guthrum to retreat to a more fortified position. After losing a significant amount of his forces, Guthrum reluctantly surrendered and signed the Treaty of Wedmore that effectively established King Alfred the Great as the ruler of England and implemented the Danelaw.⁸

After researching and discovering the story behind the Lindisfarne Gospels, I found out about the rise of Christianity in England during this time, the lifestyles of the monks that produced the illuminated manuscripts, how in depth the Vikings affected those during this time, and a little more about the way that the manuscripts were decorated.

⁷ Kendrick, T. D. A History of the Vikings. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1930.

⁸ Smyth, Alfred P. King Alfred the Great. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

In regards to the rise of Christianity, I learned that the major force behind the initial conversion of the locals was due to the missionaries not from Rome, but those from the Irish churches. It wasn't until a few years later that the Roman church had come up and gained a large foothold in England and began extensive conversion. During its early years, the church in England had Irish missionaries to thank for its conversions founding of monasteries. But the Catholic faith was brought in by a man named Augustine who would eventually convert King Æthelberht, an Anglo-Saxon king, in 597, and lead a host of 10,000 to baptism on Christmas day of the same year. The Catholic Church also wanted its presence to be felt across the whole of the British Isles as well as the rest of the continent and sent many more missionaries to convert the pagans.⁹ This influx of missionaries would eventually lead to the strong connection between the Carolingian Kings of France, who had first been converted by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, and the papacy in Rome, a tradition that continued for almost 1000 years.

During my research I also learned about the daily life of a typical monk. I found it interesting that it was not uncommon for a monk to come into the monastery early in life in hopes of establishing a lifelong relationship with Christ. I also was not surprised to learn of the men who had been "forced" to take on the life of a monk, and how common it was for a man to end up in such a place if he found himself to be a potential heir to a throne. But on more along the lines of a daily routine, I discovered that monks spent most of their time busy, either in a garden, workshop, or writing out manuscripts like the Lindisfarne Gospels to keep themselves busy. Monks did not want to be idle and strove to leave all the unnecessary things of the secular world behind them. They spent a great deal of time in prayer, fasting, and tending to the everyday needs of those who came to them for help. This particular role was mostly filled by

⁹ Cantor, Norman F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

pilgrims who sought healing at the relics located in various monasteries or cathedrals all across Europe.¹⁰

But not everyone who stayed in a monastery became a monk, because by rule of being a postulate, the man could leave at any time that he desired until he decided to give up his worldly possessions and thoughts. A man would spend a time within the monastery and more or less observe the monks who were already living there so that he could determine if such a life was for him. Many eventually did end up serving in a monastery simply because they became accustomed to that way of life. I learned that when a man decided to stay in the monastery, he became a novice in the order and was given his daily routine that was supposed to help him become more accustomed to the life of a monk. A part of many monks' daily lives was copying of the books of the Bible into great illuminated manuscripts. It typically took a team of the men to finish such a book and would take a few months at the least to make a decent work. The men had to be precise in their language, and could not afford to make mistakes in their transcriptions, which is another reason that the Lindisfarne Gospels are so impressive.

The research surrounding the Lindisfarne gospels also led to some interesting insight on the Viking raids and invasion that would plague the British Isles during the 8th century. Although most people know that the Vikings raped and pillaged, not many are familiar with their settlement of the land that would come to be known as the Danelaw. Often after a raid would pillage an area of its goods, another boat would come along with some warriors and families so that the men and women could make a new home. Often these men and women were not sent away from their homeland, but simply came of their own accord and wanted to settle in a different area. While most of the settlers were men, it was not unheard of for a woman to make

¹⁰ Broderick, Robert C. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1976.

the voyage and establish herself on a new continent the same as her male counterpart. But despite gender, the settlers would eventually establish a homestead and intermarry with the local Anglo-Saxons and assimilate themselves in a new society.¹¹

Another very interesting thing I learned during my research was about the pictures used in illuminated manuscripts. Each design and picture was hand-written and was usually done in more than one sitting. The stylings of the artists were typically very stylized and basic in their approach to the pages in their attempt to brighten up the documents. Illuminated manuscripts had several overarching themes when it comes to the art that is seen inside them. They tended to either be complex designs that took up an entire page, large calligraphy that introduced a new book, or depicted the famous men and women of the faith, usually either the author of the book or the main character in the story. For example, in the Lindisfarne Gospels, there is a cover page that comes right before the book of Matthew that shows St. Matthew hard at work on his text. During this time period there were very few people who were skilled in an artistic fashion. Most of the artists of the day were monks who were trying to liven up the dullness that came from copying and recopying endless pages of the Bible. While many monks were not exceptionally good at depicting a realistic representation of a man, they did tend to have the same style when doing so.

The basic style that was shown for the depiction of holy people on cover pages is simple, they were given a halo. This represented spiritual knowledge that filled their minds and the bigger the halo, the more spiritual knowledge that a person had acquired. Universally this trait in art was seen as a way for artist to signify that a person had received a vast amount of spiritual knowledge. Often, the apostles were shown to have large halos, but the greatest always belonged

¹¹ Yorke, Barbara. *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*. London: Routledge, 1997.

to Christ himself. The artists also tended to stylize the depictions of the apostles or Christ so that the viewer could see all of the subject, even if that meant that the person would be in an unnatural position. What the artists lacked in realism they made up for in intricacy of design. The monks often adopted animalistic forms that were woven with different designs to show the level of detail that went into the picture itself.

During this time of research, I grew to appreciate the time and effort that went into the everyday life of those who lived in Anglo-Saxon England. The differences abound. From the lack of the luxuries that I enjoy every day, such as toilets and food anytime I desire, to the constant threat of a surprise raid from a ruthless people who came only to rape and rake in the gold. The monks of that time were even more impressive, relying solely on their faith in God to preserve them despite the examples that had been made out of the monasteries all along the coast. I found a new respect for the Lindisfarne Gospels and the pictures that decorate its pages once I took the time to sit down and learn everything I could about them.

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Appendix

A.

