This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

THE BOOK OF KELLS:
THE CELTIC MONKS AND THEIR ART

presented by

Linda F. Skidmore

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

MA degree in History of Art

Margaret J. Smith

Major professor

Date May 10, 1982

THE BOOK OF KELLS:

THE CELTIC MONKS AND THEIR ART

By

Linda Fay Skidmore

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Art

1982

ABSTRACT

THE BOOK OF KELLS:
THE CELTIC MONKS AND THEIR ART

By

Linda Fay Skidmore

The study of the Book of Kells in the past has focused on the art in terms of its style, but less in terms of iconography. Scholars have not as yet attempted to understand the way in which the monks of the Celtic world interpreted the Bible, its meanings, or its significance. Nor have they attempted to look for links with the thoughts and writings of those areas whose art influenced the Book of Kells.

This study has discussed life under the Rule of St. Columba, and a discussion of several illuminations in Kells. It has attempted to show that perhaps Near Eastern manuscripts and the meanings and thoughts behind them may have influenced the Columban monks in their interpretation of the Bible. It has also set forth the theory that the art in the Book of Kells is related to the life-style of the Columban monks.

DEDICATED TO MY FAMILY

WITH LOVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr. Molly Smith for her support and insight. Special thanks also to Dr. Webster Smith and Dr. Richard Sullivan, members of my thesis committee.

Photographs within this paper were taken from Irish Art and Architecture by Peter Harbison, The Book Of Kells by Peter Brown, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting by Carl Nordenfalk, The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript by David Robb, Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, and Treasures of Early Irish Art exhibition catalogue by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....v

INTRODUCTION.....1

CHAPTER I....HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION.....4

CHAPTER II...LIFE UNDER THE RULE OF ST. COLUMBA.....23

CHAPTER III..DISCUSSION OF THE STYLE OF THE ILLUMINATIONS..38

CHAPTER IV...FOREIGN INFLUENCES.....68

CHAPTER V....THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK OF KELLS.....74

CONCLUSION.....89

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....90

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		page
1.	Book of Kells, Dublin, Trinity College Library MS A. 1. 6 (58), Canon Table I, folio 2R. (from The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript by David Robb, plate 51)	-10
2.	Book of Kells, The Symbols of the Four Evangelists, folio 27V. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 231)	-12
3.	Book of Kells, Portrait of St. Matthew, folio 28V. (from The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript by David Robb, plate 52)	-13
4.	Book of Kells, The Chi-Rho Page, folio 34R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38d)	-15
5.	Book of Kells, The Genealogy of Christ, folio 200R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 35)	-17
6.	St. Gall Gospels, St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. 51, Last Judgment, p. 267. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 206)	-18
7.	The Emly Shrine, late eighth century. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 31)	-26
8.	left--Flann's Cross at Clonmacnoise, c. mid. 9th century right--Muirdach's Cross at Monasterboice, c. mid. 9th century (from Irish Art and Architecture, Peter Harbison, plates 47 and 48)	-28
9.	Book of Kells, Temptation of Christ on the Temple, folio 202V. (from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting by Carl Nordenfalk, plate 46)	-40

Figure page

10. Church on St. MacDara's Island, County Galway, possibly as late as the 12th century. (from Irish Art and Architecture by Peter Harbison, plate 58) -43

11. Book of Kells, Virgin and Child, folio 7V. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38a) -47

12 Book of Kells, The Arrest of Christ, folio 114R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38e) -50

13. Book of Kells, Portrait of St. John, folio 291V. (from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting by Carl Nordenfalk, plate 45) -54

14. Book of Kells, Portrait of Christ, folio 32V. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38b) -56

15. Book of Kells, The Carpet Page, folio 33R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38c) -59

16. Book of Kells, Detail: The Carpet Page, folio 33R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 16) -61

17. Book of Kells, Initial Page of St. Mark's Gospel, folio 130R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 29) -63

18. Codex Amiatinus, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1, Tabernacle in the Temple at Jerusalem, folios 2V and 3R. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 23) -84

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Kells was referred to in the Annals of Ulster in 1006 as "the chief relic of the Western World". Much time has passed since then and many masterpieces have been created, but the Book of Kells remains the treasure of Celtic art. Scholars, for the most part, have discussed the art of Kells in terms of its style and description, but less in terms of iconography or symbolism. Others have attempted to trace some elements foreign to Ireland back to their origins in distant lands. There are indeed foreign influences to be found in Kells, but what of foreign thought? Scholars have not as yet attempted to understand the way in which the monks of the Celtic world interpreted the Bible, its meanings, or its significance. Nor have they attempted to look for links with the thoughts and writings of those areas whose art influenced the Book of Kells.

In general, the whole problem of iconography has been neglected. Further study concerning the origins of the thoughts and iconography in Kells from areas other than Ireland, the Near East especially, needs to be undertaken, together with the life-style of the Columban monks and its bearing on their art.

Some excellent studies have been done on the Book of Kells. The facsimile edition in three volumes,

by E. Henry Alton, Peter Meyer, and G. O. Simms, was published in 1951, and thus made the entire manuscript more readily available to scholars.[1] Francoise Henry, a noted scholar of Irish art, published The Book of Kells in 1974 with an extensive selection of color plates and a scholarly discussion of the art and the script. She has also published books dealing with the art of Ireland of different periods.[2] Sir Edward Sullivan was one of the first to deal solely with the art of Kells early in this century.[3] Martin Werner, A. M. Friend, Carl Nordenfalk, Harold Picton, T. J. Brown, Patrick McGurk, and Kathleen Hughes have all done studies dealing with the influences upon the Book of Kells.[4]

But for all this literature, work on the Book of Kells has only scratched the surface. The following will attempt to carry further the study on the Book of Kells.

NOTES

[1]E. Henry Alton, Peter Meyer, and G. O. Simms, Evangeliorum Quattor Cenannensis, facsimile edition of the Book of Kells, 3 vols. (Bern: Urs-Graf, 1951).

[2]Francoise Henry, Irish Art During the Viking Invasions (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967); Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965); The Book of Kells (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).

[3]Sir Edward Sullivan, The Book of Kells (London: "The Studio Limited", 1927).

[4]Martin Werner, "The Madonna and Child Miniature in the Book of Kells", Art Bulletin (1972); A. M. Friend, "The Canon Tables of the Book of Kells", in Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter, Wilhelm R. W. Koehler, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939); Carl Nordenfalk, "An Illustrated Diatessaron", Art Bulletin (no. 2, 1968); Harold Picton, "Kells portraits and eastern ornament", Burlington Magazine (vol. 73, 1938); T. J. Brown, "Northumbria and the Book of Kells", Anglo-Saxon England I, Peter Clemoes, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Patrick McGurk, "Two Notes on the Book of Kells and Its Relation to Other Insular Gospel Books", Scriptorium (vol. 9, 1955); Kathleen Hughes, Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972).

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

One of the greatest treasures of Celtic art, the Book of Kells, is now to be found in the Trinity College Library in Dublin. It traveled a rough road before arriving there, but since then has brought untold joy to viewers and has brought many questions to scholars. The Book of Kells, the product of a time and place and the creation of a certain kind of man, cannot be discussed and an attempt cannot be made to further understand it, without first understanding its historical background. The historical background for this Celtic masterpiece includes the coming of Christianity to Ireland, the establishment of the Columban monasteries, the life style within those monasteries, and the history and make-up of the Book of Kells itself.

When St. Patrick headed for Ireland around 432, he met with no opposition and founded the metropolitan church at Armagh in 444. The type of church organization set up by St. Patrick was the same as that found in Catholic Britain and Gaul, but within fifty years the organizational structure at Armagh no longer existed and had changed into a monastery. A monastic community also existed in Kildare, founded by St. Brigid, for both monks and nuns.[2] By the end of the sixth century in Ireland the ecclesiastical organization

consisting of archbishops, bishops and priests had given way to monasteries, each with independent control and under the leadership of an abbot. Bishops were still needed to perform ceremonies but were only a part of the total monastic community.

Monasticism in Ireland had marked similarities with monasticism in Egypt and Syria, where desert monks preferred private communion over the group worship found in the towns. There in the desert there were no social obligations; each individual was allowed to search on his own for his own personal needs.[3] This type of monasticism, chosen in Ireland over the organized Church imported from the Roman provinces in Britain, was better suited to the Irish social system, which concentrated on kinship and personal rule. Therefore the idea of a monastic community was more readily accepted in Ireland.[4]

By the sixth century in Ireland the ascetic monks were beginning to seek self-imposed exile on island sanctuaries, perhaps satisfying the need for seclusion, which the desert monks of the east also sought. Asceticism and penance played a large part in the Celtic Church and no doubt these remote dwellings, which were cut off from the mainstream of everyday life, were closely connected with that part of the Celtic Church's development.[5]

Missionary work was also a large part of the Celtic Church. In 563 St. Columba left Ireland to preach the Word of God to the Picts of Scotland, and as a result of his mission the Pictish king granted St. Columba the island of

Iona off the west coast of Scotland. This monastery, founded in 563, was to become the most important of all the monasteries founded by St. Columba (among them Durrow and Kells). Iona became the mother house of the Columban monasteries and from there the English of Northumbria were converted by c. 637.[6]

St. Columba, also known as Columcille, died in 597. Most of what we know about him was carried down through uninterupted oral tradition at Iona and written down by Adamnan almost a century after his death.[7] Education and scholarship were both important in the Irish monasteries, although little has survived from the sixth and seventh centuries.[8] The importance of education and scholarship is best seen in the monasteries founded on the continent by Irish monks. St. Columbanus and other monks from the monastery at Bangor set out for the Merovingian kingdom in France in 591. There Columbanus founded the monastery at Luxeuil.

The Irish Church differed from the Catholic Church in several practices, often causing opposition which forced St. Columbanus to move on.[9] In 613 he founded the monastery at Bobbio, which became a center for scholarship, where a large library and scriptorium were set up. At one point during his travels one monk, Gallus, became sick and was forced to remain behind near Lake Constance.[10] Gallus set up a hermitage in the mountains which grew in popularity and in 720 became the abbey of St. Gall.[11] There, too, the library and scriptorium flourished and, around 800, the famous St. Gall Gospels were completed. It is from the

traditions of the monasteries on the continent founded by Irish monks that we realize the equal importance of education in the Columban monasteries of Ireland.

Education, centered in the monastery school, needed texts. The monastery itself needed Bibles, plasters, missals and documents ranging from the Rule, which the monastery followed, to deeds and letters. All of these were produced in the monastery scriptorium.

As was mentioned above, very little still exists from these monasteries. The Viking raids began in Ireland in c. 793 causing untold damage to monasteries--scriptoriums included. The pillage and destruction by the Vikings wiped out libraries after the lavish metal and gold covers had been torn off of the finest manuscripts.[12]

In 807 the mother church of the Columban monasteries was transferred to Kells in County Meath after Iona had been sacked by the Vikings three times.[13] Kells, until then, had been a relatively small and unimportant monastery. The Book of Kells was presumably begun at Iona and taken to Kells unfinished.[14] Some work was done on the book after it reached Kells, but scholars do not all agree on just how much of the work was done at Iona and how much was done at Kells. Most do agree, however, that it was begun at Iona between c. 795 and 806. Nonetheless, the colophon page was either never done because the manuscript was left unfinished, or it was lost, therefore leaving the dating unsure.

It is known, however, that the book rested in Kells in 1006 when the Annals of Ulster mention that it had been stolen.

In the twelfth century, charters concerning the property and belongings of the monastery were copied on some of the blank pages of the book, as was the custom. Later in the same century the ecclesiastical organization at Kells changed into a community parish church.[15] The Book of Kells remained there until the governor of the city sent it to Dublin in 1654.[16]

Before this time, Geralde Plunket wrote:

> I Geralde Plunket of Dublin wrot the contente of every chapter I meane where every chapter doth begyn. 1568
>
> The boke contaynes two hondreds V score and III leves at this present xxvii August 1588.

James Ussher, who was appointed Bishop of Meath in 1621, corrected the total number:

> August 24 1621 I reckoned the leaves of this booke and found them to be in number, 334. he who reckoned before me counted six score to the hundred, and. Ja: Ussher Midensis elect:

The Book of Kells finally came to rest in Dublin in 1661 when Henry Jones, also the donor of the Book of Durrow, donated both books to the Trinity College Library.[17]

The Book of Kells did suffer a few mishaps along the way to Trinity College Library. In 1006 the original cover or case was stolen, at which point we can assume that the first few folios were also torn off. And sometime after 1621 four more folios were lost. In the 19th century a well-meaning bookbinder trimmed the pages and in the process cut off part of the head that emerges from behind the frame on the Portrait

of St. John (folio 291V).

The Roman Church had widely accepted the new revisions that St. Jerome had made in his translation of the Bible, which replaced the Old Latin text. But the isolated Celtic Church was more conservative in its views and retained many words of the Old Latin in its version of the Vulgate text. This mixed text is found in the Book of Kells as well as in other manuscripts from the Irish Church such as the Book of Armagh and the Lichfield Gospels.[18]

The letters in the Book of Kells are formed in the Insular majuscule script, in which the capitals are the same size as the other letters. Dr. E. A. Lowe and Francoise Henry have both noted that the text was written by a number of scribes, three of whcih have been distinguished by Mlle. Henry.[19] Seen throughout the manuscript are decorated capitals which show the intricacy, inventiveness, and playfulness of the artist. It is not known whether the scribes themselves were responsible for these decorations or whether they are the work of a separate artist or artists. Of the 340 folios only two pages are without color, which gives the book a richness unequaled by any other Celtic manuscript.

As a result of the disappearance of the first few folios, the book now begins in the middle of one of the lists of Hebrew names, which is a part of the Glossaries. Immediately following are the Eusebian Canon Tables. (fig. 1) The ten tables were developed by Eusebius of Caeserea in the fourth century and were used to show parallel passages among the four Gospels. The numbers indicating the correspondences and usually placed throughout the text are missing on all but two

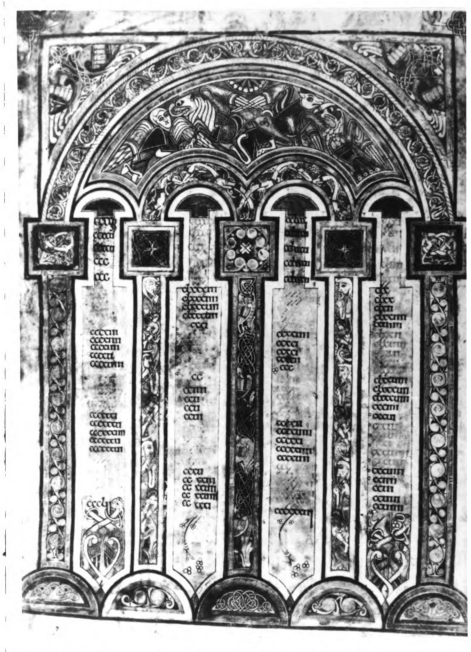

Figure 1: Book of Kells, Dublin, Trinity College Library MS A. l. 6 (58), Canon Table I, folio 2R. (from The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript by David Robb, plate 51)

of the pages in Kells. That the book was left unfinished could explain their absence. The Canon Tables, although they were not functional in Kells, were an established tradition at this time and were probably included for just that reason. Chapter numbers were added to the Bible in the thirteenth century and verse numbers were added in 1551. In Gospel books before this time the Eusebian Canon Tables were invaluable in showing the harmony that exists among the four Gospels. Immediately following the Canon Tables is a full-page illumination of the Virgin and Christ Child. This scene, along with the Temptation of Christ, is unprecedented in Insular manuscripts before this time. The Breves Causae, a list of subject headings, and the Argumenta, summaries of the contents of each Gospel, follow after the Madonna and Christ page.

The order of the Gospels in Kells is the usual one: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Throughout the book the four Evangelical symbols, the Angel, the Lion, the Ox, and the Eagle, respectively, dominate, showing, as in the Canon Tables, the unity and harmony of what is written.

The Gospel of St. Matthew begins with a page of the symbols of the four Evangelists (fig. 2) followed by the Portrait of St. Matthew (fig. 3) which is opposite a text page which reads Liber generationis. This arrangement--a symbols page, a portrait of the Evangelist whose Gospel follows, and an initial page appears to have been planned for the beginnings of all of the Gospels. But whereas the

Figure 2: Book of Kells, The Symbols of the Four Evangelists, folio 27V. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 231)

Figure 3: Book of Kells, Portrait of St. Matthew, folio 28V. (from The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript by David Robb, plate 52)

the Gospels of SS Matthew and John do have this arrangement, the Gospel of St. Luke lacks the symbols page and the portrait page, and the Gospel of St. Mark is missing the portrait page. These pages may have been lost or may never have been executed as the manuscript was left unfinished.

Other full-page illuminations are found throughout the manuscript. St. Matthew has a portrait of Christ, a carpet page, the Chi-Rho page (fig. 4), the Arrest of Christ and two more decorated text pages. One of the text pages is placed next to the Arrest of Christ. The text, Tunc dicit illis IHS, is the beginning of the Passion section which includes this event. The other text page reads Tunc crucifixerant XPI and tells of the crucifixion of Christ. There are three groups of men on this page all looking in the same direction toward a blank page which may have been intended for an illustration of the Crucifixion. The emphasis placed on these passages suggests the monks' special interest in the Passion of Christ.

None of the other Gospels contains the number of full-page illuminations that are found in St. Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel of St. Mark, for example, contains only one decorated text page in addition to the two pages introducing the Gospel. The page, which reads Erat autem hora tercia, 'and it was the third hour', concludes the Gospel with the beginning of the Crucifixion text.

St. Luke's Gospel opens with an initial page and is followed two folios later by the Genealogy of Christ found in

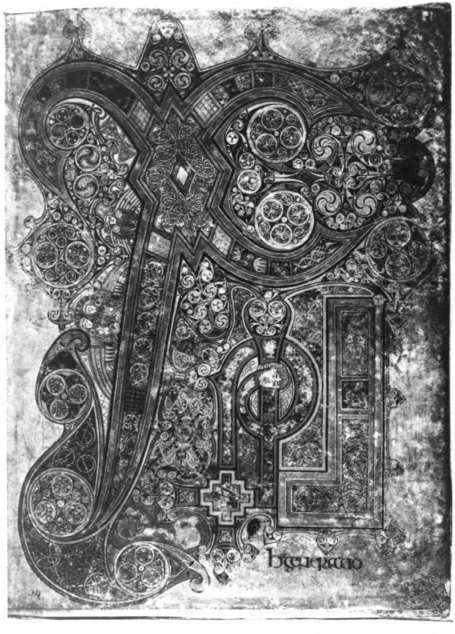

Figure 4: Book of Kells, The Chi-Rho Page, folio 34R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38d)

Luke 3:22-26. The qui fuit of the Genealogy text is repeated down the page allowing the creativity of the artist to emerge and ornament the letters with men, animals, birds and bright colors. (fig. 5) The Temptation of Christ on the Temple was chosen as a siginificant aspect of the story and was fully illustrated near the text of the scene. The text of the Resurrection begins with Una autem sabbati, 'But on the first day of the week'. This, too, was chosen as particularly significant and was therefore decorated.

As was mentioned above, the Gospel of St. John begins with the symbols page, the portrait page and the initial page. The end of the Gospel has been lost or was never finished, but it is quite possible that there was a full illustration of an important scene planned for the text, possibly ending with a scene of the Last Judgment, as in the St. Gall Gospels. (fig. 6)

The Book of Kells grew out of a long-existent artistic tradition. Two other manuscripts are often talked about in conjunction with Kells and are often called its forerunners. The Book of Durrow and the Lindisfarne Gospels are, besides the Book of Kells, the most well-known of all manuscripts produced in the British Isles.

There are several elements which are common to all three manuscripts. All three have Canon Tables, carpet pages, and Evangelist symbols. The human figure is employed in all three. Artistically the Book of Durrow is the most primitive. The interlacing is done with broad ribbons,

Figure 5: Book of Kells, The Genealogy of Christ, folio 200R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 35)

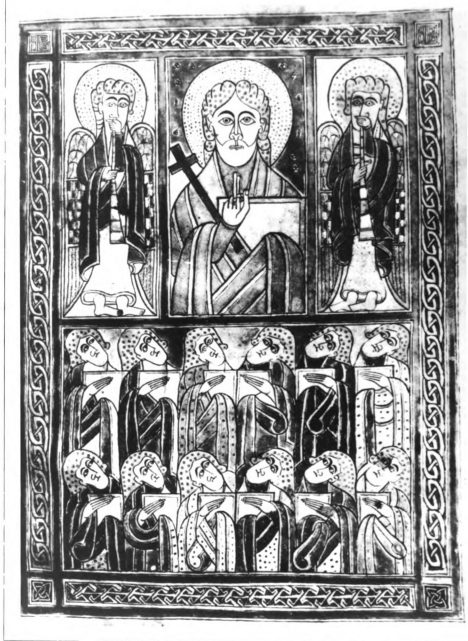

Figure 6: St. Gall Gospels, St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek Cod. 51, Last Judgment, p. 267. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 206)

the spirals are large, and the decoration is simple in comparison to Kells. The Lindisfarne Gospels, made in Northumbria, was copied from a manuscript brought to England from Italy. Therefore it contains many classical elements such as the Evangelist seated in profile. Nonetheless, the linearity and flatness reflects the tradition of Northumbria, and the Celtic world in general.

Both Durrow and Lindisfarne have several carpet pages, unlike Kells, which has only one. They are placed at the beginning of the manuscript and at the beginning of each Gospel. The Canon Tables in the Lindisfarne Gospels have arcades and pillars similar to those in Kells, whereas the Book of Durrow simply has rectangular frames. Lindisfarne and Kells both have Evangelist portraits but Durrow has a painting of the symbol before each Gospel. The Book of Kells, the last of the three manuscripts, appears to have grown out of the Celtic tradition. Elements from both Durrow and Lindisfarne are found in Kells. Kells and Lindisfarne have several elements common to both, but Kells and Durrow are closer in artistic style. The detail and complexity of design in Kells is what sets this manuscript apart from earlier manuscripts. Stylistically, the art in Durrow appears to be the root of the art in Kells. The inclusion of internal illustrations, such as the Arrest of Christ, the Virgin and Child, and the Temptation of Christ, are unique in the Book of Kells.

There are several different kinds of illumination

and decoration in the Book of Kells: the symbols of the four Evangelists, the portraits, the illustrations of particular scenes in the text, the initial pages and the decorated text pages, the arcaded Canon Tables, and the numerous decorated capitals seen on almost every text page. Along with several different scribes involved in the writing of the Book of Kells there nust have been several painters responsible for the overwhelming amount of decoration that is seen within the manuscript. The many colors and types of decoration--animals, birds, men foliage, spirals, interlacing, the Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle symbols, frames and arcades seen throughout the Book of Kells--give it an overall effect unsurpassed by any other Insular manuscript.

NOTES

[1]Peter Brown, The Book of Kells (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) p. 25.

[2]Ibid., p. 27.

[3]Kathleen Hughes, The Church in Early Irish Society (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1966) p. 12.

[4]Maire and Liam DePaor, Early Christian Ireland (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958) p. 50.

[5]Nora Chadwick, The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 95.

[6]New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-79) vol. 7, p. 605.

[7]K. Hughes, p. 61.

[8]John T. McNeill, The Celtic Churches, A History A.D. 200 to 1200 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 120.

[9]P. Brown, p. 22.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]J. T. McNeill, p. 124.

[13]New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 8, p. 145.

[14]Francis Crawford Burkitt, "Kells, Durrow and Lindisfarne", Antiquity, no. 9, (1935) pp. 33-37; David M. Robb, The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1973) p. 91; J. A. Herbert, Illuminated Manuscripts (New York: Burt Franklin, originally published in London, 1911); A. M. Friend, "The Canon Tables of the Book of Kells" in Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kinglsey Porter, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), W. R. W. Koehler, ed.; J. T. McNeill, p. 125.

[15]Francoise Henry, The Book of Kells (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974) p. 150.

[16]Aubrey Gwynn, "Some Notes on the History of the Book of Kells", Irish Historical Studies, vol. 9, no. 34 (1954) p. 159.

[17]William O'Sullivan, "The Donor of the Book of Kells", Irish Historical Studies, vol 11, no. 41 (1958) pp. 5-7.

[18]P. Brown, p. 75.

[19]E. A. Lowe, Codices Latini Antiquiores, part II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935); F. Henry, p. 154.

CHAPTER II

LIFE UNDER THE RULE OF ST. COLUMBA

In order to comprehend the art of the Celtic monks and the Book of Kells it is necessary to have some understanding of daily life, the environment and climate in which they lived, their daily routines and their practices. The monastery at Iona, belonging to the Columban monasteries, followed the Rule of St. Columba. This Rule is attributed to him but it is doubtful that he actually wrote it.[1] It was intended for use by members of secluded communities or hermits rather than social communities.[2] It is addressed to the anchorite; the opening phrase reads, 'Be alone in a separate place near a great monastery.'[3] Most of the rules follow along predictable lines--prayers, vigils, abstinence from indulgence, etc. The monastic vow which the Columban monk took was the ordinary vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience.[4]

There were three classes of monks: the seniors, the working brothers, and the juniors.[5] The seniors were older men on whom the abbot could rely; they carried out the services of the Mass and were also devoted to the reading and transcribing of the Scriptures. It was the

senior monks who were responsible for the transcribing and illumination of the Book of Kells. The working brothers were teachers and laborers who did farming and fishing. The juniors, who had not yet taken any vows, studied and did minor duties under direction.[6]

There may have been a hierarchy of monks who lived in the monasteries, but living conditions offered no privileges for those in higher levels. They all wore the same garments of undyed wool: a long tunic over an undergarment and a hooded cloak. They slept in these habits so as to be ready to go to church for the night hours. They slept on hard beds which in severe weather could be covered with a sealskin. St. Columba was said to have used a stone pillow when he slept.[7] They slept alone but worshipped and ate together. The diet was simple but plentiful and could be supplemented when visitors arrived.

The buildings in the monastery were strictly functional. Each monk had his own hut or cell with one door and sometimes a window. The buildings at the monastery at Kells consisted of a refectory with a kitchen, a guest house, a scriptorium with a library, a mill, two barns, a kiln, a smithy, and a church.[8] Ordinarily there were several small churches grouped together rather than one large one. There was usually a cemetery for the Baptised near the church.[9] These communities would be surrounded by a <u>cashel</u> or <u>vallum</u>--a wall of unmortared stone.[10]

The buildings were built of wood with wattle and daub roofs. Stone as a building material was not widely used unless wood was scarce. Because of this, very few buildings still survive from the early centuries of monastic practice in Ireland. One building still to be seen at Kells, St. Columba's House, which may be the building the Annals say was completed in 814,[11] was built to house relics brought over from Iona.[12] This structure is very similar to reliquaries dating from this time (for example, the Emly Shrine, fig. 7) and also to the temple seen in the Temptation of Christ in the Book of Kells. It is likely that wooden buildings had a similar structure or design. The monastic principle of austerity is clearly seen in these buildings. The monks did not seek to glorify themselves or God in erecting large buildings, rather they followed the belief in simplicity with regard to surroundings and comforts.[13]

The churches were simple in structure, but they were richly decorated with the accouterments of the Mass and some wall decorations. The metalworkers employed their craft, used before the advent of Christianity mainly for jewelry, to the making of chalices, reliquaries, crosses and cases or covers for books.[14] Cogitosis, writing in the 630s, describes a church at Kildare as richly decorated with tombs of gold and silver inlaid with precious stones, linen curtains, paintings, and an ornamental door.[15] Among these ornaments would also be

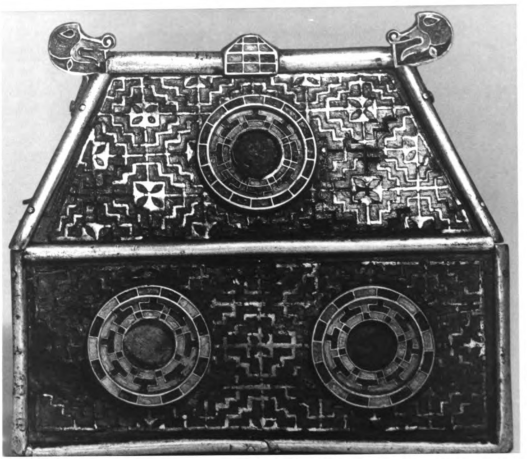

Figure 7: The Emly Shrine, late eighth century.
(from Treasures of Early Irish Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Plate 31)

found books for use during the services, such as the Book of Kells.

Another form of decoration, still seen at several monastic sites is the Irish High Cross. Very few of these crosses can be dated with any accuracy, but they were begun in the early eighth century and developed through the eighth and ninth centuries, culminating in the beautiful crosses found at Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise. The Arrest of Christ can be seen on the cross at Monasterboice and the Adoration of the Magi is found on several crosses in Ireland. They are directional (east-west) and are figurative. (fig. 8)

At the same time the high crosses were being erected, literature and poetry were rediscovered, not only in the monasteries but in the secular world as well.

Many of the stories in secular literature are tales of the heroes of the mythological cycle of the People of the Goddess Danu who, it is now generally agreed, were the gods of pagan Ireland. According to the legends, they went to the underworld when the ancestors of the present inhabitants arrived.[16] The early Irish storyteller, it would seem, was more interested in entertaining the reader than in recording historical fact. He often exaggerated in telling deeds of honor, prowess, courage, or generosity. He moved easily between reality and magic.[17] One particular story, the Cattle Raid of Cooley,[18] of which there are two versions, the second found in the

Figure 8: left--Flann's Cross at Clonmacnoise, c. mid. 9th century
right--Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, c. mid. 9th century
(from Irish Art and Architecture, Peter Harbison, plates 47 and 48)

Book of Leinster, gives the reader a view of society which is both pagan and heroic. The warriors, armed with spears, javelins, swords and shields, strove for honor or death with honor. Early Irish historians wrote in the 'Book of the Taking of Ireland'[19] of many invasions which took place in Ireland. In secular literature there is a long history of fighting, invasions and violence in Ireland. Discoveries in the arena of archaeology do not give us the same picture. Very little has been found which would lead one to think that it was a warring society.[20] The battles were more along the line of raiding and pillage, without the accouterments of the warrior.[21]The literary sources, coming from a society which dealt often with unexpected raids, seem to have exaggerated the events in the same way they exaggerated telling of courage, honor and prowess in order to please the audience.

The literature which springs from the mind of the monk or hermit differs considerably from secular literature. There was a particular love of nature which runs through many of the monks' poems. The ascetic had a special sympathy for the created thing in nature. There are stories which tell of St. Columba's love of nature, and poems by unknown monks which tell of a wish for a "secret hut in the wilderness"[22] or speak of the sea, the seasons, birds, streams, wildlife, and woodlands. One such poem reads:

Over my head the woodland mall
Rises; the ousel sings to me

> Above my booklet lined for words
> The woodland birds shake out their glee.
> There's the blithe cuckoo chanting clear
> In mantle grey from bough to bough!
> God keep me still! for here I write
> A scripture bright in great woods now.[23]

Poetry of this nature with such affection for wildlife is perhaps only seen elsewhere in Christian sources in the story of St. Francis.[24]

Another feature of poetry by Celtic monks is the closeness they felt with God. One particular poem from the ninth century expresses a wish to nurse the infant Jesus.[25] Another tells of a banquet the author wanted to hold for the Heavenly Hosts.[26]

But not all poems are directed at nature or God. A poem, ascribed to St. Columba, speaks of the weariness of his task as a scribe:

> My hand is weary with writing, my sharp great point is not thick; my slender-beaked pen juts forth a beetle-hued draught of bright blue ink....I send my little dripping pen unceasingly over an assemblage of books of great beauty, to enrich the possessions of men of art--whence my hand is weary with writing.[27]

But perhaps the most profound stanzas were written by a hermit of the eighth or ninth century:

> Alone in my little hut without a human
> being in my company,
> dear has been the pilgrimage before
> going to meet death.
> A remote hidden little cabin, for forgive-
> ness of my sins;
> a conscience upright and spotless
> before holy Heaven.
> Making holy the body with good habits,
> treading it boldly down;
> weak tearful eyes for forgiveness
> of my desires.

> Desires feeble and withered, renunciation
> of this poor world, clean live thoughts;
> this is how I would seek God's forgiveness....
> It would be desireable, a pure, holy blemish,
> cheeks dry and sunken, skin leathery
> and lean....
> Alone in my little hut, all alone so,
> alone I came into the world, alone
> I shall go from it.
> If being alone I have done wrong at all,
> through the pride of this world, hear
> my wail as I lament all alone, O God![28]

The poetry which sings the praises of nature also speaks of the hardships and sufferings of the ascetic monk and helps to show the many facets of his life.

Of these facets, work, reading and prayer, as stated in the Rule, occupied the majority of the day. The Rule of St. Columba also stated that a monk shouldn't sleep until he is tired, nor eat until he is hungry. He should not possess anything. A monk should pray until the tears come, or work until the tears come, or at least until he perspires if he cannot cry.[29]

The daily services were the canonical Office of the Hours. There were eight periods of worship each day starting at six in the morning and continuing every three hours.[30] They were, in order, Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, Vespers, First Nocturn, Second Nocturn, and Third Nocturn with Lauds and Matins. These Hours were strictly observed. At these services music played a large part and hymns or Psalms were usually sung. The earliest record of a hymnal from this area is a book which Adamnan speaks about as having been written by St. Columba himself.[31] It was the voice

rather than any instrument which filled the church with sound.[32]

Fasting was observed on Wednesdays and Fridays.[33] Days of rest and the celebration of the Eucharist were observed on Sundays and Saints' Days. The chief festival of the year was Easter, although Adamnan also mentions Christmas.[34]

Private confession played a large part in the daily life of a monk although there is no trace of compulsory confession and it seems to have been done voluntarily.[35] Many monks were accompanied by a companion or a personal advisor, the anmchara, who heard confession and prescribed penance for the sins.[36] The penance would correspond with the gravity of the sin. For example, silence was imposed for lesser sins, whereas exile till death in a foreign land might be imposed for a sin such as incest.[37] Absolution of the sin came only after the punishment was completed.

The Reverend John Ryan states very clearly why penance and asceticism played such an important part of the daily life of a Columban monk:

> God's grace will never be wanting to overcome all obstacles and to make us conformable to the image of His Son; but it is also clear that our own cooperation with divine grace is needed, if that image is to be reproduced within us. He who believes in Christ must imitate Christ in love of God and his neighbor. As the imitation is hard, he must school himself to practice it: a

> labor which implies (given the evil tendencies of his nature) severe self-repression, penitential exercises and, in short, the austere regulation of life comprised in the term asceticism.[38]

This self-repression, comprised of solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property, and the severe regulation of daily life, was meant to open the mind and heart so that prayer, meditation and contemplation were not shut out because of other concerns.[39] Devotional prayer was the center of the monastic life and nothing, not labor, studying or writing, could interfere with the purpose to which the monk had given his life.

Cassian, a monk and writer of the fourth or early fifth century, was concerned with the levels of prayer one must experience before he reaches the highest level, the mystical prayer. There is no proof that the Columban monks actually read his words, but it is entirely probable that his ideas were known to them. The lowest and easiest form of prayer, according to Cassian, was supplication; the asking of God for forgiveness of sins. The second level is prayer "by which we offer or promise something to God". Thirdly is intercession for those close to the monk or for peace in the world. The fourth level is thanksgiving for the past, present, and future.[40] It is this level, prayer from the heart, which is the highest and offers unity with God beyond all speech, all thought, all senses; it is a kind of ecstasy.[41]

There is nothing in the Irish documents which gives instructions on the methods of prayer. Given time, silence, privacy and a strong faith the rest would follow naturally.[42] Perhaps nothing was written on the subject because the importance of prayer was so strong that it was taken for granted.

The life of a Columban monk may at first appear bleak. The strict Rule of St. Columba did not offer him many comforts. The weather could be cold and windy but a summer day could seem almost ethereal. Coupled with the experience of such extremes in the weather were the threat of Viking raids, the concern over sickness, and other troubles which threatened their existence. But in the midst of all of this they wrote beautiful poetry about nature and their love of God; they loved music and decorated their churches and churchyards. It was exactly the rigid and strict life under the Rule that allowed them the time for contemplation which raised their minds to unforseeable heights and brought out their vitality and love of life.

NOTES

[1]John T. McNeill, The Celtic Churches, A History A.D. 200 to 1200 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 93; John A. Duke, The Columban Church (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957) p. 122.

[2]Duke, p. 122.

[3]Brian Tierney, The Middle Ages, Sources of Medieval History, vol. I (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978) p. 72.

[4]Duke, p. 122.

[5]McNeill, pp. 92-3; Ian Finlay, Columba (London: Victory Gollancz Ltd., 1979) p. 113.

[6]McNeill, pp. 92-3.

[7]Finlay, p. 183.

[8]McNeill, p. 92.

[9]Rev. John Ryan, Irish Monasticism, Origins and Early Development (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1931) p. 289.

[10]McNeill, p. 130.

[11]Kathleen Hughes, Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972) p. 258.

[12]M. MacDermott, "The Kells Crosier" Archaeologia (1955) p. 107.

[13]McNeill, p. 130.

[14]Katharine Scherman, The Flowering of Ireland (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981) p. 326.

[15]Kathleen Hughes, The Churches in Early Irish Society (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1966) pp. 84-5.

[16]Idem, Early Christian Ireland, p. 166.

[17]Ibid., pp. 182-89.

[18]Ibid., p. 175.

[19]Ibid., p. 171.

[20]Ibid., p. 264.

[21]Ibid., p. 265.

[22]Kenneth H. Jackson, A Celtic Miscellany, Translations from the Celtic Literatures (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971) p. 280.

[23]Robin Flower, "Irish High Crosses", Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute (1954) p. 90.

[24]K. Jackson, p. 278.

[25]Ibid., p. 283.

[26]Ibid., p. 284.

[27]Gerard Murphy, trans., Early Irish Lyrics (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1946) p. 3.

[28]Jackson, pp. 281-82.

[29]Tierney, pp. 72-3.

[30]Hughes, Early Christian Ireland, p. 93; Ms. Hughes believes that the Irish Church had six choir offices and the other two offices were spent in the privacy of the cells where they would say prayers.

[31]Duke, p. 123.

[32]McNeill, p. 134.

[33]Duke, p. 129.

[34]Ibid., p. 124.

[35]Ibid., p. 129.

[36]Nora Chadwick, The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 62; Hughes, Early Christian Ireland, pp. 83-5.

[37]Ryan, p. 355, p. 395.

[38]Ibid., p. 7.

[39]Thomas Merton, The Climate of Monastic Prayer (Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1969) p. 29.

[40]Ryan, p. 328.

[41]Ibid., pp. 329-30.

[42]Ibid., p. 330.

CHAPTER III

DISCUSSION OF THE STYLE OF THE ILLUMINATIONS

Several scholars have discussed the art and motifs of the Book of Kells. Francoise Henry has detailed discussions of the illuminations in The Book of Kells and in Irish Art During the Viking Invasions. The facsimile edition of the Book of Kells also has an in-depth study of the illuminations. The facsimile has been an important addition to the study of Kells in that it makes the entire manuscript available to scholars everywhere. Sir Edward Sullivan has also discussed the painting in Kells at length.[1] Other scholars have mentioned the Book of Kells but have not gone into quite as much detail.[2] On the whole, the scholarship concerning the painting in Kells is very good on a stylistic level. The majority of the studies describe the details of the illuminations and their various motifs.

The Book of Kells contains at least twenty-one full-page illuminations. There is evidence of many artists' hands at work in the manuscript, but only four main artists seem to have been responsible for the majority of the illuminations. Three of the artists have been named by Francoise Henry: "the Illustrator","the

Portraitist", and "the Goldsmith".[3] The fourth artist was responsible for little more than one or two of the full-page illuminations but delighted himself with many of the small capitals seen throughout the text. The seven illuminations chosen to be discussed here are representative of all the illuminations in the manuscript. The color plates used for the following analyses are from the facsimile edition.

"The Illustrator" was so named because he was responsible for the Arrest of Christ, the Virgin and Child, the Tunc Crucifixerant, probably the symbols at the beginning of St. John's Gospel, and the Temptation of Christ on the Temple. (fig. 9)

The text from which the scene of the Temptation is taken is from the Gospel of St. Luke 4:9-12:

> And he brought him to Jerusalem and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God.

Undoubtedly this passage was particularly well known to the monk who lived an ascetic life of prayer, work, and reading. In his small solitary cell he might not always have felt alone. His world would sometimes be invaded by devils and temptations which might torment those who gave their lives to the worship of Christ.

Figure 9: Book of Kells; Temptation of Christ on the Temple, folio 202V. (from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting by Carl Nordenfalk, plate 46)

Only intense spiritual activity could ward off doubt, the sense of futility and restlessness. It would then seem that Christ's victory over temptation acted as inspiration to those who were following Him.

Of the three great Celtic manuscripts, Kells, Lindisfarne and Durrow, only Kells has a representation of the Temptation. The scene does not occur on Irish or English crosses, although the devil is seen in stone carvings of the Last Judgment.[4] It is entirely possible that the Temptation miniature in Kells was copied from an earlier manuscript brought to Ireland. Although it does not appear to be a usual subject at this time, it would seem that "the Illustrator" felt a special affinity with this scene from the life of Christ.[5]

A large and noble Christ is placed in bust form atop the temple. He is beardless with large, staring almond eyes and blond curly hair. A large halo surrounds his head with a purple background and gold rim. Above his head are two floating angels. Their legs are visible through their transparent purple robes, and their wings are richly decorated. To Christ's right is a group of figures, also bust-length, who all turn to look at him. To his left is a black, skinny, springy little devil with wings. The temple, in the shape of an early Celtic church, is decorated with spiral and geomentric designs along with bands of interlacing. The finials on the roof were apparently common to church architecture;

a similar butterfly-shaped one was found on St. MacDara's Island in the Atlantic off the coast of County Galway.[6] (fig. 10) In the single doorway (there are no windows) stands a haloed figure holding two crossed scepters. He is flanked by twenty-four bust-length figures, all turning their attention to him. There are no curving lines in the geometric shape of the frame itself, except in the interlacing with which it is filled. There appear to be two columns with stepped bases and capitals which support two triangles above the entire scene. Enclosed by the triangles are two angels whose wings spread out to fill in the two areas.

Christ is larger than the other figures in the scene. His larger scale and his central position, coupled with his dark, staring eyes, makes him the focal point of the painting. All else is secondary to Christ as the symbol of good triumphing over evil. When comparing this Christ to contemporary, or even earlier, representations of Christ on the Continent or in the Near East, the extent of Celtic stylization becomes clear. There is no interest in shading or modelling and even his hair falls in unnatural curls. Certainly the artist had access to manuscripts which were produced on the Continent, but he chose his own style over the classical.

The smaller figures, to the right hand of Christ and below him, have puzzled scholars for years. These profile figures are seen elsewhere in the Book of Kells

Figure 10: Church on St. MacDara's Island, County Galway, possibly as late as the 12th century. (from Irish Art and Architecture by Peter Harbison, plate 58)

but no one seems quite sure why they are there. If one looks to the high crosses of Ireland there may be a clue. The high crosses were erected at a time when monastic culture was at its height: beginning in the second half of the eighth century and continuing to the eleventh. One high cross which is found at Arboe in County Tyrone has thirteen of these puzzling figures grouped below the scene of the Last Judgment. They surround another figure, which carries a crozier. This grouping has usually been described as Christ and the Apostles, but there shouldn't be thirteen figures in a scene which only calls for twelve. Another explanation of them might be that they represent the monastic community gathered around its founder at the Judgment. There was a common belief in ancient Ireland that souls who were buried in a monastic cemetery which held the remains of the founder would rise with him at the time of judgment.[7] Is this perhaps what is shown in the Temptation? If it is, what is the connection between the two events? Or does the figure holding the two scepters represent Christ in Judgment, and are the smaller figures awaiting their trial? Or they may be Jews following the Old Testament Law, or perhaps they are simply the faithful. One can only guess at the original meaning of these figures. The nine figures to the right hand of Christ will also probably never be identified with certainty, but they seem to represent the forces of good. They are countered on the

left hand of Christ by the devil, the epitome of evil.

The symmetrical framework enclosing this scene and others to be discussed was probably done with the aid of geometrical tools. Bruce-Mitford has shown that the meticulous geometric construction that underlies the Lindisfarne Gospels was done by pricking the vellum surface.[8] The Book of Kells is even more intricate in decoration, and one could assume that it was made in the same tradition as the Lindisfarne Gospels. Despite the geometric frame, the interlacing has a life of its own reflecting the vibrant mind of the artist. The framework is only a stage on which the interlacing plays.

The use of color, as well as the method of production, is important in understanding the message or purpose of this illumination. The colors contain light and reflect it.[9] Much in the same way that stained glass of the Gothic period allowed light to shine through the windows and illuminate the scene, so the light is reflected on the page. The Divine Light of the Word of God was made physically bright through the use of colors. The colors of the Temptation are very bright. "The Illustrator" used purple, apple green, blue, red, and yellow--all colors of life itself. The devil alone is black.

Because of the puzzling and intriguing nature of the many small figures in this painting, the entire meaning of the miniature of the Temptation of Christ may never be known. Unquestionably it tells the story of

good triumphing over evil, but the many other elements in the scene lead one to assume that there is a further message which the artist was trying to convey. The viewer would meditate upon and study this image which reflects the Word of God and comprehend it on his own level.

The Virgin and Child miniature, (fig. 11) along with the Temptation of Christ, is unique as a subject in Insular manuscripts up to this time.

The Virgin and Child miniature is placed after the Canon Tables and before the Preliminaries. This subject is appropriate for placement at the beginning of the manuscript in that only from the birth of Christ through Mary were the Gospels ever to be.

Mary, seated on a throne which is viewed from the side, holds Christ across her lap. Her legs are placed sideways as if she were seated correctly on the throne, but her torso is frontal. She wears a purple robe over a lighter purple garment. Covering her head is a golden veil, and surrounding it is a halo. Her body is flat and linear, and pushed to the surface of the painting. The legs, arms and breasts are visible only by means of the outline rather than modelling. Her legs are crossed so that her small feet are daintily placed on the edge of the frame. Her face is austere, even somewhat harsh. The eyes, staring out to the right, are large and almond-shaped. Her nose and mouth are small and

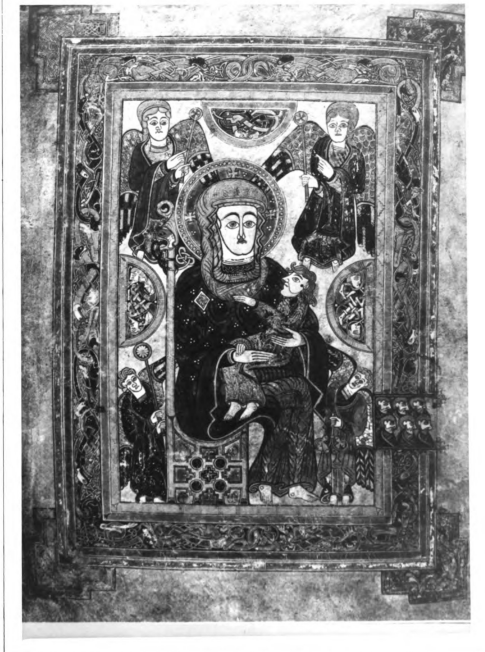

Figure 11: Book of Kells, Virgin and Child, folio 7V. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38a)

abstracted. She is static, unmoving, and made to be worshipped.

Christ, on the other hand, looks up to Mary as a child adores his mother. His right hand gestures up while his left hand rests on Mary's hand. His bright green robe and yellow garment contrast sharply with the purple which Mary wears. There is no halo surrounding his head.

In the four corners of the rectangular frame are four angels. Perhaps they are the four archangels. Three carry scepters and the fourth carries an unidentifiable ornament (perhaps a censer). The two upper angels are larger, and point to the top center of the frame. If this scene were copied from an earlier manuscript it is possible that the model had the angels placed lower and therefore pointing directly to the central figures.

There are three half-circles placed within the frame; one at the top and one at each side. The side areas are filled with the interlacing of human figures. The top area is filled with imaginative animals.

The frame itself is surrounded on its outer edges by a brown border and within it, a purple border; the inner edges of the frame are bounded by a yellow and then a purple border. Within these borders are interlaced birds. The interlacing is tightly woven and compares easily with the amount of intricacy found on the Ardagh Chalice of the early eighth century, or the Large Ardagh

brooch, also of the eighth century. Brooches were very popular at this time and even Mary has one attached to her garment at her right shoulder.

In the lower right side of the frame is a section containing six profile busts. These unidentified figures are very similar to the figures seen in the Temptation of Christ. They all look off the page to the accompanying text page as if they are the faithful asking the reader to read on. The text page is the beginning of the Breves Causae of St. Matthew, which reads Nativitas XPI in bethlem judeae. The image of the Virgin and Child enthroned is thus placed opposite the text which summarizes the birth of Christ. The six busts lead us to the next page and help to connect the two pages.

The colors chosen here by "the Illustrator" are similar to those he used in the Temptation miniature. The juxtaposition of purple, apple green, and yellow clash rather than harmonize. The colors in this miniature are bright, sharp and vivid.

The Arrest of Christ is also by "the Illustrator", and again, this miniature implies more than just the particular subject at hand. (fig. 12) The figure of Christ, in the center, is the largest figure in the scene. Again he has blond curly hair as in the Temptation, blue eyes and a red beard (very Northern in appearence in comparison to Eastern icons of Christ). He wears a blue robe covered by a dark red tunic which falls in graceful

Figure 12: Book of Kells, The Arrest of Christ, folio 114R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38e)

symmetrical curves. There is no halo indicating he is Christ. Only the scene and the placement of the page next to a decorated text page which reads Tunc dicit illis IHS omnes vos scan--"then Jesus said to them" (Matthew 26:31) indicates the captive man as Christ. The arrest is described in a later verse but the scene takes its place at the beginning of the text of the Passion. Christ's arms are very rigid. There is a tenseness seen in his posture and the gaze of his eyes as he submits to the captors in his voluntary Passion to fulfill the Scriptures.[10] Christ's pose, frontal, arms raised, reminds one of an orant position. It is as if, even in his time of trial and Passion, he remains a forgiving and blessing Lord, one who submits to suffering in order to forgive the sins of mankind in deference to God's will.

The captors, placed on either side of him, are only about two-thirds the size of Christ and grasp his arms unconvincingly. Again, naturalistic literalness was not a factor; rather, the artist wished to render a symbol in place of realism. The smaller, menacing figures are awkwardly drawn, their heads in profile, torsos frontal and legs in profile. The legs are visible through the drapery as the artist attempted to show them in movement. In doing so he made the torso very long. The anatomy, however, does not lessen the effect of the action of the arrestors leading Christ to trial and death.

Surrounding this scene is an arch which acts as a

frame. The symmetry of the figures is carried through to the colors and elements of the arch, although symmetry is not a characteristic element in the style of "the Illustrator". Stepped bases support coloumns and in place of capitals are Greek crosses. The arch itself consists of two lions whose heads meet in the center and whose interlaced tongues act as the keystone. Within the arch over Christ's head are two vases out of which springs unrealistic foliage.

The colors of the arch and of the figures are bold, but not startingly bright. Green, red, blue, orange, and pale yellow are used. Interlacing, seen only in the frame and in the hair of Christ, plays a very secondary role in the style of "the Illustrator".

The observer's grasp of the human figure as a symbol and of the symbolic use of color becomes necessary to the understanding, not only of the pages by "the Illustrator", but also of the rest of the illuminations in the manuscript. The image of man seen as symbolic rather than copied from nature is the basis of the style of "the Portraitist", who was the main painter of figures in this manuscript. Colors used by "the Illustrator" are bright, as are those of "the Portraitist", whereas the colors used by "the Goldsmith" are comparitively subdued. But the symbolism behind the colors applies regardless of these artist's individual styles.

"The Portraitist" received his name because he was responsible for the Evangelist portraits of St. Matthew

and St. John and the portrait of Christ (the portraits of SS Luke and Mark have been omitted or lost). He may also have done the initial page of St. Luke's Gospel and the symbols of the four Evangelists in square frames.

Of the three artists here discussed "the Portraitist" seems most interested in the use of symmetry, but even he changes the design in subtle ways so that upon close examination one can see his avoidence of exact symmetry. His use of color is similar to that of "the Illustrator" in its bright, bold colors, but "the Portraitist" is more aware of the balancing of colors on the page so that they work together and are pleasing to the eye.

The Portrait of St. John is a good example of the artist's individual use of symmetry. (fig. 13) The frame is outlined in blue, enclosing an orange background on which are placed four Greek crosses in the middle of each side and the four corner designs outlined in yellow. At first glance the interlacing within all of the crosses appears to be the same, and indeed it is the same in the upper and lower crosses, but the patterns of the side crosses differ slightly as if the artist wished to evade perfect and exact symmetry.

The figure of St. John is seated on a throne. Surrounding his head is a beautiful halo of two purple rings with a radiating design emanating from his head like rays of light. As usual in Kells the eyes are large and gazing but not particularly focused. He does not look at us, he looks beyond us.

Figure 13: Book of Kells, Portrait of St. John, folio 291V. (from Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting by Carl Nordenfalk, plate 45)

The most intriguing elements of the Portrait of St. John are the additional head, hands and feet which emerge from behind the frame. Part of the head was cut off when a bookbinder trimmed all of the pages in the nineteenth century, but a halo is still evident. The halo indicates that the hidden figure held a sacred significance, perhaps God from whom St. John received the Word.

St. Matthew's Gospel is frequently treated as having two beginnings. The Book of the Generations is ordinarily treated as a separate section and then followed by the Gospel beginning with the birth of Christ. In Kells the Gospel begins with a full page of the symbols of the four Evangelists followed by a portrait of St. Matthew and a page of ornamental text: Liber generationis. This constitutes the beginning of the first section. The second section begins with a portrait of Christ, the carpet page opposite Christ and the fabulous Chi-Rho page.

The Portrait of Christ was also done by "the Portraitist". (fig. 14) The figure of Christ is frontal and rather static. He is seated on a throne and flanked by four angels on either side of him and by two peacocks placed under the arch near his head. He is bearded, has long, curling blond hair and piercing blue eyes. There is no halo, but instead a cross is positioned just above his head. He wears a blue robe covered by a dark purple tunic. The lines in the drapery are stylized to

Figure 14: Book of Kells, Portrait of Christ, folio 32V. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38b)

show the form underneath, such as curving lines indicating the bend of the knee. Only the right hand is visible, the elongated fingers of which are supporting the book and placed in the manner of blessing characteristic of the teaching Christ. The indication of the left hand is seen through his tunic as he holds the book.

The placement and poses of the angels on each side of Christ show the artist's use of symmetry, but they are all differentiated so as to aviod monotony. The four angels flanking Christ all wear different garments and gesture towards Christ whereas the two lower angels do not. All of them wear different hair styles, possibly styles that were popular at that time. They are all frontal and have large almond-shaped eyes characteristic of the Book of Kells. Curiously, the upper angel on the left side has a red dot on the top of each foot, perhaps an indication of the stigmata, although red dots are often seen on the ankles or heels of other figures throughout the book, from St. John to the unidentifiable figures on the initial page of St. Luke's Gospel or the symbol for St. Matthew, the angel.

Just below the claws of the peacocks are vases with foliage that is very similar to the foliage seen in the Arrest. The artists may have had a common source from which the foliage was taken. The peacocks are recognizable by the long tails with blue and green geometric designs representing the feathers. There is no

doubt that Celtic artists were well versed in the drawing of birds because they abound in the interlacing, both here and in earlier works of stone and metal.

The frame is similar to the frame surrounding St. John in that the majority of the interlacing is found there, therefore playing a secondary role to the subject of the painting. Christ, the angels and the interlacing are placed on an orange background, each part framed in by yellow borders. The outer frame consists of birds of yellow, green, red, and blue each coiled and entwined into circles. The inner frames are also filled with birds but here they are more tightly interlaced. The inner frame, consisting of the arch and golden frame, acts as a throne for Christ.

Opposite the Portrait of Christ is a page which consists entirely of interlacing and spirals: the only carpet page found in the Book of Kells, often called the "page of the eight circles". (fig. 15) This was produced by another artist, called "the Goldsmith", who also did the beautiful Chi-Rho page and the initial pages for the Gospels of SS Matthew, Mark and John.

The circles are arranged in such a way so that four are placed down the center at regular intervals and two are placed on either side making a cross with two horizontal arms. The cross is placed on top of the background and frame, thereby breaking the miniature up into several sections. The four corner areas within

Figure 15: Book of Kells, The Carpet Page, folio 33R. (from Treasures of Early Irish Art by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, plate 37/38c)

the frame and between the circles are filled with wonderfully intricate interlacing of birds and snakes. The background is barely visible, if at all, through the dense design. In each of the two middle areas between the circles are found four men weaving an intricate pattern with birds, their wings, arms, legs, and hair entwining themselves beyond recognition. (fig. 16)

The circles themselves are filled with spirals of neutral color placed on a black gackground in order that they stand out from the muted colors of the interlacing. Each circle has a circle within it of spirals surrounded by many smaller spirals. These circles-within-circles covering the page at measured distances give a rhythm to the illumination quite unlike any other seen in Kells.

Symmetry is not a characteristic element in "the Goldsmith's" style, but the principle design, the cross, requires him to conceive of this page as a symmetrical layout. As is seen so often throughout the Book of Kells, the designs and pattern of the interlacing, where at first they appear to be exact, are in fact altered subtlely to avoid either exactness or monotony.

The intricate decoration in this illumination and in others done by "the Goldsmith" was probably influenced by metalwork done about the same time. The magnificent Tara brooch from the eighth century shows an extreme interest in interlacing on the top. The compactness

Figure 16: Book of Kells, Detail: The Carpet Page, folio 33R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 16)

is very similar to the interlacing of the carpet page. On the underside of the Tara brooch are groups of spirals within circles much like the circles of the carpet page. The clasp of the brooch is an abstracted animal head filled with interlace. The use of animals was not confined to the decoration of manuscripts.

The initial page of St. Mark's Gospel was also done by "the Goldsmith". (fig. 17) At first glance one does not see the letters which are totally integrated into the design, but upon closer examination the words Initium evangelii Ihu XPI can be read. Perhaps it was because the opening words to each of the Gospels were so well known to the monks that clarity here was not a necessity.

The entire composition is done with extraordinary originality. The page is dominated by two strong vertical bars connected by a backward "s" design. These long vertical rectangles have symmetrical patterns, but the spaces of the design have been filled with interlacing, therefore minimizing the effect of symmetry. At the ends of the rectangles are four groupings of interlacing, all with different patterns. Balancing this portion of the composition, which also makes up the letters INI, is a golden frame which runs down the right side and across the bottom of the illumination. The rest of the words are placed about the page in a seemingly haphazard but not uncontrolled arrangement. The golden frame

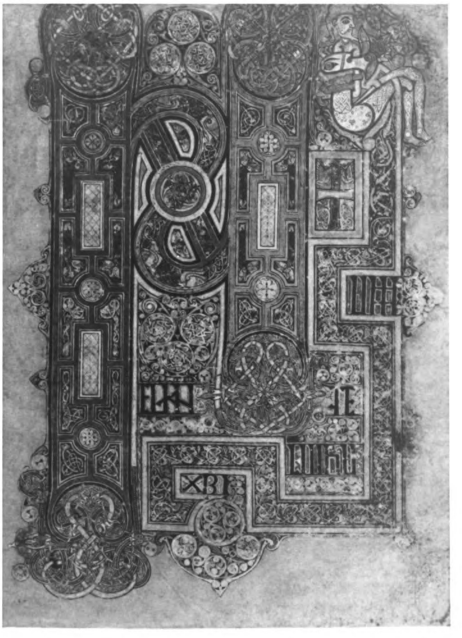

Figure 17: Book of Kells, Initial Page of St. Mark's Gospel, folio 130R. (from The Book of Kells by Peter Brown, plate 29)

moves into the page to surround the words in two places, thereby integrating them and the frame into the composition. Inside the vertical bars and golden frame, and outside them, flowing over the page, are intricately patterned snakes and animals: weaving that seems to go on forever and yet never becomes confused. Added to the interlacing are spirals decorating the edges and filling in areas. The tails of the smallest spirals do not become lost. "The Goldsmith" was able to weave the most intricate and minute patterns but never lose sight of the overall design. Directly above and below the backward "s" are groups of spirals which incorporate the human figure. There are six circles in all, each with three figures. The bodies are contorted in a way so the the hands reach under the legs and grasp in the center. Other than St. Mark, who is placed in the upper right-hand corner, these are the only human figures within the composition. But they are barely visible except under scrutiny.

Detail: Initial Page of St. Mark's Gospel

The coloring is very subtle, almost mute, and

very rich. The dominant colors used here by "the Goldsmith" are blue, purple, yellow, and red. Again, he juxtaposes the colors so that they blend rather than contrast. Very often the background is black and placed over it are interlacings or spirals of pale gold with dashes of red, blue, or purple. In some areas, such as the interlacings at the ends of the vertical bars, he has knit gold and blue, purple and yellow, or purple and red together. Scatterings of red lead the eye over the page, not allowing one area to prevail over another.

The rendering of St. Mark continues the richness of the rest of the page. He is dressed in white with a red criss-cross design covering the legs and torso. The arms and legs are entwined with the lion, his symbol, which is therefore unified with the total design. One arm reaches through the lion's mouth and around St. Mark's back to grip the lion's tongue. The legs weave through the lion's neck, which continues down the page and turns into the golden frame. Only one of the lion's legs is visible. It also semms to grow out of the frame. St. Mark is seated and placed so that he rests in the curve of the lion's leg. The two are unified into one conception. St. Mark, his face in profile with black staring eyes and pointed peard, looks off the page to the right as if inviting the reader to read on to fully understand the Word of God.

From the above discussions it is apparent that

each artist has his own individual style but at the same time is Celtic in origin. All of them employ the motifs common to Irish art: the spiral, interlace, imaginative animals, snakes, and birds. But each artist exhibits his own individuality as well. "The Illustrator" showed an interest in the human figure over the decoration. The colors he used are bright and contrasting. Each illumination is connected with the text and placed carefully either at the beginning of a section of text or near a particular passage that it illustrates. "The Portraitist" is also interested in the human figure as the axis of the miniature, but places much more emphasis on the frame and the intricacy of the decoration. He is also the artist who places the most emphasis on the use of symmetry, but never loses the vitality in his designs. His use of color is more harmonious than "the Illustrator" but also uses bright colors. "The Goldsmith" received his name because his finely detailed interlacing and minute decoration is most closely associated with the kind of decoration found on metalwork and enamels. The human figure is secondary to his supreme excellence in this and is employed mainly as decoration. The colors chosen by "the Goldsmith" are subdued, sometimes even bordering on monochrome, as in the carpet page. "The Goldsmith" was the master of minute detail. Each artist excelled in his own way and each remained true to his Irish background and influence. As a collective group their work in the Book of Kells excelled beyond that of any Irish manuscript.

NOTES

[1]Francoise Henry, Irish Art During the Viking Invasions (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967); F. Henry, The Book of Kells (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974); E. Henry Alton, Peter Meyer, and G. O. Simms, Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Cenannensis, Book of Kells facsimile edition, 3 vols. (Bern: Urs-Graf, 1951); Sir Edward Sullivan, The Book of Kells (London: "The Studio Limited", 1927).

[2]J. J. G. Alexander, The Decorated Letter (New York: George Braziller, 1978); T. J. Brown, "Northumbria and the Book of Kells", Anglo-Saxon England I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Robert G. Calkins, Monuments of Medieval Art (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979); Francoise Henry, Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965); J. A. Herbert, Illuminated Manuscripts (New York: Burt Franklin, originally published in London, 1911); John T. McNeill, The Celtic Churches, A History A.D. 200 to 1200 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); David M. Robb, The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript (New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1973); Katharine Scherman, The Flowering of Ireland (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981).

[3]F. Henry, Viking Invasions, p. 75.

[4]K. Scherman, p. 343.

[5]Patrick McGurk, "Two Notes on the Book of Kells" Scriptorium vol. 9 (1955), pp. 105-07; "The illustrations within Kells can be seen not as erratic magnifyings of occasional texts but as the development of a long established Insular habit..." Earlier, the Insular manuscripts would have stars next to the important text passages.

[6]Maire and Liam DePaor, Early Christian Ireland (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958) p. 59.

[7]Robin Flower, "Irish High Crosses" Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes (1954) p. 94.

[8]Bruce-Mitford, Lindisfarne Gospels, facsimile edition.

[9]R. Calkins, p. 201.

[10]F. Henry, pp. 74-5.

CHAPTER IV

FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The dominant influence in the Book of Kells is the art of pre-Christian and Christian Ireland. There exists as early as 2500 B.C. in Newgrange, County Meath, an enormous stone with elaborate spiraling lines carved on it. The desire to decorate with patterns has existed in Ireland since that time and it is that heritage which is the dominant force in the Book of Kells over and above any outside influence.

In the process of discussing the style of Celtic art seen in the Book of Kells it is necessary to also mention the foreign influences and motifs which contribute to this style. There have been some very convincing arguments written concerning this problem of influences although, ultimately, the questions will probably never be answered with any concrete certainty. Influences from several areas and times have been identified by scholars in the art of the Book of Kells.

Martin Werner has done an extensive study in his article entitled "The Madonna and Child Miniature in the Book of Kells".[1] In this paper he attempts to show a Coptic influence on the miniature through the pose of

the Virgin, the placement of the Christ Child, their gestures, and the angels which surround them. Werner connects the Madonna and Child illumination in Kells with the Madonna and Child carved on the end of the wooden coffin of St. Cuthbert, which was made at the monastery of Lindisfarne. In both images Jesus is seated across the lap of Mary, creating a criss-cross of diagonals. But whereas the Cuthbert grouping shows the faces frontally and the relationship between Mary and Christ as austere and hieratic, the Kells grouping is much more intimate. Christ gestures with his left hand toward Mary and looks up at her, his right hand resting on Mary's right hand. The mother-child bond is reinforced by the outlined breasts of Mary, which emphasize the nurturing aspect of her relationship with Christ. Werner traces this gesture and relationship back to the art of Coptic Egypt. This link is underscored by the adoring angels surrounding the Virgin and Child. Werner states that full-page illuminations of this kind, showing Madonna and Christ enthroned and surrounded by angels, are to be found only in Coptic manuscripts before the Book of Kells. Werner takes his study one step further. He proposes that the Madonna and Child model was part of a series of full-page illuminations associated with the iconography of the Incarnation, and that the Kells artist took the series apart and rearranged the illuminations in order to fit the "idiosyncratic Hiberno-Saxon practice".

Francoise Henry agrees with Werner on the Coptic inspiration seen in the Book of Kells.[2] She also points out the similarities between the St. Cuthbert coffin and the Madonna and Child page, and adds that Ernst Kitzinger is also in agreement on the theory of Coptic influence.[3]

Other scholars who have dealt with or mentioned the problem of Eastern Christian or Coptic art as prototypes for the Book of Kells are Harold Picton, Carl Nordenfalk, and David Robb; and A. M. Friend admits that the arches of the Canon Tables included under one large arch is probably of Syrian-Greek origin.[4]

Friend brought quite a bit of attention to the theory of Carolingian influence in the Book of Kells with his study on the Canon Tables.[5] He states that a lost Gospel book containing Canon Tables decorated with the Evangelist symbols, produced between 781 and 800, must have been the model for the Tables in Kells.[6] David Robb agrees with Friend and asserts that the prototype for the Evangelist portraits placed under a framing arch is most probably to be found in the "Ada School" of Carolingian art.[7] Francoise Henry is not so easily convinced. While she admits there may be a similarity between Carolingian and Celtic styles she also admits there may be Eastern prototypes in both traditions.[8]

Scholars have not forgotten to look towards the neighbors of Ireland--Northumbria and Pictland--for inspiration in the Book of Kells. As was mentioned

above, there is an affinity between the Virgin and Child of the Book of Kells and the wooden reliquary of St. Cuthbert. Professor Julian Brown believes that Northumbria was a source of inspiration for the artists of the Book of Kells, and that perhaps it was written by a scribe trained under the influence of the Lindisfarne monastery.[9] The vine scroll motif, which is found in the Book of Kells, came from Northumbria. These tend to connect the two areas. F. Masai, in his "Essai sur les origines de le miniature dite irlandaise", goes so far as to claim the Book of Kells was made in Northumbria.[10] Professor Brown has also noted some elements which occur in Pictish art and in Kells, but not in Northumbrian art. He points out that naturalistic animals, the human figure as decoration, and the interlacing of "fantastic" animals and human figures all find their way to Iona from Pictish art sources.[11]

These studies have all helped in the search for the origin of certain motifs which occur in the Book of Kells. There was definitely contact and communication among the British Isles, the Continent, the East and Ireland. The Codex Amiatinus and the Lindisfarne Gospels both used a manuscript brought to England from Italy as a model. The monks themselves were great wanderers and made pilgrimages to the Continent. St. Columbanus, for example, established a monastery at Bobbio. The trade routes were open, and more than material goods undoubtedly

made the passage. Thoughts and ideas, either through books or by word of mouth, were carried across to Ireland. The Irish had open minds and were eager to learn and adapt foreign themes to their own style of art and to their interpretations. But regardless of how much they were in contact with foreign lands they did not attempt to develop a new style. The new motifs were adapted to their own style, an art that remained keenly Irish. The indigenous desire to decorate, either for enjoyment or for spiritual or iconographical reasons, was a constant factor in the style, and for centuries it endured as innately and purely Irish.

Although these studies have answered some questions and have posed others concerning motifs in Kells that are foreign to Ireland, these studies have not, however, concerned themselves with the underlying significance of the decorations of this manuscript. Gerhart Ladner discussed some reasons behind the figurative illuminations in Insular art, but does not deal directly with Kells. Martin Werner touches on a few iconographic points in his article. On the whole, scholars discuss only small details of iconography within the manuscript. To discover the over-all meaning of the art of the Book of Kells, it will be necessary, in the following chapter, to look back again at the place of the Holy Scriptures in the life of the Celtic monk.

NOTES

[1]Martin Werner, "The Madonna and Child Miniature in the Book of Kells" Art Bulletin (March and June, 1972).

[2]Francoise Henry, Irish Art During the Viking Invasions (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 79. [3]Ibid.

[4]Harold Picton, "Kells portraits and eastern ornament" Burlington Magazine 73 (1938) pp. 121-22; Carl Nordenfalk, "An Illustrated Diatessaron" Art Bulletin (no. 2, 1968); David Robb, The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1973) pp. 91ff; A. M. Friend, "The Canon Tables of the Book of Kells" in Medieval Studies on Memory of A. Kingsley Porter, Wilhelm R. W. Koehler, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

[5]A. M. Friend.

[6]Ibid., p. 636.

[7]Robb, p. 97.

[8]F. Henry, pp. 83-88.

[9]T. J. Brown, "Northumbria and the Book of Kells" Anglo-Saxon England I Peter Clemoes, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Universtiy Press, 1972) pp. 219-46.

[10]Kathleen Hughes, Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972) p. 262.

[11]Brown, p. 239.

CHAPTER V

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK OF KELLS

Much has been written concerning the style of art seen in the Book of Kells: the interlacing, spirals, the types of figures, the animals, and the manner in which they all combine into an overwhelming effect on a page. Scholars have also been concerned with the foreign influences which have brought new motifs into Celtic art. But almost nothing has been written concerning the meaning of the book in its entirety.

Cernainly one cannot divorce the daily life of a Columban monk and his environment from the art which he produced; an art which is vital, energetic, rhythmic, and beyond visual reality. The spiritual energy that enveloped the monks is reflected in their art, and this energy was generated by the daily routine which allowed them private time for prayer and reading. For them to have put so much time and thought into the illumination of the Book of Kells there must have been a reason. The Gospels held a particular importance for them, the significance of which is reflected in the illuminations themselves.

The stylistic analysis of the illuminations,

discussed in Chapter III, revealed portraits that are frontal, enthroned, have large staring eyes, are symmetrical for the most part, and embody something beyond what is natural and real. The curves and folds of the drapery of St. John, for instance, are unrealistic, curling in impossible ways as if an energy or spiritual force were responsible for it. His hair, as well, is stylized and patterned so that it too is unrealistic. The Portrait of Christ and the Evangelist Portrait of St. Matthew also have these same characteristics. Their bodies are flattened out, showing no depth or space. The linear outlines and all-over patterns of decoration help to eliminate any sense of the third dimension. This flattening is also seen in the style of "the Illustrator". The figure of Christ in The Arrest of Christ is again linear, stylized, and lacking in depth. The curves in his drapery fall in a way that would never occur in nature. His feet dangle and his hair is a tangle of fabricated curls. The arrestors are smaller in scale than he is. The entire compostion departs from naturalism. In the Temptation of Christ there is again no consistency in the scale of figures; the bust of Christ atop the Temple is much larger than the many other figures included in the composition. The Temple is composed of decorative patterns rather than structural elements and, as in the other illuminations, lacks any illusion of depth. The artists, it appears, had no desire to show the third

dimension. The purpose was to go beyond reality and reach the spiritual realm of Christ and the Word of God.

This same desire was found in the method of prayer which the Columban monks practiced. The highest level of prayer, mystical prayer, or prayer from the heart, took the monk beyond his immediate emvironment to a heightened state of spirituality. The structure of daily life, allowing him to pray and contemplate God, would have encouraged the monk to express spirituality in his art.

Reading also played a large part in the daily life of a monk. Most of the learning was centered on the Bible and mastering the meanings of the Scripture. The majority of Biblical commentaries available to the monks were from the Alexandrian school of exegesis, Clement of Alexandria among them.[1] The writings of Clement, or his school of thought, may have helped to form the thinking behind the illuminations in the Book of Kells, especially the figurative paintings. A possible reason for the consistent absence of depth may be found in a chapter in Book Five of Clement's <u>On the Miscellanies</u>.[2] The opening paragraph of this chapter states:

> ....the sacrifice which is acceptable to God is unswerving abstraction from the body and its passions....for the... soul must be consecrated to the light, stript of the integuments of matter, deviod of the frivolousness of the body and of all the passions, and divested of the lusts of the flesh.[3]

This attitude would have been understandable to a monk leading the ascetic life. Clement goes on to explain his reasons for saying that the things of this world must be relinquished:

> God has bestowed on us ten thousand things which He does not share: birth, being Himself unborn; food, He wanting nothing; and growth, He being always equal; and long life and immortality, He being immortal and incapable of growing old. Wherefore, let no one imagine that hands and feet and mouth and eyes...to be attributes to God.[4]

In other words, do not imagine God to be like us, in human form. He can only be imagined as a spiritual being. Clement also discusses the element of depth: "We shall understand the mode of purification [as the].. abstracting from the body its physical properties, taking away the dimension of depth...."[5] God, already pure in spirit, has no depth. He is beyond the properties of the body, namely dimension. It appears that the monks, upon reading and interpreting such passages from the writings of Clement, or upon learning of his writings through established channels of communication, took them to mean that in order to represent Christ, the Son of God, visually, he must be shown in a state of visual unreality, stressing his spirituality and disregarding semblances of dimension, depth or space. Or perhaps this kind of spiritual interpretation came from a long tradition of thought and established methods of interpretation beginning in the monasteries in fourth century Egypt and finally

spreading to Ireland and the monasteries found there.

Gerhart Ladner also touches on this subject in his essay, "Ad Imaginem Dei: The Image of Man in Medieval Art".[6] Upon discussing Hiberno-Saxon art, and the Evangelist portraits in the Lindisfarne Gospels in particular, he states:

> It was the purpose of the illuminator... to make the physical appearance of a man a mere function of spiritual meaning.... The existence of the body is not denied but it exists chiefly as a vehicle for the all-important act of inspired writing.[7]

Ladner goes beyond what Clement talked about in connection with the image of God and sees the spiritual content in the Evangelist portraits as well. Indeed, this is what is seen in the Book of Kells. The Portraits of St. John and St. Matthew are similar to the Portrait of Christ in their abstraction, linear qualities and dematerialization of the figures, the lack of space in which to place them, and the lack of depth. The approach to all three of these portraits is the same.

If the abstraction of the Christ figure is due to a spiritual interpretation, and the portraits of the Evangelists show the same kind of spiritualized content, cannot this approach also be applied to other illuminations? The initial pages, while they lack any figures for the most part, are also flattened and abstracted. The lettering is almost beyond readability. The integration of the words into the total design is more important than their

legibility. Interlacing, spirals, and imaginative animals combine with the words to give the pages a rhythm not seen in any other illuminations. The overwhelming detail exhibits the vitality of the monks which is poured unendingly onto the page. This energy, pouring forth from the monk, may come from the fullness of heart experienced during mystical prayer. The unrealistic curling hair, the folding drapery and the patterns of decoration seen in the portraits are carried to the extreme in the patterns and interlacing of the initial pages. The artist has transformed the written word by means of illumination to show the spiritual and transcendental character of what is written. It is not only the meaning but the words themselves which are holy or sacred. They convey the Word but at the same time are the Word of God. The words themselves are holy and convey a meaning, to the heart of each reader, beyond the literal meaning.

As mentioned above in Chapter III, the meticulous geometric construction underlying the decoration in the Lindisfarne Gospels was most likely used in the Book of Kells as well. All of the illuminations in Kells are surrounded by a frame of some sort. The frames, as well as the decoration, are based on underlying geometric shapes. The Canon Tables and the Arrest of Christ are surrounded by arches; the portraits, other text illustrations, and the symbols pages all have rectangular frames; and the initial pages, which are more open, are often framed in

by the letters or have definite frames. The decoration is contained within these frames. Can yet another parallel be drawn here between the daily routines of the monks and the style of their art? The "severe self-repression, penitential exercises and, in short, the austere regulation of life comprised in the term asceticism" allowed time for the most important activity of the day: prayer.[8] Just as the beautiful and spiritualized decoration is kept within a framework, so the daily prayer, often leading to mystical prayer, is at once channeled and energized through strict routine and discipline. The monk's life is reflected in the geometrical structure of the illuminations, and their souls in the vitality of line, interlace, and color.

An incredible amount of time, energy, and thought went into the planning and execution of the Book of Kells, and it can therefore be assumed that the Gospels held a special significance for them. This special significance seems to be an outgrowth of an ancient tradition of reverence towards the Scriptures. Dr. Molly Smith of Michigan State University attempted in a talk given in 1975 at the first St. Louis Conference on Manuscript Studies to show, quite convincingly, that "Jewish manuscripts provided the inspiration for the Canon Table frames" and that "the Christian artists drew from this source for definite symbolical reasons".[9] There are no Jewish biblical manuscripts surviving from before the

ninth or tenth centuries because by that time the Massoretic text had been established making all earlier texts obsolete. Surviving texts dating from that time, however, show framing arches as ornament around prefatory or dedicatory materials usually in the front of the book. Smith cites several colophon pages from Jewish manuscripts which indicate the sanctity of the texts. One colophon cited by Smith reads, "May God in His mercy open for him [that is the reader] the gates of understanding." Others refer to the manuscript itself as the "Divine Sanctuary" or the "Sanctuary of Jehovah". The sanctity of the Penteteuch may well have influenced the way in which Christians viewed the Gospels, the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, in that it too was sacred. Smith shows that the thinking of Eusebius of Caeserea, the developer of the Canon Tables, supports this idea of fulfillment and the idea that the Word of God is revealed gradually to the minds of the faithful. As she states:

> This sense of a gradual realization of hidden truth, to be revealed only through God's power, may have determined the character of the Canon frames themselves, which are viewed one after another in succession and thereby suggest stages of discovery, illumination, and revelation as one approaches heavenly truth. The Canon frames apparently were meant to suggest the mysterious dimension of Christ's Gospel that lies behind and beyond the written word.[10]

I would suggest that this is also the purpose of

the initial pages and the carpet page. The carpet page is placed before the actual text of the Gospel begins, but after the Preliminaries, thereby acting as a curtain which must be pulled aside to reveal the Word of God. The carpet page comes before the Word; the initial page begins to reveal the meaning of the Word. The first letters of an initial page dominate and are usually followed by a few letters which secure continuity from the first word to the body of the Gospel on subsequent pages. The reader must cross over the carpet page to find the Gospel. He must then encounter the initial page as he begins to read the text, and, as he reads, may be given the insight to truly understand the Word of God.

The Portrait of St. John may also reflect this idea of hidden mysteries. The head, hands and feet which emerge from behind the frame could be a symbol of the hidden mystery of the Word of God, the unknowable, the spiritual. Through the writings of the Evangelists, and ultimately through Christ, the Word is made available to the faithful. Thus in St. John's left hand is his Gospel in book form and in his right a quilled pen, the means by which the Gospel was written. The artist's symbolism seems clear: behind the written word is the hidden message which one must search for.

The writings of Clement of Alexandria also speak of the hidden mystery of the Word of God. One chapter in Book Five of <u>On the Miscellanies</u> speaks of the "mystic

meaning of the Tabernacle and its furniture".[11] Within the Tabernacle is found the Holy of Holies separated from the rest of the Tabernacle by a veil. The instructions for the building of the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies are found in Exodus 26. Verse 33 states: "And you shall hang the veil from the clasp, and bring the ark of the testimony in thither within the veil; and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy." The ark, containing the Law of Moses, was hidden behind the veil, because it contained the holy Word. Only when the veil was drawn aside was the Word made available to man. The New Law as written in the Gospels is also holy and therefore set apart and hidden from man. It appears that the veil has been replaced by the Canon Tables and the initial pages. To pull aside these pages, to turn them, is to enter the most holy of places, the Sanctuary of the Scriptures, and to begin to have the hidden mysteries revealed.

This idea of the Gospels enclosing the most holy of holies of the New Testament may not be very far-fetched. The Codex Amiatinus contains on folios 2V and 3R a representation of the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies. (fig. 18) The outer edge of the two pages shows a curtain hung on posts much in the same way Exodus 26 instructs it to be hung. In the center is a rectangular box in which is placed the ark. The earliest known Jewish manuscripts have an image of the Tabernacle at the beginning. A Jewish

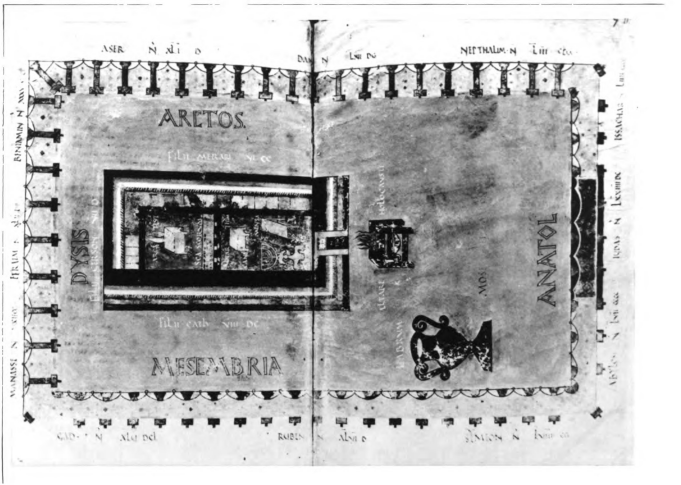

Figure 18: Codex Amiatinus, Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1, Tabernacle in the Temple at Jerusalem, folios 2V and 3R. (from Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Centuries by J. J. G. Alexander, plate 23)

colophon page actually refers to the manuscript in which it is contained as the "Sanctuary of Jehovah". When Christians began to illuminate their Bibles the interpretation of the Old Testament as being God's sanctuary undoubtedly influenced the thinking of the Christians in their interpretation of the New Testament. The Temptation of Christ on the Temple may illustrate this continuing thought of the New Law fulfilling the Old Law. The placement of Christ on top of the Temple in the Temptation is most likely a symbol. He is not shown full length, as is most common in Kells; only his head and arms are shown. Christ and the New Law are thus supported by the Temple, the Old Law. The New Law reigns supreme and is born out of the Old Law, making Christ the head of the Church.

Moreover, the unity of the four Gospels is stressed in Kells over and above the importance of each individual Gospel. The Canon Tables reiterate this unity in a conventional way, noting, as they do, the correspondences among all four books. Most significantly, before three of the Gospels is placed a page containing the symbols of the four Evangelists. The page is missing in the Gospel of St. Luke but has probably been lost or was not finished. This image of all four symbols on one page is a unique feature of Kells.

There appears, then, to have been a very old tradition of viewing a Biblical manuscript as sacred. It

existed in Jewish thought as seen in the separation of the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Tabernacle, and was manifested in Jewish biblical manuscripts.[12] The writings of Clement reveal that this belief extended into Christian thought. Christians applied to the New Testament the Old Testament passages in Exodus 26 concerning the Holy of Holies as containing that which is sacred and hidden. The meaning of the Word of God in the New Testament is also hidden and therefore sacred. As Clement states: "...in accordance with the method of concealment, the truly sacred Word...[is] deposited in the shrine of truth, and by the Hebrews [concealed] by a veil."[13] What is this "shrine of truth"? Clement writes: "...we also say that truth is something, yet we have never seen any such objects with our eyes, but with our mind alone. Now the Word of God says, 'I am the truth.' The Word is then to be contemplated by the mind."[14] As Smith states in regard to the Canon Tables, the writings of Eusebius show a belief in a gradual revealing of the Word of God to the contemplative mind. This is reiterated in St. Matthew 11:27, "no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

One could ask whether the monks were actually responsible for the entire production of the Book of Kells, or whether there were perhaps secular craftsmen involved in the production of the illuminations. The monks were in contact with the secular world and no doubt were

exposed to its crafts, but all evidence points to the monks as the sole producers. The large scriptoriums which were equipped for book production, the emphasis on education, and the communal spirit within the monasteries all suggest that the monks were indeed responsible for the illuminations. It is apparent that a profound faith was involved in their production. The monks seem to have used the illuminations as a means to fulfill the need to express their faith, spirit, and vitality. The Irish monks worked at finding the hidden meanings in the Word of God through their prayer and through the study of the Bible. Thus they hoped that the hidden mysteries would be imparted to them. The structure of life allowing for prayer filled them with a spirituality which overflowed into their art. Their faith illuminated their endeavors, their art, and conversely this art reflects back that inner faith and vitality which they experienced. The four Gospels had long been interpreted as a manifestation of Christ, the Word of God Incarnate. The Book of Kells, a vessel for the four Gospels, was the perfect and dynamic expression of the monks' deep seated, inner spirituality.

NOTES

[1]Kathleen Hughes, Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972) p. 198.

[2]Clement of Alexandria, On the Miscellanies, Books II-VIII, The Rev. William Wilson, trans. (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1867) Book Five, Chapter 11.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Gerhart B. Ladner, "Ad Imaginem Dei: The Image of Man in Medieval Art" in Modern Perspectives in Western Art History, W. Eugene Kleinbauer, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971) pp.432-61.

[7]Ibid., p. 438.

[8]Rev. John Ryan, Irish Monasticism, Origins and Early Development (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1931) p. 7.

[9]Molly Smith, "On the Original Meaning of the Canon Table Frames", paper presented at the St. Louis Conference of Manuscript Studies, 1975.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Clement of Alexandria, Book V, Chapter 4.

[12]See B. Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, plate 1, for an early Jewish manuscript showing the Tabernacle and the Holy of Holies.

[13]Clement of Alexandria, Book V, Chapter 4.

[14]Ibid., Book V, Chapter 3.

CONCLUSION

This study of the Book of Kells may pose more questions than it begins to answer. It has attempted to show that perhaps Near Eastern manuscripts and the meanings and thoughts behind them may have influenced the Columban monks in their interpretation of the Bible. It has also set forth the theory that the art in the Book of Kells is related to the life-style of the Columban monks.

It appears that Celtic manuscripts should be re-evaluated in the light of the evidence of Near Eastern manuscripts and monastic traditions. Perhaps if the iconography of Near Eastern manuscripts, both Judaic and Christian, were better understood, it would shed some light on the iconography of the complex, puzzling, and fascinating Book of Kells.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adomnan's Life of Columba, ed. and trans. by A. O. and M. O. Anderson. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1961.

Alexander, J. J. G. Insular Manuscripts, 6th to 9th Century. London: Harvey Miller, 1978.

Alexander, J. J. G. The Decorated Letter. New York: George Braziller, 1978.

Anwyl, Sir E. "Celtic Heathenism in the British Isles." Cambridge Medieval History, vol. II, (1936): pp. 472-79.

Bede. A History of the English Church and People. Trans. and with intro. by Leo Sherley-Price, revised by R. E. Lathem. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968.

Bonser, W. An Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Bibliography, 450-1087. 2 vols. Berkeley: 1957.

Brown, Peter. The Book of Kells. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

Brown, T. J. "Northumbria and the Book of Kells." Anglo-Saxon England I. Peter Clemoes, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972. pp. 219-46

Burkitt, Frances Crawford. "Kells, Durrow and Lindisfarne." Antiquity 9 (March, 1935): 33-37.

Calkins, Robert G. Monuments of Medieval Art. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979.

Clement of Alexandria. On The Miscellanies, Books II-VIII. The Rev. William Wilson, trans. Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1867.

Chadwick, Nora. The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

DePaor, Marie and Liam. Early Christian Ireland. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958.

Diringer, David. The Illuminated Book. New York: Philosophical Library, 1967.

Doran, Joseph M. "The enamelling and metallesque origin of the ornament of the Book of Durrow." Burlington Magazine 13 (1908): pp. 138-45.

Duke, John A. The Columban Church. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957.

Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Cenannensis 3 vols. Bern: Urs-Graf, 1951.

Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Durmachensis 2 vols. Olten: Urs-Graf, 1960.

Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Lindisfarnensis 2 vols. Olten: Urs-Graf, 1956-60.

Finlay, Ian. Columba. London: Victory Gollancz Ltd., 1979.

Flower, Robin. "Irish High Crosses." Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 17 (1954): pp. 87-97.

Friend, A. M. "The Canon Tables of the Book of Kells." Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter. W. Koehler, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939.

Fox, Sir Cyril. Pattern and Purpose, A Survey of Early Celtic Art in Britain. Cardiff: The National Museum of Wales, 1958.

Gwynn, Aubrey. "Some Notes on the History of the Book of Kells." Irish Historical Studies 9 (1954): pp. 131-61.

Harbison, Peter. Irish Art and Architecture. London: Thames and Hudson, 1978.

Henry, Francoise. Irish Art During the Viking Invasions. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.

Henry, Francoise. Irish Art in the Early Christian Period. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965.

Henry, Francoise. The Book of Kells. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

Herbert, J. A. Illuminated Manuscripts. New York: Burt Franklin, originally published in London, 1911.

Hoyt, Robert S. Life and Thought in the Early Middle Ages. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1976.

Hughes, Kathleen. "Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages." Studies in Scottish and Welsh Sources, David Dumville, ed. Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1980.

Hughes, Kathleen. Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972.

Hughes, Kathleen. "Evidence for Contact between the Churches of the Irish and English from the synod of Whitby to the Viking Age." England Before the Conquest, Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock, Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971. pp. 49-67.

Hughes, Kathleen. The Church in Early Irish Society. London: Methuen E. Co. Ltd., 1966.

Hughes, Kathleen. "The Distribution of Irish Scriptoria and Centers of Learning from 730 to 1111." Studies in the Early British Church. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.

Jackson, Kenneth H. A Celtic Miscellany, Translations from the Celtic Literatures. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971.

Jones, Leslie Webber. "Pricking Manuscripts: The Instruments and their Significance." Speculum 21 (October 1946): pp. 389-403.

Ladner, Gerhart B. "Ad Imaginem Dei: The Image of Man in Medieval Art." in Modern Perspectives in Western Art History by W. Eugene Kleinbauer. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971. pp. 432-61.

Lowe, E. A. Codices Latini Antiquiores. Part II. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935.

MacDermott, M. "The Kells Crosier." Archaeologia xcvi (1955): pp. 59-113.

McGurk, Patrick. "Two Notes on the Book of Kells and Its Relation to Other Insular Gospel Books." Scriptorium 9 (1955): pp. 105-07.

McNeill, John T. The Celtic Churches, A History A.D. 200-1200. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

MacNiocaill, Gearoid. Ireland Before the Vikings. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, Ltd., 1972.

Merton, Thomas. The Climate of Monastic Prayer. Spencer, Massachusetts: Cistercian Publications, 1969.

Metropolitan Museum of Art. Treasures of Early Irish Art. New York, 1977.

Murphy, Gerard, ed. and trans. Early Irish Lyrics. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

Narkiss, Bezalel. Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts. New York: Encyclopaedia Judaica Jerusalem, The MacMillan Company, 1969.

Nees, Lawrence. "A Fifth Century Book Cover and the Origin of the Four Evangelist Symbols Page in the Book of Durrow." Gesta 17 (no. 1, 1978): pp. 3-8.

New Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967-79.

Nordenfalk, Carl. "An Illustrated Diatessaron." Art Bulletin 50 (1968): pp. 119-40.

Nordenfalk, Carl. Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting. New York: George Braziller, 1977.

O'Sullivan, William. "The Donor of the Book of Kells." Irish Historical Studies vol. 11 (no. 41, 1958): pp. 5-7.

Picton, Harold. "Kells portraits and eastern ornament." Burlington Magazine 73 (1938): pp. 121-22.

Robb, David M. The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript. New York: A. S. Barnes & Company, 1973.

Ryan, Rev. John. Irish Monasticism, Origins and Early Development. Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1931.

Scherman, Katharine. The Flowering of Ireland. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981.

Schiller, Gertrude. Iconography of Christian Art, 2 vols. Greensich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971.

Smith, Molly. "On the Original Meaning of the Canon Table Frames." Paper presented at the St. Louis Conference on Manuscript Studies, 1975.

Sullivan, Sir Edward. The Book of Kells, 3rd edition. London: "The Studio Limited", 1927.

Swenson, Inga Christine. "The Symmetry Potentials of the Ornamental Pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels." Gesta 17 (no. 2, 1978): pp. 9-17.

Thompson, Daniel V. The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956.

Tierney, Brian. The Middle Ages, Sources of Medieval History, vol. 1. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

Weitzman, Kurt. Age of Spirituality. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.

Werner, Martin. "The Madonna and Child Miniature in the Book of Kells." Art Bulletin (nos. 1 & 2, 1972): pp. 1-23, part I; pp. 129-29, part II.