

The Book of Kells and its Analogical Vision of Reality

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The Book of Kells is a famous illuminated Gospel in Old Latin (rather than Vulgate Latin) that probably dates back to the eighth or early ninth century. According to Francoise Henry, it belongs to "a distinctive group of decorated manuscripts whose connections are chiefly in Ireland, Scotland and in the monastery of Lindisfarne in the north of England." The group includes such other texts as the Book of Durrow, the Echternach and Maihingen Gospels, the Book of Lindisfarne, the Lichfield Gospels, the Book of Armagh, the Book of Mac Regol, the Grammar of Priscian, and the Book of Mac Durnan. "Insular" is the abbreviated label referring to the style of illumination of this group of manuscripts. The Book of Kells was originally located in a monastery at Kells established on the coast of Ireland in the early ninth century by monks of Iona when the Vikings invaded. It was probably constructed at Kells, at least, in part. The book has been damaged over the years. It is missing its cover and at least a dozen pages of illumination.) It nevertheless remains a beautiful text and is available for viewing at Trinity College Dublin.

The book's full page illuminations include portraits of the four evangelists (Christian Gospel writers) and other holy persons, featuring animal symbols, foliage, and abstract patterns in complex relation. In some cases, such as that of the famous Chi-Ro illumination representing Christ, a single initial, featuring a highly complex abstract pattern, perhaps also interspersed with twisted animal symbols, forms the subject matter of an entire full page. An abstract pattern by itself, elsewhere in the book, can also occupy a whole page. The illustrations within the text routinely include initial letters illuminated with abstract patterns and twisted human and animal symbols.

In this presentation, we will explore how the Kells imagery communicates a very specific idea of the character of reality, one that stresses self-similarity throughout the whole and infinite possibilities for transmutation and transformation. These features characterize both its physical and spiritual standpoints. In its preoccupation with seeing the form of the whole reflected analogically at lower levels, the book is deeply Platonic as well as Christian; and its particular imagination of reality challenges modern viewers to compare their own presuppositions about the nature of the cosmos and the relationship between the physical and spiritual planes. It is a text to be meditated and digested, pondered and discussed; and so we will do in our time with it.