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A Project on Medieval Manuscripts: The Book of Kells

1. Where to start?

When you're thinking about how to start your project, it can help to start by looking at something quite small and seeing what kinds of ideas and questions this prompts. Then you can start following up some of those questions.

We decided to start with a single page from the medieval Irish **manuscript** known as the Book of Kells – but you could carry out a similar investigation to this one by starting with any manuscript page, or another artefact, such as a carved stone or a piece of jewellery or a weapon.

The whole of the Book of Kells has been digitised by Trinity College Dublin, where the manuscript is kept. As a starting-point, go to their [website](#) and scroll down to find [folio 34r](#).

[https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=MS58_003v]

Look at folio 34r. What sorts of things immediately strike you about this page? You might think about the layout, or the patterns, or the colours. Can you see any words on this page? Can you see any pictures of people or animals?

- In terms of layout, you might notice that all of the decoration has been fitted tightly together, with every available space filled by some kind of ornamentation.
- In terms of patterns, there are lots to choose from! You might notice that there are a lot of spiral patterns, or interwoven lines (this is called **interlace design**), or red dots around some of the outlines. What might the purpose of this red dotting have been?
- In terms of colours, you might notice that the page is very brightly coloured. There are lots of reds and yellows and some blues.
- There is some writing at the bottom of the page, but did you notice the symbol that takes up most of the page? This is called the **Chi Rho** and is made up of the two Greek letter X (chi) and P (rho). These are the first two letters of the Greek word for 'Christ', *Khristos*, and so are used as a symbol to represent Christ. Can you spot the X and the P?

Let's look a bit more closely at the page (you can zoom in on the image).

- There are some human-like figures down the left-hand side of the X. Who do you think they might be? And why might the artist have chosen to include them?
- There are some animals down at the bottom of the page, next to the bottom of the X. What sort of animals are they? Can you work out what they are doing?

2. What sorts of questions could I ask?

There are lots of different sorts of questions that you might have thought of while looking at folio 34r, and that you would now like to follow up further.

Here are a few examples of questions that we thought of. Depending on how thoroughly you want to look into them, each question could turn into a whole research project of its own, or it might just provide you with some useful background information.

- [Why is it called the Book of Kells?](#)
You might assume that the name of a manuscript refers to where it was produced, but this isn't always the case. So you could do some research into where the Book of Kells was produced, which would provide important background information. This might also lead on to the next question: **why** was the Book of Kells was produced?
- [Why was the Book of Kells produced?](#)
The extravagant decoration of the page we started with suggests that this was a very important manuscript, that would have taken a long time to produce. But was it created for a particular purpose? And is it possible to work out how this manuscript might have been used from the way it has been laid out and decorated?
- [What can the Book of Kells tell us about Christianity in medieval Ireland?](#)
The page we started with is mostly taken up with a Chi Rho monogram, a symbol for Christ. You might have spotted some other Christian imagery on this page as well. Following on from the previous question, we might start on the basis that the Book of Kells was intended to convey a Christian message. But which particular aspects of Christianity are brought out in the decoration of the Book of Kells, and what can this tell us about what was important in the practice of Christianity in medieval Ireland?
- [How were medieval manuscripts produced?](#)
You might have been impressed by the intricate designs and different colours on the page we started with. So you might like to find out more about how medieval manuscripts were made. How were they assembled and planned? Where did they get the different colours from?
- [What possibilities can the digitisation of manuscripts offer?](#)
This whole investigation is possible because Trinity College Dublin have digitised the Book of Kells and made it available online. But are there any disadvantages or difficulties associated with the digitisation of manuscripts? And how could we use digitised images in the future, to help promote more research into this period?

You can either work through these questions in order, or just pick one that interests you. In each section, we will look at how you might go about researching the answer to that question, and how this might lead to further questions or ideas.

We will look at resources which are available online, and consider how far they are reliable sources of information. However, it is difficult to carry out a project like this without also consulting books and journal articles. You could go to your local university library and find out if it's possible for school students to access their collections. You could also look out for cheap second-hand copies of books on Amazon or AbeBooks – these can be as little as 1p + postage!

3. Why is it called the Book of Kells?

A good place to start looking for information is the Trinity College Dublin [website](#) itself. Seeing as they own the manuscript, the information they provide should be accurate.

[<https://www.tcd.ie/library/manuscripts/book-of-kells.php>]

TIP: A good starting-point for finding about any manuscript is the website of the library or museum where that manuscript is kept.

Here we find out that the Book of Kells may not have actually been produced at Kells. It has also been linked to the monastery on the island of Iona, founded in 561 by an Irishman, St Colum Cille. In 806, monks from Iona were forced by Viking raids to flee to Kells in Co. Meath, Ireland, after which the two monasteries were governed as a single community for many years. According to the Trinity College Dublin website, the Book of Kells seems to have been written close to the year 800, probably in one of these two locations, or partially in both. But we also find out that not all scholars agree about this: others suggest that it was produced in Northumbria or Pictland.

To find out more detail about the origins of the Book of Kells, a useful book to consult is Bernard Meehan's illustrated guide, *The Book of Kells: An Illustrated Introduction to the Manuscript in Trinity College Dublin*.

You might also want to find out more about Iona. Look it up on a map and think about where it is in relation to Ireland. How easy would interactions with Ireland have been?

We know a lot about the life of St Colum Cille (also known by the Latin name Columba) and his monastery on Iona from the writings of Adomnán, a seventh-century abbot of Iona, writing about a century after Colum Cille's death in 597. You can read Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* online through University College Cork's [Corpus of Electronic Texts](https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T201040/) [https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T201040/]. Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* is a very valuable **primary source**, which can give us a lot of information about Christian practices and values in seventh-century Iona.

4. Why was the Book of Kells produced?

To work out why the Book of Kells was produced, we first need to discover what the manuscript actually contains. Again the Trinity College Dublin [website](#) can give us some introductory information.

Here we learn that the main text contained in the Book of Kells consists of the four Gospels, accompanied by some other religious material. So we can conclude that the manuscript must have been produced with a religious purpose in mind. But what role would it have played in religious life?

There are several factors we can consider simply by looking at the [manuscript](#). Look through the manuscript folios now (and the Trinity College Dublin information) and think about what these factors can tell us about the purpose of manuscript.

- how big is the manuscript? how easy would it be to carry around?
- how much ornamentation is there throughout the manuscript, and how many full-page decorations like folio 34r? how would this affect the value and status of the manuscript?
- where might a book of this size and lavishness be displayed? how might it have been used in religious services?
- do you think it was intended for public use or private, personal use?

To get more of a sense about how different manuscripts were used, it might be useful to compare the Book of Kells with other early medieval manuscripts.

For example, the Lindisfarne Gospels is another large-scale, elaborate manuscript. You can view this manuscript online through the British Library [website](#), and they've also got some introductory material about it [here](#).

[<http://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=fdbcc772-3e21-468d-8ca1-9c192f0f939c&type=book>]

[<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/lindisfarne-gospels>]

By contrast, the Book of Dimma is a much smaller manuscript, although also containing a text of the Gospels. You can view this manuscript online through the Trinity College Dublin [website](#).

[https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?folder_id=1659&pidtopage=MS59_001&entry_point=1]

Look through these different manuscripts online, and try and find some other contrasting examples. What differences can you spot between them? Think about their size, how much decoration there is, how large the writing is and how close together. How well-used do the pages look? What indications might these factors give about how these different manuscripts were used and what they were intended for?

5. What can the Book of Kells tell us about Christianity in medieval Ireland?

We know that the Book of Kells is a manuscript containing the four Gospels, intended to convey the Christian message. But is there anything about its particular choice of imagery and decoration which can tell us which aspects of Christianity the creators of the manuscript wanted to emphasise? This might give us clues about specific concerns or themes that were considered important in medieval Ireland at this time, or at least in the monastic community where this manuscript was produced.

Look through the [manuscript](#). Can you spot any religious symbols or characters?

Here are some symbols you might have noticed:

- **The Cross:** This is a key Christian symbol, representing Christ's death and resurrection which provided salvation to mankind, according to Christian teaching. The medieval Irish words for 'Cross' are *croch* [[dil.ie/13037](http://www.dil.ie/13037)] or *crois* [[dil.ie/13123](http://www.dil.ie/13123)], derived from Latin *crux* (you can look these words up in the Electronic Dictionary of the Irish language).
- **Angels:** The medieval Irish word for 'angel' is *aingel* [[dil.ie/1364](http://www.dil.ie/1364)], derived from Latin *angelus*.
- **The Book:** The medieval Irish word for 'book' is *lebor* [[dil.ie/29673](http://www.dil.ie/29673)], derived from Latin *liber*.

You might notice that lots of the medieval Irish words for religious figures, items and symbols are derived from Latin words. Why do you think this is?

The medieval Irish word for 'gospel' is *soiscél* [[dil.ie/38383](http://www.dil.ie/38383)], formed from *so* 'good' + *scél* 'story, news'. This is actually equivalent in meaning to the English word 'gospel'. Try and find out the Old English word which lies behind 'gospel', and where this meaning 'good news' originally came from.

You might have spotted some of those symbols, but it seems likely that there are lots of other symbols hidden in the ornamentation which you can't spot immediately, or need specialist knowledge to understand. This is where you need to do some further research, looking online or going to your local university library. You could search for news articles about the Book of Kells, or search using Google Scholar, which specifically searches for academic publications.

One article we found was by Suzanne Lewis, entitled 'Sacred Calligraphy: the Chi Rho Page in the Book of Kells'. You can find this online if your school or library has access to [JSTOR](http://www.jstor.org).

[<https://www.jstor-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/27831075>]

Lewis emphasises the prominence of the **Eucharist** in the imagery of the Book of Kells. Do you remember the mice from folio 34r? Look again at the disc they're holding between them. Can you see a cross on it? Lewis suggests that this disc is intended to represent the **host**, the bread used in the Eucharist. Look through the rest of the manuscript. See if you can spot any other discs with crosses on them incorporated into the decoration. The other key eucharistic symbol is the chalice, holding the wine – you might be able to spot some chalices as well.

You could do some further research into Christian symbolism in the Book of Kells. One place to start might be this [website](http://www.bookofkells-ashleyjaneleonard.weebly.com/index.html), which is useful because it contains a bibliography, suggesting further reading. Websites with bibliographies are often more reliable than those without, since this shows that the website author has based their material on wider scholarly discussion.

[<http://bookofkells-ashleyjaneleonard.weebly.com/index.html>]

6. How were medieval manuscripts produced?

Rather than looking at the content of the Book of Kells, you might be more interested in *how* this manuscript and others like it were made. One useful place to start looking is on the websites of museums and libraries that contain medieval manuscripts, since they will often provide information about how their manuscripts came to be produced. There are a number of videos about making medieval manuscripts produced by the [British Library](http://www.bl.uk) and the [Getty Museum](http://www.getty.edu).

[<https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/videos>]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuNfdHNTv9o>]

Look through the pages of the Book of Kells. What can you work out about how this manuscript was put together and designed? You might like to think about some of these questions:

- how does the text interact with the illuminated letters and images? how are they laid out on the page?
- which colours have been used? You could look up the medieval Irish words for these colours by typing the English words into the search box of the [Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language](http://www.dil.ie/) [<http://www.dil.ie/>].
- are there any traces of the manufacturing process? Look out for places where holes were made in the **vellum** during the process of stretching and scraping the calfskin. You can tell if they were there before the text was added because the scribe will have written around them.

If you're interested in this aspect of medieval manuscripts, you might think about doing a creative project. For example, you could attempt to reproduce some aspects of medieval bookmaking – learning a medieval script, or reproducing a medieval illumination.

7. What possibilities can the digitisation of manuscripts offer?

By now, you've probably got used to using the digitised versions of the various manuscripts we've been discussing. So perhaps you might like to think about how you've found this experience. Here are some questions to consider:

- what are the pros and cons of the digitisation of medieval manuscripts?
- what has having access to the digital versions enabled you to do that you otherwise wouldn't have been able to do?
- have there been any limitations to the digital images? are there details that you think you might only be able to see if you consulted the physical manuscript?
- were there differences in the presentation of the digital images between websites hosted by different institutions? which methods of presentation worked best and why? could you suggest any improvements?
- do you think the most important role of libraries and museums is to preserve their collections or to make them accessible? how far are these roles conflicting and how does digitisation affect this issue?

Institutions and academics are continually experimenting with new ways to make use of the digital forum as a means of exploring medieval (or earlier) manuscripts and the texts that they contain. You could design a project around the different possibilities that a website can offer for the study of medieval texts and manuscripts. What are the advantages of presenting this material in a website as compared with presenting it in a book? What are the disadvantages?

You could start by comparing the approaches of websites like these:

- [eSenchas: An Electronic Resource for the Study of Medieval Irish Texts](https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/esenchas/)
[<https://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/esenchas/>]
- [Saint Patrick's Confessio](https://www.confessio.ie/)
[<https://www.confessio.ie/>]
- [Codex Sinaiticus](http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/)
[<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>]

How effective are these websites in their presentation? What sorts of resources and design features have they incorporated?

Glossary

- **MANUSCRIPT** – the term **manuscript** refers to a document that has been written by hand rather than printing. This was the only means of producing books in the early medieval period – it was time-consuming and so very expensive.
- **FOLIO** – the term **folio** is used in terms of page numbering for some manuscripts. A folio refers to a single leaf, both front and back. The front and back are distinguished by the terms **recto** (the front or right-hand side) and **verso** (the back or left-hand side). So to find a particular place in a manuscript, you need to know its folio number and whether it's recto or verso. This is written as 'folio 34r' or 'f. 34r'. In contrast, some manuscripts are numbered according to their pages. A **page** only refers to one side of the leaf, i.e. the right-hand side will be page 1 and if you turn over, this will be page 2 – so there's no need for recto and verso.
- **VELLUM** – prepared calfskin, used for the pages of manuscripts.
- **EUCHARIST** – The Eucharist is a central part of Christian worship, in which Christians share bread and wine, which commemorates the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood in the Crucifixion. The bread usually takes the form of a small disc incised with a cross, called the **host**. The wine is usually presented in a metal cup called a **chalice**.