A Light in the Darkness: Theologies of the Book of Kells

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I begin this essay with a 10th century riddle and will end it with a 9th century poem, both of which illume the monastic world of the book and of learning, faith, and art in the first millennium in Ireland. So, riddle me this and say what I am:

> One of my enemies ended my life
> sapped my world strength
> afterward soaked me
> wetted in water
> set me in the sun, where soon I lost
> the hairs which I had
> and then the hard knife edge
> cut me
> fingers folded me, and feather of bird
> traced all over my tawny surface
> with drops of delight.
> Then, for trappings, a man
> bound me with boards, bent
> hide over me
> glossed me with gold so I glistened
> wondrous in smithwork.
> Useful to mortals
> Mighty my name is
> A help to heroes, and holy am I.
> Say what I am.[1]

You are a calf that becomes a book. The riddle-poem is found in the Exeter Book, a collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and it describes the process of

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creating an illuminated manuscript such as the Book of Kells, beginning with killing a calf, "ending its life," and preparing its skin as vellum (from *vitulus*, Latin for calf) by soaking it in a bath of lime, scraping off the hair and fat, and stretching and drying it before cutting it into folios or pages. The folios are then "traced all over" with calligraphic script and decorative imagery and initial letters using "feather of bird," a writing instrument made from the tail feather of a goose or swan stripped to its shaft and sharpened at the quill to create a nib. Inks, "drops of delight," were produced from carbon or from the interaction of iron salts and crushed oak tree galls, varied pigments from clays and minerals, and dyes extracted from lichen, berries and even insects.[2] The manuscript was finally bound between boards, "trapping" it, and then placed in a shrine decorated with smithwork. The poem captures the brute physicality, almost violence, of building the book organically from the ground up, wresting it from nature. Christianity abandoned the scroll and adapted the codex format early on, becoming a cult of the book, with the Bible being the ultimate book of that cult. Medieval monasteries had to be their own publishing houses. Missals were needed for mass, psalters for the liturgy of the hours, and textbooks of Latin grammar for the school. Monks made the book, wrote the book, and in the case of the Book of Kells venerated the book. Books were important because they carried on the story of Jesus Christ. When these books were "lit up" with colourful imagery, ornate borders and decorated letters they were called "illuminated" manuscripts. Illuminated manuscripts grew from love of the book and of Scripture, specifically the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, sacred reading, a slow, prayerful reading of the text, falling in love with it, allowing your life to flow into it. There are more than forty images of books within Kells itself, books within a book.

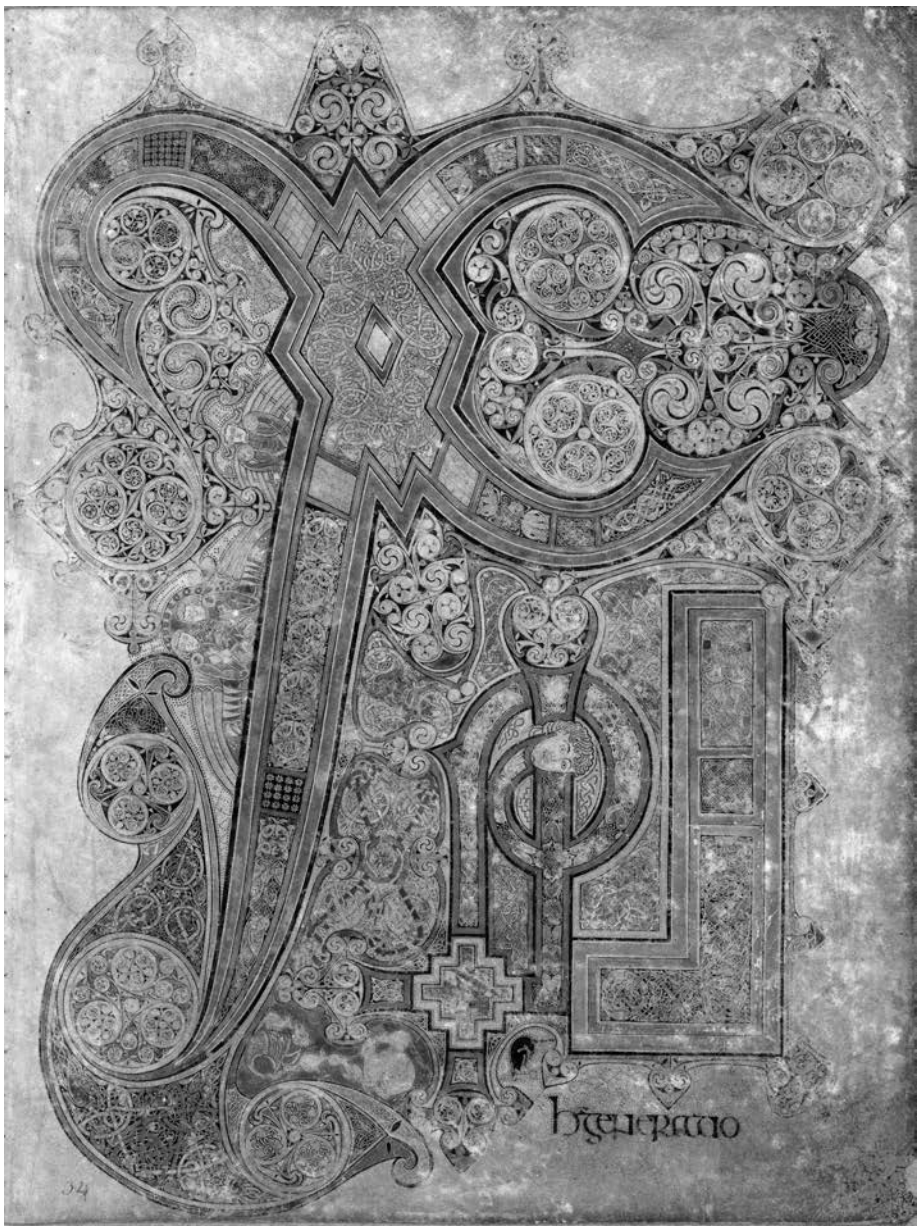
The Book of Kells is one of seven early Irish gospel books held in the Old Library at Trinity College, Dublin, and has caught the public imagination as an emblem of medieval European art and culture. In the Irish collective consciousness, according to Bernard Meehan, "it symbolizes the power of learning, the impact of Christianity on the life of the country, and the spirit of artistic imagination."[3] Each year half a million people queue to see this 9th century religious manuscript; they are people of all faiths and none, and they want to see a Christian book that somehow transcends its orthodoxy and touches something universal in the human heart. In the hushed darkness of the treasury room they gaze silently on it. When I went to see it last year a woman whispered to me "It's perfect, isn't it?" Twelve hundred years after its creation it is still a catalyst for contemplation. What is the allure of the Book of Kells and what can it reveal to us about the power of faith, learning and art in dark times?

The story of the Book of Kells begins about 800AD, not in Kells but on Iona, an island off the west coast of Scotland and site of a monastery founded

by St Colum Cille in 563. It was only after a Viking raid on Iona in 806 and the slaughter of sixty-eight monks that a new monastery was founded in Ireland, in the relative safety of Kells in County Meath, on the site of royal hill-fort owned by the southern branch of Colum Cille's family. Here the manuscript was completed – a distinct change in writing style suggests relocation. The first mention in writing of the Book of Kells is in 1007; the Annals of Ulster, a record of medieval Ireland, describes it as "the most precious object in the western world" and tells us that the book was stolen in 1006 for its ornamental shrine, which was never recovered. Fortunately the book itself was found three months later, hidden under a sod of turf, and it remained in Kells up to the middle of the 17th century. In 1653, during the violent upheaval of the Cromwellian period, the book was sent to Dublin for safekeeping. In 1661 the Bishop of Meath and Vice Chancellor of Trinity College, Henry Jones, gifted the book to the university where it has been on display since the mid 19th century.[4]

Kells is fundamentally a gospel book; it contains the four Gospels in Latin based primarily on the Vulgate of St Jerome. Text and images fill 340 folios, each with a *recto* (front of a folio) and a *verso* (back of a folio) making 680 pages in total. Apart from the primary text of the gospels there are supplementary texts that act as exegetical tools in the study and understanding of Scripture: "canon tables" or concordances of gospel passages, summaries of the gospel narratives, and prefaces characterising the four evangelists. However it is the lavish and brilliant decoration that makes Kells special. Historiated initials and interlinear images of plants and animals bring the text to life, and there are full pages of decoration for the symbols of the four evangelists, the portrait of the Virgin and Child, narrative scenes such as the temptation of Christ, and for the first words of each gospel, the most famous being Matthew's account of the nativity, the *Chi Rho* folio, so called because the monogram *XPI*, representing Christ, swells to fill the entire page.[5]

In Kells, word and image are responsive to one another, word inspiring image and image commenting on and drawing out the latent meanings of the words. Often letters *become* images, and images become letters. The imagery is not just superficial decoration designed to make the book attractive. It is loaded with symbolism and deep theological significance. It wants to draw you into its world not just intellectually but visually, viscerally and emotionally. It is immersive and contemplative. The words are a copy, a transcription of the gospels, and in that the scribes had no leeway to alter or augment the sacred text, though the calligraphy itself is masterful art; but in the imagery there was freedom for creative and playful *transcreation* of the text. Creative freedom and imagination enters with the imagery, fruit of *lectio* of the text. The book is not just illustrated; its imagery illuminates the text visually through its decoration



Chi Rho folio, 34r. © 2017 The Board of Trinity College Dublin.

and colour, and semantically with theological meaning and insight. The Book of Kells is a work of iconography and much academic research has focused on it as a work of art and as a cultural and historical treasure, but it is also a book of theology and teaching, of *sacra doctrina*. Kells wants to tell a story, that of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the life and message of Christ and its salvific meaning for humanity. It is in the imagery, and in the interplay between word and image, we find its theological hermeneutic. As the historian Jennifer O'Reilly states, "the decoration is not a visual aid for the illiterate but a coded text for the initiated."[6] This coding shows the theological sophistication underpinning the book. The monks who encoded and decoded it had to be literate not only in Latin but in the theological vocabulary of the time. What the Welsh medieval historian Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223) wrote in the 12th century about another gospel book could equally be applied to Kells: "Take the trouble to look very closely, and penetrate with your eyes to the secret of the artistry."[7]

The Book of Kells was a luxury art work into which the monastery poured huge resources: it is estimated that one hundred and eight-five calves were slaughtered for its vellum. Why this investment? The book is too complex in its design and layout to be read as a lectionary or for study; in addition there are many errors, variant spellings and some repeated words or lines due to eye-skip, with corrections made later in red ink. More likely is that it was an object of contemplation, the full page decorations resembling eastern icons where the viewer is the vanishing point, gazed at by Christ, or Mary, or John the Evangelist. However its primary function was liturgical, ceremonial and processional; illuminated letters signal the start of passages and there is a rubric on a page of John's gospel in red ink, *initium*, "the beginning," indicating where the reader should begin the reading. The book was a luminous presence at the centre of the monastic community's worship, a visible and tangible reminder of the authority of the gospels as the Word of God. So the Book of Kells is a relic, a sacred object that points towards the divine. The monastic and wider community in Kells venerated it specifically as a relic of St Colum Cille; the Annals call it the "great Gospel book of Colum Cille" and it may have been created to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of his death in 797 A.D.

Writing and the miraculous were synonymous in medieval Ireland. Books were believed to have curative powers, even to give protection in battle. This is not surprising given that, until the arrival of Christianity and Latin in the 5th century, Ireland was an oral culture. Christianity brought literacy and learning. "The intensive effort made to study Latin in Ireland was focused on providing access to the Bible and scriptural understanding," writes Marie Therese Flanagan; "it was undertaken in the service of Christianity."[8] By the 7th century, a monastic culture of the written word had developed as scholars engaged

with this new visual as opposed to aural language, one comprehended by the eye rather than the ear. Ireland was then a powerhouse of intellectual activity as monasteries became centres of education and learning. The cleric and the monk took the place of the druid and poet as the holders of knowledge. In place of the old druidic schools, children destined for religious life would receive a Christian education. The old Irish for poet, *fili*, means a seer or wise man; now it was the monk who was revered for his learning and wisdom. According to the scholar John Ryan, "it was an axiom of the Irish monastic system that the study of religion and the study of letters should go hand in hand . . . the school and the library were taken for granted."[9] Clerics produced new grammars and textbooks, designed for those learning or teaching Latin as a second language, and consequently contributed to the "grammar of legibility," innovating graphic conventions such as spaces between words, new punctuation marks, and techniques giving visual emphasis to sections within a text such as enlarged or decorated initials.[10] Certainly the folios of Kells are luminous in the clarity of calligraphy and the space surrounding them, recalling the Hebraic description of Scripture as "black fire on white fire." Clerics also wrote biblical commentaries and exegetical textbooks that enabled deeper engagement with and understanding of the Bible. This is the context in which the Book of Kells was created, the product of a sophisticated culture of learning and of the written word. It is the culminating masterpiece of a whole tradition, intellectually in terms of language and theology, artistically in terms of calligraphy and decoration.

It was into this culture of the written word that the saint associated with the Book of Kells, Colum Cille (*c*.521–597) "the dove of the church," was born around 520AD. His family, the Uí Néill, were the ruling dynasty in Donegal in the north west of Ireland. As with all Irish medieval monastic founders, Colum Cille was highly educated. His early study of letters began with a local priest and continued as a pupil of Fionnbharr, the great monastic abbot and teacher who also taught Ciaran of Clonmacnoise.[11] Much of what is known about Colum Cille comes from the hagiographical *Vita Columbae* written by his cousin Adomnán (*c*.628–704), the eighth Abbot of Iona in succession to Colum Cille. From it we learn that Colum Cille was a scholar, a scribe, and that he loved the natural world. Adomnán tells us that he spent much time writing in his cell; that once, when he saw that a book which a pupil was studying was about to fall into a jug of water, he shouted "take care, take care, my son;" and that the saint once tenderly cared for a heron, arriving in Iona, weary from its flight across the Irish sea.[12] Not surprisingly, Colum Cille's most famous surviving relic is a book, the *Cathach*, meaning "battler" or "champion," so called because its custodians paraded it before the enemy before going in battle. It is a 6th century Latin psalm book and the earliest surviving

Irish manuscript, attributed for centuries to the hand of Colum Cille himself. Adomnan tells us that Colum Cille worked as a scribe until the end of his life, transcribing a psalm book until he was too weak to continue; the last words he wrote were from psalm 34, "They that seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing." The scribal tradition that he founded came to perfection in the Book of Kells, two hundred years after his death.

In Adomnan's two books, his *Vitae Columbae* and *De Locis Sanctis,* "The Holy Places," we see a theologian at work and gain an insight into the intellectual life on Iona in the late seventh century. Both books display wide knowledge of Scripture, of patristic writings and of others saints' lives such as those of St Benedict and St Anthony, the 4th century Desert Father and archetypal Christian monk. Iona was a place of education, a learning community, and the centre of a "family" of monastic foundations in Ireland and in Lindisfarne, in the north-east of England, with connections to a network of monastic centres internationally as distant as Egypt, Syria, and Eastern Church. As it was well-situated for travel by sea it was visited by many monks and students. From the evidence in *De Locis Sanctis* Thomas O'Loughlin concludes that the library in Iona was "as well-stocked as most in the Latin west at the time" and that "some of the great books of the Latin fathers, some books of poetry, manuals of instruction and encyclopaedic works were in use there",[13] held in satchels hung from pegs on the walls rather than on shelves.

We do not know the names or biographies of the monk-scribes and monk-artists who quilled the masterful calligraphy, decorated the leaves with complex ornament and vivid images, and painted the luminous full-page illustrations such as the evangelist portraits or the *Chi Rho* folio. But in their work they have left ghost traces of their artistic personalities, invisible watermarks of the spirit. Four scribes are thought to have been responsible for the calligraphy – Scribe A, B, C, and D – all trained in the same scriptorium style,[14] but each identifiable by his own unique visual signature. Scribe A's style is conservative; he uses smaller letter forms and little decoration. Scribe B is characterised by his use of an angular script known as Insular Miniscule and his fondness for purple, yellow, and red inks. Scribe C is distinguished by his steady script and skill in forming initial letters around animal forms. Scribe D has the largest script and the most expressive decoration. It is conjectured that three artists illustrated the major folios; they are known as the "Goldsmith", the "Portrait Painter" and the "Illustrator."[15] These monks lived in community and their life was organised around prayer, particularly chanting the psalms, manual work such as farming, and intellectual work such as studying and writing. Those with artistic gifts and a steady hand naturally selected themselves for the scriptorium.

So let's take one of the Scribes, Scribe B, the one fond of bright inks, and flesh out a generic biography and intellectual formation. To help bring him more to life, I'd like to give him a name; let's say Manchán, because it reminds me of the etymology of the word "monk," from the Greek *monachos*, "one who is alone." Manchán was singled out by his parents or kinsfolk for religious life and handed over at five years old to a cleric or hermit who instructed him in reading, writing, and religion. When he came of age at seventeen he then had a choice of applying to enter the monastery. As he had been prepared for it since childhood, it seemed the most likely option. On entering, his few belongings were taken from him his head shaved, the mark of a slave, and he was given a new name symbolising his entry into new life and the death of the old. Manchán began an ascetical existence marked by prayer, fasts, manual work, and study. The main goal in his new life was union with God, and crucial to this was language and grammar. The life of the mind and the life of the Spirit interlaced and spiralled upwards. The three main branches of monastic study were Latin, theology, and Scripture. Scripture was considered the most important and the highest form of knowledge. Since the language of the Bible was Latin Manchán had to learn how to read, write and speak this "visible" language. An illiterate monk was a contradiction in terms. These intensive studies aimed at a deepening encounter with Jesus Christ and with his Abba through the medium of language.[16]

It was a distinctive type of engagement with language. Manchán spent hours learning passages of Scripture by heart, particularly the psalms and the New Testament, beginning with Matthew and Acts. Following medieval practice, where silent reading with the eyes was unknown, he read the words out loud, forming them with his lips and hearing them with his ears. His *lectio* became a *lectio divina*, a slow, concentrated and meditative reading of Scripture in which the words percolated down to the depths of his emotional and psychological life, transformed his inner being, and drew him into intimacy with the divine. Reading became a spiritual practice and a prayerful experience. A common medieval image for *lectio divina* compared the cow chewing the cud to the monk ruminating on the word, drawing out and being nourished by its juices. A mid 12th century monk, the Carthusian Guigo II, extends this analogy of reading to eating: "Reading, as it were, puts the whole food into the mouth, meditating chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavour, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes."[17] As his intellectual training continued, Manchán would have been introduced to biblical commentaries and exegetical tools that would further deepen his understanding of Scripture.

In addition to this daily ingestion of Scripture, as a Scribe, Manchán would have had an engagement with the text that few other monks enjoyed. He spent hours in the silence of the scriptorium transcribing the Latin text

of the gospels. According to the contemporary calligrapher Denis Brown, the script technique in Kells required "painstaking and complex manipulations of pen angle . . . and also pressure variation on the quill tip to swell serifs or stroke endings."[18] Mistakes could be erased with a knife, but not easily, and it could mark the vellum. The writing process itself became a spiritual practice, a *meditatio* or meditation requiring profound silence, stillness and attention. While a monk would not dare alter a word of Scripture, his transcription was not just a passive act; as with *lectio*, it evoked a response in the monk both intellectual and emotional, what Guigo II termed *oratio* or prayer, "extracting the flavour" of the text and expressing his response to the Word of God which "is living and active . . . able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12 *ESV*). This creative response found freedom of expression in the decoration with which Scribe B embellished his folios. According to the respected scholar of medieval monasticism, Jean Leclercq, the medieval mind had a powerful visual and spatial imagination that allowed for a precise and vivid recreating of the colours and shapes of things described in words so that the "words of sacred text produced a strong impression on the mind."[19]

Manchán would have drawn on his *lectio*, his heart-knowledge of Scripture, and his knowledge of biblical commentaries and exegetical works, particularly that of John Cassian, to create his initial letter decorations, interlacing, and the natural imagery of animals, birds and plants, each of which carried symbolic resonances. Cassian drew from the roots of Christian monasticism in the deserts of 5th century Egypt and Syria and taught that Scripture could be read at many levels, the most important being the allegorical level which revealed the deep meaning and wisdom behind the words. This allegorical approach was one in which the "speculative and imaginative gifts were allowed full scope"[20] and those gifts are certainly evident in the vivid and playful imagery and huge inventiveness of the letter decoration and complex, playful imagery of the Book of Kells. Manchán's scholarship and prayer, his calligraphy and art, were a catalyst for spiritual awakening, for inner illumination.

And what of the Goldsmith? Henry Francoise considered him to be the greatest draughtsman of the manuscript and she gave him this name because his use of silvery blue and golden yellow, and the fine intricacy of his patterns, is suggestive of metalwork.[21] The Goldsmith was the hand and mind behind the eight-circle cross folio (33r) and the *Chi Rho* folio (34r). We can assume that his intellectual training was similar to that of Scribe B. As an artist and illustrator, his role was to create images that incarnated the theology of the Book of Kells. That theology was simply the theology of early Western and Irish Christianity. The Irish church did not see itself as separate from Rome, though its theology, through the process of inculturation, had a different emphasis. Visual art, beyond words, closer to music and silence, has a unique power to

convey the faith world, the unique theological insights of a culture. The monk-artist is illuminating for us what the world of mystery behind the sacred word looks and feels like.[22] "It is only possible to understand such work in a spiritual context," writes Hilary Richardson, ."..manuscript art came into being for the sake of the Scriptures, in something like the way calligraphy, or beautiful writing, had a spiritual purpose in Islamic art, where the text of the Koran itself is sacred."[23] Consistent with medieval scholarship, iconography acts as an exegesis of the text, reflecting, exploring and amplifying its meaning, much as *meditatio* does in *lectio divina*, and yielding a theological reading of Scripture that is culturally situated. The theology of the Book of Kells is incarnational; the imagery celebrates the wonder of God become flesh, of the interpenetration of the divine and the human. It is resurrectional; Christ has risen from the dead and won for us eternal life. And it is Christological, Christ centered. Each of these theologies is visible in the Goldsmith's *Chi Rho* folio.

The *Chi Rho* folio, Fig. 1 above, comes at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, at 1:18. It reads *Christi autem generatio*, "now the birth of Christ." The monogram for Christ is *Chi Rho Iota* or *XPI*, *Chi Rho* being the first two letters of Christ in Greek: *ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ*. The *X* swells to fill the whole page, while the *P* rises from a cross and terminates with a Celtic, red-headed Christ, intersecting the *I*. At the bottom of the folio the Latin word *autem* is represented in shorthand by the Greek letter "*h*", followed by the Latin *generatio*. Greek and Latin interweave as fluidly as the interlace of human figures and peacocks surrounding the lozenge shape at the focal point of the *X*. This is the first time that the name of Jesus appears in the Bible. Kells, like many medieval manuscripts in Ireland and Britain, marks it with a major decorated page. In Semitic culture names are deeply significant – to know someone's name is to know who they are, what role they play. The sacred name of Christ, the Messiah, the "anointed one," the "chosen one," is venerated in the art of the *Chi Rho* folio.

It is a folio with profound theological meaning. In the spiralling, rhythmical motion of its shapes, letters, and interweaving lines we ride the waves of an infinite, restless sea. We are in the presence of the eternal God who is without beginning or end, the God who names God's self in Exodus 3 as I AM, a name signifying the fact of God's presence and the mystery of God's being. The *Chi Rho* folio is a celebration of the incarnation, of God becoming human, of the Word becoming flesh. It expresses the inexpressible, the radiant explosion into human history of the light of Christ, a light no darkness can overcome. In it we see the reaching, spiralling arms of the *X*, of Christ, embracing the whole of creation. At the heart of the *X* we see a lozenge or diamond shape, a common image in Kells and a medieval symbol of Christ, the Word or *Logos* who is Lord and saviour of the whole world, the four corners of the lozenge mirror-

ing the four corners of a flat earth. Heaven and earth, the transcendent and the mundane, the divine and human become intimate in the heart of Christ.

The sacramentality of creation is symbolised even more graphically and movingly by the fauna that appear in the folio, so different from the abstract, fabulous, storied animals that appear throughout the manuscript. Conflated with a "Greek" Christ as transcendent *Logos* we also see some of the most anatomically accurate representation of insects and animals in Kells, fauna that were an everyday part of the monks' lives and of the local ecology. The moths, the cat and mice, and the otter with the fish in its jaws, represent the three dimensions of creation – sky, earth and sea – as defined by Isadore of Seville (c560–636) whose *Etymologies* was a standard reference work for medieval Irish and European scholars. This is a cosmic Christ, an all pervasive presence in all that exists, in mountain and stream, book and bell, lake and well. The *Chi Rho* folio offers a sacred, inclusive vision of the whole universe, full of limitless potential, infinitely more so than a Renaissance painting of a white, Westernised, masculinised Christ.[24]

The left arm of the *X* reaches down connecting heaven and earth, from the moths, creatures of the air, to the mice, creatures of the earth, to the otter, creature of water. Each of the creatures ingests a eucharist of some form, transforming it into their own bodies. The delicate and transparent moths are a disguised image of Christ and his resurrection; they have emerged from a chrysalis, metamorphosed. They nibble a lozenge-shaped chrysalis, according to Lewis an "eloquent metaphor for the Body of Christ, and the eucharist through which Christians are reborn."[25] The mice nibble a host, possibly a humorous aside to the medieval quandary of mice eating consecrated hosts, hence the necessity for cats that in this image claw the tails of the mice. The otter is eating a fish, an early Christian symbol of originating in an acrostic, the Greek word *ichthus,* or fish, standing for the first letter of each word in the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour." The resurrection of Christ is encoded in the imagery of the *Chi Rho* folio and throughout Kells, which contains no images of the crucifixion, only of the cross. The logos incarnate cannot die, only change form to rise again in newness of life. The cross appears on almost every page of the manuscript, a constant reminder of Christ's death and resurrection, and of the redemption won for humanity by Him. On the *Chi Rho* folio Christ's birth, death and resurrection are all present – the whole cycle of incarnation and redemption. Humanity's sin and suffering and death are overcome in Christ. The *Chi* or *X* could itself be seen as a saltire cross, similar to that created by the arms and legs of Jesus on folio 114r, a full-page narrative scene of Jesus on the Mount of Olives. The *Chi* would then signify that Christ was born to die for humanity, and so to redeem it. Bernard Meehan points out

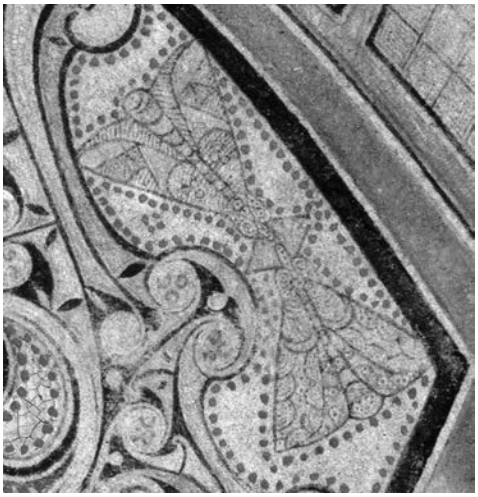


Fig. 2. Detail from Chi Rho folio: moths.

Fig. 3. Detail from Chi Rho folio: cats and mice.

Fig. 4. Detail from Chi Rho folio: otter and fish.

a saltire cross in the lower left quadrant of the *Chi Rho* folio, formed by blue snakes among yellow lions and green peacocks.[26]

All of these animals are theologically significant. They speak symbolically of Christ's resurrection, of eternal life. The scribes and artists would have been familiar with the Bestiary of Isadore of Seville, where exotic animals are described. The snake sheds its skin and is reborn and so symbolises Christ's resurrection from the dead. The peacock's flesh was believed not to putrefy and so symbolises Christ's immortality. And in the *Physiologus*, a 4th century Greek text of animal lore, there is the story of a female lion that gives birth to a dead lion cub. She watches over it until, on the third day, the male lion comes and breathes on its face, bringing it back to life.[27] For the monk-artists reading this the parallel with Christ's rising from the dead was explicit and fed into the lion imagery of Kells. For example, on folio 124r, a lion is shown with a life-giving breath and eucharistic vine coming from its open mouth. The *Chi Rho* folio and the Book of Kells as a whole is testament that the early Irish church was a hope-filled church, a church with its feet firmly rooted on the earth but with a deep and joyful belief in the reality of Easter. This vivid faith and faith-filled assent is pictured through the visceral and fabulous animal imagery. Bernard Meehan writes that "representation of animals feature extensively as form of commentary, running parallel to the text, and in anticipation – or summation – of certain passages."[28] Often the animals seem to be responding emotionally to the words of the gospel. They capture a sense of joy, terror, wonder. It is a world of danger, laughter, and beauty. If the imagery grows out of a deep *lectio* of the gospels, it is an affective as well as an intellectual response, one which has trickled down from head to the ventricles of the heart. These monk-artists were contemplatives, grounded in stillness and *lectio divina*, and because of that their scholarship, their intellection, was as alive and dynamic as their illuminated pages. Their learning was not abstract or sterile but infused with feeling and a catalyst for creative and spiritual awakening. Their thinking was an experience that modified their sensibility, as immediate as the odour of a rose.[29]

The Book of Kells emerged from a society that was close to nature and in direct daily contact with it, dependent on it, aware of its beauty and danger. According to Mary Low, "for early Irish Christians, the natural world, in both surface and depth, was intimately connected with the presence of God . . . through the incarnation, God had become one, not just with human flesh, but with the wind and air, fire, the sun and the stars, salt, bitterness, stones, the earth and flowers."[30] Nature was sacramental and God spoke to humanity within it. Kells reflects this in its iconographic language, a symbolic language in direct dialogue with the natural world, drawn from the rhythmic motions of nature and light, and from the astronomical cycles of the sun, moon and stars.[31] The earliest European nature poetry in the vernacular was written in

early Irish. The 9th century poem Pangur Bán (White Pangur), written in Irish and found in a student copy-book known as the Reichenau primer, also references the natural world. The copy-book also contains material in Latin, Greek and Irish and a wide variety of subject matter – grammar, biblical geography, notes on logic and astronomy, an extract from the Aeneid – testament to the eclectic curriculum of the young student.[32] The poem is a witty and playful paean to a cat and to contemplative thought. Here is the translation by Robin Flower:

Pangur Bán

I and Pangur Bán my cat
'Tis a like task we are at:
Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.
Better far than praise of men
'Tis to sit with book and pen;
Pangur bears me no ill-will
He to plies his simple skill.
'Tis a merry task to see
At our tasks how glad are we,
When at home we sit and find
Entertainment to our mind.
Oftentimes a mouse will stray
In the hero Pangur's way;
Oftentimes my keen thought set
Takes a meaning in its net.
'Gainst the wall he sets his eye
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I
All my little wisdom try.
When a mouse darts from its den,
O how glad is Pangur then!
O what gladness do I prove
When I solve the doubts I love!
So in peace our tasks we ply,
Pangur Bán, my cat, and I;
I our arts we find our bliss,
I have mine and he has his.
Practice every day has made
Pangur perfect in his trade;

I get wisdom day and night
Turning darkness into light.[33]

NOTES

1. Adapted from the Book of Kells exhibition at Trinity College Dublin, *Turning Darkness into Light*.
2. Susan Bioletti, Rachel Moss, *Early Irish Gospel Books in the Library of Trinity College Dublin* (Dublin: Trinity College, Dublin, 2016), 30.
3. Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 13.
4. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 21–24.
5. The manuscript of the Book of Kells is now digitised and available to view on-line via the Digital Collections Repository, Trinity College Dublin. http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=MS58_003v
6. Jennifer O'Reilly, *Book of Kells Documentary*, *Part 1* (YouTube, 2011), 7mins, 12 secs. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRGQPJIO5CM
7. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 16.
8. Marie Therese Flanagan, "The Contribution of Irish Missionaries and Scholars to Medieval Christianity," in Brendan Bradshaw and Dáire Keogh, eds., *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2002), 34.
9. John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972) 216.
10. Flanagan, "The Contribution of Irish Missionaries," 32–33.
11. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 207.
12. George Otto Simms, *Exploring the Book of Kells* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1989), 15–16.
13. Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London: Continuum, 2000), 81.
14. Timothy O'Neill, *The Irish Hand* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 22.
15. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 197–218.
16. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 377–378.
17. E. Ann Matter, "Lectio Divina," in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152.
18. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 219.
19. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: The New American Library, 1962), 80.
20. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, 374.
21. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 218.
22. Quote by Margaret Lonergan, a Dublin-based visual artist, in personal correspondence.
23. Hilary Richardson, "Visual Arts and Society," in Dáibhí Ó Crónín ed., *A New History of Ireland Vol.1: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 699.
24. Margaret Lonergan, personal correspondence.
25. Suzanne Lewis, 'sacred Calligraphy: The Chi Rho page in the Book of Kells," *Traditio* 36 (1980), 150.
26. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 68.
27. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 141.
28. Meehan, *The Book of Kells*, 138.
29. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 64.
30. Mary Low, "The Natural World in Early Irish Christianity," in Mark Atherton ed.,

Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 184, 188.

31. Margaret Lonergan, personal correspondence.
32. Celia Keenan, "The Hunt for Pangur Bán," in Nora Maguire and Beth Rodgers eds., *Children's Literature on the Move: Nations, Translations, Migrations* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 65.
33. Celia Keenan, "The Hunt for Pangur Bán," 69, 70.