

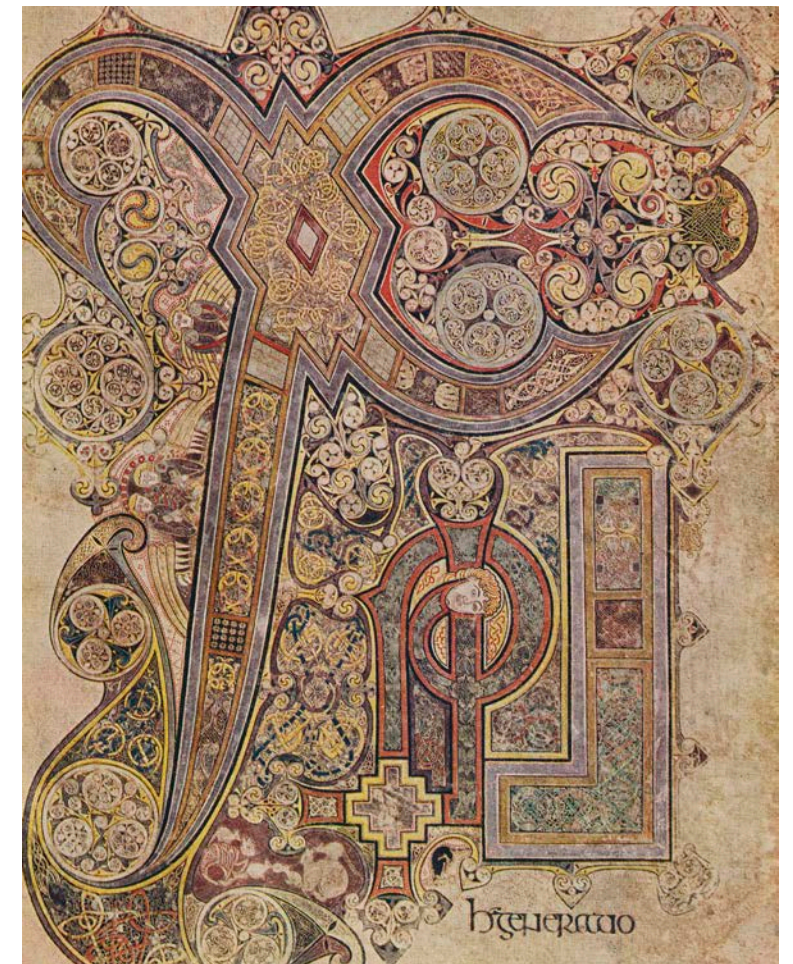
The Historical  
Influence<sup>of</sup><sub>the</sub>  
Book of Kells





# The Historical Influence of the Book of Kells

by Andrew Steinmetz





## *Introduction*

The Book of Kells has been described by some as the pinnacle piece in the genre known as illuminated manuscripts. However, it is more than a piece of Christian artwork, it has also contributed to the continuity of knowledge, it is a celebration of life, and of the unique. But perhaps the greatest contributions of the Book of Kells come from its influence on typography, page layout, and the modern alphabet.



Right: Evangelical Symbols

### Europe Before the Book of Kells

After the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, the former provincial governments began the rapid process of dissolution. Without the backing and protection of the Empire, there was no longer any point in trying to maintain government as they no longer had the strength of the Empire behind them, nor the financial support. With the disappearance of the local governments, what little protection they offered disappeared with them. As the people of Europe were left unprotected, the number of marauders and wandering bands



Below: Saint John's Evangelical Symbol



of barbarian grew. Being attacked on the road became common, which resulted in people becoming wary of travel or leaving their hometowns. At the same time, Viking attacks along the coastal communities became a regular occurrence throughout much of Europe. The one exception to this general rule was in the case of the sleepy island of Ireland at the farthest western edge of Europe. Initially, the Vikings rarely went as far as Ireland, so St. Patrick and the other monks of Ireland were able to continue their work, converting the peasants to Christianity and creating illuminated manuscripts, in relative peace.

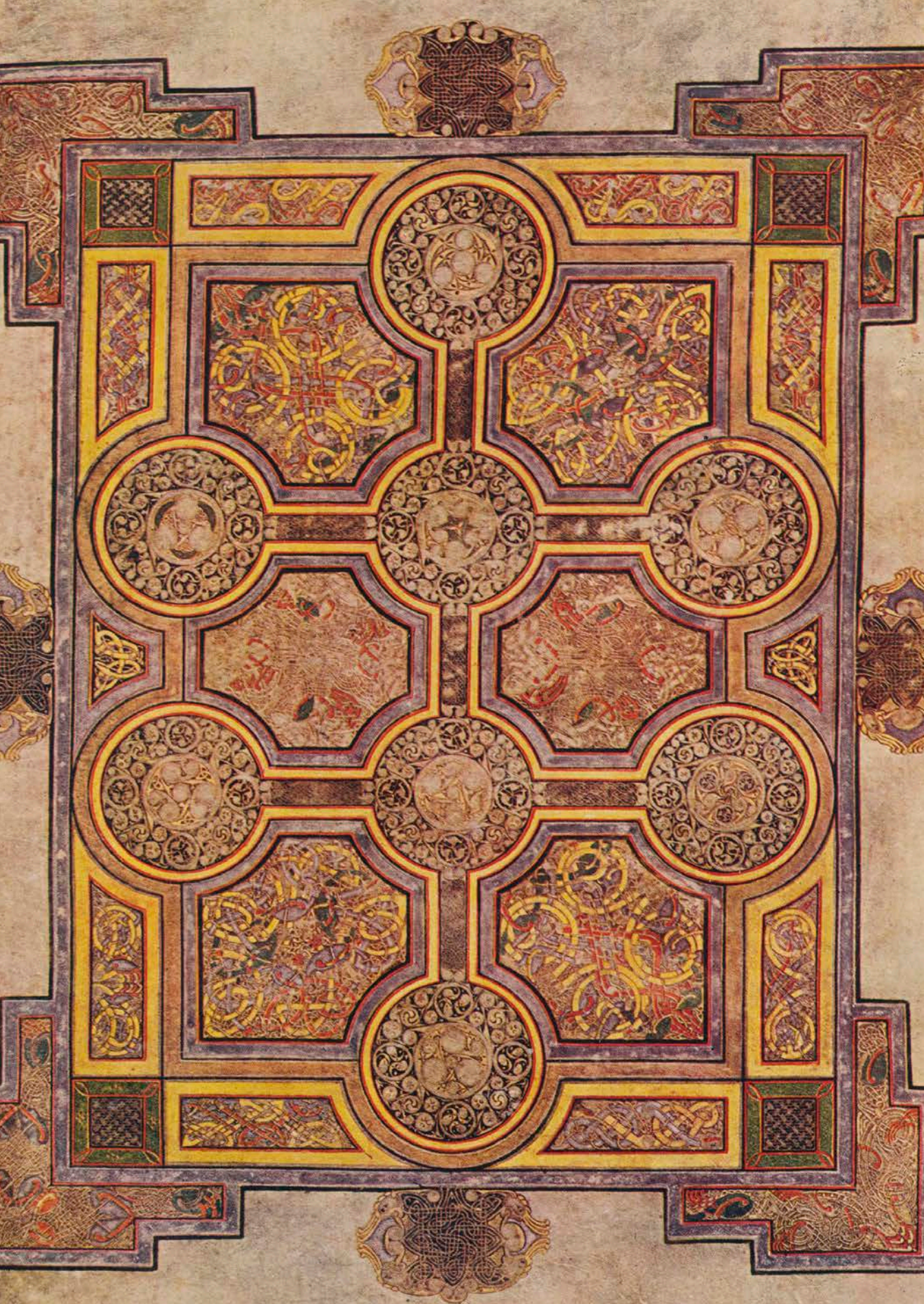
### The Book of Kells

During this time of relative peace in Ireland, the Columban monks began creating illuminated gospels, which were meant mainly for display or for use in special ceremonies. It was because of this tradition of illustrating the gospels, the Books of Durrow, Lindisfarne, and Kells, were created from roughly 650 to 800 CE. The Book of Kells is the last of this tradition and was created around 800 CE.

Where the book was created is not precisely known, however the common consensus of the experts today is that it was started on the island of Iona, the home of the Columban order of monks, and finished in the Abbey at Kells. This is because around 802 CE, the Abbey at Iona was attacked forcing the Abbot to flee taking with him the illuminated manuscript that was being worked on.

The actual creators of the work are not known because the last several pages, which would have contained all of the pertinent creation information, have been lost over the centuries (Sullivan, 5). Some experts believe the pages were most likely lost out when the book was stolen 1006.





They could have been lost when the thieves tore the jewel encrusted covers off and threw the book into a ditch.

Some time after the dissolution of the monasteries in roughly 1540, the Book of Kells found its way to Gerald Plunket of Dublin for safekeeping. (Sullivan, 6). At this time, Plunket noted that the number of pages was 344. Then in 1621 James Ussher was commissioned by King James I to collect antiquities related to the British Church. Once in his possession the book was transferred to Trinity University at Dublin, where it remains to this day.

The Book of Kells has been rebound many times over the centuries. At some point in the 1800s it was severely cropped to its current dimensions, and as a result, some of the illustrations were cut into. In its current form, the Book of Kells is 330mm X 250mm and comprised of 340 folios. It has been split into four books, one for each of the gospels. They are the gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and the incomplete gospel of John (Sullivan, 6).

### *Significance of the Book of Kells*

The Book of Kells is significant for several reasons. The first of which is its many influences on modern typography. In order to be able to write in straight lines across the page, the monks needed to use top and bottom guidelines, much in the same way that architects and draftsmen do. The distance between the guides was measured in a Roman inch and is known as an Uncial. The uncial represented the height of the capital letter, but in time the half-uncial—also known as a miniscule—was used for lowercase letters. Overtime, the script became rounded and began to curve to the right. This curving developed because it reduced the number of calligraphic strokes that were required to make characters. Because of this stroke reduction the monks were essentially able to write faster. Additionally, the creation of ascenders and descenders were born out of the Book of

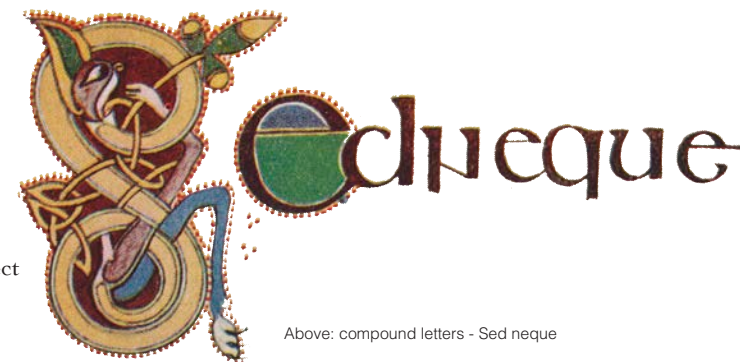
Kells, along with the humble comma and Arabic numerals (Meggs 46).

The second major contribution ascribed to the Book of Kells is that it is the basis of the modern typeface. In 800 CE Charlemagne was crowned King of the Holy Roman Empire by Pope Leo III, uniting the lands of Europe. He then introduced the feudal system appointing Nobles as rulers over areas of land

INTERUOS CONQU  
DEN SUNUS DETU  
AGISTER ADTULI FI

de illodixit hie quem m rce  
uanoq minone te quae epac  
mufet filu teum dicit fia ut

Examples of Uncial and miniscule



Above: compound letters - Sed neque

Right: opening words to Saint Mathews gospel -  
liber generationis

Opposite: Virgin and Child



and indenturing the people living on those lands to those Nobles, basically creating a cheap labor force. Along with this reform, Charlemagne insisted on creating a standard script for the Latin alphabet. It was at this time that scholars searched for the most readable typeface from which to base their new type. In the end, it was the Book of Kells insular script that had the greatest influence on the scholars for their new typeface Caroline script (Meggs, 46).

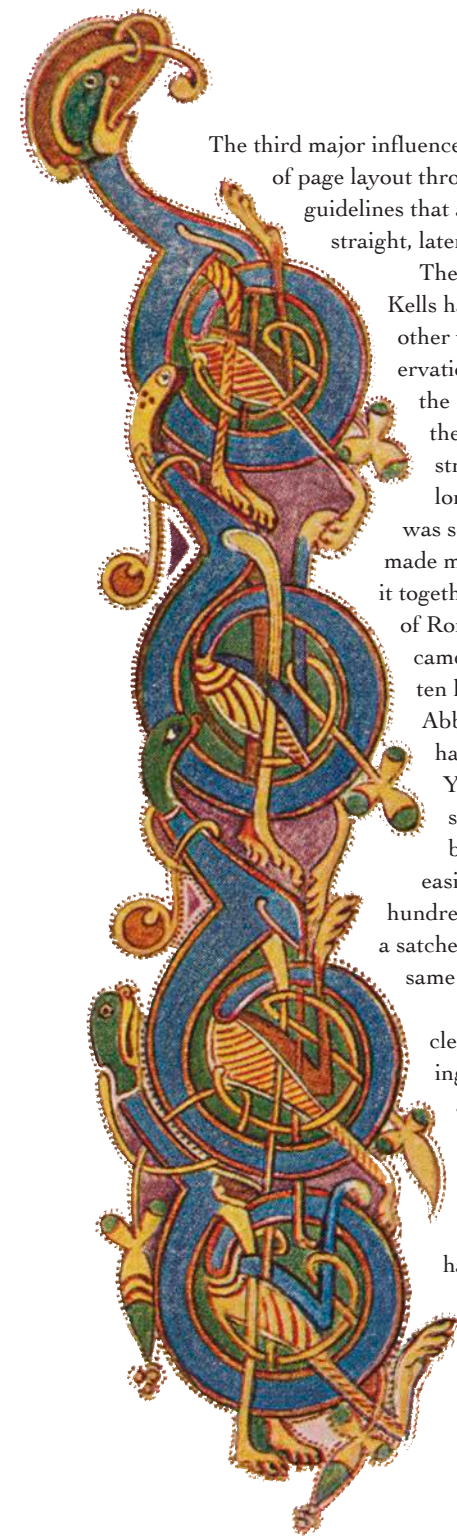


factus est tuus filius meus dilectus in te  
bene complacuit mihi.

**Q**uipse ihserat inapiens quasi a  
horum trinitate ueritabatur filius

ioseph

<b>put</b>	heu
<b>put</b>	machab
<b>put</b>	leui
<b>put</b>	melchi
<b>put</b>	ia ille
<b>put</b>	ioseph
<b>put</b>	machab hic
<b>put</b>	amos
<b>put</b>	mann
<b>put</b>	esu
<b>put</b>	magge
<b>put</b>	enacch



The third major influence of the Book of Kells was concept of page layout through guides and page margins. The guidelines that allowed the scribe to keep lines of text straight, later developed into the baseline.

The final major influence the Book of Kells had on the Western world, along with other works of illumination, was the preservation of knowledge. After the burning of the Great Library of Alexandria during the Reign of Julius Ceasar, a better substrate was sought to help increase the longevity of a work. Eventually, vellum was settled upon for it's durability and made more durable by binding quantities of it together into volumes of work. After the fall of Rome, as mentioned above, the world became a perilous place, especially for written knowledge. One need only look to the Abbey at Kells and see how many times it had been sacked by Viking invaders. Yet, despite the odds, the Book of Kells survived, in part through its durability, but also due to its portability. It is far easier to take a few volumes containing hundreds of pages of work and put them in a satchel and run, than it would be with the same number of scrolls.

As we can see, the Book of Kells is clearly an important work for introducing the concepts of typefaces, upper and lower case letters, page layout, baselines, Arabic numerals, and even the humble comma. But it is also important as a historical touch point that keeps us informed of how design has progressed over the past 1500 years.

Opposite: Geneology of Christ

Left: compound letters 2b - B[eati]



Above: compound letters - Sed neque



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