



PHILATELI-GRAPHICS

QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE GRAPHICS PHILATELY ASSOCIATION ISSN 9739-6198



VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 3 - WHOLE NUMBER 100 - JULY 2003

Gospels from the Holy Island *by Paul Horton*

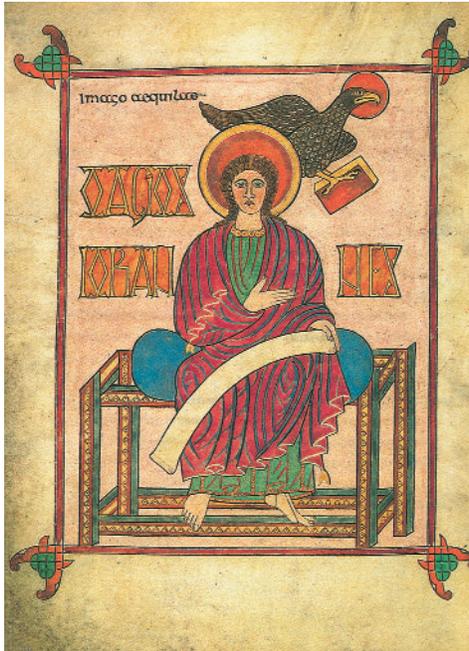
The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is located about a mile off the northeast coast of England. It is accessible at low tide via a metaled causeway from the mainland hamlet of Beal, Northumberland. Circa 631, Oswald, King of Northumbria, sent to the Irish monastery of Iona for priests to re-establish Christianity in his kingdom. Born in Ireland and trained in Iona, St. Aidan led the mission to establish a church and monastery on Lindisfarne. Cuthbert was born in the Lammermuir Hills (circa 635) and was a shepherd boy before entering the Melrose Monastery in 651. Three years later, in 654, he became the Guestmaster at Ripon. In 656, he returned as Prior to Melrose.

After the Synod of Whitby, at which the Celtic Church of the north accepted the universal authority of the Church of Rome, Cuthbert slowly converted

recalcitrant brethren. He kept up his missionary work, and his fame as a miracle worker spread to such an extent that he could apparently heal the sick and exorcise devils simply by the power of prayer. From time to time he would retreat to an island, now known as St. Cuthbert's Isle or Cuddie's Isle.

Twelve years after being appointed Prior of Lindisfarne, he was granted permission to live in seclusion on Inner Farne, the largest of the Farne Islands. He came out of retreat in 684,

persuaded by King Ecgfrith to become Bishop of Lindisfarne. He was consecrated on the following Easter. But feeling prophetically that his life was drawing to a close, he resigned from his See and retreated to Farne Island where he died in 687.



Above, St. John from the Lindisfarne Gospels. Left and right, ornamentation from canon tables.

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Turks & Caicos Islands, 26 Nov 1979, [Sc409-416] Icons and Illuminations Christmas issue. 6c features the Portrait of St. John from the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Top row (left to right): 1c, St. Nicholas-Prikra, Ukrainian; 3c, Master of the Registrum Gregorii, Emperor Otto II with symbols of four parts of his empire; 6c, Book of Lindisfarne-Portrait of St. John; 15c, Prayer Book of Otto II-Adoration of the Majestas Domini.

Bottom row (left to right): 20c, Book of Kells-Christ attended by angels; 25c, Gospels of St. Medard of Soissons-St. John the Evangelist, Charlemagne; 65c, Christ Pantocrator-Trocanry Ukrainian; \$1, Canterbury Codex Aureus-Portrait of St. John.

Eleven years after his death, Cuthbert was to be elevated, this was the customary way of recognizing a saint before official canonization by the Church. At death the body would be interred, after a suitable interval, by which time the body had become a skeleton, the bones would be disinterred, washed, wrapped in fine cloths and placed in a casket for viewing by the faithful. The date for Cuthbert's elevation was fixed for 20 March 698, the eleventh anniversary of his death.

As part of the preparation for the elevation ceremony, Eadfrith the Scribe undertook his special task, the writing and painting of a splendid copy of the four Gospels in the Scriptorium at Lindisfarne. Before commencing this monumental task, Eadfrith visited the library at Jarrow, where there was a larger collection of books than at Lindisfarne. And from the Jarrow library Eadfrith borrowed a copy of St. Jerome's translation of the Gospels, the Vulgate, which originated from Italy.

The making of books was an highly skilled and labor intensive craft and to produce the Lindisfarne Gospels at least 130 skins from sheep or calves would have been used, and consequently it would have been very expensive. Each large sheet of skin

formed two leaves. The sheets were prepared by being soaked, scraped, stretched and smoothed. Vellum naturally has a "hair side" and a "flesh side" (rather like the wire side and felt side of paper). Sometimes it was easier to write on the flesh side, being whiter and smoother, but the vellum of this book was so well prepared that both sides took paint and ink equally well. The only clues to which side was which are the traces of hair still clinging to a few pages. From these, experts were able to deduce that the vellum came from the skin of calves.

The pages of the Gospels were built up from "gatherings" of eight pages (that is, four large sheets of vellum, each of two pages, one on top of the other) and then folded together. Each gathering had eight leaves (16 pages). The book contains 258 leaves for which at least 129 large pieces of vellum approximately 24" x 15" were required.

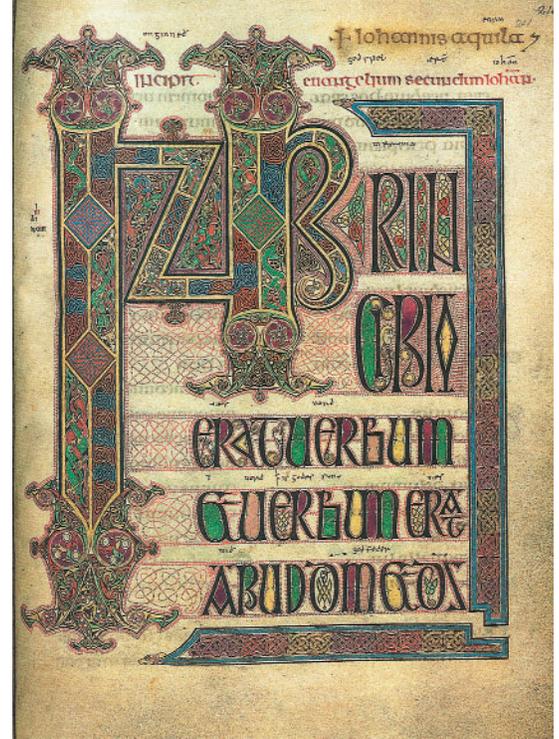
The spines or backs of the animals run horizontally across the book. Both flesh and hair sides have been most expertly prepared to form a white and uniform working surface.

Eadfrith would have written and painted his book while it was in separate gatherings, before collation

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Gospels from the Holy Island / Continued

Carpet page (left) and initial page (right) for the Gospel of St. John.



and binding. To guide his hand he would have pricked down the right and left sides of each page making a series of holes and would then rule across the page using a metal tool to make very fine light grooves on the surface of the vellum. A double groove was made for each line and Eadfrith wrote in two columns at 24-25 lines per page.

The scribe used pens cut from reeds or quill feathers (much of Holy Island is now part of Lindisfarne Nature Reserve and is as it was then, popular with migratory geese). Plenty of reeds or quills would have been readily available.

It has been calculated that this task would have been completed before 698. Ethelwald, who is credited with the binding, moved to Melrose in 699 and would have bound the work before his departure.

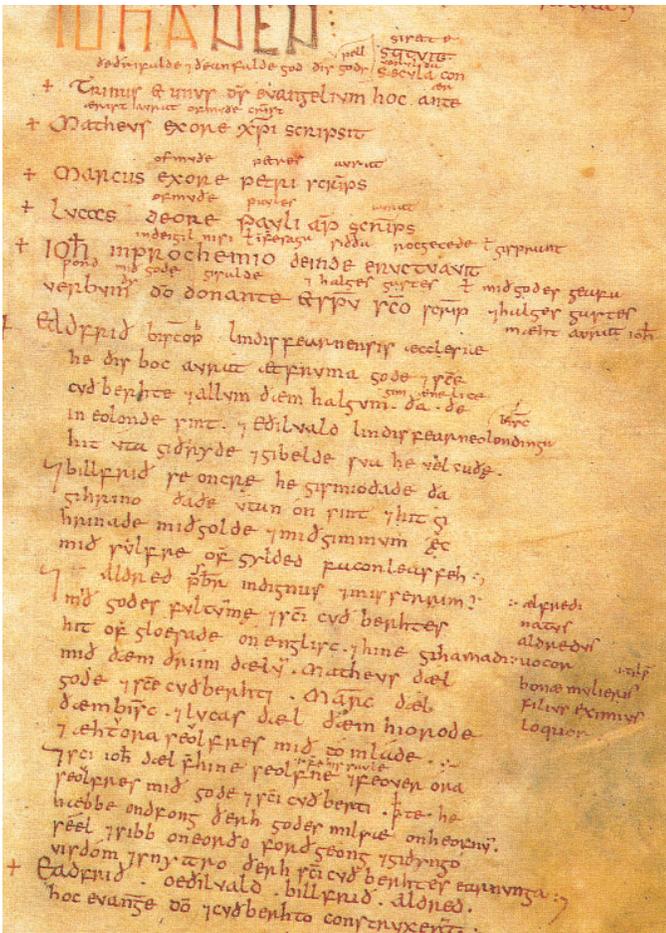
From examination it has been determined that the scribe cut all the pens himself and maintained a regular consistency of width, thus ensuring an even writing style. For ink he would have used a mixture of soot or lamp black with a glutinous substance such as egg white and water. This produced a rich deep brown ink which has withstood the passage of time and has not faded.

Eadfrith was a skilled writer/editor at a time when there were not many practitioners of this art. He wrote the text of his Gospels in Latin and chose a fine stately script identified today as 'Insular Majuscule.' This script was developed in early Christian Ireland where it spread to Northumbria with the arrival of the Ionian missionaries and was later adopted in other parts of the British Isles.

It is reasonable to suppose that Eadfrith chose to write his Gospels in two columns, copying earlier books which he would have examined at Jarrow.

Eadfrith employed 45 different colors, many of them very delicate shades. A number of the colors were achieved by a careful mixture of rare and delicate media. The results of tests carried out using contemporary recipes suggest that the binding agent for most of the colors was egg white and possibly fish glue (again, these resources would have been readily available on Lindisfarne). His range of ingredients was wide and varied, one of his reds was kermes made from the dried eggs of an insect which lives on the evergreen oak trees of Mediterranean lands. One of the yellows was probably made from ox gall. Other recognized sources of individual colors include: red and white lead; verdigris, produced

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Aldred's colophon was added to the Lindisfarne Gospels in the middle of the 10th century. It states that the book was made in honor of God and St. Cuthbert by Eadfrith, the Bishop of Lindisfarne.

by pouring vinegar onto copper resulting in a brilliant green paint; yellow ochre; yellow arsenic sulphide (orpiment); indigo from an oriental plant; woad from a plant cultivated in Northern Europe; bright green malachite (hydrated copper carbonate); a range of pinks and purples from folum prepared from fruit and flowers of the turnsole plant. Probably the most expensive paint was ultramarine which came from lapis lazuli, a precious stone emanating from the foothills of the Himalayas. How Eadfrith obtained it can only be conjectured, indeed many of these ingredients would have been beyond Eadfrith's knowledge and must have passed through many hands to reach Lindisfarne.

Although Eadfrith wrote the complete body of the text and designed and executed the great decorated pages, it seems he delegated the writing of the rubrics (or titles) to another member of the Lindisfarne scriptorium. This was probably due to pressure of work. The name of this scribe is unknown.

There are 15 great ornamented or cross-carpet pages in the manuscript. Each of the four Gospels begins with a symbolic illustration and is introduced by a cross-carpet page and a major initial page. The complex and intricate designs on the cross-carpet pages were painstakingly constructed over an outline of a geometric framework traced on the vellum before completing the final design in paint. The more subtle curves were drawn by hand and eye.

From the colophon added in 995, it is recognized that Eadfrith wrote the manuscript; (Bishop) Ethelwald is credited with the binding; Billfrith the Anchorite (religious hermit) produced the ornaments, gold, silver and jewels for its outer covering. The binding and jewels have not survived despite the fact that when not in use the book would have been housed in a box or chest.

Aldred the Priest added the colophon and gloss (translation from Latin to Anglo-Saxon). This gloss was one of the sources used by Laurence Nowell in his compilation of *Vocabularium Saxonicum* the first ever dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon language. Aldred wrote his gloss in the 'insular minuscule' script, a time-saving form of the majuscule used by Eadfrith.

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- Postmarks:**
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Thanks to Anne Kramer for providing stamps to illustrate this article.