

Donncha MacGabhann, *The Book of Kells A Masterwork Revealed: Creators, Collaboration and Campaigns*. Sidestone Press, Leiden 2022; 323pp. €120 (hardcover), €60 (softcover), €15 (e-book only PDF). ISBN 978-94-6426-122-6 (softcover) ISBN 978-94-6426-123-3 (hardcover) ISBN 978-94-6426-124-0 (PDF e-book)

In the twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis reported on a manuscript he had seen in Kildare in which, ‘if you take the trouble to look very closely, and penetrate with your eyes to the secrets of the artistry, you will notice such intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so close together and well-knitted, so involved and bound together ...’. No one will doubt that in his detailed examination of the Book of Kells, Donncha MacGabhann applied just such close scrutiny, and he presents his work, based on his PhD thesis, over 300 pages. This complex book is not for the faint-hearted and comes with a warning on the cover ‘that the abundance of evidence may at times seem extravagant in its detail.’

A nine-page Introduction sets out the author’s main argument that the Book of Kells is the work of two individuals, namely a ‘Master-Artist’ and a ‘Scribe-Artist’. Modern scholars are in general agreement that the manuscript was created c. 800 (16, ft 27). There is an examination of the Script (pp. 23–53) and the Illumination (pp. 55–91) and an analysis of the Canon Tables (pp. 91–120). The Initials and Display Lettering are discussed (pp. 121–148) as is the use of Colour (pp. 149–168). The next section contains ‘Aspects of the second campaign and its later phase’ (pp. 171–182) and Excavating Kells’ Text Pages (pp. 183–230) and, finally, an Epilogue (pp. 231–234). The book concludes with thirteen detailed Appendices (pp. 235–304), a comprehensive Bibliography (pp. 305–316), an Index of Manuscripts Cited and a General Index.

The discussion throughout the volume insists on the author’s argument that the manuscript is the work of two individuals, a conviction owed to a ‘flash of insight [] sudden and entirely unexpected’

(p. 51). Consequently, the opinions of Françoise Henry (1975) and Bernard Meehan (2012), the two best-known manuscript historians who have published monographs on the Book of Kells and who have both argued for a team of scribes and illuminators, are constantly challenged. Donncha MacGabhann is convinced that two highly-talented artists collaborated in isolation or, to use his puzzling phrase, ‘on campaign’ to create the Book of Kells. When faced with significant variations in the quality of the artwork in the manuscript, he notes the following about the Scribe-Artist: ‘Despite his calligraphic virtuosity, however, when faced with the challenge of creating more accurate, literal, and visual figurative representations, his artistic inadequacies are most glaringly exposed’ (p. 63). However, in what appears to be the main explanation for variation in the Book of Kells, the author speculates that on the death of the Master-Artist, his collaborator launched ‘a second campaign’ to complete their *magnum opus* despite the fact ‘that perhaps it was not only the Scribe-Artist’s physical faculties that were in decline’ (p. 181), an argument he also uses to explain certain scribal miscalculations (p. 243).

In any manuscript, a distinction must be made between script and illumination, that is, put simply, between writing letters and drawing them. Moreover, every manuscript had to be planned. This was a relatively simple operation when it only involved making a copy of an exemplar and when the number of leaves (bifolia) in a gathering and the number of lines on a page remained the same. A project like the Book of Kells, however, was something much more elaborate. It may have called for a Gospel text of similar proportions from which to copy and would have required the use of singletons, which are single pages decorated on one side only and used for particularly elaborate pages. There are over fifty singletons in the Book of Kells, for example the *Chi-Rho* page, the eight-circle cross page, the portrait of Christ (f. 32^v), the Virgin and child (f. 7^v) and the symbols of the four evangelists at the beginnings of the

gospels. This meant that whoever planned, copied and painted such a page could take as much time as was needed to produce the design, while the writing of the gospel text continued. The decorated leaf could be, and indeed was, inserted later. The large proportion of singletons in the Book of Kells is a fact that deserves more consideration, not least because it raises the question of how long it took to design and execute these pages. MacGabhann tells us of the insight he gained from reconstructing the *Chi-Rho* page but does not say how long it took. In her book *The Book of Kells: Reproductions and Comments* (2009), the Japanese artist Misae Tanaka writes that it took her 592 hours to complete that particular page. It was, however, the variations in style of these single leaves, some more figurative, others more abstract, that led art historians like Françoise Henry to suggest that there had been an artistic team at work.

The writing of the 'ordinary' majuscule script of Kells was the work of the most talented of scribes and, like any fine calligraphy, it had to flow. This meant that as the black writing flowed onto the parchment, spaces were left for elaborate initials and embellishments to be drawn in at a later stage, a justification, perhaps, for the concept of 'the second campaign.'

Basically, majuscule script is written with the chisel-edged nib held parallel to the ruled guidelines, which gives a thick down stroke and a thin horizontal. For a minuscule script, the same pen held at an angle of about 40 degrees to the guidelines gives a thinner downstroke that ends in a point and gives an overall compressed look to the letter forms. The more economical nature of miniscule in terms of words per line is one reason why lines of minuscule are generally found at the bottom of pages written by a scribe who needed to fit in extra words. The more economical nature of the minuscule contributed to it becoming the dominant script from the tenth century onwards.

The author presents many details of script from different folios that previous experts had argued were evidence for the work of various scribes. While resolutely maintaining his theory that one Scribe-Artist did all the writing, MacGabhann admits that '[t]he script in Kells does not conform to the norms of typical Insular scribal performance and is not amenable to the traditional methodologies of palaeographic analysis' (p. 40). Later he argues that 'All the script in fig. 1.27 [which shows 18 examples], regardless of variations in script size, the use of different scripts or coloured inks, can be understood in the context of the Scribe-Artist's predilection for variation and his two campaigns of work' (p. 50). Scribal activity was a very important part of monastic work because all books were hand copied and the liturgical and scholarly life of the monastery depended on the books copied in the scriptorium by the scribes who worked there. The marginalia in the St Gall Priscian (Cod. Sang. 904) names four scribes working on that manuscript as well as the master of the scriptorium

The author's complex analytical work would have benefitted by contextualising the Book of Kells in its early medieval insular monastic setting where stone carving and fine metalwork with detailed designs were also produced. Moreover, the high standard of Latin learning established in these monasteries demanded many books for school, study and liturgy, every one of which was a manuscript. Traditionally, such an important activity suggested a scriptorium, and marginalia in contemporary non-liturgical books such as the St Gall Priscian grammar (Cod. Sang 904) seem to confirm this. But perhaps the Master-Artist and Scribe-Artist had a private scriptorium; after all, Columcille himself, according to Adomnán, had a writing hut distinct from his sleeping place?

Whether Donncha MacGabhann's persistent argument featuring the two Kells artists convinces those who use his book, the immense

labour in providing assemblages of letterforms such as the fifty-seven examples of the ampersand from the manuscript (pp. 124–125) and the collection and scrutiny of zoomorphic and figurative details throughout the volume will undoubtedly be of great benefit to future scholars, artists or anyone who may ‘try to penetrate the secrets of the artistry’ of the Book of Kells.

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