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Beyond Literal: The Meanings of Text and Image in the *Book of Durrow*

How much is text seen when it is read? Does one draw or write a letter, or both, simultaneously? Like any other graphic mark, letters have a spatial form and a visual meaning. This meaning can be an additional or separate connotation from their symbolic signification to phonetics and language.¹ This aspect of their nature is often overlooked, or missed entirely, to those familiar with using writing for the everyday activities of life. Familiarity trains the eye to only see the literal meaning of text, rather than text as a form and image. However, how would a people unfamiliar with letters and the system of written communication perceive text? Would they still find meaning in the shapes?

One can find answers to these questions by examining artwork from the British Isles during the Middle Ages. When illiterate Anglo-Saxons were introduced to the written language inherent in Christian doctrine, they used these letterforms to produce Insular illuminated manuscripts—some of the most highly regarded artwork of their culture. These works blurred boundaries between image and text, integrating the two so thoroughly that text is seen as image, and image read like text. This phenomenon can be viewed through examining select pages from a masterwork of the period: the *Book of Durrow*. This early manuscript was one of the first

¹ Mary C. Olson, *Fair and Varied Forms: Visual Textuality in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts*. New York: Routledge, 2003, xvii.

examples of how Insular works established a definitive link between Christianity and literacy, bridged Mediterranean and Northern visual traditions in order to communicate textual meaning to an illiterate audience, and elevated the status of text to that of the Word of God—venerated in much the same way as Christ himself.²

In the early Middle Ages, artwork across mediums was funded and initiated by the Christian church. Christianity is a religion of the Bible, centering its practice around the covenants and teachings of the Old and New Testaments.³ As such, its visual traditions, like Judaism and Islam, emphasize the sanctity, beauty, and significance of God’s written word. However, unlike the other Abrahamic religions, the Christian visual tradition is equally concerned with imagery—a tradition allowed to exist, if untenably, by the loose interpretation the Christian church applies to the Second Commandment, which prohibits the creation and idolization of representational images.⁴ By qualifying that only images that are used as false idols need be shunned, Christian artwork is free to link and compliment text with image, illuminating the narratives and symbolism of God’s holy word.⁵ This relationship between image and text was creatively explored in the Middle Ages, most especially in the British Isles.

After the Saxon invasion, but before the Norman conquest, the British Isles were populated by Anglo-Saxons, who held polytheistic pagan beliefs and maintained an oral culture.⁶ When the papacy sent a mission to England in 597 to convert these peoples, Northerners were introduced not only to Christianity, but to the traditions of the written word. This established a definitive link between Christianity and literacy in the minds of Anglo-Saxons, who strove to

² Diebold, 14.

³ William J. Diebold, *Word and Image: An Introduction to Early Medieval Art*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000, 6, 18.

⁴ Diebold, 12.

⁵ Diebold, 12.

⁶ Diebold, 6.

understand and integrate text—the foreignness of which inspired awe and desire—into their own visual traditions.

The preexisting art of the Anglo-Saxons was influential to the design of Insular manuscripts. The significant features of this art seen in Insular book illumination include the preference for intricate symmetrical compositions, the decorative use of ancient Celtic forms—i.e. scroll work and spiral motifs—the abstract ornamental zoomorphic interlace patterning derived from a rich metalworking tradition in the pagan arts, and flat fields of vivid color, which is often limited to four colors: blue, red, gold, and white.⁷ These characteristics can be seen in objects from the burial site of Sutton Hoo. The golden buckle (Figure 1) displays the masterful intricacy of technique, the eye for symmetry, and the use of knotwork motifs by these artisans. The purse cover (Figure 2) represents an example of the abstract, zoomorphic patterning and interlace, as well as the use of color.

In Anglo-Saxon artworks, there was also a notable absence of figurative or representational art. Therefore, the linear perspective and pictorial representation seen in the religion iconographic art that the Christian missionaries brought to the British Isles would have been equally foreign to the Anglo-Saxons as the written word.⁸ Similar to how difficult it is for untrained eyes to understand the pattern work and stylized animals in the intricate metalwork at Sutton Hoo, the Anglo-Saxons would have had a similar reaction to the different methodology of art seen in Mediterranean works.⁹ The *Book of Durrow* is one of the earliest attempts by

⁷ Diebold, 16.

⁸ Diebold, 20.

⁹ Diebold, 6.

Northern artisans to bridge these traditions in order to help an Anglo-Saxon audience understand and interpret the Christian narrative for themselves.

The exact dating and origin of the *Book of Durrow* is shrouded in mystery, although it is probable that it was created sometime between 650 and 700 in Durrow or Northumbria in Northern England, Lindisfarne, Durham, or the island of Iona in Scotland. This piece represents the emergence of the basic layout and forms of Insular manuscripts, with three main components being the decorated initial, the carpet page, and the evangelist symbol illustrations. Most striking and characteristic of these works may be the incredibly intricate and expressively rendered letterforms, such as in the folio's Incipit of Mark page (Figure 3).

The prominent “N”, which extends through the better part of the vertical length of the page, is formed from the knotwork interlace and scrolling geometric motifs that characterize Anglo-Saxon works. More so than a “letter,” it is natural to call this design a “figure.” Its relative size on the page and expressive nature give it a life of its own. The cascading waterfall of text that hugs its form, creating a visual diminuendo down the page, creates a contrast that gives the main letterform even more emphasis. The script—written in a language foreign to its audience—becomes more familiar by drawing it in context of the visual language established by the Anglo-Saxon culture. By artistically deforming the letters, the script—rather than losing its significance—becomes more meaningful to an audience who cannot understand the coded meaning of the text, but who can interpret the importance of the work in visual terms.¹⁰

This becomes even more significant when considering that the monastic scribes who created these works may also have been illiterate. These scribes poured their energies into

¹⁰ Diebold, 45.

drawing the intricacies of the letter—rather than writing the word—and composing the rhythm of the page, rather than only taking into account issues of clarity and legibility. This makes for a highly impactful and emotive image. Its impressiveness as an image lends the text and its meaning a tangible authority.¹¹

Just as text becomes more like image, image becomes more textual in the *Book of Durrow*. When looking at the evangelist symbol page *Man, Symbol of Matthew* (Figure 4), the human figure seems quite awkward and stiff. The straight-on depiction of the face, the profiled view of the feet, and the trunk-like body flatly articulated with detailed pattern work all contribute to this perception. One might assume that this is the result of inexperience, as Northern artisans were unused to depicting figural and representational imagery. This may in part be true; however, the level of technical virtuosity displayed by the surrounding complex pattern work would suggest that the nature of the depiction is at least somewhat, if not largely, intentional. This is supported by the interpretation that the figure, rather than being the actual representation of Matthew the Apostle, is a symbolic representation of Matthew's icon in the book of Revelations—that of a man. In that way, the figure becomes a connotative symbol like any other textual denotation. The flat treatment of the figure then seems to make more sense, if one thinks of it the way one thinks of a letter form.

Even when Insular manuscripts gravitate more towards Mediterranean styles of naturalist representation, they still maintain the flat, graphic articulation characteristic of textual treatment. For example, in the evangelist page of St. Matthew in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (Figure 5) there is attention given to creating some illusion of depth and space, and proportion in the figure.

¹¹ Carol Ann Farr, *The Book of Kells: Its Function and Audience*. London: British Library, 1997, 41.

However, this illusion is promptly broken by the attachment of the curtain to the foreground frame, which paradoxically sits behind the rug on which Matthew rests his feet. The graphic patterning detailing the cloth adds to this flattening effect, as does the inclusion of text within the composition.¹² The image is more narrative than in the *Book of Durrow*, yet the narrative becomes more allegorical with the inclusion of the figure behind the curtain, thought to be Moses.¹³

Christian theology during the Middle Ages had a peculiar notion of time based on typology, paralleling Old Testament stories as prefiguring or symbolizing events and doctrines in the New Testament.¹⁴ In this case, the closed book in Moses's hands symbolizes the closed nature of the Old Testament, whereas the open book being written in by Matthew symbolizes the "living word" of the New Testament. This image, which uses allegory to juxtapose these concepts in a like/as comparison, is much more akin to how text functions than image.¹⁵ While image can often only imply metaphor—comparing two things by depicting one as the other—Insular images function textually, somehow suggesting the idea of simile.¹⁶

Some images in Insular manuscripts functioned neither as narrative or allegory, but as punctuation. It is uncertain what the exact function of carpet pages (Figure 6)—named for their visual likeness to Persian rugs—were for scribes and viewers, or whether they were strictly ornamental. A possible theory is that, because of their position preceded each of the gospels, they were meant to prepare viewers to receive the written truth of each gospel book. Like a pause

¹² Diebold, 41.

¹³ Olson, xxvi.

¹⁴ Diebold, 75.

¹⁵ Bernard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print. Diebold

¹⁶ Diebold, 74.

implied by a period, the swirling patterns—which inspire an almost meditative state—allow for a moment of contemplation. In this way, the imagery, despite its visual prominence, is subservient to the text. This shows the ways text was revered by its scribes and viewers.

Unlike other cultures that used writing systems for law, transactions, notations, and other daily activities, text at this time in the British Isles was only ever used in religious contexts, linking writing directly to God. This was bolstered by specific biblical references linking Christ with the written word, for example: “In the beginning was the word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,”¹⁷ and the reference of Christ’s incarnation described as “the Word made flesh.”¹⁸

There was a wonderment and belief in the magic quality of text, since its content and use lent it an aura of supernatural power. There is even a legacy with the *Book of Durrow* that a farmer, distraught at the predicament of his livestock who were ailing from hoof and mouth, immersed a portion of the manuscript in the trough water, thinking the imbued holiness of the text would cure his animals.¹⁹

The perceived magic of the text was reinforced by the manuscript’s complex imagery. When describing an early insular gospel book, the priest Gerald of Wales aptly described this phenomenon:

Look more keenly at it, and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colours so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all this was the work of an angel, and not of a man.²⁰

¹⁷ 1 John 1:1

¹⁸ 1 John 1:14

¹⁹ Diebold, 28.

²⁰ Diebold, 24. Cited from G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells* (London, 1987), 195.

The *Book of Kells* took the complexity found in manuscripts like the *Book of Durrow* and the even more intricate *Lindisfarne Gospels* further than audiences even now can quite comprehend. The Chi Rho page (Figure 7) displays the baffling depth of intricacy that could be achieved by these scribes, who took the concept of decorated initials seen in the Incipit of Mark (Figure 3) page in the *Book of Durrow* to monumental proportions. The Greek monogram symbol for Christ—chi(X) and rho(P)—fills the entire page, forming an epic framework for numerous miniscule illustrations.

To keep such precious objects safe, some of these manuscripts were housed in cumdachs, elaborate ornamented book shrines—similar to reliquaries—which were used to house relics of saints. This is similar to how the tablets, inscribed with God’s commandments, were housed in the Arc of the Covenant. The *Book of Durrow* was housed in a cumdach for a time, which was sealed against any access. More than protection, these shrines turned these illuminated manuscripts into relics, to be revered in much the same way.²¹

Again, this brings up the subject of the untenable balancing point that Christian art teeters on; the compromise between the Second Commandment, and the acceptance of images as evangelizing tools supporting the holy text. If the texts, because of their adornment and preciousness, were being hidden away from sight and worshipped as objects, the imagery no longer acts as a support, but as an idol.

Even when properly displayed to the public, these texts were challenging to decipher. The difficulty in reading stemmed from more than just widespread illiteracy—even if one was able to understand writing, it would still be a challenge to decipher such wildly distorted letters.

²¹ Diebold, 28.

This distortion was used for decorative means, but there are also other possible reasons for the scribes' artistic freedom. Medieval society was rigidly structured by social and classist constructs, and scribes may have enforced their own elevated status as part of the intellectual monastic community by creating texts inaccessible by the layman.²² The complexity in their work could also have been a personal means of devotional practice and expression, with the intense intricacy in their work reflecting their belief in God's infinite unknowability. Whatever the reason, in a culture that was largely illiterate and unfamiliar with these foreign characters, these texts may not have needed to be decipherable regardless. Often the manuscripts were used as placeholders, visually marking the liturgy to be practiced that day from memory.²³

During the Carolingian Renaissance, opinion gravitated back towards the idea of image being inferior to text, which was supported by religious doctrine and by classical rationality, such as Plato's condemnation of images as "nothing more than deceptive imitations of the truth."²⁴ Text was standardized for clarity and consistency, as was doctrine. The visual playfulness of letters in early insular manuscripts was perceived as a distraction to studying the Word of God.

However, it is through the artistic engagement of text and the balance and flattening between text and image in early Insular manuscripts that has allowed text to become such an artistic star of the period. The Word of God was given a platform that could be appreciated academically and artistically by the intellectual and the literate, while also exposing the transcendent nature of God to the illiterate and religious unlearned. By bridging the visual traditions of Northern Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as the treatment of text and

²² Diebold, 3.

²³ Jeffery F. Hamburger, "The iconicity of script." *Word & Image* 27, no. 3 (July 2011): 249-261. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 3, 2016).

²⁴ Diebold, 12.

image, Northern artisans created a holistic visual experience through their manuscripts, filled with meaning beyond the coded signification of the words. In that way, those artisans who had never experienced written systems might have actually better known how to truly appreciate the value of a text.



Figure 1. *Belt Buckle*, Sutton Hoo, early 7th century, gold, 13.2 x 5.6 cm © Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 2. *Purse lid from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, early 7th century, gold, garnet and millefiori, 19 x 8.3 cm (excluding hinges) © Trustees of the British Museum*

Figure 3, *Incipit of Mark, Folio 86, recto*, from the *Book of Durrow*, Dublin: Trinity College Library



Figure 4, *Man, symbol of Matthew, folio 21 v*, from the *Book of Durrow*, Dublin: Trinity College Library

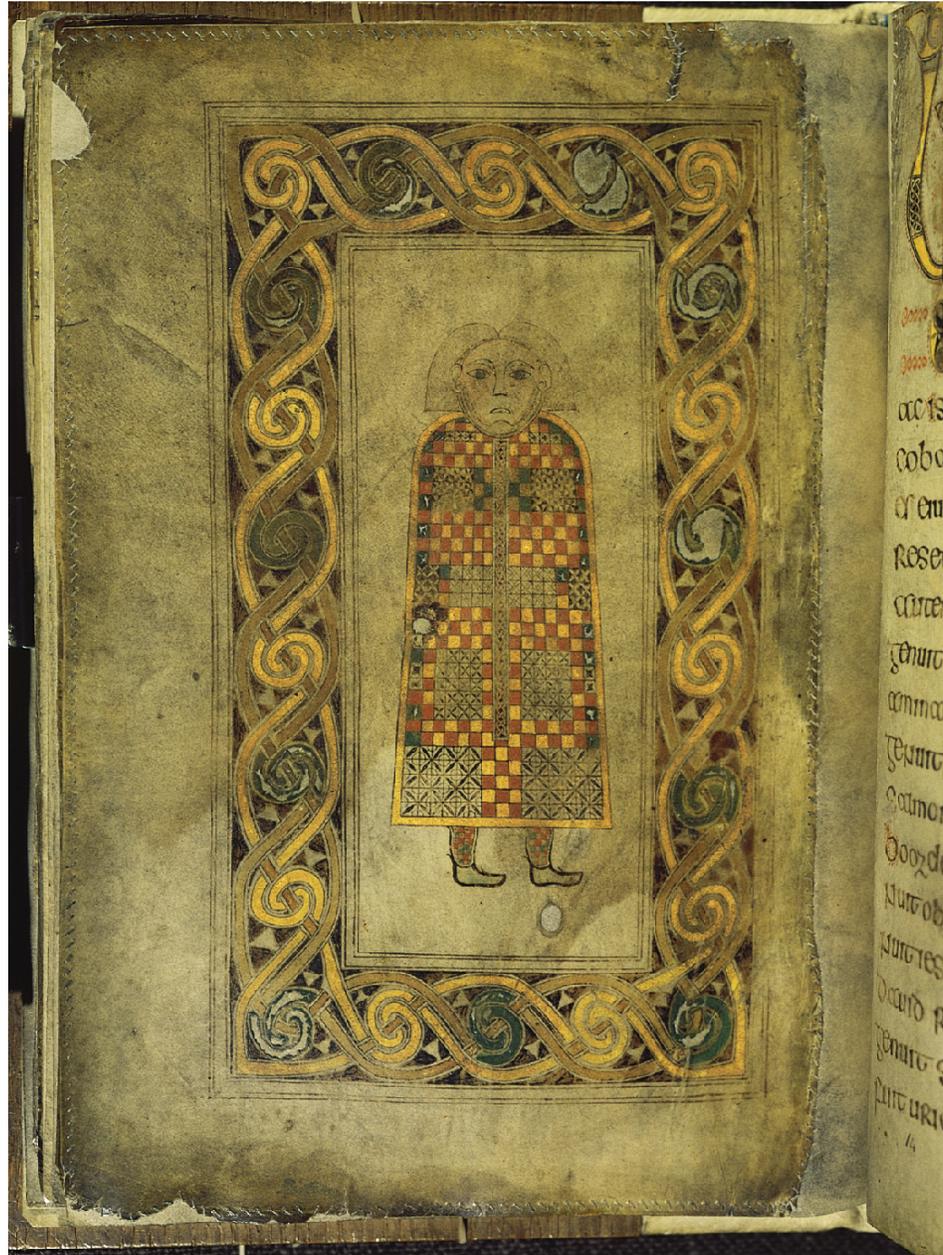


Figure 5, Eadfrith of Lindisfarne (presumed), *Saint Matthew the Evangelist, Folio 25 Verso*, from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, c 700-3rd quarter 10th century, London, British Library Cotton MS Nero D.IV

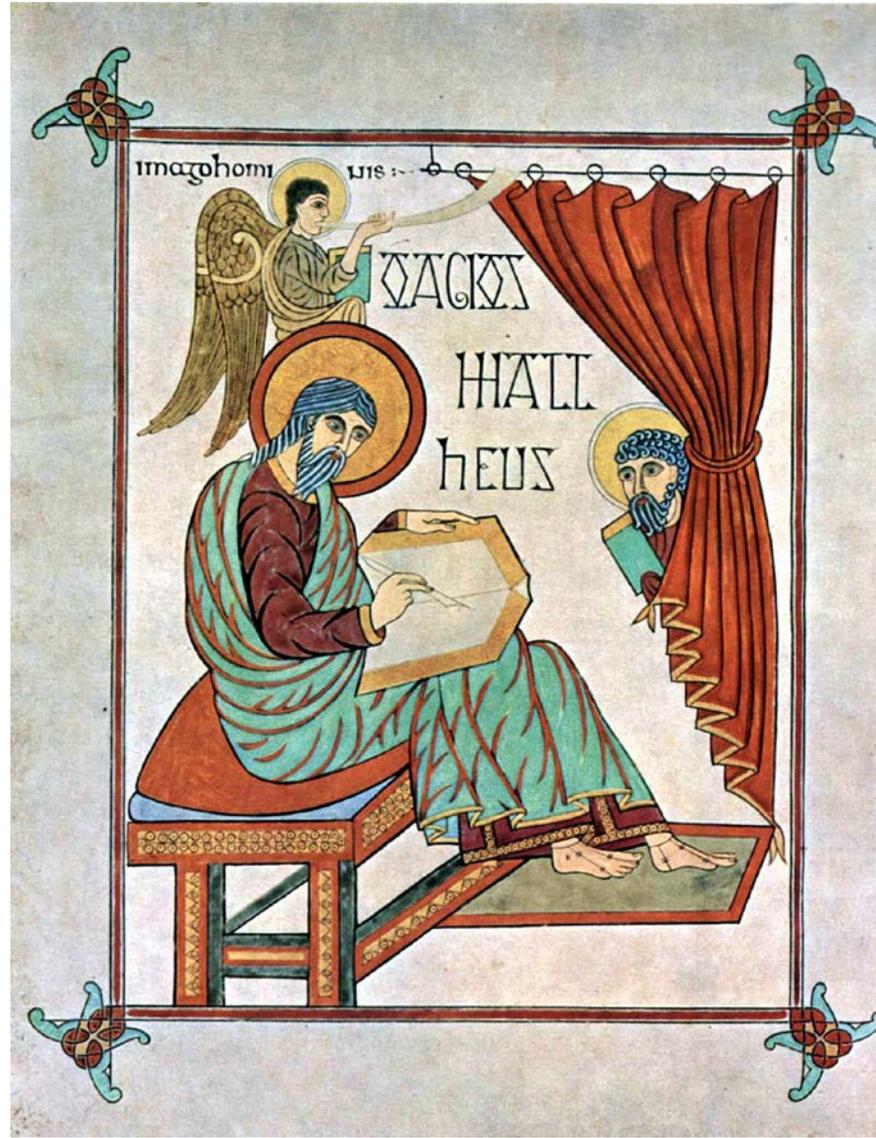


Figure 6, *Carpet Page, folio 85 verso*, from the *Book of Durrow*, Dublin: Trinity College Library



Figure 7, *Chi Rho Iota* page,
from *the Book of Kells*, c. 800,
ink and pigments on vellum,
13" x 9 1/2", Trinity College
Library, Dublin.

