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Being and Becoming: Origins and Interpretations of Folio 3v in the Book of Durrow

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As the oldest extant insular illuminated manuscript, the Book of Durrow is a significant codex that embodies the cultural blending that occurred as Christianity adapted to the cultures of Britain and Ireland. Much of the knowledge regarding this manuscript, created in Ireland around the second half of the seventh century, has been lost to history. Folio 3v is particularly enigmatic, as it has been dislocated and decontextualized throughout the centuries. However, this isolation liberates folio 3v from its nebulous history and places it in an ongoing dialogue with a multiplicity of interpretations. This multiplicity is perhaps the appeal of insular illumination, as this ornamentation bridged the visual cultures of Christians and potential converts. Folio 3v features a spiral motif, which is unique to this page and is key to understanding it. "Being and becoming" refers to both the spiral's static form and the sense of movement that this form evokes, representing the contrast between its Christian origins and its openness to interpretation. By representing the intersections of pagan and Christian spirituality, the spiral recalls notions of transcendence, universality, and intermediation, which likely resonated with medieval viewers of diverse religions, just as they now speak to contemporary viewers across centuries.

I. Introduction

But if you have found customs, whether in the Church of Rome or of Gaul or any other that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection of them, and teach the Church of the English, which is still young in the Faith, whatever you have been able to learn with profit from the various Churches. For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things.

In a letter written from Gregory the Great to St. Augustine in 597 C.E., the pope suggests that Christianity adapt to the culture of Britain and Ireland in order to facilitate conversion from paganism.¹ This letter illustrates the concerns and adaptations that arose from cultural exchanges on both islands: less than a decade later, Columbanus's inquiries to the pope regarding the Celtic *computus* compared to that of continental Europe similarly highlight the intersections of local and Roman traditions that

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990): Book I, Chapter XXVII, 79.

continued to develop throughout the seventh century and beyond.² This blending of cultures gave rise to the impressive illuminations found in insular manuscripts from this time period, which often feature interlace patterns and other designs reminiscent of native pre-Christian forms.

The Book of Durrow is the earliest extant insular manuscript and was likely created sometime during the late seventh century in Ireland.³ The time of its creation supports analysis within the historical context of missionary activity, and its illuminations exhibit the adaptation of pagan iconography into a Christian context. A focused study of folio 3v in the Book of Durrow, which traditionally receives little attention in scholarship on the manuscript, helps to shed light on the complex relationships between these visual cultures. Through the concept of “being and becoming,” this paper contemplates the simultaneously fixed and fluid inspirations and interpretations embodied in the folio’s prominent spiral motif. While folio 3v is fixed in a permanent state of Christian being due to its provenance, its use of abstraction and its synthesis of diverse visual languages provoke countless analyses of vastly different meanings—each of equal validity—thereby placing the folio in a perpetual state of becoming.

Limited knowledge of folio 3v, and of the manuscript itself, clouds understanding of this page’s significance. The Book of Durrow is an illuminated Gospel book that presently contains 248 folios with designs that resonate with the missionary work of such figures as Augustine and Columbanus. While Christianity had existed on the island for several centuries, the seventh and eighth centuries witnessed “the synthesis of Christianity and pre-Christian Irish society.”⁴ As a product of this period of religious conversion, the Book of Durrow is of utmost importance for several reasons: it reflects the transitions occurring during the seventh century, embodies Irish-Gallic and Roman traditions, and represents the

² Francis Shaw, “Early Irish Spirituality: ‘One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic,’” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 52 (1963): 190.

³ Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 33.

⁴ Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2005), 66.

gradual conversion of Britain and Ireland to Christianity.⁵ This transition is especially evident in the manuscript's illumination, which is concentrated in six extant carpet pages.

The carpet pages in the Book of Durrow tend to follow their commonly accepted function as a preface for important sections in a manuscript; they accordingly demarcate the prefatory material and each Gospel (Figures 1-6). However, exceptions to this rule exist: the final carpet page, folio 248r, intriguingly marks the end of the manuscript (Figure 6). The Gospel of Matthew is also missing a carpet page, which presents the following possibilities: folio 248r's current location is inaccurate or a seventh carpet page is missing, and in either scenario the carpet pages quite possibly do not follow this proposed prefatory purpose.⁶ The original placement of folio 3v is also unclear; it is likely the decorative panel was cut out at some point, sewn onto a new page, and reinserted into its current location as the frontispiece for St. Jerome's letter.⁷ Another hypothesis suggests folio 3v might have been the frontispiece for the Gospel of Matthew.⁸ Without delving into the specifics of these arguments, such contradictions demonstrate that it is important, and in this case quite necessary, to look beyond textual cues in order to derive meaning.

The incongruities and inconsistencies among the carpet pages encourage their study as individual works. This method offers an alternative to the tradition of analyzing the pages within the context of the manuscript's text and content, and instead more intentionally recognizes their significant history of rearrangement and dislocation. Folio 3v is particularly suited for this form of research as it marks a dramatic stylistic departure from the group. Unlike the other carpet pages, this folio prioritizes a spiral motif over interlace, which creates a distinctive visual effect. In addition, folio 3v is the only carpet

⁵ William A. Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," *The Harvard Theological Review* 53.3 (1960): 198.

⁶ Calkins, 42.

⁷ Calkins, 37.

⁸ Meehan, 51. The basis for this argument is that the folio's forty-two spirals likely make reference to the forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus. Matthew was the only evangelist to record this genealogy. However, this connection is challenged by the fact that the carpet page for the Gospel of John also features forty-two animals (Figure 5).

page that does not contain the image of a cross, which isolates it from the manuscript's otherwise explicit Christian context. The absence of the cross is indicative of a broader trend in which the design elements used throughout the manuscript draw on local traditions in a strategy that resonates with Gregory's policy of inculturation.

II. Art and Audiences

Just as Gregory the Great found use in adapting Christianity to local customs, he also recognized the power of the instructive function of religious images. In his famous letter to Serenus of Marseilles, Gregory asks the bishop to preserve images while discouraging their adoration, arguing that images served as educational tools for the illiterate.⁹ Indeed, images could facilitate communication across disparate verbal and visual languages. Augustine clearly attributed such a role to images during his missions; upon his arrival in Kent in 597, he approached Ethelbert "carrying a silver cross as [his] standard and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board."¹⁰ This scene illustrates the ways in which art objects could demonstrate religious power through valuable and luxurious materials.¹¹ It makes sense, then, that Christian manuscripts in Britain and Ireland would not only visualize religious expression in commonly valued materials and craftsmanship, but might also accommodate the local traditions of pagan culture to appeal to audiences of diverse religious backgrounds.

Given the absence of explicitly or exclusively Christian iconography in folio 3v, an analysis of the folio is an ideal case study to examine the use of native and abstract forms to communicate across religions and other cultural differences. Interestingly, this folio tends to receive little attention in scholarship on the Book of Durrow, which is likely due to its contested location within the manuscript and its relative lack of textual reference points. The composition's use of form, duplication, and symbolic

⁹ Celia Chazelle, "Pictures, Books, and the Illiterates: Pope Gregory I's Letter to Serenus of Marseilles," *Word & Image* 6 (1990): 139.

¹⁰ Bede, Book I Chapter XXV, 75.

¹¹ Christopher De Hamel. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. (London: Phaidon, 1994): 14.

numbers nevertheless supplies plenty of interpretations. Folio 3v is composed of an interlace border containing six trumpet and spiral devices that are nearly vertically symmetrical.¹² The devices are grouped into two sets of three; each triad includes a larger device near the center of the page and two smaller devices in the respective corners of the composition. Within each device reside either three or six spirals that encircle a central spiral emanating trumpet-like forms. An interlace border composed of six ribbons frames this dizzying design. Notably, the top edge of the border is missing, along with the rest of the page.¹³ The border likely formed twenty-four roundels at the time of the folio's creation, with four knots in each roundel.

The intricate compositions of folio 3v and the other carpet pages in the Book of Durrow have been related to artifacts ranging from Celtic to Sassanian sources, from textile to stonework.¹⁴ While it is possible that the Book of Durrow engages with all of these sources, the metalwork of Anglo-Saxon England and early medieval Ireland is most commonly cited as its principle source of inspiration.¹⁵ Interlace in the Book of Durrow is often compared to similar designs in many of the seventh-century treasures from the Sutton Hoo burial site (Figure 7). The manuscript's representations of animals, such as the eagle in folio 84v, are clearly similar to cloisonné fibulae that predate the Book of Durrow (Figures 8, 9), while the spirals in folio 3v are much like those found on the Lagore belt buckle (Figure 10).¹⁶ These comparisons do not reveal mere artistic influence but instead highlight a complex relationship and ongoing exchange between insular and continental discourses and visual languages.

The reciprocal relationships between insular and continental sources, and between metalwork and manuscripts, were studied by art historian Lawrence Nees in his research on two garnet buckle mounts found at Sutton Hoo. The mounts feature a unique guilloche, or "twist" pattern, with closed

¹² The only interruption in this symmetry is the orientation of the spirals and trumpet elements.

¹³ Meehan, 13. These pieces were perhaps lost when the manuscript was placed in an ill-fitting shrine around the end of the ninth century.

¹⁴ Calkins, 53.

¹⁵ Calkins, 57.

¹⁶ Meehan, 50.

cloisons deliberately inserted at the crossing points of the twists (Figure 11).¹⁷ This style required much more work to produce and is markedly different from the other mounts found at Sutton Hoo and most known cloisonné metalwork. Nees argues the mounts' design drew inspiration from twists drawn in manuscripts, as paint on parchment would accommodate this style much more easily than metal. This connection illustrates that motifs in metalwork were quite intentionally translated across media and religions in a reciprocal relationship between pagan and Christian art.

What common values could diverse audiences identify in these designs? Given the high level of craftsmanship needed to create this work, some scholars believe such objects could have been appealing for their protective properties.¹⁸ Small amulets and other forms of personal ornament often feature interlace designs and were perhaps used to protect against evil spirits.¹⁹ The immense effort required to produce such work paradoxically made the finished product seem effortless, or even miraculous. The use of perfect geometry and symmetry could have emitted not only a sense of luxury but also a stunning, and perhaps unearthly, presence.²⁰

While the Book of Durrow was believed to have protective properties, it is important to note that this power was likely derived from its connection with St. Colum Cille rather than its illumination:

[St. Collum Cille's] bookes have a strange property which is that if they or any of them had sunck to the bottom of the Deepest waters they would not lose one letter, signe, or character of them, w^{ch} I have seen partly myselfe of that book of them which is at Dorow in the K^s County, for I saw the Ignorant man that had the same in his Custody, when sickness came upon cattle, for their Remedy putt water on the booke & suffered it

¹⁷ Lawrence Nees, "Weaving Garnets: Thoughts about Two 'Excessively Rare' Belt Mounts from Sutton Hoo," *Speculum* 83.3 (2008): 7.

¹⁸ Robert D. Stevick, "The St. Cuthbert Gospel Binding and Insular Design," *Artibus Et Historiae* 8.15 (1987): 17. Stevick's article studies the design of the St. Cuthbert Gospel, which is derived from the perfect geometry of the square. The symmetry of the design, with spiraling forms framed by interlace, functions as a protection over the manuscript.

¹⁹ Ernst Kitzinger, "Interlace and Icons: Form and Function in Early Insular Art," in *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Insular Art Held in the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, 3-6 January 1991*, ed. Michael Spearman and John Higgitt (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland, 1993), 3.

²⁰ Kitzinger, 4. Art historian Ernst Kitzinger interprets the carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels in this way. Though he considers the potential for its design to protect, he argues the illumination in the manuscript is too excessive to have a solely protective purpose.

to rest there a while & saw alsoe cattle returne thereby to their former or pristin state & the book to receave no loss.²¹

This observation from the Annals of Clonmacnoise explains both the water damage found on a section of the manuscript and the possible origins of its protective powers. Though the source of the manuscript's power cannot be fully determined, it is believed that talismanic qualities were attributed to Irish manuscripts in particular.²² While it is difficult to determine the nature of this power and how it might have functioned in relation to faith and other factors, the art object's value is easily perceived regardless of religious background.

III. Being and Becoming

Given the manuscript's origins, the design of folio 3v can be contextualized through an analysis of Christian beliefs and symbols that is not necessarily tied to the textual information surrounding the page. For example, folio 193v, the *incipit* to the Gospel of John in the Book of Durrow, uses the Greek delta in the place of a Roman D to make reference to the Trinity in a play on the formal qualities of the words (Figure 12).²³ Abstraction in both lettering and decorative panels required viewers to disentangle the coded iconic meanings of concurrent, competing images, which might allow them to "see God, or at least to glimpse his nature."²⁴ With this in mind, folio 3v has a degree of independence from whatever its original textual counterpart might have been. A reader of the Book of Durrow would have looked at the words and then past them, making use of his "spiritual sight" to attain higher understanding.²⁵

Such intellectual puzzles direct the viewer's attention to the complexities of Christianity and to perhaps spirituality in general. In folio 3v, the forty-two spirals likely make reference to the forty-two

²¹ Denis Murphy, ed., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise*, trans. Conell Mageoghagan (Dublin: University Press, 1896), 96.

²² de Hamel, 38.

²³ Ben C. Tilghman, "The Shape of the Word: Extralinguistic Meaning in Insular Display Lettering," *Word & Image* 27.3 (2011): 292.

²⁴ Tilghman, 296.

²⁵ Tilghman, 303.

generations from Abraham to Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. The triangular shapes and organization of the circular devices recall symbolize the Trinity, while the two nearly identical triads might represent the dual nature of Christ. Spirals are unique to this particular folio, which suggests their intentional inclusion cannot be dismissed as decoration, especially given the absence of the cross: perhaps, then, the motif evokes ideas of cyclicity and continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The intricate design of folio 3v seems to defy human production, which could be reminiscent of the paradox of Christ's birth by the Virgin Mary. These analyses locate meaning outside of the art and text. By extension, this work can be appreciated more widely for its use of familiar motifs, independent of the specific spiritual connotations one might glean from them.

Images derive power and value from their mutability and flexibility of interpretation. Abstract ornament can facilitate such analyses by serving as an intermediary for broader reading.²⁶ Because geometric forms do not make specific reference to recognizable figures, they are the most effective form of intermediation between an art object and a viewer's understanding. Geometry both causes the image to lose distinct meaning and also makes it more accessible to viewers.²⁷ The lack of cultural specificity in folio 3v—its blend of Celtic imagery, Christian context, and geometric design—resonates with pagan, Christian, medieval, and contemporary viewers alike. These abstract visual cues are fragmented and imperfect, which encourage inculturation while attempting to address the often-paradoxical complexities of Christian faith.²⁸ In this way, the viewer's interpretation of the work does not have to match that of the artist's original connotation, making the illumination more universal and appealing to potential converts to Christianity.

Hegel's concept of the Absolute in Romantic art applies to this broader interest in spiritual essence, or universality, that is independent of religious belief. His analysis, though rooted in a Christian

²⁶ Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 45.

²⁷ Grabar, 154.

²⁸ Tilghman, 301.

context, helps explain the interactions between spirituality and art. Similar to the ways in which geometric design does not refer to geometry itself and thus serves as an intermediary for an external spiritual ideal, the Absolute is a spiritual essence and truth that cannot be fully represented by the physicality, or sensuousness, of art. Art is therefore an effective but imperfect vehicle for evoking spirituality:

There is something higher than the beautiful appearance of spirit in its immediate sensuous shape, even if this shape be created by spirit as adequate to itself. For this unification, which is achieved in the medium of externality and therefore makes sensuous reality into an appropriate existence, nevertheless is once more opposed to the true essence of spirit, with the result that spirit is pushed back into itself out of its reconciliation in the corporeal into a reconciliation of itself within itself.²⁹

The impossibility of reconciliation between the "spirit" and the physical form of an art object creates a closed-circuit relationship in which the spirit continuously refers to itself. An artwork's apparent, but inferior, spirituality and its simultaneous reference to an external spiritual essence serves as an effective model for understanding the role of spirituality in folio 3v.

The paradox of the spiral's physical stasis and perceived movement represents the phenomenon Hegel describes. In folio 3v, the spirals' intrigue and intricacy appear to be "created by spirit as adequate to itself," and in this sense the spiral's meaning is fixed, or static. However, the spiral's geometry does not refer to itself, but serves as a vehicle to arrive at the "true essence of the spirit." As a vehicle for this spirituality, it is therefore in a constant state of flux. Thus, the spiral represents being and becoming—the spiral's static form and the sense of movement that this form implies—a key concept to understanding folio 3v.

The spiral's intermediary role leaves the carpet page in a state of impermanence on two levels. The first level of impermanence relates to the Hegelian idea of unification between Romantic art and the Absolute. This relationship is in a constant state of becoming, as the spirit actively reconciles itself

²⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), Web.

within itself. The second level of impermanence involves the interpretive potential of insular manuscript illumination among viewers from different backgrounds. The spiral's geometric shape could reveal an ethereal sense of spiritual transcendence independent of a specific religion, which was likely appealing to missionaries and Celts alike, as the accommodation of local traditions facilitated the spread of Christianity.

IV. Conclusion

Though often neglected in research on the Book of Durrow, folio 3v offers a plethora of starting points for further study. Formal analysis of its predominant spiral motif encourages careful consideration of the principal visual elements in this folio and their significance. The spiral encapsulates this method by embodying the paradox of fixed context and infinite interpretative potential. In the impossible quest for perfect spiritual knowledge, fragmentary visual and mental exercises become more universal in that they are able to accommodate the interpretations of diverse audiences. This is perhaps the appeal of insular illumination, which attracted Christians and converts in centuries past. The notions of transcendence, universality, intermediation, and being and becoming likely resonated with medieval viewers of diverse religions, just as they now speak to contemporary viewers across centuries.

Appendix: Images

1. Folio 3v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
2. Folio 1v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
3. Folio 85v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
4. Folio 125v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
5. Folio 192v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
6. Folio 248r from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
7. Gold belt buckle from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo
Early 7th century
London British Museum
8. Folio 84v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin
9. Pair of Eagle Fibulae
Visigothic, found in Spain, 6th century
The Walters Art Museum
10. Belt buckle from Lagore
7th century
National Museum of Ireland
11. Rectangular mounts for a harness from the ship burial at Sutton Hoo
Early 7th century
London British Museum
12. Folio 193v from the Book of Durrow
Late 7th century
Trinity College Dublin

1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.



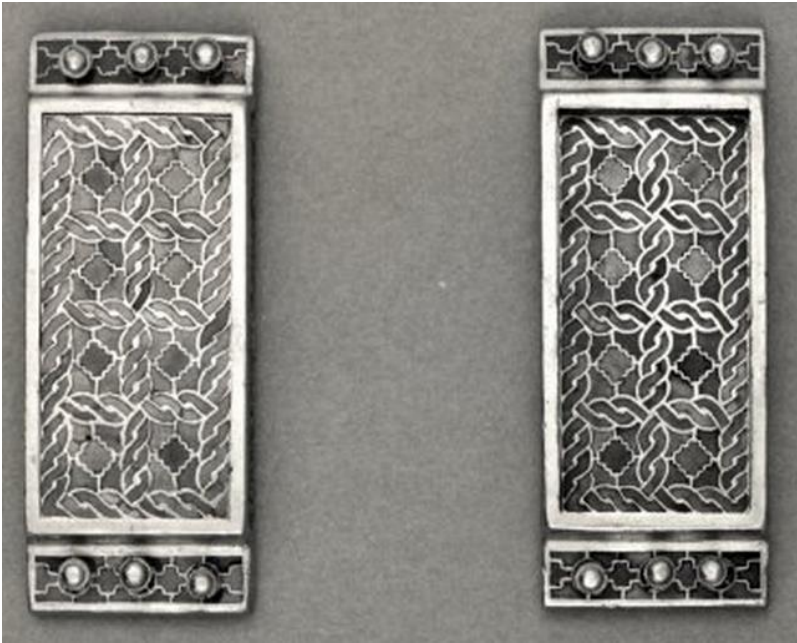
9.



10.



11.



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