



## On the Peculiarities Exhibited by the Miniatures and Ornamentation of Ancient Irish Illuminated MSS

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ON THE PECULIARITIES EXHIBITED BY THE MINIATURES AND ORNAMENTATION OF ANCIENT IRISH ILLUMINATED MSS.

THE extreme rarity and the singular character of the miniatures and ornaments of ancient Irish illuminated manuscripts, induce me to think that a few particulars relative to their remarkable peculiarities, may not be without interest to the members of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

These peculiarities have presented themselves to me whilst collecting materials for my "Palæographia Sacra Pictoria," already published, and for a work to be specially devoted to the miniatures and ornaments of Irish and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, of which I hope shortly to commence the publication.

The early manuscripts which are ornamented with illuminations, are, for the most part, copies of the Gospels; and in them we have the first few words of each Gospel generally written of a large size, occupying the whole page, the initial letter being of gigantic proportions, and the whole ornamented with a profusion of minute, but exquisitely precise and delicate patterns, which may be referred to four principal types:—

First, interlaced ribbon patterns, varied *ad infinitum* in the interlacings, but almost symmetrical in their arrangement;

Secondly, patterns formed of monstrously attenuated lacertine animals, or birds, with long interlacing tails, tongues, and topknots;

Thirdly, patterns formed by delicate straight lines, arranged obliquely, resembling Chinese work; and,

Fourthly, patterns formed by spiral lines, several of which



St. Matthew. Lambeth MS.

spring from the same centre, their opposite ends going off to the other centres of other similar spiral ornaments. The excessive minuteness and precision of these ornaments is perfectly marvellous, far surpassing the productions of any other school of early art.

Of the miniatures with which these manuscripts are ornamented, it is, on the contrary, impossible to conceive anything more barbarous, either as regards composition or treatment. The drawings, indeed, more nearly resemble Egyptian or Mexican figures, whilst the colours are laid on in solid masses, without the slightest attempt to introduce shading or relief. In most instances these drawings simply consist of single figures of the Evangelists, each being respectively placed opposite the commencement of his gospel. Generally, we find these figures represented standing upright, facing the reader, with long flowing robes, and holding the book of the Gospels, or probably the particular gospel of each Evangelist, in his hands. Such is the case with two of the Evangelists in the Book of Kells; with the three Evangelists in the Leabhar Dimma; with the three Evangelists in the Gospels of St. Moling; with St. John, in the Duke of Buckingham's Irish missal; with St. Matthew and St. Mark, in Archbishop Usher's Gospels (Trin. Coll. Dubl.); and with St. Mark, in the Gospels of Mac Regol, at Oxford. These figures, therefore, furnish us with little archaeological information, if we except the peculiar style of the dress, which it seems, however, difficult to refer to an uniform system of clerical costume, being rather, as it would appear, the result of the fancy of the artist, than a regular attempt to delineate the costume of the bishops of the time: the arrangement of the hair, destitute of tonsure, the form of the shoes, and of the book, are, however, to be noticed.

In some cases, however, additional details are given to these single portraits, which confer on them a higher archaeological interest. Thus, the Evangelist represented on folio 291 verso, of the Book of Kells, is seated on a rich cushion, and he holds in his right hand an instrument for writing, which, from its feathered extremity, seems to me to be intended for a quill.<sup>1</sup> The figure of St. John, in the Gospels of Mac Durnan, at Lambeth Palace, in addition to the book, holds a

<sup>1</sup> See fac-simile of this in *Palæogr. Sacra Pict.*

style or knife in his left hand, whilst in his right he holds an instrument similar to that figured in the Book of Kells, and which he is in the act of dipping into a long cup like an ale-glass, filled with red paint or ink, affixed at the end of a stick.<sup>2</sup> St. Luke, in the Gospels of Mac Regol, dips an instrument very like a quill with the beard stripped off, into a square ink-pot stuck on the top of a stick, which is fixed into a projection of the seat on which he sits, and which is ornamented at the top with eagles' heads, whilst St. John is engaged in writing with a similar instrument upon a long roll which he holds upon his knees. One of the Evangelists, in Archbishop Usher's Gospels, holds in his right hand a short kind of club or broad-sheathed sword. St. Luke, in the Gospels of St. Chad, holds a cross in his left hand, whilst in his right he holds a long wand,<sup>3</sup> the end of which is branched and convoluted, closely resembling the instruments held by the angels attendant upon the Virgin and Child, in the Book of Kells, also copied in my "Palæographia Sacra."

The mode of dressing the beard varies in these drawings; the face is generally shaven smooth, but in some cases the beard is represented as short and straight.

St. Luke, in the Gospels of St. Chad, stands in front of a chair, the sides of which are terminated at the top in dogs' heads; whilst St. Mark, in the same Gospels, stands in front of a chair formed of a monstrous giraffe-looking quadruped, with a long interlaced tail and tongue. St. Mark, also, in the Gospels of Mac Durnan, is represented with a long, upright, monstrously attenuated quadruped on each side, intended, as I presume, for the sides of his chair. The same Gospels of Mac Durnan contain drawings of the two other Evangelists, St. Matthew and St. Luke, of which copies are here presented, and which I consider to be more archaeologically interesting than any of the other figures of the Evangelists



St. Luke.

<sup>2</sup> See copy of this figure in *Palæogr. Sacra Pict.*

<sup>3</sup> See fac-simile of this figure in *Palæogr. Sacra Pict.*

which I have yet seen. St. Luke holds in his right hand the short Episcopal cambutta, rounded at the top, and truncate at the bottom; whilst St. Matthew holds a pastoral staff as long as himself, with a similar top, but pointed at the bottom.<sup>4</sup> I know no other illumination representing the cambutta, of which such beautiful specimens are still in existence (especially that of Clonmacnoise, in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy, and one in the possession of the Duke of Devonshire), but in the engraving given by Dr. O'Connor, of the Duke of Buckingham's Cumdach, is a small figure representing a bishop, holding a short cambutta, and in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy is a small metal figure of an ecclesiastic, in relief, found at Aghaboe, also holding a short cambutta in the right hand, and a book in the left.<sup>5</sup> With

<sup>4</sup> The Gospels of Mac Durnan, at Lambeth, are certainly the most elaborate specimen of this class of minuscule written manuscripts in England, and are equalled only in some respects by the Book of Armagh in Dublin. Indeed, from several circumstances, I am almost tempted to believe that both these volumes were the work of the same scribe and artist. 1st. The exquisite character of the handwriting is identical in both volumes. 2nd. The same curious instances of false or peculiar orthography occur in both—Abraam; Issaac; pfeta for propheta; anguelum for angelum, &c., and precisely the same contractions are found in common. Thus the commencing verses of St. Mark's Gospel are letter for letter, and contraction for contraction identical. Moreover, 3rdly, the ornamentation is in several instances almost identical. The Liber Generationis is treated in the Lambeth Volume just as in the Book of Armagh, except that the tail of the second letter I is cut off short, whilst the "initium" of St. Mark is precisely similar. The same peculiar wheel-like pattern, formed of interlaced ribbons, is also found, I think exclusively, in both these MSS. On the other hand, the Lambeth Volume is entirely destitute of the peculiar spirally convoluted lines, forming so very distinct a feature in many Irish drawings, and which occurs in some of the illuminations of the Book of Armagh; the scribe of the former volume does not appear to have been so anxious to preserve his name as Ferdornach, who so repeatedly signed his in the Book of Armagh; and lastly, the circumstances inscribed in the Gospels of Maeiel Brigid Mac Durnan militate somewhat in point of time against

its having been written by Ferdornach; that is, supposing the entry quoted by Mr. Graves from the Annals of the Four Masters ("A.D. 845, Ferdornach, a sage and choice scribe of the Church of Armagh, died,") to apply to the writer of the Book of Armagh, whilst the same work, as quoted by Dr. Todd, states that "A.D. 926, Maolbrighe, the son of Tornan, comarb of Patrick and Columbkille, felice senectute quievit". If, indeed, we translate the word triquadrum in the inscription in the Lambeth Book ("Maeiel Brigidus Mac Durnani istu textu per triquadru Do digne dogmatizat"), which has so much perplexed the writers on this volume by the words three quarters of a century, it is just possible that Ferdornach may have written the volume just before his death; at any rate, the inscription does not affirm that the volume was written by Maeiel Brigid's direction; it may, therefore, have been executed before his days, although the term "felice senectute quievit" will admit of his having been born twenty or twenty-five years before the death of Ferdornach; the middle of the ninth century appearing to me to be the date most proper to be assigned to the Gospels of Maeiel Brigid Mac Durnan.

<sup>5</sup> There is a figure of the head of a beautiful cambutta published in the Second Volume of the Archaeologia Scotica, and the British Museum possesses the head and boss of another less elaborate specimen. The finest, however, of these cambuttæ are the pastoral staff of the Abbots of Clonmacnoise, mentioned above, and that of the ancient Bishops of Waterford and Lismore, now in the possession of the Duke of Devonshire, (and recently exhibited at one of the Meetings of the Archaeo-

the exception of the figure representing St. Matthew, habited as a bishop in that singular MS., the Sacramentarium of Gelloni, I know no other early figures in which the Evangelists are represented as ecclesiastics ; nor do I believe that any earlier representations of the pastoral staff exist than those here figured.

In several instances these copies of the Gospels, in addition to the figures of the Evangelists, are ornamented with representations of their ordinary symbols, generally arranged in the four open spaces of a cruciform design. Such is the case in the Book of Kells, the Gospels of St. Chad, those of Mac Durnan, and the autograph Gospels of St. Columba, at Dublin ; whilst, in a few rare instances, the same symbols were separately represented opposite the commencement of each of the Gospels instead of its respective Evangelist, as in the last-named Gospels of St. Columba, the Gospels in the National Library at Paris (of which fac-similes have just been published in Lacroix's "*Le Moyen Age et la Renaissance*"), and also in the Harleian Gospels, MSS., Nos. 1023 and 1802. Nothing can be more singular than some of these representations, even of the Ox and Eagle, which bird is, however, splendidly represented in the fragment in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, whilst the Lion, in the Paris Gospels, is a really respectable delineation of the king of beasts. Sometimes these symbols are represented wingless, but occasionally they are tetrapterous, according with the Vision of Ezekiel, as in the Book of Armagh, or are only furnished with a pair of wings. Sometimes, also, they are represented over the separate figures of the Evangelists of which they are the symbols. (Gospels of St. Chad and Mac Regol, the Duke of Buckingham's Missal, and the figure of St. Mark, in the Gospels of Mac Durnan.)

With scarcely an exception, the illuminators of these ancient copies of the Gospels appear to have contented themselves with the delineation of the Evangelists, or their symbolical emblems, which of course prevented all attempt at composition or grouping in the picture. I am, in fact,

logical Institute), which came into his Grace's hands with the property of the Boyles, Earls of Cork. Both are of bronze, beautifully inlaid with interlaced dragon patterns, and ornamented with gems, and both are singularly ornamented along the

outer rim of the crook with a row of dogs or dog-like animals. The latter has been referred to the eighth or ninth century, but from comparison with other specimens of Irish work I should think its real date must be about the eleventh century.

acquainted with only the following instances approaching to the idea of pictures, several of which indeed occur in Psalters which may have suggested the attempt :—

1. "The Virgin and Child," surrounded by four angels, in the Book of Kells. (Copied in my "Palæographia.")
2. "The Temptation of Christ," a most singular composition, in the same manuscript.
3. "The seizure of Christ by two Jews," in the same manuscript.
4. "The Virgin and Child," in one of the fragments of the Gospels at St. Gall.<sup>6</sup>
5. "The Crucifixion," also at St. Gall.
6. "The Crucifixion," in the Psalter of St. John's College, Cambridge. (Copied in my "Palæographia.")
7. "David's Combat with the Lion," in the same manuscript.
8. "David's Combat with Goliath," in ditto. A most strange design ; the Giant being represented with his head downwards, and his legs in the air, reaching to the top of the drawing.

In addition to these eight drawings, I have now the pleasure of adding notices of two others, of which copies are annexed, which may be said to have been discovered quite recently at the British Museum. They occur in the Cottonian Manuscript of the Psalter (Vitellius, F. xi.), which was so greatly injured by the Cottonian fire, that the subject of the fragments remained undetermined, so that it is not mentioned in either of the Cottonian catalogues. Having recently been carefully mounted, by the directions of Sir F. Madden, that gentleman has ascertained it to be a copy of the Psalter, which, upon examination, appears to me to have been executed by the scribe of the Psalter of St. John's College, Cambridge, above mentioned. The character is the same fine semiuncial in both, written with extreme beauty and care. The illuminated initials are very similar, and it is ornamented with two drawings, in precisely the same rude style as those above mentioned in the St. John's College volume. Unfortunately, the frag-

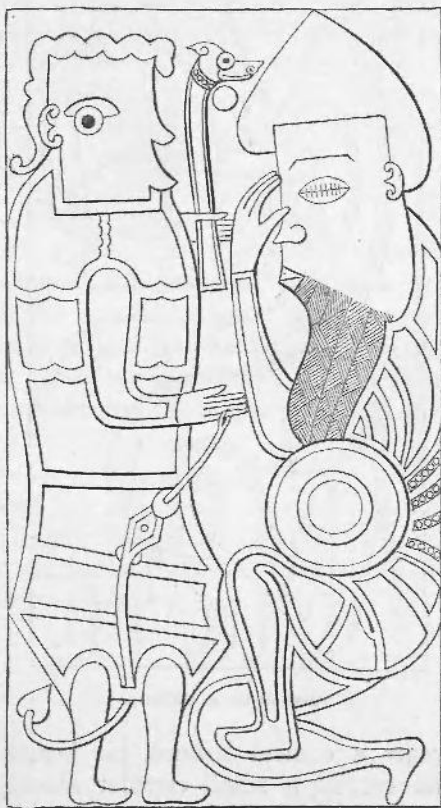
<sup>6</sup> A complete series of fac-similes of the St. Gall illuminations (upwards of twenty quarto drawings in number) have been obtained by the Record Commission. They are in the style of the Gospels of Mac Regol and Book of Kells. They have been engraved, printed, and coloured

at the public expense years ago, but still are suffered to lie unheeded and forgotten among other valuable materials in the presses of the Rolls House in Chancery Lane. The public have a right to inquire why they have not long since been published.



ments are so singed and blackened, that it has been with the utmost difficulty, and only with the aid of a magnifying glass, and by holding the pages in different lights, that I have been able to make out the lines of the figures ; whereas, the beautiful ornamental borders are more easily determined by the colours, which have better withstood the action of the fire. These I have omitted copying, as they are in the ordinary style of the ribbon and diagonal patterns.

The first of these drawings represents the combat between David and Goliath, the former of whom holds in his left hand

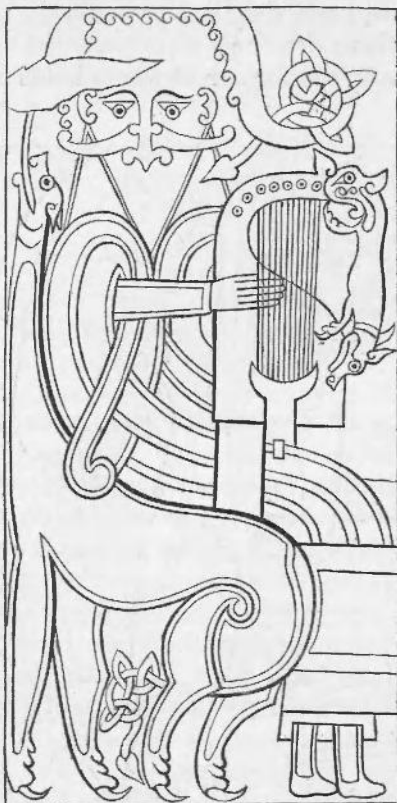


David and Goliath.

his shepherd's staff, terminated appropriately in a dog's head, whilst in his right hand, suspended from the little finger, he holds one end of his sling, from which he has just discharged



a stone, which is seen about to strike the head of Goliath.<sup>7</sup> The figure of the latter, although very strange, is sufficiently expressive. By figuring him kneeling upon one knee, the artist has contrived to introduce him into the picture of a larger size ; whilst this attitude, combined with his shut eye, and his hand held up to protect his face, indicate his fear of the coming



David playing on the Harp.

stone. He wears a conical helmet, his beard is long and plaited, and he carries a small circular shield, ornamented

<sup>7</sup> I am informed by Mr. Eugene Curry that a discussion has recently been carried on in the pages of "Saunders' News Letter," respecting the nature of the ancient Irish sling, Mr. Clibborn considering it to have been nothing else than a stick slit at the end. The drawing before

us will set the question at rest. The Anglo-Saxon MS. (Cotton. MS. Claudius, B. iv.,) of the tenth century, also contains a figure of a man using a sling of nearly similar form, copied by Strutt. (Horda, pl. xvii., fig. 4, and in his Sports and Pastimes.)

with concentric rings variously coloured. Across the middle of his body is apparently a representation of plate-armour, indicated by rows of round rivet-heads. As a representation of an Irish, or rather Celtic, warrior of the ninth century, this drawing is extremely valuable.

The other drawing in the Cottonian Manuscript, (Vitellius, F. xi.), represents David playing on the harp; and will be equally interesting to the Irish antiquary, as the earliest pictorial representation of that favourite instrument,<sup>8</sup> the form of which, although curious, is not very elegant. It is furnished with twelve strings, although there are only seven pegs round which they are fastened. The long plaited and curled hair, the long moustachios,<sup>9</sup> and the pointed beard, will be noticed, as well as the curious seat, formed of an animal with a long neck, on which the Psalmist is seated.

I consider that these drawings may be referred to the ninth or first half of the tenth century, and I think they will be regarded as very valuable in respect to their archaeological details, more especially when we consider that so few illustrations of this character exist in Ireland, of a pictorial class. I am aware, indeed, that many valuable particulars may be obtained from the sculptures of the various splendid crosses in different parts of Ireland, and I can only express my regret, in conclusion, that these highly characteristic and truly national monuments have hitherto remained unpublished.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a small figure of a man playing on a harp in the carved cumdach of the Duke of Buckingham's missal.

<sup>9</sup> The Jews, in the drawing of the

seizure of Christ in the Book of Kells, have the moustache and beard precisely similar; so also in the carvings on the smaller of the crosses at Monasterboice.