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Revealed: hidden art behind the gospel truth

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DISCOVERIES

Migration-Period Art

Revealed: hidden art behind the gospel truth

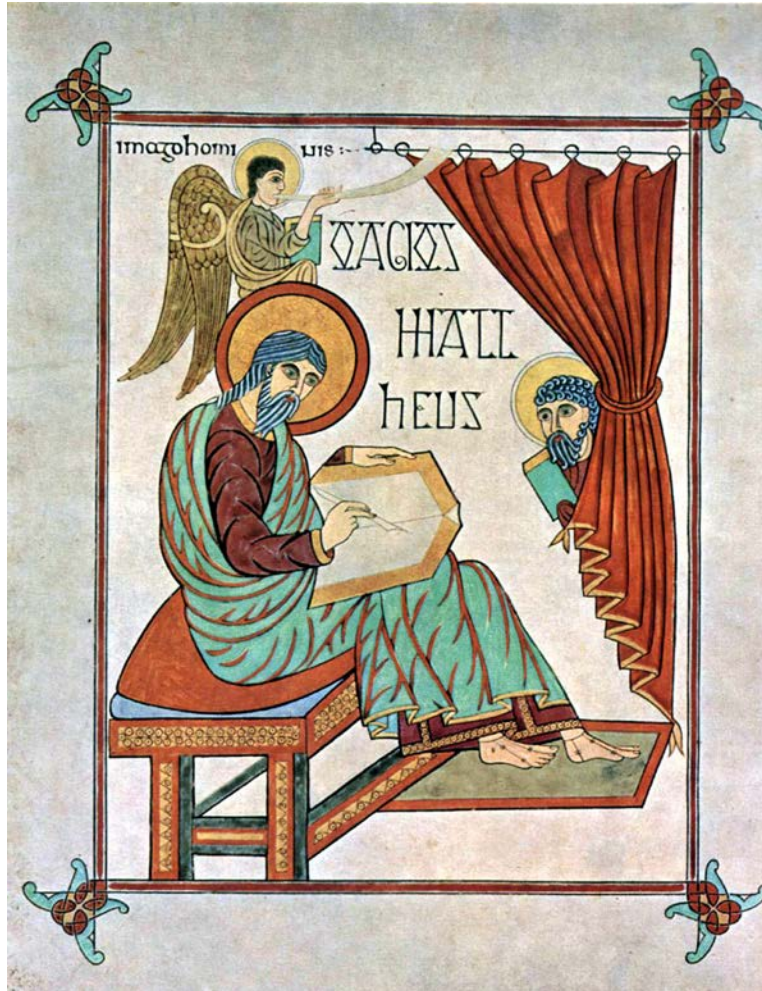
Sixty previously undetected drawings have been discovered in the Lindisfarne Gospels - nearly 1,300 years after the illuminated Latin manuscript was created as one of the world's greatest artistic treasures. The discovery, made by Michelle Brown, curator of illuminated manuscripts at the British Library, using a high-magnification binocular microscope, was said yesterday to show that the volume marked the birth of the first distinctively and proudly "English" culture.

Study of the drawings, discovered on the back of calf hide parchment, established them as by far the earliest known use of a metal-point pen, a forerunner of the pencil. No other metal-point drawings are known to have existed before 1100. In many of the drawings, the artist also used paint that washed through to the front of the parchment. This can still be faintly seen. But the metal-point outlines are invisible to the naked eye. Some traces of drawings were noted when the Lindisfarne Gospels were last closely examined at the British Museum in the 1950s. Ms Brown said they were not found then, partly because microscope technology was less advanced. "I went looking for them. It was a bit like looking at an archaeological site." She used steeply angled light. "Lo and behold, the drawings were there - like the plough marks you get in a field."

What she had discovered was a series of practice sketches on every page of the manuscript. They were the doodle-pads used by a monk working in an era of recurrent invasions, when monasteries in remote, rocky places such as Lindisfarne were refuges of learning and art. The artist is believed to be Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne from 698 to 721. He practiced script letters and tried out preliminary versions of flowers, birds and other images. He did this preparatory work on the backs of parchments because calf hide was too expensive to be used as sketchpaper. Ms Brown said these indicated that he was "consciously creating a new English culture." The sketches proved that he had begun by planning to write the gospels in a traditional Roman half-uncial script familiar from the culture of Lindisfarne's mother churches in Rome and the Mediterranean. But in his finished manuscript, he fused this style with Anglo-Saxon runic letters, some of them only seen before on pagan inscriptions. "He was grafting these on to Mediterranean script," Brown said, "... having to make up his font as he went along. It was a conscious decision. It was the first time runic figures had been used in a book."

They proclaimed to Rome, according to Brown that the young English church was "no provincial outpost but vibrant and integrated... A prime motivation was to define what it meant to be Northumbrian, to be English and to be a part of the wider Christian church. The style of lettering was important. It needed to ring bells in the audience's mind of both 'Englishness' and 'Romanness.'"

Another key finding of the research is that the dating of the gospels - one of the prime sourcebooks of English Christianity - should be moved forward from the long-accepted 698 to about 720. This means that the Venerable Bede, author of the first English history book, is now thought likely to have also been involved in producing the masterpiece. The argument for re-dating the manuscript is based on evidence about its style and technical production. Bede, a monk at Jarrow 40 miles from Lindisfarne, which had close links with it, was 47 years old in 720 and his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was finished in 732. "I think Bede would have been consulted about the thinking behind the production of the gospels," Ms Brown said. "One of the figures in the volume's painting of St. Matthew relates to a theological issue he raised."



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