

ARTS / SESE — IRISH HERITAGE · 3RD–6TH CLASS

Leabhar Ceanannais — The BOOK OF KELLS

Irish Illuminated Manuscripts — 3rd–6th Class

What is the Book of Kells?

1

The Book of Kells

A magnificently decorated manuscript of the four Gospels of the New Testament in Latin. Created by Irish monks, probably on the island of Iona (Scotland), around 800 CE. Considered one of the finest examples of Insular art.

Example: Held at Trinity College Dublin — one of Ireland's most visited tourist attractions

2

Illuminated manuscript

A manuscript decorated with intricate illustrations, borders, and lettering in gold, silver, and vivid pigments. 'Illuminated' refers to the way the gold catches the light.

3

Insular art

The distinctive art style developed by monks in Ireland and Scotland (the islands — hence 'insular') from about 600–900 CE. Characterised by intricate interlaced patterns, zoomorphic (animal) designs, and elaborate knotwork.

4

Celtic knotwork

The interlaced patterns of lines that have no beginning or end — symbolising eternity. Found throughout the Book of Kells and in Irish metalwork (like the Tara Brooch).

5

Chi-Rho page

The most elaborate page in the Book of Kells — the monogram of Christ (XP in Greek). It contains hundreds of interwoven figures, animals, and patterns.



6

Monastery of Kells (Co. Meath)

After Viking raids on Iona, the manuscript was brought to the monastery of Kells in Co. Meath. 'Book of Kells' refers to this association.

Activities — Inspired by the Book of Kells

Art and SESE cross-curricula

- **KNOTWORK DESIGN:** draw a continuous interlaced line that goes over and under itself — never touching itself except at crossing points. Begin with a simple 3×3 grid.
- **INITIAL LETTER:** choose a letter of your name. Make it huge. Fill it with interlaced patterns, animal forms, and spirals inspired by the Book of Kells.
- **ZOOMORPHIC BORDERS:** Irish monks filled borders with elongated animals (dogs, cats, birds) whose bodies become interlaced with each other. Try drawing a border where the animals' bodies form the frame.
- **COLOUR PALETTE:** the Book of Kells used lapis lazuli (blue, from Afghanistan), verdigris (green, from copper), orpiment (yellow, from arsenic), and iron gall (brown/black ink). Use similar colours — deep blue, emerald green, ochre, black.
- **RESEARCH QUESTION:** why did the monks spend years on a single book? What does the level of care tell you about what the text meant to them?
- **TRINITY COLLEGE:** the Book of Kells has been on display at Trinity College Dublin since 1661. In 2023 a new dedicated gallery opened. It is viewed by 700,000 people a year.

