MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Book of Kells
(Ireland)

Ref No 2010-08

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

I SUMMARY

The Book of Kells is widely regarded as Ireland’s greatest historical treasure, and is one of the most spectacular examples of medieval Christian art in the world. Produced around the year 800 AD, it contains a copy in Latin of the four Gospels of the life of Jesus Christ, along with ancillary texts. Its fame rests principally on the impact of its lavish decoration, the extent and artistry of which are incomparable. The decoration ranges in complexity from full folio compositions based around initials or portraits, to small details used to augment and emphasise text. Each page contains decoration. The Book of Kells attracts around 500,000 visitors to Trinity College Dublin every year, and functions for many both in Ireland and further afield as a cultural symbol of Ireland. Many questions remain about its date and the circumstances of its production, adding to its mystique for scholars and the public alike.

II DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name (person or organisation)

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

The Book of Kells has been in the ownership of Trinity College Dublin since the mid 17th century, having been presented to the College by the ecclesiastical authority of the time.

2.3 Contact person(s)

Dr Bernard Meehan, Keeper of Manuscripts, Trinity College Library Dublin

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

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III IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

The Book of Kells is catalogued as Trinity College Dublin MS 58

3.2 Description
The Book of Kells is a large manuscript codex now containing 340 folios (680 pages), measuring in the region of 330 x 255 mm. Originally the leaves probably numbered around 370: there have been losses to the beginning and end of the manuscript which can plausibly be explained as the result of damage caused when the manuscript was stolen in 1007. Since 1956 it has been housed, for reasons of conservation, in four separately bound volumes, one for each of the gospels. It is written on calfskin vellum, mostly using iron gall ink, with carbon black, purple, red and yellow inks used on a few pages. The script is best described as insular majuscule. Decoration has been applied in mineral and organic pigments, with the basic palette including red, blue, yellow, green, purple/pink and white, frequently layered or mixed.

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4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Is authenticity established?
The Book of Kells is widely believed to date from around 800 CE. The principal foundation of the great Irish missionary and scribe St Colum Cille (died 597) was on the small island of Iona, off the west coast of what is now Scotland. Following the sack of the island by Viking 'heathens' in the year 806, and the killing of 68 of the community, the building of a new and less vulnerable house was begun the next year at Kells in county Meath, about forty miles north-west of Dublin. Completed in 814, Kells became the principal house of the Columban familia during the ninth century, its abbot being known as the heres or comarba (successor) of Colum Cille. It was traditionally believed that the Book of Kells was the work of St Colum Cille himself, a tradition which persisted well into the nineteenth century. There has been considerable academic contention and debate on whether it was executed in its entirety by the Columban community at Iona, or at Kells, or whether it was begun at Iona and completed at Kells - and so whether it represents work done before or after 806 - or whether indeed it was written in Northumbria or even Pictland.
The earliest reference to the Book of Kells occurs in 1007, when its theft was recorded in the Annals of Ulster:

"The Great Gospel of Colum Cille was wickedly stolen by night from the western sacristy in the great stone church of Cenannas. It was the most precious object of the western world on account of the human ornamentation (?). This Gospel was recovered after two months and twenty nights, its gold having been taken off it and with a sod over it."

The book remained at Kells throughout the middle ages, being venerated there as a relic of St Colum Cille, as the fifteenth-century poem on folio 289v of the manuscript indicates. In the twelfth century, charters in Irish relating to property rights of the community were added to hitherto blank pages.

The town of Kells suffered badly in the political upheaval of the seventeenth century. The 'great stone church' of the Annals seems to have been damaged in the rebellion of 1641. Samuel O Neale, surveying the parish and barony of Kells for the Down survey of 1655, reported that the church was 'ruinous: one end is covered, wherein the horse quarter that are in garrison there'. O Neale noted further that 'The inhabitants of this town have for many hundred years past past had the keeping of a large parchment manuscript in Irish, written as they say by Columkkill's own hand, but of such a character that none of this age can read it', but that the manuscript had been sent by the governor of Kells 'to the late commissioners of the commonwealth' in Dublin. This probably happened in 1653.

After reaching Dublin, the Book of Kells was presented, along with the Book of Durrow, to the Library of Trinity College (the University of Dublin) by Henry Jones, while bishop of Meath in the period 1661-82. Jones had served as scoutmaster general to Cromwell's army in Ireland, and had been vice chancellor of the University from 1646 until 1660.

A more secular mode of reference seems to have co-existed with the attribution to St Colum Cille. Some time after 1621, Ussher prefaced a transcription of the Irish charters with the words 'out of the book of Kelles'. This heading was rendered by Bernard and by Lhuyd as 'extracts from the book of Kells, in Irish', but otherwise the term 'Book of Kells' seems not to have been used in print for almost another two hundred years. In 1814, Charles O'Conor combined both references in the description 'The Book of Kells, written, it is believed, by the hand of St Columba'. Henry Monck Mason's unpublished catalogue of the College manuscripts, prepared in the period ε 1814-ζ 1819 for the Irish Record Commission of 1810-30, used the term 'Book of Kells', but it also referred to the popular belief that the manuscript had belonged to St Colum Cille. The spine of the 1821 binding continued the attribution to Colum Cille ('QUATUOR EVANGELIA LATINA. M.S.S. LIBER S. COLUMBKILLE') and it was still 'St Columba's Book' to queen Victoria when she saw it in 1849, but by then perceptions of the Book of Kells were changing. Whereas in the middle ages and beyond it had been venerated as a relic of St Colum Cille, and in the early modern period used as a textual source, in the nineteenth century scholars began to view it as an art object. John Obadiah Westwood was a key figure in this process. Like Ussher two hundred years earlier, Westwood retained some tendentious purpose in examining the texts of the early Gospel manuscripts, since 'The great truths of our holy religion are ... entirely dependent upon the purity of the received versions'. Through the work of collation he discovered evidence, 'unlooked for' he was careful to add, 'that the ancient church in these islands was independent of Rome, and that it corresponded, on the contrary, with the Eastern churches'. His examination of the decoration and script of the Book of Kells led him to pronounce it 'unquestionably the most elaborately executed MS of early art now in existence', and other nineteenth century scholars concurred with his estimation of the manuscript's place in the world of art.

The nineteenth century brought to a height that interest in Irish history and antiquities which had begun late the previous century and which is associated particularly with the names of such scholars as John O'Donovan, George Petrie, and Eugene O'Curry. The display of the Book of Kells in the Long Room of the Library was an aspect of this development, though the precise date and circumstances of its display are uncertain.
In recent years the Book of Kells has been exhibited on a number of occasions outside the Library. In 1961 the first volume (Matthew) formed the centrepiece of a display of College treasures called simply 'The Book of Kells Exhibition' held at the Royal Academy, London, in aid of a Library extension appeal. Between January and March it was seen by a total of 58,000 people in a strikingly designed setting, and displayed for the first time alongside the Lindisfarne Gospels (British Library Cotton MS Nero D. IV). Whereas the London exhibition had taken place for stated financial motives, the protracted tour which the second (Mark) and fourth (John) volumes of the Book of Kells among other 'Treasures of Early Irish Art' undertook through the United States in the late 1970s was conceived as a response to the publicity engendered by contemporary political and social developments in Ireland. The exhibition which toured the United States was placed on view in the National Museum of Ireland from May 1980 to November 1981. Late in 1982 the Gospels of Mark and John from the Book of Kells were again on the move, this time as part of a modified exhibition 'Treasures of Ireland', which was mounted at the Grand Palais, Paris (October 1982 to January 1983); the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Köln (February to May 1983); the Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (June to October 1983); the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (November 1983 to February 1984); and the Louisiana Museum at Humlebæk near Copenhagen (March to June 1984). The exhibition was seen by a total of 154,555 people in Paris; 98,741 in Köln; 38,222 in Berlin; 85,104 in Amsterdam and 121,394 in Copenhagen. Between February and May 2000, the second volume of the Book of Kells, the Gospel of Mark, was displayed at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Subsequently the Board of Trinity College reached the decision that, as a matter of policy, the Book of Kells should not be lent to exhibitions outside Trinity College.

4.2 Is world significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability established?

There is no doubt that the cultural heritage of the world would be impoverished were the Book of Kells to disappear or deteriorate to a significant extent. The great French art historian Françoise Henry wrote in 1974 that 'The Book of Kells is one of the most splendid Western manuscripts of the early Middle Ages. Its Gospel text is interspersed with large illuminated pages covered with an incredibly fine maze of brilliantly coloured ornaments and with strange, hieratic figures wrapped in the near geometric folds of their draperies. Through the text pages runs the constant coloured arabesque of animated initials made of the bent bodies of fantastic elongated beasts. The student engrossed in the exploration of all these unexpected patterns is soon overpowered by a feeling of both strength and mystery.' [Françoise Henry, 'The Book of Kells' (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974)] It is the extent of its decorative scheme which differentiates the Book of Kells from other manuscripts of the period. This text is decorated and at the same time elucidated with images of great iconographic subtlety. Important words and phrases are emphasized and the text is enlivened by an endlessly inventive range of decorated initials and interlinear drawings. The great decorated pages, upon which the book's celebrity mainly rests, comprise symbols and portraits of the evangelists, introducing the gospels; portraits of Christ and the Virgin and Child; and illustrations of the temptation and the arrest of Christ. The major decorated pages are complex in composition and iconography. They comprise canon tables (folios 1v-6r); pages grouping symbols of the evangelists (folios 1r, 27v, 129v, 187v and 290v); a depiction of the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels (folio 7v); portraits of St Matthew (folio 28v), Christ (folio 32v) and St John (folio 291v); narrative scenes, the earliest to survive in gospel manuscripts, representing the arrest and the temptation of Christ (folios 114r, 202v); a page wholly of decoration depicting a double-armed cross with eight roundels embedded in a frame (folio 33r). The famous Chi Rho page (folio 34r) introduces St Matthew's account of the nativity. The opening words of each of the gospels are elaborated extensively: Liber generationis (Mt. 1.1) on folio 29r; Initium evangellii iesu christi ( Mk. 1.1) on 130r; Quoniam (Lk. 1.1) on 188r; and In principio erat uerbum {et} uerbum (Jn. 1.1) on 292r. Other passages given additional decorative emphasis are on folios 8r (the opening of the Breves causae of Matthew); 13r (the beginning of the Breves causae of Mark); 12r, 15v, 16v, and 18r (the opening words of the Argumenta of the four gospels); 19v (the words ZACHA[riae] at the opening of the Breves causae of Luke); 114v (the opening of Mt. 26.31, Tunc dicit illis ıhs omnes uos scan[dalum]; 124r (Mt. 27.38, Tunc crucifixerant xpi cum eo duos latrones); 183r (Mk. 15.25, Erat autem hora tercia); 200r-202r (Lk. 3.22-38); 203r (Lk. 4.1, Ihs autem plenus spiritus sancto); 285r (Lk. 23.56-24.1, ... Una autem sabbati ...). No other insular Gospel manuscript of the period was planned or executed with such an elaborate decorative scheme.
4.3 Is one or more of the criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style (f) social, spiritual and community significance satisfied?

(a) time
Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th century and spread rapidly. Gospel books and psalters were produced in large numbers from this time. The Book of Kells is the greatest example of an insular decorated manuscript Gospel book from the 7th-9th centuries, the period known as the ‘Golden Age of Irish Art’. In the words of Dr Christopher de Hamel, 'The Book of Kells is ... a giant among giants. There are signposts through the streets of Dublin directing tourists to where it may be seen, an honour paid to no other manuscript in the world. Around its glass case in Trinity College there stands an almost permanent circle of admirers. Its decoration is of extreme lavishness and the imaginative quality of its workmanship is quite exceptional. It was probably this book which Gira ldus Cambrensis in about 1185 called 'the work of an angel, not of a man'. [Christopher de Hamel, A History of Illuminated Manuscripts (London, 1994)]

(b) place
The Book of Kells takes its name from Kells in county Meath, around 60 km north-west of Dublin. The monastery of Kells was founded in the year 806 as a place of refuge for monks fleeing Viking attacks against their monastery on the island of Iona (Argyll), founded by St Colum Cille. There is a continuing debate among scholars as to whether the Book of Kells was produced entirely at Kells or on Iona, or partially at both locations. This question has fundamental bearing on the conjectural date of the manuscript. It is clear from 12th-century charters that the manuscript was at Kells in that period. There is further scholarly debate, again unresolved, on the issue of the numerous influences – Irish, Pictish, Anglo-Saxon, Byzantine, European – which came to bear on the text and decoration of the Book of Kells as a result of the movement of people and their artefacts around Europe in the early Middle Ages. There is a particular debate around the relative dates of the Book of Kells and the manuscripts produced in the Carolingian period.

(c) people
Little is known for certain about the circumstances of production of the Book of Kells. We do not know the names of its scribes or artists. Scholars have tended to name the artists after the characteristics of their work, such as ‘The portrait painter’ or ‘the goldsmith’. The scribes, probably four in number, have been termed ‘A, B, C and D’.

(d) subject and theme
The texts of the Book of Kells and their decoration serve to glorify the life, sayings and teachings of Jesus Christ.

(e) form and style
The text of the manuscript is laid out in single columns, in a splendid example of the script which is best described as ‘insular majuscule’. There are around 30 full-page decorations, and every page has initials decorated to a greater or lesser extent.

(f) social, spiritual and community significance
For many in Ireland, the Book of Kells functions as a reminder both of the Christian faith, which has had such a large impact on the country historically, and of high artistic achievement at an early historical date. In a sense, it has also transcended its primary function as a Christian artefact and has become a symbol of Irish culture worldwide.

4.4 Are there issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management that relate to this nomination?

Rarity:
This is one of a few remaining copies of Gospels produced in Ireland during the early middle ages, and stylistically represents the pinnacle of illuminated decoration of the 7th – 9th centuries. As Professor George Henderson has commented, ‘Through wars and revolutions we have certainly lost
major insular Gospel-books ... These losses must always haunt the theorizer’ (G Henderson, *from Durrow to Kells. The Insular Gospel-Books 650–800* (Cambridge 1987).

**Integrity:**
An estimated 30 folios are missing from the manuscript, most of them possibly since the 11th century, and some folios have been trimmed. The original binding and book shrine no longer exist, and the manuscript has been bound as 4 separate volumes since 1956.

**Threat:**
The condition of the manuscript is generally very good. There is evidence of some deterioration of pigments over time including darkening of red lead and verdigris, and some loss to pigment layers due to use and handling over the past 1300 years. There is some chemical damage to the parchment caused by unstable verdigris, and minor repair on some folios. In general the pigments retain their vibrancy and the parchment its flexibility and tone.

**Management plan:**
See item 6

5 **LEGAL INFORMATION**

5.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

The College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Queen Elizabeth near Dublin (commonly called Trinity College Dublin and so defined in the Universities Act 1997).

Contact details:
Ms Anne Fitzgerald,
Secretary to the College,
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Email: anne.fitzgerald@tcd.ie

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

Custodian is the same as owner legally i.e. Trinity College Dublin. The Book of Kells is held in the Library of Trinity College Dublin.

5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership
University established by Charter

(b) Accessibility
Two out of four volumes are normally on display to the public in the Library, Trinity College Dublin. A rotation of the volumes and openings takes place for reasons of conservation and to minimise wear in accordance with the Library’s treasures rotation policy. The Book of Kells is not available for loan.

(c) Copyright status
Reproductions of images from the Book of Kells require the consent of the owners.

(d) Responsible administration
The Board of Trinity College Dublin
6 MANAGEMENT PLAN

6.1 Is there a management plan in existence for this documentary heritage? YES

SECURITY: Electronic security is in place on a 24-hour basis, and security staff are present when the manuscript is open to the public. Trinity College Dublin takes every possible precaution to ensure the manuscript is safeguarded against risk.

EXHIBITION: Rigorous exhibition management and environmental management plans are in operation to ensure the optimum conditions are maintained and constantly monitored, with reference to BS 5454:2000. The exhibition plan ensures the manuscripts on display are examined every 8 weeks and changed every 16 weeks. Environmental monitoring is 24hr 7 days per week, and environmental conditions are maintained using an HVAC system and BMS. Light levels during display or set at less than 50Lux, zero ultraviolet content.

CONSERVATION: The Preservation & Conservation Department includes staff with specialist expertise in the treatment, storage, display, and monitoring of parchment manuscripts. The Library has a disaster preparedness plan which is under continued review. Technical analysis of the manuscript is on-going, providing data on its materials and their condition over time.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional Memory of the World committee

The owner and custodian are the one – Trinity College Dublin – and consultation has taken place within the institution on this nomination. At present there is no relevant committee for Ireland.

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8 ASSESSMENT OF RISK

8.1 Detail the nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage (see 5.5)

The Book of Kells is not threatened by political circumstances. Any physical threat to it relates only to its condition, as outlined above (4.4).

9 ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION

9.1 Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage (see 3.3)

See section 4.4