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The Lindisfarne Gospels: A Living Manuscript

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This article questions how current and previous owners have marked the Lindisfarne Gospels, created 1,300 years ago. Their edits, which would be frowned upon today, are useful for historians to understand how the Gospels have been valued by previous owners and thus why they are so treasured today.

The Lindisfarne Gospels are on display in the treasures gallery of the British Library. The eighth-century Insular manuscript is opened and accompanied by a short caption with information about the work.¹ It is presented as a 1,300-year-old masterpiece, which has survived to the present day against the odds of time. The average visitor will overlook even the most pervasive changes that can be observed in the manuscript. With modern science and ever improving conservation technologies, we are quick to judge those who “desecrate” items from the past, but we are far less critical if that physical change was made two centuries ago. The display of the Lindisfarne Gospels should prompt viewers to question how what they see today is not the original but rather a manuscript that has lived among many communities and bears marks from them. It is difficult to criticise edits made long ago, though, especially when they harm only the aesthetics of the book. The changes made to the Lindisfarne Gospels have only affected how the manuscript is viewed; it remains a book of the Holy Scriptures. When studied with historical empathy, the edits are beneficial for enabling an understanding of this book as a sacred text, a work of art, and a window into British curatorial practices.

Physical changes to the Lindisfarne Gospels denote how their symbolic significance has changed over time. The book was created within a monastic community and kept by the church until Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. In this capacity, it was both a sacred text and a relic of St. Columba. However, the seventeenth-century collector of manuscripts, Sir Robert Cotton, likely bought the book because he recognised its scholarly value and artistic richness. Once the Gospels came into the national collection at the British Library they became a link to the past and a relic of Britain's national identity. Yet all of the book's curators have left a mark, whether within the text or as an addition to the original manuscript. These marks take many forms, internal and external, but almost all were motivated by recognition that this was an uncommonly beautiful and historically significant manuscript.

Most likely, a single artist-scribe, Eadfrith, created the Lindisfarne Gospels. He was a monk of the cult of St. Columba and bishop from AD 698-721, at the time likely on the Holy Isle now known as Lindisfarne. Eadfrith's script is in Latin and he also created portraits of the four evangelists and cross-carpet pages to begin each gospel. The manuscript is on vellum, written and decorated with a vast array of local pigments (Brown, *Painted* 280). It travelled with the relics of the monastic community in the 9th century, and is not listed in Durham's library lists, denoting that it could have been

considered a relic rather than a book (Bruce-Mitford 100). This book was for worship and religious ceremonies rather than personal use and study. Yet, laymen of the community likely would have seen the pages; the images and illumination would have made the scriptures more understandable to an illiterate audience (Kendric 30). In further support of the theory that it was not entirely inaccessible, there are several gospel books made shortly after the Lindisfarne gospels that are believed to be linked, if not direct descendants of the manuscript. These include the portrait pages of the Copenhagen gospels and parts of the Rushworth Gospels and BL Stowe MS 1061 (Stanton 52; Brown, *Painted* 141).

The most comprehensive and significant alteration made to the Lindisfarne Gospels is a gloss and colophon completed around AD 950 by Aldred, priest and later provost for the community of St. Cuthbert. The colophon is written at the end of the original manuscript, beginning below the final word of the original. It is not an external addition, but imposed upon Eadfrith's manuscript. Though it detracts from the beautiful illuminated script of the final page, it is only from Aldred's inscription that we presume Eadfrith created the manuscript and another monk, Billfrith, its original binding.

Aldred's interlinear gloss consists of scratchy-looking Anglo-Saxon translations sitting above and in contrast to the crafted Latin script of nearly every page. Glossing was a common monastic pedagogical tool in tenth century North Britain. It was one of many techniques of scholarly interpretation and one way to integrate the new Latin church with the existing Celtic church. Glossing, both for translation and commentary, can serve to cement the authority of a text by implying that it needs an intermediary - the gloss - in order to be fully understood (Stanton 11). Thus, in its time, Aldred's edit signified the holiness of this particular gospel book. Robert Stanton argues that Anglo-Saxon glossing is instructive for later scholars as a window into monastic culture. This comprehensive edit reflects the need to learn Latin as a second language, ways that churches and communities used both languages actively, and suggests that the vernacular was valid for biblical interpretation (13). In one particular quadruple gloss, Aldred offers four equivalent English words for the one Latin: *desponsata*. Stanton concludes from this that the gloss has been a tool for expanding language both in contemporary cultural pursuits like poetry and in aiding later linguists (Stanton 52).

Today it is unthinkable to write in a two-hundred-year-old text, much less one of such beauty and sanctity, but Aldred took part in a practice that was relatively common in tenth-century monastic communities. Glossing was very rare before the tenth century, but by Aldred's time it was becoming a popular practice (Nees 363; Stanton 34). This addition may have been a career move; he mentions an amount paid by him in the colophon, suggesting that, as we might read it today, he bought his way into the community. The payment also signifies that the community leaders desired that this change be made to their holy relic. Aldred's edit was a sign of reverence in his day. His information for the colophon likely came from a number of sources, including oral tradition. He also may have found much of it in the Corpus Christi College 183 manuscript, likely with the community of St. Cuthbert by AD 939 (Nees 357-8). For these reasons, the originality of the colophon's content should be considered with a grain of salt, but we cannot discount the historical and linguistic value of Aldred's

additions for later generations. Around this time, there was a shift wherein the written word began to hold the authority of cultural memory instead of the spoken word; the choice to put the book's history in writing belongs in this larger context (Kendric 29).

The gloss detracts from the manuscript's beauty, but it did not cause physical harm. Eight artistically rich pages, those with cross carpets and evangelist portraits, had no words for glossing and remain unchanged. The gloss and colophon were a tenth-century form of preservation, cementing the book's relic status by putting its early history in writing within its own pages. In fact, the stark contrast between Eadfrith's original illuminated script and Aldred's cumbersome notes suggests that the religious value of the book weighed much more heavily than the artistic value for its tenth century curators. It was a living manuscript for the community, and the physical changes allowed its usefulness and purpose to also be adjusted. The fact that Aldred glossed the Latin into Anglo-Saxon shows that there was a concern similar to the Reformation's that the Holy Scriptures should be accessible in the vernacular. Furthermore, by doing so in such a high-profile manuscript, Aldred raised the status of the vernacular itself (Stanton 53).

After the tenth century glossing, there is little certainty about the life of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Symeon of Durham wrote about them in his 12th century histories, denoting that they were alive in the memory of Scottish monastic communities. He describes a book, most likely the Lindisfarne Gospels, "jumping" overboard and washing up on the shores of the Solway Firth. Hunred - a monk of the community - was led there by a dream and found the book unscathed. Apparently such miraculous water survivals of precious manuscripts were common in the collective memory of the time (Brown, *Painted* 12-13). Regardless of the extent to which this is true, Symeon's account shows another way that the book was accorded relic status. Although his hands did not alter it, his story illustrates that preservation from physical damage and loss was a regular concern.

In 1605 the book surfaced again in the possession of Robert Bowyer, who sold it to Sir Robert Cotton by 1621 (Brown, *Painted* 136). During this time, Lawrence Nowell used the gloss for scholarly research while compiling an Anglo-Saxon dictionary (Brown, *Painted* 132). Nowell made some chapter notations in the margins of the manuscript. Most were probably trimmed away with a later binding, but eleven are still visible in an orange-red script (Tite 137). These markings are now incorporated into the text. When Nowell made the chapter notations, though, he acted alone to write in a five-hundred-year-old text. This edit was the act of an individual, not the decision of a community. Nowell's marks inform our knowledge of scholarly practices in the seventeenth century and attitudes towards the care and maintenance of ancient manuscripts. However, unlike the gloss, they were not made in order to help preserve or revere the manuscript.

Cotton was a notable collector of manuscripts and donated his library to the nation. It was one of the few fundamental collections for the British Museum and now the British Library. An edit almost as pervasive as Aldred's gloss is the "British Museum" stamp that appears consistently in the manuscript. A different stamp "Museum Britannicum" is on several folios as well; these likely pre-date

the ones with the image of the crown (Brown, *Painted* 128). We can therefore conclude that this practice, too, continued over a span of years. The ink of the stamps appear to do no physical harm to the vellum, but it is shocking to realise that nineteenth-century caretakers of the manuscript, so close to the modern day, made such a consistent alteration to the body of the original text. When the librarians stamped the Lindisfarne Gospels, the book was nearly one thousand years old. Adding stamps was a collective decision, but should the Museum have done this?

Stamping was a standard practice in the Department of Manuscripts and appears in most of their holdings. These small, red marks are a constant visual reminder of who owns and cares for the manuscript. It seems today that the only harm done by these stamps is aesthetic. They are interspersed anachronisms that edit the look of the manuscript but not what it says. We should question why the Museum did this; an edit made one thousand years later should raise a (literal) red flag for viewers. Ultimately, though, this ink visually signifies an important transition in the ownership, status, and life of the Lindisfarne Gospels. The stamps inform our knowledge of the manuscript's history and also the early collecting practices of museums. Should the Lindisfarne Gospels or other manuscripts change hands again centuries from now, the stamps might be as informative for future owners as Aldred's colophon has been for us.

Physical changes take the form of external additions, too, which with time are considered integral to the work. Aldred's colophon is the only source of information about the Lindisfarne Gospels' original binding. He wrote: "And Æthelwald, bishop of the Lindisfarne-islanders, impressed it on the outside and covered it - as he well knew how to do. And Billfrith, the anchorite, forged the ornaments which are on it on the outside and adorned it with gold and with gems and also with gilded-over silver - pure metal" (Nees's translation, 341). Aldred's description first elucidates the high status of the Lindisfarne Gospels in the time of their creation. Billfrith enshrined the manuscript with precious materials to express the worth of the book itself as a relic. Such book shrines were known of at the time and certainly in later centuries. Examples of similar cumdach, such as the Soiscel Molaise in the National Museum of Ireland and the Sion Book Cover at the Victoria & Albert Museum, survive to the present day to provide clues about how the original cover-shrine may have looked.

Billfrith likely also had access to more portable forms of metalwork, such as jewelry, when designing the original cover. The Hunterston Brooch and a silver ring from the Victoria & Albert Museum are both roughly contemporary to the Lindisfarne Gospels; they show interlace common to Insular art and seen throughout the leaves of the manuscript ("Ring" and Blackwell 27). There is no record of the disappearance or dismantlement of the original binding, but we can deduce that the very physical wealth that served to enhance the spiritual wealth of the manuscript is what made it vulnerable for future generations who valued it for different reasons. The jewels and precious metals were likely removed during the dissolution of the monasteries. Away from the hands of its monastic curators, the book was no longer a sacred object, much less a relic. Fortunately, Robert Bowyer obtained the manuscript by 1605, likely recognizing it for its religious value and artistic richness.

Michelle Brown speculates that the original binding could have included an inscription that Aldred referenced when writing the colophon (*Painted* 93-4). Her argument lacks substantial evidence, but she does highlight the efforts of subsequent generations to add their own mark on a treasured, often holy, object. A number of other fine early medieval objects have such alterations from later generations, suggesting that this was an accepted form of editing from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. Contemporary to the time surrounding the Lindisfarne Gospels' creation and colophon, it was acceptable - kingly in fact - to make additions to holy objects or recycle old pieces into new ones. This practice cemented the authority of secular transactions and it often meant physical alterations or additions to the objects. A Scottish example of this is the Book of Deer, which has later land charters written into its margins (Foster and Jones 13). Similarly, the Royal Æthelstan Gospels, written in the eighth century, contain an inscription recording King Æthelstan's manumission of slaves in AD 924 (Brown, "Book" 58).

Later inscriptions of ownership or dedication appear on metalwork objects, too. The Hunterston brooch is a particularly well-preserved example of celtic metalwork created around AD 700. Generations after its original production, the owner inscribed her name - Mael Brigitte - in tenth-century runic script (Clarke 124). Scholars still debate whether the Hunterston brooch and others like it were secular or religious objects. If the community, especially by the tenth century, was largely Christian then the two spheres may not have been as separate as we see them today. The Hunterston Brooch, even if owned in the secular community, is similar to other examples of later inscriptions especially because of its highly portable nature and likely visibility as a symbol of status in Insular Scotland.

Beyond written or carved inscriptions, the medieval church often layered saints' relics with precious materials. Two apt examples of this practice are the Kells Crosier and the Crosier of St. Fillan. The wooden Kells Crosier was covered with bronze plates in the late ninth or tenth century and furthermore with silver in the eleventh century (Blackwell 32). Similarly, the Crosier of St. Fillan today encases its namesake relic, the wooden crook that belonged to the eighth century saint. From the late eleventh up until the fifteenth century, various people added precious metalwork and decoration to it, recycling pieces of earlier decoration in the later ones (Clarke 125). Since decorative additions have been layered over time, the original wood of the crook may have had decoration as well (Clarke 125). Communities added bullion worth to precious objects and relics in order to keep them relevant to their time. This was a standard practice of reverence and preservation for several centuries.

These items - books, crosiers, and brooches - would have been highly portable and possibly seen by a large number of people. They illustrate Insular culture's view on the validity, indeed the importance, of conscious changes to highly valued secular and religious objects. Embellishments and inscriptions provided a way for individuals to make an object their own years after its creation, and sometimes even held an apotropaic property for the owner.ⁱⁱ In the case of the two crosiers, later curators added monetary value to enhance the spiritual value of these objects. The original binding on

the Lindisfarne Gospels must have acted similarly. The relic was the manuscript itself, encased in precious materials much like the wooden crooks.

However, unless such items were carefully passed from hand to hand over the centuries they often met a less reverent fate. The Hilton of Cadboll is an exquisitely carved Pictish cross slab. In 1676, Alexander Duff repurposed it as a headstone; the side that once showed a cross today has just an inscription and coat of arms. Its fate is intertwined with the iconoclasm of the Reformation. Even if the stone was damaged to begin with, Duff's action demonstrates how quickly a treasured object, removed from its initial purpose, becomes susceptible to physical edits that erase the original work. This may help to contextualise the loss of the original binding on the Lindisfarne Gospels. If those who held the book no longer remembered it as a relic, then the binding would have had a great monetary value while the beautiful manuscript itself had little. The first binding would of course be preferential for us to have today, but its loss allows historians to better understand the manuscript's changing status through time. The opportunity for later curators to edit the frame of the Lindisfarne Gospels enables contemporary study of the practices of preservation and reverence for ancient objects in more recent generations. Specifically, the manuscript received external additions when part of Sir Robert Cotton's library in the seventeenth century and again in the mid-nineteenth century when in the British Library's possession.

While in Cotton's collection, the Lindisfarne Gospels were one of many highly prized medieval manuscripts. He had an intricate cataloguing system, from which the manuscript still carries its official name: Nero D:IV. Although there is no record, it is likely that Cotton issued a leather binding for it much like that created for many of the other items in his library. He also employed a scribe to create a contents table and to label it in the method used throughout his library. Either Cotton or the Museum numbered every page of the manuscript. In 1884, the British Museum renumbered it to include the contents page. The double numbers signify that the Library considered Cotton's additions integral to the manuscript. It is strange that they had no qualms about adding so many markings to the book, though. The scribe simply put a slash through the first number and wrote in the second one. While the original numbers would help future scholars if part of the manuscript were damaged, the second numbers serve no such purpose.

One reason we might shy away from making such an addition today is the risk in human error; there is a conspicuous ink spill where someone bumped their well too close to the contents page. No historians have inquired why Cotton did not have the scribe re-do this contents page. It would have required only one additional sheet of vellum and some extra time of the scribe's work. The fact that this ink stain remains, I conjecture, indicates that Sir Robert Cotton did rebind the manuscript with this contents page, and that someone made the ink stain afterwards, possibly when numbering the pages.

Much like with the case of Aldred, additions made by Cotton are now part of the Lindisfarne Gospels' story. Unlike Aldred's gloss, they typically did not encroach on the pages of the manuscript

itself. For contemporary readers, this is a preferable type of editing and suggests the beginning of an attitude that careful curation can be the best method of preservation. His contents table is on a seventeenth century page, bound in along with the eighth century vellum. Undoubtedly, Cotton saw such additions fitting and scholarly. His curation of the manuscript ensured that its history from his possession to the present day is well known. Cotton's possession of the Lindisfarne Gospels marks their transition from sacred object to one of academic interest, and the edits that he and Nowell left lead us to an understanding of this shift in their significance.

In 1852, Dr. Edward Maltby, Bishop of Durham, offered to commission a treasure binding for the Lindisfarne Gospels similar to the one described in Aldred's colophon. The Museum's trustees approved his offer in 1853 and commissioned a London jeweler to create the new casing for the manuscript for sixty guineas (Brown, *Painted* 207). Maltby and likely the trustees as well were inspired by the discovery, exhibition, and popularity of the Tara brooch around the same time (207). The British Museum's Keeper of Manuscripts at the time disapproved of the jewel binding, though: "hideous, as it now stands, and the effect wretched enough to bring us into ridicule" (Brown, *Painted* 207). His reaction was largely aesthetic, with no concern for how this rebinding would physically affect the manuscript itself. Recently, the Library has investigated how the 1853 binding may adversely affect the manuscript. This would further support our modern notion that physical adjustments to ancient objects should be avoided at all costs. Yet, can we find some value in the Victorian trustees' approval of the treasure binding? After all, we tend to accept the medieval additions to crosiers but frown upon this more recent embellishment. The jewel binding speaks to the cultural worth that the Victorians placed on the manuscript. Maltby paid a significant amount to enshrine this treasured text in the manner of the original community. It may put undue pressure on the original manuscript and look "hideous" to some, but it has now been part of the Lindisfarne Gospels for 160 years. This treasure binding demonstrates that while the manuscript was no longer considered a relic of St. Columba, it was now a relic of Britain's religious, linguistic, and artistic past.

Today the Lindisfarne Gospels are more precious for their historic and artistic value than as a Christian relic, and the book was on exhibition in Durham from July to September 2013. This was one of the rare times that the British Library has allowed this fragile work to leave its confines ("Lindisfarne"). The British Library considers the care, study, and safety of the work foremost among its concerns (Brown, *Painted* 139). Our modern technologies of textual reproduction are one of the reasons that the book has avoided edits in the past 100 years. The Library has actively sought to make high-quality facsimiles of the manuscript. In 1923 it published a partial one and completed the project to make a full facsimile available from 1953-60 (Brown, *Painted* 142). Furthermore, one can "flip through" this incredible eighth century gospel book on a computer, as the Lindisfarne Gospels were one of the first works that the Library made accessible online with its "turning the pages" feature. Anyone with internet access can now sit down with a cup of tea to look at each page of this magnificent work - gloss, stamps, and all - without any fear of adding their beverage to the ink spill on the Cotton contents page.

Even when physical edits detract from the aesthetic value of the manuscript, they usefully guide historians to knowledge about the work itself and the communities that cared for it. Therefore, is the modern practice of leaving no mark on an object such as the Lindisfarne Gospels laudable? By creating facsimiles, the British Library has edited the way that the manuscript is viewed and studied without changing the object or physically adding to it. This has enabled the context for studying the manuscript, originally tightly controlled in the monastic community and the library, to become increasingly fluid. I would argue that increased access is always beneficial, but it will mean that the curators have less control over the manner in which the manuscript is accessed, used, and interpreted. Electronic accessibility also means that small edits, such as Nowell's margin notations, can be seen by anyone and not just those who visit the Library on a day that the book is opened to one of those pages. These digital facsimiles are in fact the mark of the modern era, even if they do not physically encroach on the original (and the additions which are now also considered part of it).

Facsimiles and online access raise questions about the changing importance of the original Lindisfarne Gospels. The original book remains highly prized, possibly even more so because of the facsimiles. Whether one visits the British Library or "flips through" the manuscript online, the many edits discussed here are visible. The very brief caption introducing the Lindisfarne Gospels in either context should prompt viewers to notice these marks. The edits to this national treasure denote how it has lived among different communities through time, and the dynamic life of the manuscript keeps it relevant to the public today. Understanding how it has passed through many hands in different ways makes the Lindisfarne Gospels more than simply a beautiful gospel book. Thankfully, the physical changes have not endangered the manuscript, and most have been acts of preservation. Though Aldred's gloss, two numbers, and stamps of ownership mark so many pages, the original illuminated script still first catches the eye and the pages of pure art remain unchanged. The edits, therefore, act as signs of a fuller history and the changing importance of the Lindisfarne Gospels among several communities, pointing to why the book is displayed in the Treasures Gallery today and will be for many years to come.

Notes

ⁱ Insular is a term describing the art of the northern British Isles in the early medieval period.

ⁱⁱ Items with apotropaic properties were believed to ward off evil.

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