

## THEME I

### ORIENT and OCCIDENT

#### ORIENTAL INFLUENCES IN IRISH ILLUMINATIONS

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The earliest manuscripts illuminated by Irish monks either in Ireland or in Irish monasteries on the Continent, go back to the end of the VIth century or the beginning of the VIIth. The development of Irish illumination from that time to the end of the IXth cent. is fairly well-known. The decoration of most manuscripts in the Irish style includes elaborate capitals and often full pages of ornaments. "Portraits" of the Evangelists are also found from the beginning of the VIIIth cent. on, and sometime later a few figurative pages appear in the Gospels of St-Gall (No. 51), of Kells and of Bobbio (end of the VIIIth, beginning of the IXth cent.).

Oriental influences are very marked in the earliest period of this art. Later, they are still noticeable, but only occasionally.

#### Earliest contacts

Several characteristics of Irish manuscripts which will endure to the end are clearly Oriental in origin. Some of them pertain to the structure itself of the manuscript : composition of the quires, marking of lines, etc.. Others belong more specially to the decoration.

#### Dots

The earliest Irish manuscripts, the Cathach (end of the VIth or beginning of the VIIth cent.), the Ms. D.23.sup. and S.45.sup. of Bobbio (beginning of the VIth) show already a decoration of red dots either overlaying the black surface of a letter or surrounding a capital, or in scattered groups of three dots. This will remain as a permanent feature of all Irish manuscripts and is often a sign of Irish influence in Continental manuscripts. At the end of the VIIth cent. appear fields of red dots used as a background to some decorated letters, whilst the figures of VIIIth cent. manuscripts have dots on their draperies either by groups of three or in a regular dotting of a contrasting colour.

In the VIth and VIIth cent., this decorative motif exists in the West only in a few manuscripts clearly influenced by Oriental models, whilst it is found frequently - mostly as groups of four dots - in Byzantine manuscripts. It is nearly always present in Coptic manuscripts of the VIIIth cent. (surrounding letters or in groups of four dots) and it exists under all possible forms (groups, overlay, dotted background, edging of letters) in the frescoes of Bawit and Sakkarah.

#### Carpet-pages

Full pages of ornaments, usually called "carpet-pages" are an essential feature of Irish manuscripts. A comparison between the earliest of these pages (Ms. D.23.sup. of Bobbio and Book of Durrow) and some Coptic book-bindings of the VIth cent. or pages of Syriac manuscripts (B.N., Syriac 27) is enough to give a clear notion of their origin.

#### Interlacings

The appearance of interlacings in the decoration of Irish manuscripts where it will play to the end an essential part, is due also to an Oriental impulse. It ap-

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pears towards the end of the VIIth cent. in the shape of large ribbons (Book of Durrow, Ms. A.II.10 of Durham, some pages of the Echternach Gospels).

Similar interlacings are to be found in the frescoes of Bawit and Sakkarah, in the Coptic book-bindings and textiles of the VIth cent., in VIIth cent. Syriac illuminations.

Some of the patterns of these early Irish interlacings will not be found later : they include loops, twists, broken circles, which all have Coptic equivalents. They are witnesses to the origin of this ornament which will take later in Ireland a rather different aspect.

### Transmission

These similarities bear on such essential points of the art of the Irish painters, that they remain striking, even at a time when Oriental influences play a great part in the art of Western Europe. They can only be explained by direct connections. Irish texts mention seven Egyptian monks who lived in a monastery of the north of Ireland, two Armenians in a monastery of the centre, innumerable "Romani" (Byzantines), some arriving in Ireland in three boats, and there is, in an island of the west of Ireland, a funerary slab commemorating seven of these "Romani". Whatever the reason which brought them to Ireland, their presence there shows that we are dealing with something else than a vague infiltration of patterns handed over from place to place across Europe. It seems really that the Irish scribes and painters, at the time when they were learning the elements of copying and decorating a text have had the advice and example of Oriental masters. From these, they learned - not their decorative system which they elaborated themselves - but somehow the technique and routine of their trade and some patterns.

### Late contacts

The comparisons which can be made, at a later stage of the development of Irish illumination, between some Irish illuminated pages - specially those with figures - and some Oriental representations of the same subjects, belong to the common history of Oriental influences in the West during the Early Christian period and do not exceed its usual scope. To this category belong the "portraits" of the Evangelists of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the page of the Virgin and Child in the Book of Kells, etc...