

An Introduction to the Southampton Psalter

Video transcript

Before the arrival of the printing press, which brought the written word to a mass audience for the first time, all documents were written by hand. We call such documents 'manuscripts', which means 'hand-written'. Manuscripts were made from sheets of animal skin, usually calf, which was treated to produce a writable surface known as 'vellum'. The person responsible for writing on the vellum was called the scribe. In this 12th-century manuscript, the scribe, Samuel, has given us a portrait of himself at work in the cloisters of Christ Church, Canterbury. He imagines Josephus, the author of the book he is copying, standing before him, holding the text. The scribe wrote with a quill pen and inks made from a variety of ingredients including oak gall, lapis lazuli and charcoal. Manuscripts may look similar to modern books, but they were not used in quite the same way. There are no contents pages, no indices and no page numbers. Handwriting had to be clear, neat and consistent because one manuscript could be used by many different people over a long period of time.

The manuscript we will be looking at is known as the Southampton Psalter. But what is a psalter? 'Psalter' is the term used to refer to an anthology of psalms. A 'psalm' is a poem from the Book of Psalms in Christian and Jewish worship. The word psalm comes from the Greek word '*psalmos*' which means a song sung to harp music. Psalms are a key part of Christian and Jewish worship. The psalter was the hymnbook of Christian and Jewish religion and sung as part of the daily service, just as hymns are sung in churches today. In medieval Europe, the psalms remained an integral part of daily life. They were the first words that a monk or nun learned to read and they were recited every day. The ability to find the deeper meaning behind the words of the psalms was prized among medieval scholars and it was the subject of many debates.

The Southampton Psalter is the oldest manuscript here in the Library at St John's College, Cambridge. It was produced in 10th-century Ireland and written mostly in Latin, with some comments added in medieval Irish. The decoration is lavish, using colours of shimmering yellows, reds and purples. To accompany the psalms, the manuscript also contains illustrations, musical notation and the autographs of previous owners. The psalms themselves are covered with comments, as the scribes engage in theological arguments and interpretation of the text, just as we might annotate a textbook today. This was an expensive and well-used manuscript. But who would have used such a manuscript?

Alice: Well, I'm joined now by two students at St John's College, Cambridge, who are studying Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic: Fergus Holmes-Stanley and Abbey Farrow. Now,

Abbey, as part of your degree, you study the history of manuscripts. Could you tell me a little about manuscripts and how one goes about studying them?

Abbey: So, the study of manuscripts is called palaeography and we investigate the script and the origin of a manuscript.

Alice: And why is palaeography important?

Abbey: So, palaeography provides the basic answers that we need in order to understand how and why manuscripts come into being. And manuscripts are valuable witnesses to our past and crucial primary sources for understanding history.

Alice: There must be a huge amount of information that manuscripts can tell us. What are the key questions that palaeographers need to ask?

Abbey: Well, some questions that palaeographers might ask include who was the scribe, where was the manuscript produced, how was the manuscript used and what was the political context or, for something like a psalter, what was the ecclesiastical context in which the manuscript was produced?

Alice: So, as a palaeographer, if you were planning a project on the Southampton Psalter, what research questions would you now ask?

Abbey: Well, there are several different sizes of script in the Psalter and so I would want to know, what do the different sizes of script signify and what can they tell us about how the Southampton Psalter was used?

Alice: And Fergus, you study medieval history. Thinking now about the Southampton Psalter in particular, I wonder if you could give us a bit of context to the Southampton Psalter and its origins?

Fergus: Well, the first thing we can say is that it was made in Ireland. You'll notice the ribbon-like pattern in the borders and this was a distinctive Irish style of the early medieval period.

Alice: And can you tell me a little about what was happening in 10th-century Ireland at the time when the Southampton Psalter was being produced?

Fergus: "This period was a time of great change in Ireland with regard to politics, religion and art, and as a historian, I'm really intrigued by the list of sources that are quoted in the annotations and the range of different artistic styles so we can really see the theological and artistic changes that were going on within the Southampton Psalter itself."

Alice: And how important were psalters in medieval Ireland?

Fergus: Very important. Religious texts provided the core learning material for schools in Ireland and they also provided spiritual guidance for all levels of society. So, when we think of religious texts in medieval Ireland, we often think of gospels, such as the Book of Kells, but psalters played an equally important role.

Alice: So, as a historian, if you were planning a project on the Southampton Psalter, what research questions would you now ask?

Fergus: Well, there are three illustrations within the Southampton Psalter which depict scenes from the Bible. I would look at why these scenes were chosen to go alongside the Psalter and what they can tell us about the scribe who produced the Southampton Psalter.

Alice: Thank you, both. As we have seen, the Southampton Psalter has a rich history and poses many questions for both students and researchers. So, what are the past lives of the Southampton Psalter and how do we find out?