The Scripts of the Southampton Psalter

Video transcript

A psalter or psalm book contained one hundred and fifty psalms and these were usually presented in groups of fifty. We're looking here at the page on which Psalm 51 begins. It commences the second group of fifty and like the page, on which the first and 101st psalms are found, it is particularly finely decorated. These three pages, with which each new group of fifty psalms begins, have a finely decorated border, too, as you can see here. What also stands out is the large ornate initial underlining the beginning of the psalm – 'q' the first letter of the Latin word '*quid*'.

The 'u' and the 'd' of this first word are also coloured to mark them out. Other letters in the left-hand margin are larger and filled in with colour in the same way. These mark the beginning of the individual verses of the psalm: '*dilexi*', '*dilexisti*', '*propteria*', '*videbunt*'. This pattern of a large ornate initial marking the beginning of each new psalm, followed by smaller decorated capitals highlighting the beginning of the verses, runs throughout the manuscript as we can see just by turning the page. On this, the reverse side of our highly decorated page, we can even see the border and parts of the initial coming through. Such highlighted initials at the start of each psalm ('d' on this page, the first letter of the Latin word '*dixit*') helped a reader find their place. The psalms weren't numbered in any way as they are in Bibles today. Similarly, instead of numbers before each verse, the enlarged coloured initial meant that one could easily go from one to the next. This is important when we remember that the psalms would have been recited everyday as part of church liturgy. The psalms were also used to teach reading and so quickly orientating yourself in the text would have been important in that context as well.

The verses themselves are written in a formal rounded script, characteristic of writing in the early middle ages known as 'Insular Half-Uncial'. To form these letters, the pen is held horizontally creating broad vertical strokes. Some of the roundedness of the script used for the verses is also evident in the red-coloured script of the heading preceding the next psalm, but this is mixed with some more angular letters. If you look at the different kind of 'a' in '*pamelech*', the difference becomes clear.

If we look at this heading more closely, another feature of this script comes into view – abbreviations. These were used frequently in manuscripts, often to save space on what was expensive vellum. If we look at the last two words of the heading '*intellectus*', a stroke above the 'i' signifies an 'n'. The contraction at the end of the word, which looks like a semicolon, stands for 'us'.

This is followed by two 'd's with a line above them. This is a common abbreviation for David, the biblical king with whom many of the psalms are associated. Between the lines and in the margins, another type of script is used. This is less formal and regular – it is known as 'Insular Cursive Minuscule'. In the margin, it is used to give a few lines of interpretation on a particular psalm. This is known as an 'argumentum' and there are usually a few of these for every psalm.

If you look at the specific interpretation in this margin, the third word in has the pointy 'a' again and the semicolon standing for 'us' – '*psalmus*'.

In between the lines, the same less formal script is used to write glosses or notes on the psalm so we see that the hierarchy of scripts – formal Half-Uncial for the sacred text of the psalms; less formal Cursive Minuscule for the interpretative material and notes – reflects the importance of the layers of different types of texts. Many of the notes and glosses are in Latin, as they are on this page, and they clarify words and phrases in the psalm, but there are glosses in Irish in this manuscript also, written in the same cursive script so the scribes did not differentiate language by using different types of script. When we turn back to the previous page, the page with which we began, we can see the same hierarchy of scripts in use also: the formal script for the text of the psalm, an explanation of the psalm in the less formal Miniscule script to the left of the initial of the psalm, and glosses and notes between the lines throughout in the same less formal script. At the top of the page in the left-hand corner, the scribe writes the date, much as we might today when starting a new page in a notebook. '*beltene inndiu*', which in Irish means "today is May day, the 1st of May". Once again, note the stroke over the 'i' signifying an 'n'. And the scribe adds that it is a Wednesday so something of the everyday lives of the scribes comes through as they go about their important writing tasks.