The Lichfield Gospels: the question of provenance

The volume known as the Lichfield Gospels, or the Gospels of St Chad, in the Lichfield Cathedral Library, is an illuminated manuscript of the gospels in Latin, in the style characteristic of the British Isles from the seventh to the ninth centuries. It now contains the complete text of only two gospels, Matthew and Mark, as well as Luke up to 3: 9. It seems, though, that it originally included all four gospels, as a fourteenth-century sacrist’s roll for Lichfield Cathedral lists ‘two ancient books which are called the books of St Chad’. It is commonly held that these two books were a manuscript of the four gospels bound in two parts, of which the Lichfield Gospels represents the surviving portion.

The Gospels came into the possession of Lichfield Cathedral in the tenth century, as is indicated by some of the many marginal entries made in the manuscript. An inscription, ‘+ Wynsige presul’, inserted at the top of p. 1, gives the name of a tenth-century Bishop of Lichfield. A record added to the bottom of p. 4 concerns charges brought by Leofgar, Bishop of Lichfield in the eleventh century. On the bottom of p. 141 is a long list of Mercian names, including once again that of Wynsige.

The marginal entries also suggest that in the ninth century, the manuscript was in the possession of a Welsh church of St Teilo, generally thought to be Llandeilo Fawr. At the top of p. 141 is a record of a Gelhi having purchased the manuscript for the price of a good horse, and given it to the church for the good of his soul. It reads:

Ostenditur hic quod emit - Gelhi + filius Arihtiuoc hoc euangérium de Cingal, et dedit illi pro illo equum optimum. et dedit pro anima sua istum euangelium deo et sancti Teliauui super altare. + Gelhi + filius Arihtiuud ... et + Cincenn + filius Gripiud.

5 Ibid., p. 10.
6 Ibid., p. 9.

PARERGON ns 13.2, January 1996—Text, Scribe, Artefact
That this entry dates from the late eighth or early ninth century can be deduced from the name of the witness to the gift. This man, ‘Cincenn filius Gripiud’, is assumed to be the son of the prince ‘Griphiud filius Cincen’ whose death in 814 is recorded in the Annales Cambriae and the Brut y Tywysogion. The script and placement on the page are not incompatible with the entry having been written at about this time, and there has been no suggestion that the deed is not authentic.

That Gelhi was able to purchase the manuscript, and for such a moderate price, suggests that it was stolen property. It is extremely unlikely that the church could ever wish to dispose of such a treasured possession, and equally unlikely that the manuscript legitimately belonged to a secular owner. In any case, had the sale been legitimate, a more appropriate price must surely have been asked for such a valuable object than a single horse, which would only have been worth about four cows. It therefore seems appropriate to assume that, when Gelhi purchased the manuscript, it had indeed been stolen.

However, the question of where it was stolen from is an extremely difficult one, and one which this paper aims to explore. The Vikings were raiding in Ireland and Northumbria at this time, and it is possible that the manuscript was plundered in either place and travelled thence to Wales, possibly changing hands during its journey. The Brut y Tywysogion tells us the Welsh raided Mercia during the appropriate period, so it could have been stolen there. It must also be assumed that it is possible for the manuscript to have been stolen from a Welsh foundation, since it is apparently in that country that it was sold. Scholars have not yet agreed on a provenance for the manuscript, some tentatively proposing one or other of these four areas, others preferring to remain silent on the subject. There is, however, a strong tendency to dismiss the Lichfield Gospels as just another manuscript of the Lindisfarne style, originating in either Northumbria or Ireland. However, this is in many ways an unsatisfactory explanation of such an unusual manuscript. In order to speculate further upon where it may have resided before coming into Gelhi’s hands, it is necessary to look more closely at the manuscript itself, seeking indications as to where it may have been made.

7 Ibid., p. 10.
8 Loc. cit.
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The manuscript has no agreed date of manufacture. Stylistically, it seems reasonable to assume that it is later than the Lindisfarne Gospels and earlier than the Book of Kells. This, together with the dating of the deed of gift—allowing a period of at least a few years to elapse between the manufacture of the manuscript and the recording of the gift—seems to indicate an eighth-century date.

Fragments of evidence from such diverse sources as place names, excavations of Roman remains, Welsh poetry, land grants, English chronicles and the writings of Bede, combine to show that Lichfield in the eighth century was a thriving religious centre, with a Welsh Christian presence that had continued in the area since Roman times. Although there are no manuscripts which can be definitely attributed to Lichfield in the eighth century, or indeed before the Norman Conquest, the level of church organisation in the area was apparently similar to that of the more prolific manuscript-producing areas.

There is a strong likelihood that the Lindisfarne Gospels was made for the elevation of Saint Cuthbert, and that the making of the Book of Kells was associated with a great anniversary of St Columba. The possibility that the Lichfield Gospels was made to celebrate a similar event is strong enough not to be rejected out of hand. For instance, in the early years of the eighth century, a new church was built at Lichfield. The relics of the local cult saint, Chad, were translated to the new building and a special shrine built to house them. Furthermore, the centenary in 772 of St Chad's death was also a worthy occasion for the creation of such a manuscript. It is possible, then, that either of these events was the occasion for which the Lichfield Gospels was made.

Between 760 and 778, Wales and Mercia were at peace. It is possible that, during this peace, the Welsh and Mercian churches were reconciled, because at about this time the Welsh church abandoned the old Celtic observance of Easter and adopted the Roman one, which had been used by the Anglo-Saxons since the Synod of Whitby. The centenary of St Chad's

death in 772, already mentioned as a likely occasion for the making of the manuscript, fell during this period of peace.

Given that the skills to create the Lichfield Gospels were probably possessed by many Welsh and Mercian scriptoria in the area in the eighth century, and that at that time Mercia was prosperous and Lichfield’s religious community alive and well, there is no reason to doubt that Mercian centres, including Lichfield, were sufficiently equipped and motivated to produce a manuscript such as the Lichfield Gospels. The supposition of such an origin is supported, as we have seen, by the fact that Lichfield had two important occasions which the manuscript might have been meant to celebrate.

The aim of this paper, then, is to seek further indications that the gospels book originated in the Lichfield area. To this end, it will concentrate on text and materials, leaving aside the complex area of the manuscript’s decoration.

Vellum

What remains of the Lichfield Gospels represents the skins of between fifty and sixty animals, probably calves. In its full form, according to repairer Roger Powell, the manuscript would have used over one hundred skins. Most of the surviving pages have the spine of the animal running across the page, so that one bifolium only would be obtained from a single skin.

Most monasteries kept their own cattle, but the herd would have been relied upon to provide meat, possibly milk, and leather, as well as vellum. Considering that the Lichfield calves were in most cases small enough to render only one bifolium per animal, animals which were slaughtered for vellum would provide little if any meat, and obviously no substantial quantity of leather. The provision of vellum for a manuscript must therefore have represented a huge cost either in foregone commodities or at purchase.

Clearly, vellum was not so easily to be had that a scriptorium could afford to reject damaged pieces, even for its most important, de luxe manuscripts. Nonetheless, it seems that some scribes were able to be more discriminating than others. The Book of Durrow must have been made at a time and place where vellum was an extremely rare commodity. Its small

pages and damaged vellum are witnesses to this. This may have been the result of a scarcity of cattle, possibly due to a plague or famine. Alternatively, it may have been a result of the scriptorium’s inability to purchase more abundant supplies. The Lichfield Gospels has fewer patches and is larger than the Book of Durrow. It must therefore have been produced in a place where vellum was fairly readily available. However, the scriptorium where it was made was probably not as wealthy as those which produced the larger Book of Kells and Lindisfarne Gospels, because it had to resort to patching on a few pages.

There are three places in the manuscript where the vellum was visibly repaired with small patches before the writing and decoration took place. Apart from these three places, the vellum was apparently undamaged at the time when the manuscript was made. By contrast, Powell reports that the Lindisfarne Gospels had no original patches, but a study even of the facsimile shows numerous places where small round holes in the vellum, up to almost one centimetre in diameter, have interrupted the flow of the script. The Book of Kells similarly has only one patch, but many small holes. Here the scribe has made use of the holes from time to time by incorporating them into the small animals and other drawings which are dotted throughout the text. The Book of Durrow apparently has several patches towards the end of the manuscript, which Powell interprets as meaning that vellum ran short in the later stages of its manufacture, so that it became necessary to use inferior pieces.14 It too has many holes which had to be avoided during the writing.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Lichfield vellum is the absence of the sort of holes found in other Insular manuscripts. These small holes, which are usually quite regular in shape, were apparently not considered a major flaw by the scriptoria, since in the case of the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells, the vellum is otherwise of excellent quality, and no attempt is made in any manuscript to repair them. The regular shape of the holes suggests that they were not made by a tool during the vellum preparation process, but rather that they are the result of an attack by some kind of insect or disease, either during the curing process or while still on the animal. If this is the case, it is evidence for the Lichfield manuscript having been produced in a quite different area from the others.

14 Ibid., p. 263.
Both the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells are possibly from Ireland, but more probably they and the Lindisfarne Gospels were created in Scotland or the north of England. If the small round holes in their vellum were made by an insect or disease, then the absence of such holes in the Lichfield Gospels must suggest that it was made in an area where this pest was not prevalent. Mercia and Wales may have been such an area.

James Wilson states, in *The Evolution of British Cattle*, that the Romans introduced a new, larger breed of cattle into England. Following the Roman withdrawal, these cattle continued to be husbanded by the Welsh, but elsewhere they became feral. Somewhat later, there were two breeds of cattle in England, one in Staffordshire (that is, the Lichfield area) and the south, and the other further north. In other words, the Lichfield area had a distinctly different breed of cattle from those in the areas where the manuscripts with the holes originated. This supports the suggestion that it was an insect or disease absent from the one area but present in the other which caused the holes in the vellum. It has not been possible to examine more than a single page of the Hereford Gospels. However, according to the staff of Hereford Cathedral, there are no holes in this manuscript either. If this is indeed the case, it must argue a common area of origin for the two manuscripts.

Within the Lichfield manuscript, there are two pictures of calves, one accompanying the portrait of Luke, and the other on the four-symbol page. An interesting feature of both, unique to this manuscript, is a circle surrounding a spot, shown on the animal’s body just above the hind leg. There has been no suggestion as to what this may represent. It is possibly a brand mark. If it can be interpreted in this way, then further investigation of animal husbandry practices of the time might yield some further clue as to the place of origin of the manuscript. Meanwhile, the presence of this sign is another clear point of distinction between this manuscript and those of the established schools.

Powell notes various other ways in which the Lichfield Gospels differs from Northumbrian manuscripts. First, although the vellum in the latter is mostly of a uniform thickness, and is consistently smooth, and light in colour, the Lichfield vellum varies in thickness from 0.005 to 0.034 of an inch and in quality from ‘leather-like’ to the finer, more paper-like character.

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of the Book of Kells,\textsuperscript{16} while it ranges in colour from pale brown to cream. Similarly, Lichfield's original quiring was irregular, with quires consisting of anything from eight to thirteen leaves, whereas the Northumbrian manuscripts tend to adhere to an even, uniform quiring. The layout of text in the Lichfield manuscript is also irregular. Here, the text is written on twenty lines to a page, marked out by a stylus and relying on vertical lines of prick-marks at each side. The lines ruled by the stylus are of uneven lengths, often extending well into the margins. Powell notes that this is never the case in the Lindisfarne Gospels, where the rulings always finish neatly at the text boundary.\textsuperscript{17}

These features tend to indicate that the Lichfield Gospels was made outside the sphere of influence of the disciplined scriptoria which produced such carefully uniform manuscripts as the Lindisfarne Gospels. While the evidence does not point to a specific geographic location, it certainly suggests that the Lichfield manuscript is not Northumbrian. Similarly, it allows for the possibility that it was produced in a Welsh or Mercian centre.

**Pigments**

The coloured pigments in the manuscript have suffered badly over time. Powell identifies damage from water, abrasion and flaking.\textsuperscript{18} The manuscript has clearly been subjected to some rough treatment during its long and eventful existence. However, the same is undoubtedly true of the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Durrow, each of which has its own tradition of abusive treatment in the past.\textsuperscript{19} The metal-based green in the Book of Durrow has eaten through the page in places, but none of the colour has been dislodged to a significant extent. The colours in the other two manuscripts are for the most part in a condition which must be close to the original.

Powell suggests that, since only the colours and not the black ink of Lichfield are damaged, the media used for mixing the colours were

\textsuperscript{16} Powell, "The Lichfield St Chad's Gospels", p. 261.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 261–62:
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 260.
\textsuperscript{19} The Lindisfarne Gospels is said to have fallen into the sea when the community fled the Vikings, the Book of Kells was supposedly stolen, stripped of its outer cover and buried, and the Book of Durrow immersed in water to produce a cure for sick cattle.
unsatisfactory, and that this prevented the colours from adhering adequately to the vellum. It is clear that the media used by the Northumbrian and Columban Irish scriptoria did not have this problem. It is extremely unlikely that a scriptorium which made regular use of a highly satisfactory medium would suddenly have changed to an inferior alternative for just one manuscript. The use of an inferior binding medium suggests yet again that the Lichfield Gospels was made at a centre which was not in regular contact with the Northumbrian or Columban centres where the better preserved manuscripts were made.

The most distinctive feature of Lichfield’s decoration is its colour scheme. The predominant shades are a very strong violet of a dark reddish hue, and lighter mauves. The other colours that appear are a fairly dark blue-green, pale blue, brown, orange and yellow. This system of colours is very different from those of other manuscripts. Many manuscripts, such as the Book of Durrow and the Hereford Gospels, have more limited colour schemes, from within the range of yellow, orange, red and green. At the other extreme, the most elaborate manuscripts, for example, the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, have many more colours than Lichfield, and tend to favour brighter, more primary tones, including a bright blue, green and red. There is no contemporary manuscript whose overall scheme resembles that of the Lichfield manuscript.

Research into the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels reveals sources of colour based on metal, animal and vegetable extracts, many of which were available in the British Isles. The pink, mauve and purple range of colours was available from various lichens and plants which grew extensively throughout the British Isles. However, the sources for the bright blues and a clear red would have been imported. The colours present in the Lichfield Gospels, on the other hand, could all have been made from materials available in the immediate area of Lichfield. The absence of all blues, except a very pale one, from the manuscript suggests that it did not make use of imported colours at all.

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23 Fox, The Book of Kells, loc. cit.
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The scriptorium may have been unable to acquire imported goods, either through lack of trade connections or through inability to afford them, or it may have been perfectly satisfied with the range of locally manufactured colours and felt no need to seek colours from further afield. Robert Stevick indicates that the techniques used in the painting of the Lichfield Gospels are very highly developed. Many of the colours now visible were only part of a layering process which would contribute to a final colour and texture effect. Perhaps this ability to use colour in an extremely creative way obviated the need to import a wider range of colours. Whatever the reason for the absence of imported colours, this, together with the use of a different binding medium, points inescapably to the Lichfield manuscript having arisen within a different school of illumination from the other de luxe manuscripts of the period. The obvious implication is that the makers of the Lichfield Gospels lacked access to either the information or the ingredients which were common amongst their Northumbrian and Irish counterparts, or chose to approach their task in a completely different way.

Text

The major work on the text of the Lichfield Gospels is Hopkin-James’ The Celtic Gospels, published in 1934. Hopkin-James refers to Lichfield as a ‘British text’, and groups with it in this category the Hereford Gospels.25 The foundation of his argument is that the Lichfield text has an uncommonly high number of variants from the Vulgate text of the gospels. He cites examples from Matthew 6: 9–13 (the Lord’s Prayer) and 11: 28–30 (‘Come to me, all ye who labour …’), where the reading is entirely Old Latin with the exception of one word from the Vulgate in each passage.26

It is rather telling that, in the Lichfield Gospels, the readings which vary most from the Vulgate are the frequently quoted passages, in particular the Lord’s Prayer. When a scribe making a copy of the gospels comes to a passage which he recites regularly, he is likely to insert at least some of the

26 Ibid., p. lvii.
readings to which he is accustomed, regardless of the readings in his exemplar. The copy that he is producing will contain a large element of locally preferred usage. It will also contain much of the usage in the exemplar, while parts which the scribe has not learnt by heart will be copied piecemeal. Therefore, a scribe's text shows us which is the preferred usage in his own monastery, as well as in the monastery from which his exemplar comes.

Hopkin-James finds 1920 places in Matthew where the Lichfield Gospels varies from the Vulgate text collated by Wordsworth and White, and he finds 1354 places where Mark departs from the Clementine Vulgate. 27 This means that about twenty percent of the text in each gospel varies from the Vulgate version. No other manuscript comes close to an exact match with the Lichfield manuscript in the choice and number of variants. The one which shows the highest level of agreement is the Hereford Gospels. Of the 1920 Matthew variants, Hereford has exact matches for 774. Although this figure is only a forty-percent rate of conformity, it nonetheless argues at least a common influence for the two manuscripts. Clearly, at some point in their development, these two versions have had access to common traditions of usage. Textually, then, the Lichfield Gospels is not linked closely with any of its contemporary manuscripts other than the Hereford Gospels.

Both Hopkin-James and W. M. Lindsay identify several orthographical peculiarities in the Lichfield Gospels. 28 These include the abbreviations for frequently used words. Lindsay identifies abbreviations for nostrī and qui which seem to be unique to this manuscript, at least within his area of research. All of the other abbreviations he identifies in the body of the text occur as well in the Welsh marginalia added to the same manuscript, in the Hereford Gospels, and, in some cases, in other Welsh manuscripts. Similarly, many of the spelling peculiarities evident in Lichfield can also be found on stone monuments of roughly the same period in south Wales. Clearly, in its orthography and scripting, the Lichfield Gospels presents

27 Ibid., pp. xxxiii–xxxix. Hopkin-James does not explain his choice of different versions for comparison.
28 Ibid., pp. liii–lv, and W. M. Lindsay, Early Welsh Script, Oxford, 1912, pp. 3–6, 26 and 42.
strong links with Wales and the Welsh border region, and not with areas such as Northumbria.

The evidence is sufficiently strong, then, to suggest that the Welsh-Mercian border area is the most likely origin for the manuscript. To date, the principal reason for discounting such an origin has been the notion that neither Wales nor Mercia possessed a cultural centre capable of producing an object like the Lichfield Gospels during the eighth century. However, the information discussed above, which has been collected from a wide array of sources, is sufficient to challenge such a notion.

If an origin in this area is accepted, I believe that there is no better candidate for the scriptorium's location than Lichfield itself. During the eighth century, Lichfield saw two important events, the translation of St Chad and the centenary of his death. Both took place within the period when the Lichfield Gospels was apparently made. The association of the manuscript with the saint is usually attributed to the fact that it has belonged for several centuries to a cathedral dedicated to him. However, the cathedral was dedicated to Chad only after the present building was erected, and the manuscript had already been there for some time. The manuscript therefore seems to have some other, and earlier, association with Chad. There is no reason to discount the possibility that the manuscript was made to be what it is today, the most prized possession of the church at Lichfield, and that it was from there that it was stolen before its sale to Celychi.

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The principles of a...