The Book of Kells is what we call a gospel book. It contains the four gospels which come from the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The book itself is very precious to us, the manuscript of the Book of Kells, because it comes from an era in Ireland, a time of great learning, from the eighth and ninth century. And we have very few manuscripts left with us from that period.

However, we know that there was lots of learning in Ireland at that time because we have records of stories which tell us of learned people who came from mainland Europe to learn even more, to study in the Irish monasteries. And we also have many accounts of Irish scholars, Irish monks, Irish pilgrims, going to mainland Europe, and bringing their learning with them. We have evidence of that in some gospel books, which still exist in England and in mainland Europe. We have the Saint Gall Gospels, the Echternach Gospels, and the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Although there are a number of surviving manuscripts from the period, the Book of Kells really excels. It's written in a very clear script, known as Insular majuscule. That's the script that was unique to the Irish church at the time. But what makes it particularly exceptional is the quality and quantity of illustrations. Practically every page is adorned with intricate artwork. The name the Book of Kells comes from the Monastery of Kells in what is now modern County Meath. The monastery was founded in 807 by monks fleeing Viking attacks on the western Scottish island of Iona.

The date of the manuscript has been subject to some debate. It's thought that it may have been started on Iona, and perhaps brought with the monks when they came to Kells, and finished there.

While still in Kells, the gospel book was known as the Great Gospel Book of Columcille. Columkille, also known as St. Columba, is an early Irish saint who was born in the northwest of Ireland in County Donegal. He went as a missionary to the islands off the coast of Scotland. And on the island of Iona, he founded a monastery which became a very great monastery. From Iona, many other monasteries were formed. Two, perhaps, of the most famous, would be Durrow in County Offaly, and also Lindisfarne in the northeast of England.

These great monasteries formed a family of monasteries, and people would travel between them and share learning and creativity. Columcille himself was famous for his scribal gifts, for his learning, and for his creativity. And very early on, stories tell us that he produced many gospel books and many psalters I suppose it's no wonder that the manuscript that we now call the Book of Kells came to be known as the Great Gospel Book of Columcille. And indeed, from the 11th century, or even earlier, this manuscript was regarded as a relic of Saint Columba, Saint Columcille.

By the 11th century, the gospel book was enshrined in a great jewelled cover, and kept adjacent to the church. In

1007, we know that calamity struck, and thieves made away with the book in order to steal its jewelled cover. The manuscript itself was secreted, we're told, under a sod -- so presumably buried in the ground -- and recovered some time later, and thereafter remained in Kells for the entire later medieval period.

By the early 17th century, the manuscript, we know, was considered to be miraculous, and venerated by the local Roman Catholic community. However, following a rebellion against local Protestant settlers in Kells in 1641, the church in which it had been kept fell into ruin, and the local governor, Sir Charles Lambert, decided to send the manuscript for safekeeping to the library at Trinity College. Probably about a decade later, the manuscript was formally presented to the library at Trinity College by the then Bishop of Meath Sir Henry Jones, and it has remained in the university collections ever since.