Romanesque Knotwork Panels From the St. Albans Psalter

By Éowyn Amberdrake

May 2014

Introduction

Individual leaves of this manuscript were on display at the J. Paul Getty Museum from September 20, 2013 to February 2, 2014, in the *Canterbury and St. Albans: Treasures from Church and Cloister* exhibit. The manuscript had been unbound for conservation, which allowed scholars, conservators, and scientists to look at it closely, and gave the general public the opportunity to see many pages on display at once. I saw it there in January 2014.

One of the things that struck me about this well-studied manuscript, but which was not discussed in the displays at the Getty nor in the essays at the St. Andrews site, is the way the different artists drew the knotwork that they used occasionally in the illustrations. It was not quite the same as that done in the great Hiberno-Saxon Insular manuscripts of the 6th to 9th centuries. It appears that the artists of the St. Albans manuscript were trained in that method, but then started using shortcuts, thus creating their own style.

The implications for the SCA scribe are that the dots method of knotwork can be used as part of a Romanesque style of scroll illustration, and that the scribe doesn't need to "get it right" in the same way that a scribe emulating the earlier Hiberno-Saxon styles do. This article assumes that the reader is familiar with the dots method of laying out knotwork panels [1].

The St. Albans Psalter and its Scribes

The *St. Albans Psalter*, also known as the *Psalter of Christina of Markyate* or the *Albani Psalter*, is a 418 page psalter, calendar, and history book from ca. 1130 – 1145 created at the St. Albans Abbey in St. Albans, Hertfordshire, England, just north of London. This Latin manuscript is in the Romanesque style, decorated with a wealth of full-page miniatures and large historiated initials.

The manuscript was at St. Albans or in nearby Markyate until the English Civil War, when the manuscript was taken to the monastery of Lamspringe in Lower Saxony, in what is now northwestern Germany. It is now in St. Godehard's Church, Hildesheim, Lower Saxony, probably since 1803. It has no additional identifying shelf mark beyond its name. At some point in modern times, page numbers were written on each page in pencil, in the upper right corner. [2]

Six scribes and four artists worked on the manuscript. I recommend to you the essays at < http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/essays/index.shtml > for more information about them and their styles. The discussion on the artists is particular relevant to SCA scribes, with descriptions of painting styles and how color was used for modeling faces. They are identified as the Alexis Master, Artist 1, Artist 2, and Artist 3 (only 1 page), and the essays have assigned particular artists to particular pages.

Knotwork in the *St. Albans Psalter* is used in two ways:

- inside *panels* as elements of decoration, and
- large loopy *Letter Knots* joining elements of letters.

This article only addresses the knotwork used in panels.

Review of HIberno-Saxon Knotwork Characteristics

Knotwork set in panels in the great early Hiberno-Saxon insular manuscripts had the following characteristics [3]:

1. The panels themselves were bounded by broad ribbons of uniform color, usually not gold.
2. The knots were laid out using the dots method, with breaks of (usually) horizontal or vertical lines joining dots. The strands are drawn after the dot-grid was laid out, to avoid the dots and bounce off the lines.
3. Each strand consistently alternates traveling over and under other strands.
4. The dots and background in general was colored in, leaving a black background for the knot. This also let the strands be clearly individual and easy to trace their paths.
5. The knots were complete within the panels. They did not appear to "flow under" other objects. When the knots got to the edge of the panel, the strands turned back on themselves.
6. Smaller knots were one solid color. Larger knots had a vellum margin on each strand with color in the center of the strands.
7. Usually, multi-color knots were colored in patterns unrelated to the strands, rather than following the strands through the knots (though some knots colored in that style appear in some manuscripts). Color changes occurred when a strand passed under another as one color, and emerged a different color.

The above list does not necessarily apply to zoomorphic designs.

Observations on the Panel Knots in the St. Albans Psalter

It is clear that the Alexis Master artist was well-trained in drawing standard Hiberno-Saxon knotwork. It is just as apparent that Artist 1 and Artist 2, who did the remaining panels of knotwork, were not. Given that their panels had reasonable dot grids in them, it is possible that someone who understood the method put in the dot grid layout for them, but the artists who completed the work did not follow through correctly. Of the

two, Artist 1 seemed to get more "lost in the dots." As the book progressed, Artist 2 introduced some innovations that we see most clearly on page 326, with knotwork panels that are at once partially obscured, and not really knotwork.

These knots appear to be created using the dots method. In most cases, this means that dots or their colored-over locations are clearly visible in the panels, as are horizontal and vertical breaks in the patterns. The knots are generally all one color. So far, these are in the tradition of the great insular gospel books.

Page 38 – Border Knots - Artist: The Alexis Master

The border of this full-page illustration has been divided into many short rectangles with double-pointed ends, alternately filled with knotwork and a yellow and white doodle. You can see the page for yourself at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans038.shtml >.
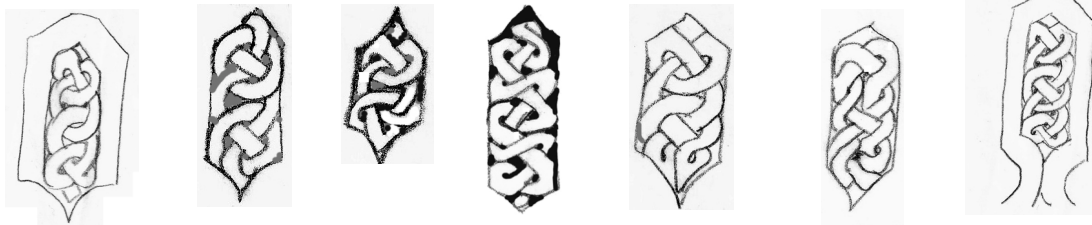
The knots are consistent with that done in the Hiberno-Saxon illuminations of earlier centuries in their invariable over-under alternation, and in using the dots method with breaks for layout.

Each of the sixteen panels filled with knotwork is a double-pointed rectangle. One knot is white, all others are ochre yellow. The dots and breaks are colored in black or dark brown, which provides a clear foreground / background distinction. There are also two small corner panels, at upper right with a 4-lobed white knot, and at lower left with white triquetra.

Inside the point at each end of most panels is an ochre yellow disk – not part of the knot, it is a decorative element common to all these knots. The addition of the small yellow dots at either end of the rectangular knot is new, compared to the Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts, but consistent with knotwork produced elsewhere about this time. [4]

Below are a few traced examples of the knots on this page. Some are drawn with the boundary band. All the knots are different. I numbered the knotwork panels starting at upper left, traveling clockwise. The two tiny corner panels are not included in the count. The knots are not perfect. For instance, #6, just as in the original, appears to have an end that stops abruptly in the pointed corners. They may be intended to turn and meet the strand passing through the middle of the circle, but it doesn't look like it succeeded. Some, like #8 and #13, make the curve of the base strands more pointed, to better fit into the corner.

#4   #6   #8   #9   #13   #14   #16

Page 89 – Interior of the letter I – Artist 1

< http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans089.shtml>

The knotwork panel is complete within the section allotted it, but at the bottom, the illuminator ran out of space, and it is so cramped that the integrity of the knot pieces at the base of the panel is difficult to discern.

The arrow from the archer in the panel below overlies the knot, obscuring it slightly. This "breaking the frame" is new with this psalter, and occurs in several examples beyond this letter.

The coloring of the knots is shaded along the length of the knot strand. The strands are red, blue, and green, and follow the strand around. The bottom portion of the knot is colored as if part of it will be a circle, but then the artist ran out of room, and barely manages to link this partial circle with the rest of the knot. The background is not filled with black, but rather the knot fills all the space. However, it is possible to lay this out with the dots and breaks method, and it appears that was done.

There is a small edge of white, uncolored vellum between the edge of the knot and the containing gold bands.

On the right is a redrawn example of the panel as a dots and breaks pattern, and speculatively fully drawn if Artist 1 had laid it out with sufficient space at the bottom. Other pages that Artist 1 worked were p. 197 – D, and p. 242 – B .
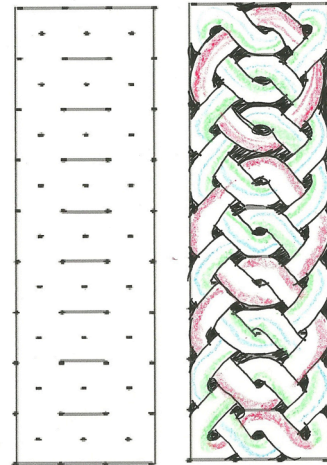
### Page 113 – Interior Panel in the Bar of the Letter D – Artist 2

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans113.shtml

Dots method inside, but seems to have lost the thread.

Page 121 – Interior Panel of the Letter A – Artist 2

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans121.shtml

There are two knotwork panels in the A, and they both appear to be competently worked. The edges of each knot are rounded where they bounce off the edges, and the paths of the strands are clear.

The upper one, in red, has black paint or ink over it outlining the knots. There is slightly less space for the strands on the left side of the knot than the right, but this is a shortcoming of the grid layout, not how it is used. Dots on the edges are shown in the illustration, but it is not clear that the original used them.

upper panel　　　*lower panel*
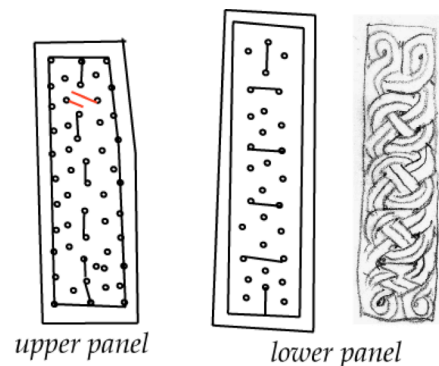
p. 121, two panels with dot patterns; right panel also has traced original

The lower one, in pink, has a darker shade of the same color defining the knots. The break patterns are created to provide a series of circles down the center of the panel. The lower circle has run out of room, so the dots are not spaced as widely as elsewhere. The circle there is squished relative to the others. So the layout is not quite even, but the knots themselves are well defined. The artist added a central line of the darker pink down each strand, as well.
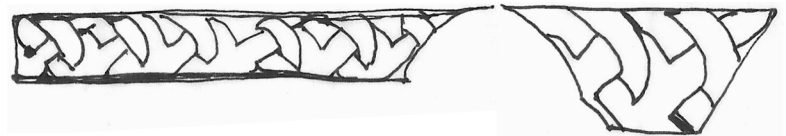
Other pages Artist 2 worked include p. 157 – D, p. 248 – M, p. 358 – U, p. 371 – L, and p. 326, which is examined more closely below. In the latter three examples, Artist 2 also allows his figures to break the frame, and obscure part of the knotwork panels, which appear to continue under the figures.

Page 326 – Multiple Panels in the Letter F – Artist 2

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans326.shtml

There are six panels of knotwork, with people obscuring the ongoing knots in the two horizontal panels. The human figures break out of their frames, partially and fully overlaying the knots beneath them.

The top horizontal panel looks like it is filled with knotwork, but closer inspection shows that none of the strands actually match up well enough to be called knotwork. In the margin

p. 326, Knotwork panel on upper horizontal of letter F

is a tracing of the two sides of this panel, which flow under the haloed head. There are three-way branches in the strands, which indicates that this is not successful knotwork in the Hiberno-Saxon tradition.

The lower horizontal panel almost works

The top vertical panel is plausible.

The second vertical panel is also plausible.

The third vertical panel down isn't really knotwork, nor is it anything else.

The bottom vertical panel is partially washed away, but one can make out the lines.

Page 358 – Multiple Panels in the Letter U – Artist 2

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/commentary/page358.shtml

Upper left, lower left, and lower right – the dots have been connected along the diagonal, with random horizontals put in, but without being able to see strands turning against them. Upper right panel – the dots and diagonals have been replaced with an odd loopy line, repeating like a chorus line down the panel.

The lower left panel has a strand at one end that ends against the edge of the panel, no continuation at all. There is some evidence that the

p. 358, upper right panel

artist started to retouch the panel, turning the bottom and top into strands, but the middle is left as a field of undifferentiated lozenges.

Page 371 – Multiple Panels in the Letter L – Artist 2

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/commentary/page371.shtml

The first panel of knotwork, at the top, emphasizes the diagonals so much that it is difficult to read it as a panel of interlaced strands. The dots can be made out; it appears as if the strands are formed by joining the dots, and a few places along the edges may be missing lines.

The second panel has well-defined knots, but the lower half of the panel is obscured by a harp. Partial knots are visible as the rest of the strands continue beneath the harp to the bottom of the panel.

The third panel appears to have well-defined knots, but it is badly rubbed so they are hard to make out. The fourth panel is even more badly rubbed.
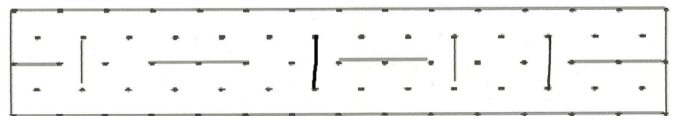
The fifth and sixth panels, the horizontal of the L, again emphasize the diagonal lines more than interpreting them as knots. Below is a tracing of the knot in the sixth panel. It is followed by the dots and breaks only, and an example of how a less-hurried scribe might have woven the knot based on those breaks.
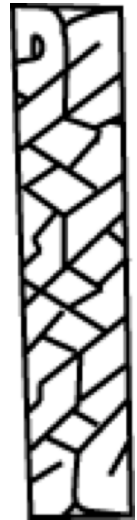
p. 371, panel 1
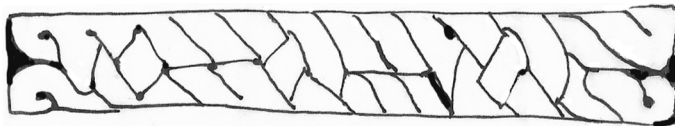
p. 371, panel 6, actual (above) and ideal (right)

Conclusions

In the last 30 years in the modern world, the dots method used in the ancient world for creating regular knotwork panels been rediscovered, published, and become commonly known among knotwork aficionados.

The knotwork panels in the *St. Albans Psalter* show examples wherein knowledge of how that method works is changing. The Alexis Master, Artist 1, and Artist 2 have all demonstrated that they know the trick for using dots and breaks. In the course of the manuscript, Artists 1 and 2 begin emphasizing the diagonals, de-emphasizing the connectedness of the strands of the knots, and losing proportions. Dots are being connected diagonally, instead of avoided. Strands are running into the side of the panel, instead of bouncing off. The style is changing, and one can see the historical dots method is on the path to being lost within a community of scribes in the early 12th century.

The scribes of this manuscript frequently "break the frame" by letting elements of the figures telling the story spill over the borders of the letters and the panels within the letters. The knotwork (and other decorations) appears to flow beneath the figures,

rather than being complete within its own section. This provides a more three-dimensional quality to the illustrations.

This manuscript also provides examples of knotwork that was not classically perfect and sometimes confused, but is historically attestable for artworks being done in Anglo-Norman Romanesque style.

End Notes

[1] The dots method for laying out knotwork is explained in this author's "Interlacing Without Erasing" article, as well as works by Mark van Stone and Aidan Meehan.

[2] from Aberdeen University site

[3] List is distilled by this author from lectures by Mark van Stone and books such as J. J. G. Alexander's *Insular Manuscripts from the 6th to the 9th Century* .

[4] For instance, the ca. 1000 – 1200AD Athenian carved stone *templon* screen in the collection of the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, identification number VEX 2014.2.55, seen at the Getty Villa in May 2014.

Note on Terminology

The term "Celtic knotwork" is the modern world's way of referring to the graphical representation of knots echoing the style used in the British Isles in the first millennium. It is sometimes loosely used to refer to almost any drawing of a complete knot. This term emphasizes only one of the cultures that used this style, and is too general for the context of this paper.

The term "Hiberno-Saxon Art" means "Irish and Saxon Art", and was the preferred academic term in the early to mid 20th century for the style of art, particularly manuscript art, developed principally in the 7th and 8th centuries AD in the scriptoria founded by Irish missionaries. This term comes from the cultures that produced the artwork.

The term "Insular Art" means "Art from the Island", and is the preferred modern academic way to refer to that same art, which recognizes that more than those of Celtic or Saxon origin used it. This term comes from the place where this artwork was made.

I have chosen to generally use "Hiberno-Saxon" in this article because I wish to contrast the artwork between two cultures of Hiberno-Saxon in one time and place, and Anglo-Norman in another time but the same place, as one manuscript tradition evolves from the other. Also, the St. Albans Psalter was produced on the island, and so in that sense, it is Insular. It is hard to compare two different things that can have the same name.

Sources

Aberdeen University. The entire manuscript is available on-line, with commentary, at < http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/index.shtml >

http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/copyright.shtml has the copyright provisions for use of images. In accordance with this, the URL for images has been provided in this article, not the images themselves.

Alexander, J. J. G. *Insular Manuscripts from the 6th to the 9th Century (A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles).* A Harvey Miller Publication.1978.

Collins, Kristen. *The St. Albans Psalter: Painting and Prayer in Medieval England.* Los Angeles: Getty Publications. 2013. ISBN 978-1-60606-145-9

Sherbring, Melinda (writing as Éowyn Amberdrake). "Interlacing Without Erasing," *The Known World Handbook.* Milpitas, CA: Society for Creative Anachronism. 1985.

Meehan, Aidan. *Knotwork: The Secret Method of the Scribes.* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991. ISBN 0500276307

St. Albans Psalter (St. Albans, England: ca. 1130 – 1145). Seen at *Canterbury and St. Albans: Treasures from Church and Cloister.* Exhibit at the J. Paul Getty Center. 2014.

Van Stone, Mark. Lectures in 1983 in Los Angeles, CA.

Van Stone, Mark. *Celtic knots: Techniques and Aesthetics*. Arvada, Colorado: Alphabet Studio. 1992.