

## Insular Scripts

We use the term “Insular” for the scripts and art that were common, with variations, to England and Ireland in the early Middle Ages. In England, this style was particularly used in the north, alongside Roman-influenced styles, in the area that had been proselytized from Iona.

We already looked at Uncial as used in England for the Codex Amiatinus and the St. Cuthbert Gospel, on the model of 6th-century books brought to England by the Roman mission. In addition to this, Ireland and England used two scripts derived from Half-Uncial: a majuscule (more or less) and a minuscule.

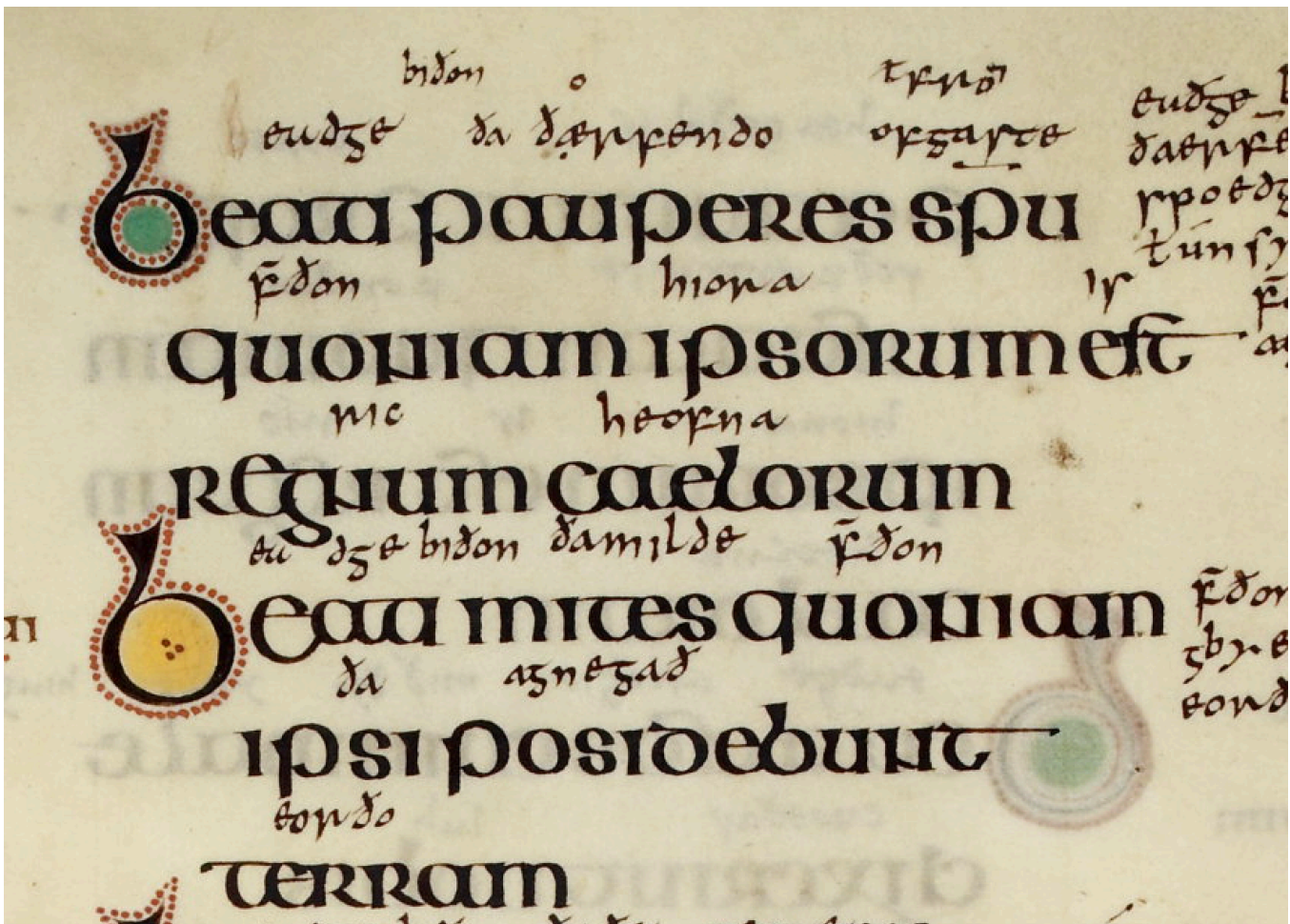
### Insular Majuscule or Insular Half-Uncial

This is the script used for the main texts in the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells. It has essentially the inventory of letterforms from Half-Uncial, though sometimes with the Uncial form of **s** (i.e., our s, rather than the tall s like a candy cane), blown up into a calligraphic near-majuscule for these high-grade Gospel books. In particular, you can spot the 5-shaped g that arrived with Half-Uncial. As a reminder, here’s a snippet of late-antique Half-Uncial.



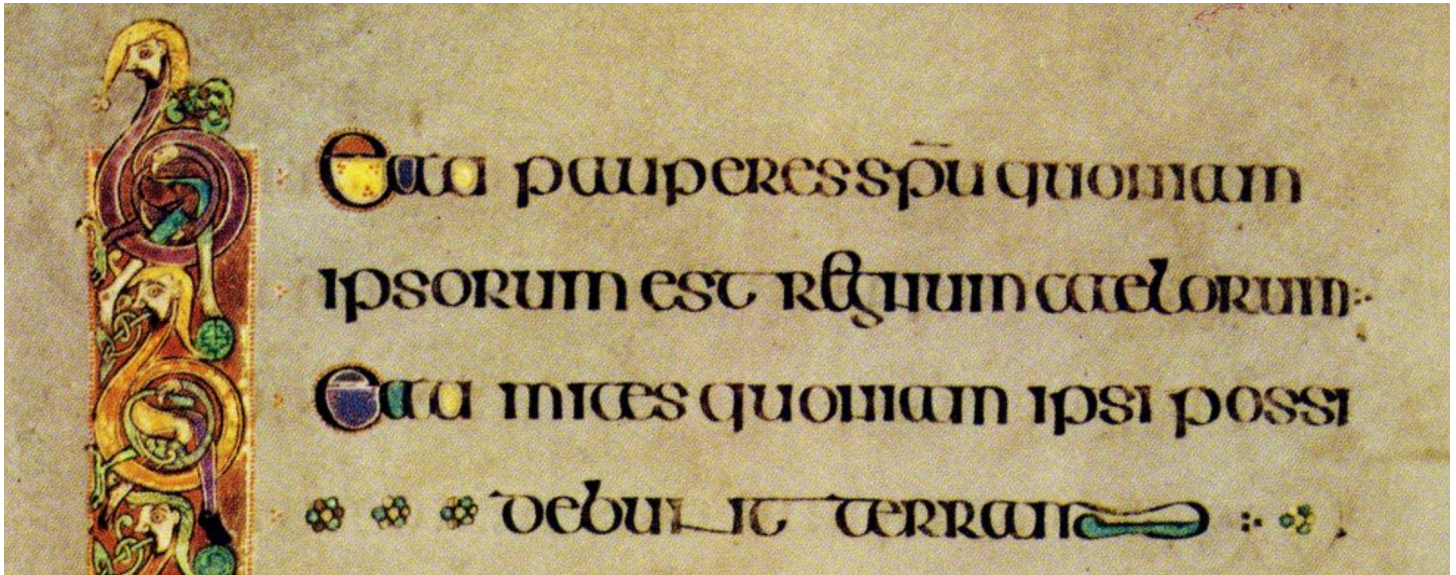
**euangelista** (late-antique Half-Uncial from Italy)

and here is the beginning of the Beatitudes in the Lindisfarne Gospels. Note the **g** in REGNUM, the first word in the 3rd line. (The small script is Insular Minuscule, about which more in a minute.)



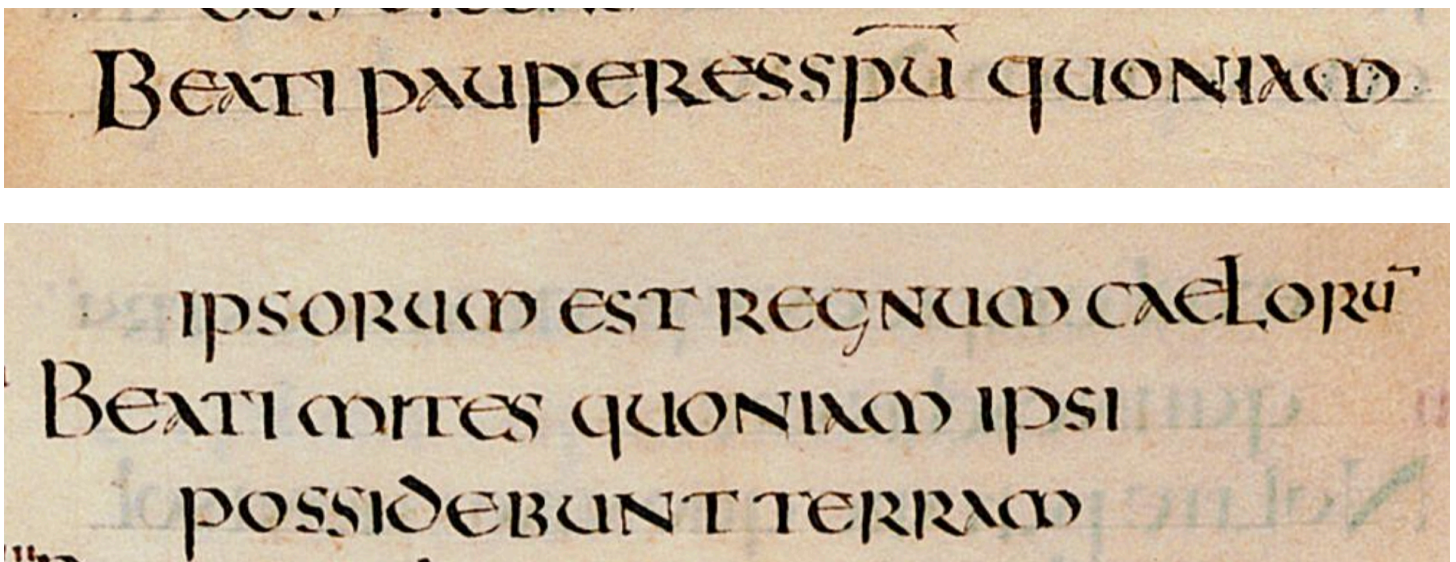


Here's the same text from the Book of Kells, made a century later on Iona. There are differences, but the inventory of letterforms and the aspect (general look) are the same.



The text is:           Beati pauperes sp(irit)u quoniam ipsorum est regnum caelorum  
Beati mites quoniam ipsi possidebunt terram

For comparison and as a reminder, here's the same text in Uncial from the Codex Amiatinus, made within a few years of the Lindisfarne Gospels, just down the road:



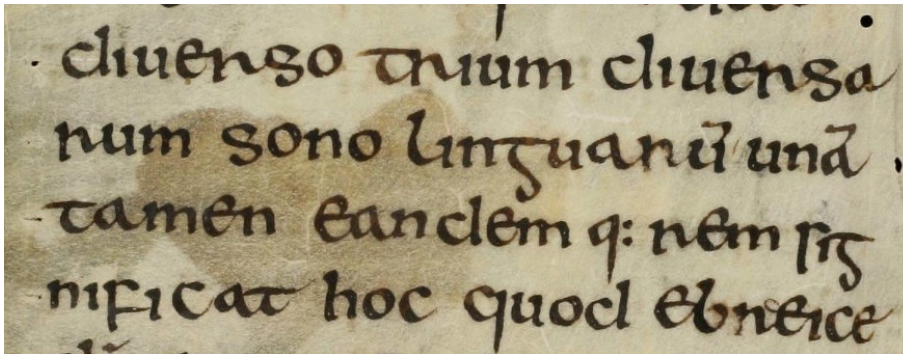
The plain page tends to go along with Uncial and the colorful, decorated page with interlace, dots, beasties, etc., tends to go with Insular Majuscule. The two book styles were practiced simultaneously and in many cases by the same people.



## Insular Minuscule

For more ordinary books, both Ireland and England in this period used a minuscule that was also derived from Half-Uncial.

Its letterforms are again essentially those of Half-Uncial. Here is an Irish minuscule from around the year 700:



diuerso trium diuersa

rum sono linguarū unā

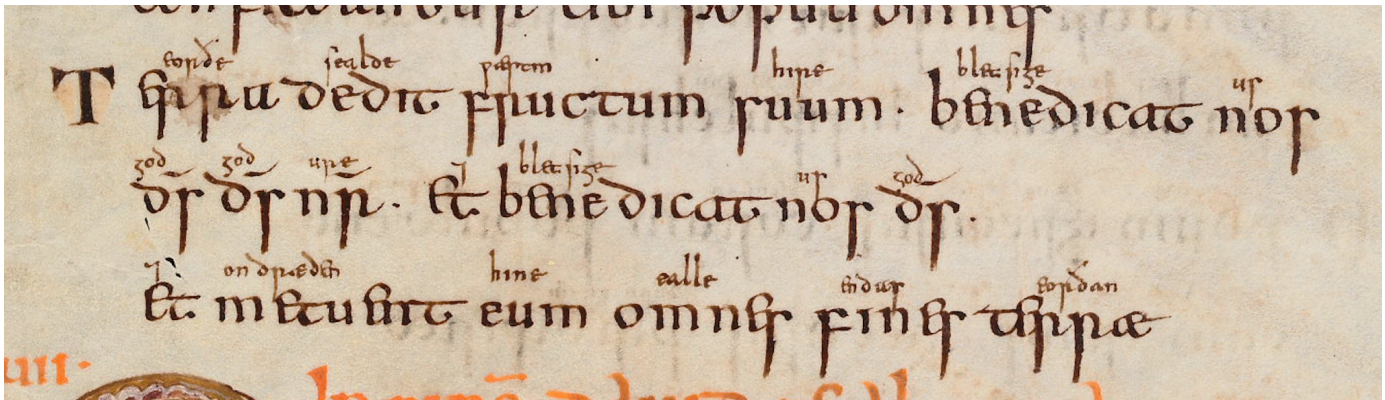
tamen eandem q(ue) rem sig

nificat hoc quod ebreice

Note especially the **r** with a shoulder that bends down towards the line, so it looks a little like an **n**; the swoopy form of the 5-shaped **g**; and the **f** whose crossbar (hasta) sits on the baseline.

Versions of this script are used in Ireland throughout the early Middle Ages and beyond, and to write both Old English and Latin in England from the 7th-early 10th centuries. From the reforms of the 970s until the Conquest, Latin in England was written in Caroline Minuscule (which we'll get to next week), but Old English continued to be written in variants on this script until the Conquest.

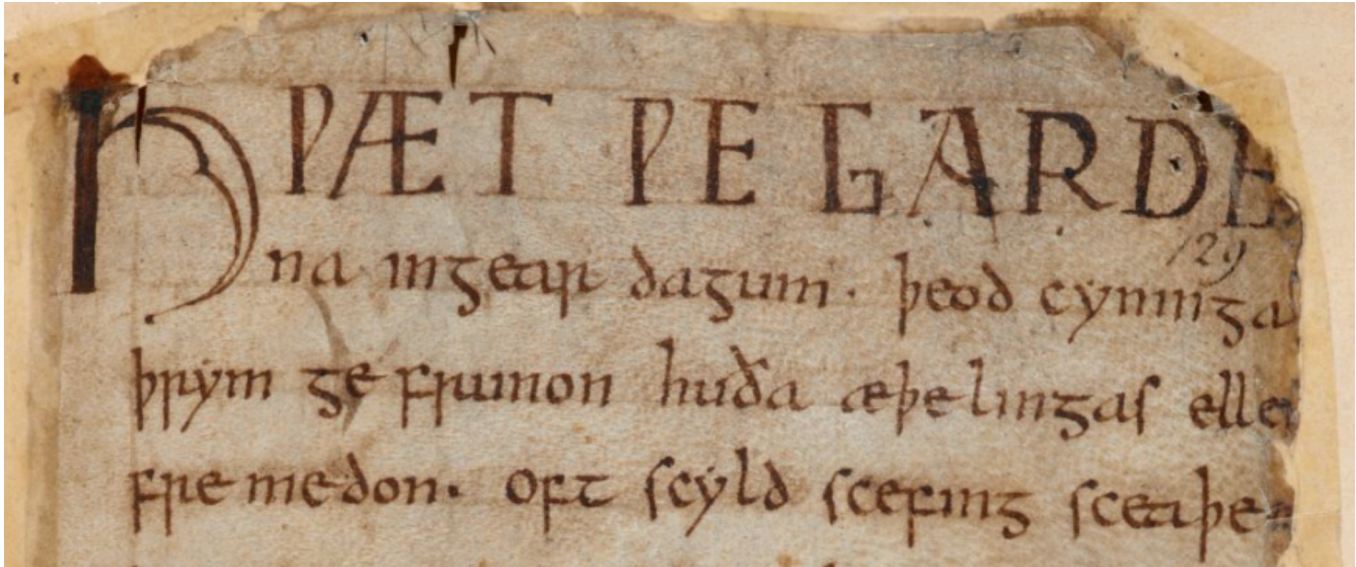
Here is a detail of a psalter from the early 10th century in England. The main text is Latin and the gloss is Old English, both in Anglo-Saxon minuscule:



The main text reads: Terra dedit fructum suum. benedicat nos  
d(eu)s d(eu)s n(oste)r. et benedicat nos d(eu)s.  
et metuent eum omnes fines terræ

Note that in this version of the script, which is typical of most of the period, both **r** and **s** have descenders. They are tempting to confuse with one another, but as in the earlier Irish version and in Half-Uncial, the shoulder of **r** bends down towards the line, while the **s** does not. Compare **terra** and **suum** in the first line, and the abbreviations **ds ds nr** in the second line.

Here is the opening of Beowulf, written around the year 1000. The first line is in capitals, and then it continues in Anglo-Saxon minuscule:



The main text is:

HWÆT WE GARDE  
na ingear dagum. þeod cynniga  
þrym ge frunon huða æþelingas elle[n]  
fre medon. oft scyld scefing sceape[na]

Things to note:

- There are several special characters used to write Old English: a p-shaped letter, “**wynn**,” which has the value of **w**, seen here in capital as the second letter in the first word; **þ** “**thorn**,” which has the value **th** and looks like a p with an added ascender; and **ð** “**eth**,” which looks like a d with a cross through its ascender and also has the value **th**.
- The 5-shaped **g**, **f** with low hasta, and **r** that both has a descender and leans over to the baseline on the right are like the earlier forms of Insular Minuscule we saw above. The **s** is more of a normal tall s and is less confusable with r in this version of the script.