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## Raiding the Archive: A Study in the Veneration and Visibility of the Lindisfarne Gospels

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Raiding the Archive: A Study in the  
Veneration and Visibility of the Lindisfarne Gospels

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Submitted for Research Honors

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	7
I. Leaving Lindisfarne: “And the Word was God”	13
II. The Library of Sir Robert Cotton: Judging Books by their Covers	26
III. The Lindisfarne Gospels in the British Library: An Absent Presence	43
Conclusion	60
Appendix	64

## List of Illustrations

1. Book-shrine of Cathach of Columcille (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Fig. 79).
2. Map of Northumbria in the eighth century by John Mitchell (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Fig. 2).
3. Lindisfarne Gospels (Cotton MS Nero.D.iv), f. 90r, Mark prologue (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Pl. 13).
4. Lindisfarne Gospels (Cotton MS Nero.D.iv), 1853 treasure binding, upper cover (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Pl. 1).
5. Lindisfarne Gospels (Cotton MS Nero.D.iv), f. 210v, John carpet page (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Pl. 24).
6. Portrait of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton by Paul van Somer, engraved by George Vertue (Tite Fig. 10).



7. Example of a Cottonian binding, early seventeenth century (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Fig. 59)
8. Lindisfarne Gospels (Cotton MS Nero.D.iv), f. 25v, Matthew evangelist miniature (Brown, *Lindisfarne* Pl. 8).
9. Artist's rendering of the library room in Cotton House (Tite Fig. 34).
10. Duke Humphrey's library, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Tite Fig. 32)
11. Staircase in Montagu House, from a print c. 1810 (Alston, Inside front cover).
12. Robert Smirke's museum building, from a watercolor by George Scharf, 1845 (Wilson Pl. 18).
13. Plan of the British Museum's ground floor (Wilson 377).
14. The Roman Pantheon as painted by Pannini c. 1750 (Wheeler Pl. 81).
15. The British Museum's round Reading Room (Alston Title page).
16. Exterior of the British Library, from the photo essay "Approximation," by Gerhard Stromberg (Stonehouse 11).
17. St. Pancras rail station behind the British Library, from the photo essay "Approximation," by Gerhard Stromberg (Stonehouse 13).
18. Drawing of the British Library main entrance hall "big wave" by Colin St. John Wilson (St. John Wilson 90).
19. Saint Denis cathedral interior from the west, off axis (Tuck Langland Database)
20. Inside the Humanities Reading Room of the British Library (St. John Wilson 58).
21. The King's Library, The British Library, from the photo essay "Affirmation" by Gerhard Stromberg (Stonehouse 213).



## Introduction

What is no longer archived the same way,  
is no longer lived the same way.

~Jacques Derrida

The Lindisfarne Gospels (LG), also known as BL MS Cotton Nero D.iv, an eighth-century English Gospel Book, has been revered since its creation for its unique illuminations and its Anglo-Saxon gloss of the Latin gospels. The codex has changed hands many times, surviving Viking attacks, the Norman Conquest, and the tragic biblioclasm associated with the English Reformation. This study examines the way that three owners of the manuscript have understood and negotiated the balance between protecting the LG and sharing its treasures with pilgrims and scholars. I explore the methods and motives of the eighth-century monastic community that produced the LG; the Jacobean librarian, Sir Robert Cotton; and London's British Library. Although growing collections, impressive buildings, and advances in digital technology suggest that present-day scholars have increased accessibility to rare books like this one, librarians enshrine the LG today in almost the same way that medieval clergy did.

In his lecture series, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida begins his argument about the institution of the "archive" by dissecting the word itself. In revealing the word's etymology, Derrida also illustrates what he understands to be the purpose and function of the archive. Aristocratic bureaucrats, the *arkheions*, or archons, of ancient Greece were responsible for storing the records of a community in their homes, which became known as archives: repositories for the preservation and organization of information (2). In this study,



monks, librarians, scholars, and architects will all play the role of the archon, managing how others access and interpret information, at one time or another. Throughout Western history, archons of all kinds have recognized different connections between the archive and the Ark of the Covenant, which contained such sacred material that it was never to be opened or touched. Applying the motifs of the archons and the Ark to the case of the LG (with a little help from Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), I identify three phases in the history of archiving and determine how far we have, or have not, come in the 1300 years since the LG's creation.

By examining the ways that the archons entrusted with the LG have understood its value and their responsibility to it and its users, I have learned about the art of preserving and presenting rare books, and about how prioritizing and achieving these goals has changed over the centuries. Because I intend to pursue archival studies as a career, I have found it valuable to understand the historical development of archives as religious, academic, and cultural institutions. Furthermore, I have learned that it is necessary to acknowledge the power and, thus, responsibility of the archivist. Derrida ascribes to the archive authority over determining how and what people can know, remember, and relate about a population, culture, or event (17). This authority is particularly powerful in light of one *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) definition of the term "archon:" in the Gnostic tradition, archons were subordinate only to the Deity and were responsible for creating the world. This notion of the archons as creators warns us that, in order to maintain conscientious and productive scholarship, we must recognize the interests, motives, and goals of the authorities that manage and interpret documents and texts.

The next leap, from archive to Ark, is not difficult: both fall under Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown's definition of the archive as "a repository—that is, a place or space in which materials of historic interest or social significance are stored and ordered" (17).

This idea of “place” is a flexible one—an archive might exist in a building, a room, or even a portable box, as long as it unites and contains the historic material associated with it. According to Achille Mbembe, “[a]rchives are the product of a process which converts a certain number of *documents* into *items* judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place” (19, emphasis mine). According to Mbembe, this transformation occurs at a specific moment, such as the death of the author or owner of a collection. After such a disruptive event, “[t]here will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded. Archives are born from a desire to reassemble these traces rather than destroy them” (Mbembe 22). Gathered together, or consigned, as Derrida calls it, these remnants aim “to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 3). Thus, archivization is literally the process of re-membering, of gathering and reassembling the disparate and fragmentary elements of a dis-membered place or event in order to create an ideal, complete memory of it. As an archive, or part of one, the LG has the potential to signify an otherwise inaccessible history in each of the historical phases I present. Although this potential never changes, in each era the LG’s archons define its limits of function and access, which the affects the realization of the LG’s signifying power.

Sîan Echard agrees that “archival practices and archival encounters structure and control our reading of medieval books and the texts they contain” (186). She suggests that, although many archives attempt to represent manuscripts only in their “original” state, scholars should attempt “to approach the object in its ‘medieval’ condition—to recover the medieval book—and to trace the evidence of that object’s passage from one culture to another” (186, emphasis in original). The history of medieval manuscripts, according to Echard, is written literally on the



pages of the book in its marginalia—from commentary to doodles—left by their various owners, users, and abusers. She suggests that “all the moments between scribal workshop and research library” (202) merit consideration and academic examination, because each of these “moments” leaves its mark on a manuscript. I expand upon her work of writing the history of ownership “back into” manuscripts (202). Taking as a premise the powerful influence of each of the LG’s owners, I explore the relationships among these guardians and reveal the patterns rehearsed each time the LG has changed hands.

First, I examine the eighth-century monastic community that produced and brandished the LG in a culture where books of scripture were understood to contain and produce divine power. For the monks of Lindisfarne, the LG embodied the divinity of God, and therefore empowered their community through its physical presence among them. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* provides a useful analogy: according to Indiana’s rival, the villainous but expert Belloq, the Ark of the Covenant “was a transmitter, a radio for speaking to God.” Indy’s sidekick Marcus Brody also explains, “The Bible speaks of the Ark leveling mountains and laying waste in entire regions. An Army that carries the Ark before it... is invincible.” For both the Ancient Hebrews and the Lindisfarne monks, God was present in the presence of an object—the Ark or the LG—and as a result, both treasures were powerful and miraculous forces in their communities. Furthermore, when the Lindisfarne community was driven from their home by Viking raids, the codex, which they carried with them, as the Hebrews had carried the Ark in the wilderness, became a testament to their community and their experience, representing Lindisfarne while the community was away from that place.<sup>1</sup>

Second, I explore the famous library of the seventeenth-century antiquarian, Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, and the way his philosophies of collecting, organizing, and sharing information

changed the way his peers used and understood the LG. Cotton, vigilante librarian extraordinaire, is our Indiana Jones. “This belongs in a museum!” is Indy’s battle cry, which echoes Cotton’s desire to gather and catalog the manuscripts and documents scattered by Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries. For Cotton and his colleagues, the LG’s contents, in particular its translation of the gospels from Latin to Anglo-Saxon, were most important. Known for re-organizing, re-covering and freely lending his manuscripts, Cotton emphasized the importance of gathering information and making it available to scholars. His philosophies of collecting and lending counteracted the medieval reverence for scriptural manuscripts and the careless biblioclasm of the Dissolution. The LG was a particularly valuable addition to Cotton’s collection. However, rather than remaining an individually powerful entity, it served Cotton’s goal to compile all of English history.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, I locate the LG in its current home, the British Library, by following the development of this national library from its foundation in 1753 as part of the British Museum to the new British Library at St. Pancras, which opened in 1997. Both institutions have reacted to the significant alterations Cotton wrought on his holdings and his open, often careless, lending policies by focusing on the maintenance and security of their collection, especially of very rare materials like the LG. Sir Anthony Kenny, former Chairman of the Board of The British Library (Kenny 17), and Sir Colin St. John Wilson, its architect (St. John Wilson 26), both identify the British Library’s first priority as conservation and preservation of materials. The LG is frequently sought and visited when on display in the British Library, but is rarely available for scholarly study. As a consequence of the modern technology that protects its pages, the LG has disappeared into vaults, behind closed doors, and even “in plain sight” under the glass of a display case (Echard 186).<sup>3</sup>

Today, scholars enshrine the LG and rare books like it with a secular reverence that echoes the religious awe medieval Christians felt in the presence of God incarnate on the page. However, the LG does not, indeed cannot, function the same way in a secular, academic setting as it did for believers over 1000 years ago. For the Lindisfarne monks, God's presence and power were incised on the skin of the LG's pages, and so to approach the codex was to approach that power. Today, the LG is valuable not as an embodiment of holiness but simply as itself, a precious artifact. In order to benefit from the insights into historical material culture that the LG offers, scholars must have total physical access to the codex—more than archons have ever granted to LG pilgrims in history. However, because it is so rare, the LG is fastidiously protected and preserved with state-of-the-art technology, and is almost completely inaccessible. Valuable only in its own right, rather than as an embodiment of something else, the LG is powerful by virtue of its absence. As a result, the LG no longer signifies, but instead is signified by the technological and exhibition resources that allow scholars partial access to it. Guarded like the Ark in Spielberg's film, with a barrier of "top men" between the object and the user, the LG has been transformed from signifier to signified, an absent presence made partially accessible by the British Library's exhibition resources.

## I. Leaving Lindisfarne: "And the Word was God"

The Bible speaks of the Ark leveling  
mountains and laying waste in entire regions.

An Army that carries the Ark before it... is invincible.

*~Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*

These books are portals of prayer,  
during the acts both of making and studying

*~Michelle Brown*

The Gospel of John, of particular importance to the Christians of Pre-Viking Northumbria, opens with the following verse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Verse 14 then adds, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." For Christians in seventh- and eighth-century England, these passages proclaimed the literal, physical presence of God in the sacred Word of the Bible. As a result, scriptural manuscripts, literally made from the flesh of animals and inscribed with the Word of God, signified a transcendent Creator and were capable of producing God's power for believers. According to Marc Drogin, "Letters and words were miraculous in origin and therefore were the stuff of magic. And with the stuff of magic one could *produce* magic" (33, emphasis in original). There are countless reports of miracles wrought by those wielding scripture, especially the Gospel of John. St. Augustine suggested that this gospel's opening verse could cure



headaches. According to John of Salisbury, aide to St. Thomas Becket and later Bishop of Chartres, St. Cuthbert, in whose honor the LG was made, once healed a man by laying a copy of John's gospel on the patient's body. In fact, St. Cuthbert himself was buried with a copy of that text (Brown 70).

Drogin compares the divine power ascribed to manuscripts in the Middle Ages to that of another prevalent, miraculous signifier of the day: the relics of saints. These relics—fingernails, hair and toes were all popular—evoked the powerful presence of an absent saint, even when unexamined or hidden from view in reliquaries. According to Drogin, this “[h]oliness produced what can be called contagious magic” (33). Christians believed relics to be holy and powerful because they were the remains of saints that, through their physical presence, brought supplicants closer to the intercessory influence of those saints. The miraculous power of these relics then spread to the reliquaries that contained them, the altar upon which the reliquary was set, and even the chapel housing the altar and the community that built the chapel. Manuscripts worked the same way: the divinity of God's Word spread to the pages on which it was inscribed, and to the book itself. According to Brown, “the potent relics associated with the cult of St. Columba [who is discussed below] were not his corporeal remains or burial place but his clothing and books” (*Bede* 10). Indeed, the physical presence of a scriptural manuscript in a religious community, rather than its textual content, made manifest God's presence and power.

The longstanding Christian practice of writing holy words, or cutting them from a manuscript, in order to burn them, bury them, eat them or wear them “for their protective, talismanic merits” (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 70), further illustrates that the physical presence of scripture, in addition to—and often in place of—its meaning, worked powerfully for Anglo-Saxon Christians.<sup>4</sup> This unorthodox consumption of divine material in order to access divinity

echoes the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, which illuminates the logic behind this practice. In both the miracle of transubstantiation and the inscription of God's word on vellum pages, earthly material is infused with divinity. The sacrament, which laypeople usually received twice a year, was the most direct and therefore the most powerful way for a Christian to connect with the divinity of the Godhead. This explains why medieval Christians would have seen value in ingesting what they understood to be God in the flesh. The consumption of God's power through a manuscript's pages, as a counterfeit Eucharist, would have provided believers, many of whom were illiterate, with more immediate access to God's power than the analogous ingestion of reading or hearing the Scripture.

Monks and other clergy made up most of the literate population at the time and they, of course, valued scripture for liturgical and meditative purposes, in addition to revering the holiness of manuscripts themselves. The monks, too, consumed and digested God through the Word, although for them it was a strictly figurative meal. Part of daily monastery life involved study of and meditation on the Bible, so that the monks might increase their own holiness by absorbing scripture. As they studied individually, reading aloud softly as practice dictated, their mouths moved along with the words, giving the impression that the monks were chewing on the scripture and enhancing the metaphor of eating God's Word.

However, even the literate guardians of a book like the LG would rarely, if ever, open and read it as we would a text today. In fact, "within a generation of their manufacture and sometimes perhaps from the point of completion, some ... stunning Insular scriptural manuscripts would never actually have been seen, but would have been enshrined as powerful embodiments of divinity" (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 69). An extreme example of an unreadable holy book contemporaneous with the LG is the Irish Cathach or "Battler" of Columcille (named after

the Irish prince St. Columba, who founded many Irish monasteries), which is built into a “book-shrine,” an elaborate metal casing with no opening mechanism (Fig.1). The psalter was permanently and impenetrably stored inside this case, but its divine presence, not its readability, produced its power (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 69). Just as the ancient Hebrews did with the Ark of the Covenant, Irish troops carried this manuscript into battle as evidence of (and probably as a prayer for) divine approval and protection from the enemy. For the exiled Hebrews, the Ark containing the remnants of the Ten Commandments proved their proximity to God, and also their identity as the chosen people under Mosaic Law. This notion of a holy book as a representative talisman would serve the community of Lindisfarne well, as the LG would come to stand for their identity, authority, and origin—the essence of their community—thereby functioning as their community’s archive, as well as their connection to God.

#### Historical Contexts: Between Ireland and Italy

The LG was created in a tradition that developed from conflict between the Irish and Roman Churches in sixth- and seventh-century England, a conflict that would reveal itself on national, regional, and personal levels. Roman Christianity came to the British Isles in 597, when the Benedictine monk St. Augustine established a monastery at Canterbury.<sup>5</sup> Although he was on a mission of conversion, another variety of Christianity already prevailed in the insular world at this time. A generation before St. Augustine’s arrival, the Irish prince St. Columba established a monastery on the northwest island of Iona (Fig. 2). This institution developed a tradition of elaborate manuscript production that would influence all the surrounding monastic houses, most of which were dependencies or daughter houses of Iona. Founded in 635 by Bishop Aidan of Iona, Lindisfarne (also known as Holy Island) was one of these. Throughout the sixth and

seventh centuries, the Irish monks set a new precedent for combining pictures and letters to represent God's Word and thus—because “the Word was God”—God himself. Although manuscript illumination was certainly practiced on the Continent at this time, Brown notes the significant difference between insular and Continental illuminations:

In Insular works, the Word assumes iconic status, the sacred incipits and monograms of its Gospelbooks growing to occupy the entire page as vehicles of *contemplatio* intimately combining word and image. The modest initials of sixth- and seventh-century Italy and of Merovingian Gaul, with their crosses, birds and fishes, do not begin to approach the level of adornment accorded to the Word in an Insular text. (*Lindisfarne* 76)

The development of the historiated initial, a large, illuminated initial letter featuring a scene inside and around it, along with other intricate illumination conventions, came out of and continued to feed into the insular passion for the miraculous quality of words.

This Celtic tradition characterized the illumination practices at Lindisfarne, which was established off England's northeast coast during a resurgence of the Columban (Irish) church's influence under King Oswald, who came into power in 634. However, Oswald died in 641, and in the quarter century after his death, the Roman and Irish churches continued to clash, in particular over the method used to determine the date of Easter. In 664 King Oswy convened the Synod of Whitby to address this conflict, which affected him significantly: while he was for the Irish church, his Kentish wife favored the Roman tradition. The synod ruled in favor of the Roman method.

Although not all Columban monasteries were eager to accept the change, many of them, including Lindisfarne, benefited from the Roman influence in the north of England. This



influence appeared most obviously in the monasteries at Monkwearmouth (founded in 674) and Jarrow (681) by Abbot Benedict Biscop and his successor Ceolfrith. Each of the abbots made numerous trips to Rome to stock their famous library, which was the largest in Anglo-Saxon England, and the home base of the Venerable Bede.<sup>6</sup> Lindisfarne made use of the library at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, as well as the libraries of Canterbury in the south and York in the north. Under the diplomatic leadership of St. Cuthbert, who was assigned to Lindisfarne shortly after the Synod of Whitby and became its bishop in 685, the community thrived in the “new eirenic atmosphere of reconciliation and collaboration” (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 34) that developed in Northumbria after the Synod. Despite this trend toward the integration of Roman, Celtic and Eastern traditions and King Oswy’s declaration of a united English church, tensions continued to mount among regional and individual supporters of the Roman and Columban traditions. One of these rivalries, between the cults of St. Cuthbert and Wilfrid of Ripon, was likely the impetus behind the creation of the LG.

The conflict began before the Synod of Whitby, when the pro-Roman Wilfrid and his followers forced St. Cuthbert and his bishop, Eata, “stalwart representatives of the local Columban tradition” (Brown *Lindisfarne* 34), out of their home at Ripon, in West Yorkshire. Once assigned to Lindisfarne, St. Cuthbert kept a fairly low profile. His famed diplomacy consisted essentially of allowing the Lindisfarne community to continue practicing its faith according to Columban tradition, while adjusting to the Roman standards required by Whitby. St. Cuthbert was beloved by his flock, but he cherished retreat, and chose to move from the monastery to the a tiny isolated island in the bay of Lindisfarne. His real influence, and that of his rival, Wilfrid, began with the biographies written about each man *after* his death, and with the way each was honored and presented to others by those who remembered him.

Between 691 and 705, an anonymous monk at Lindisfarne wrote the verse *Life of St. Cuthbert*, presenting him as “a figure of reconciliation and rallying point for the reformed identity of Northumbria and England” (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 64). Veneration of the saintly bishop increased in 698, when Bishop Eadberht of Lindisfarne ordered the translation of St. Cuthbert’s remains from the island retreat where he died to the church on Holy Island. When the body of the saint was found to be incorrupt upon exhumation—more than ten years after his death—a cult was born, and the community at Lindisfarne devoted itself to the veneration of St. Cuthbert. When Bishop Eadfrith, the likely creator of the LG, took over the bishopric from Eadbert, he commissioned the Venerable Bede to update the *Life of St. Cuthbert* by writing a new prose version. Bede, like the author of the verse biography from which he worked, presented Cuthbert as “the leading figure in the process of reconciliation,” describing “his ability to combine the best of the Celtic ascetic tradition of spirituality, roving ministry and perceptible sanctity with the administrative acumen of the ecclesiastical infrastructure” (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 35).

Eadfrith probably commissioned Bede’s prose *Life of St. Cuthbert* to compete with the contemporary biography of Wilfrid, St. Cuthbert’s old rival. Supporters of this would-be saint (Wilfrid was never canonized) were trying to establish a cult around their leader at the same time that the community honoring St. Cuthbert began to take hold, and the growing cults began a sort of one-upsmanship. Imitating the verse *Life of St. Cuthbert*, the monk Stephanus finished the *Life of Wilfrid* around 720, just a year before Bede completed his new and improved version of the *Life of Cuthbert*. Given this rivalry, the Lindisfarne monks likely prickled at Stephanus’ reference to a “‘book of the Gospels, done in letters of purest gold on parchment all empurpled and illuminated’” (qtd. in Brown, *Lindisfarne* 66) by the bishop of Ripon, Wilfrid himself.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that such a treasure did exist at Ripon: a jeweled Gospel Book that appeared

after Wilfrid's death around 710, and was "apparently a focus of attempts to establish a cult of Wilfrid at Ripon" (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 66). Such a book would have challenged Lindisfarne to produce an even more elaborate response. Bede's updated biography of St. Cuthbert had trumped Stephanus's imitative verse biography. The same competitive drive set the stage for the creation of a magnificent Gospel Book, "a prerequisite of the cult of St. Cuthbert at Lindisfarne" (Brown *Lindisfarne* 41).

#### Personal and Spiritual Contexts: Eadfrith, Aldred et al.

The LG's tenth-century colophon provides the only extant clues to the identities of its makers. Written by a priest named Aldred at Chester-le-Street, home to the Lindisfarne community for nearly 100 years, the colophon credits three monks with the creation of the book "for God and for St. Cuthbert and—jointly—for all the saints whose relics are on the island" (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 104). As the translator who glossed the LG's Latin text in Anglo-Saxon (Fig. 3), Aldred also added his name to the list of creators. Brown suggests that Aldred used older traditional sources to identify the three names that he associates with the creation of the gospels: Eadfrith, the Bishop of Lindisfarne who is supposed to have created, that is, copied and illuminated the work; Æthilwald, his successor, who bound it; and Billfrith, an anchorite credited with the metalwork on the original treasure cover (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 103-04) (Fig. 4).

Scholars commonly date the completed LG at before 698, insisting that Eadfrith must have completed his task before ascending to the bishopric. However, Brown suggests that only as bishop would Eadfrith have taken on this, the community's most important spiritual task, and thus proposes a *terminus a quo* of c. 710. This later date fits well with the development of the cult surrounding St. Cuthbert. In 698, his incorrupt body had *just* been discovered and the first

*Life* commissioned. Brown's date coincides with the height of the cult's expansion, including Bede's 721 *Life* and Wilfrid's death in 709/710, which would allow the Lindisfarne community to pull ahead in the competition with Ripon once and for all. The rivalry between the cults of St. Cuthbert and Wilfrid, in conjunction with the information in Aldred's colophon, provides convincing evidence that the manuscript was indeed made at Lindisfarne during the lifetimes of those credited.

Scholars estimate that the task of copying and illuminating the LG would have taken Eadfrith at least two years if he had worked full time. However, as Bishop of Lindisfarne, with many other duties calling for his attention, Eadfrith may have spent nearly ten years on the task—and indeed he never finished the job. According to Brown, only two other Anglo-Saxon manuscripts demonstrate such “solitary working patterns”: the Book of Durrow and the Durham and Echternach Gospels (*Bede* 14).<sup>8</sup> However, as St. Cuthbert demonstrated during his lifetime (and as his later popularity attests), the Irish church valued ascetic, “eremitic” solitude and retreat (Brown, *Bede* 14). Brown suggests that a project like the LG was an individual meditative and spiritual undertaking that functioned in the same way as St. Cuthbert's voluntary exile to a small island: “The act of copying and transmitting the Gospels was to glimpse the divine and to place oneself in its apostolic service and this may have been seen as a solitary undertaking on behalf of the community, rather than a communal collaboration” (Brown, *Bede* 14). This explains why some of its illuminations were left unfinished. If the creation of the manuscript was a personal journey, rather than a shared one, then it was a journey that only the creator could finish (Fig. 5).

For the monastery, the value of intricately copying, illuminating, and binding a manuscript lay in its power as a powerful talisman, a sort of trophy that would draw the attention of other religious communities and the awe of the laity. The creation of such a manuscript



connected scribe and illuminator to God through the transmission and translation of God's Word, but the Word did not only benefit the one who inscribed it on the page. On the contrary, once literally reincarnated through His Words, incised in vellum, God was present in the community. His presence, tangible and portable, brought glory to the Lindisfarne community and St. Cuthbert when it lay on the altar of the monastery church. However, the codex took on a whole new function and meaning when the Lindisfarne community took to the road in the mid-ninth century, driven from Holy Island by decades of Viking attacks that began in 793.

### The Function of the Codex: A Body of Believers

For the exiled monks, the LG functioned in the same way that a modern-day family Bible might. Much of such a book's value derives from its history as an artifact, rather than from its scriptural content, and answers to questions about the book's unique history—who has touched, owned, and altered it—become more important than the reproducible text it contains. During the active life of the Lindisfarne monastery, functional treasures such as the LG and the relics of St. Cuthbert would have been stored, for security and ease of access, in the monastery's treasury. Between 830 and 846, Bishop Ecgred of Lindisfarne temporarily evacuated some of the community, as well as their treasures, to Norham for fear of their destruction during the Viking attacks. By 875, the community had abandoned Lindisfarne and “embarked on a nomadic period, taking the relics of St. Cuthbert with them” (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 86). Both Achille Mbembe and Jacques Derrida specify this gathering of selected remnants for preservation as a major step in the formation of an archive. Selection, according to Mbembe, ascribes to the Gospels archival “status” (20). Thus, away from Lindisfarne the LG signified doubly, signifying the memory of Holy Island in addition to manifesting God's incarnation among them. The

community's absence from Lindisfarne is a vital step in the LG's transformation from a solely liturgical tool into archival material, a signifier for the island. An archive can only signify a history that is itself, over and inaccessible. Only away from Lindisfarne was the LG able evoke the abandoned island and lost life, and only away from Lindisfarne was such signification necessary.

Symeon of Durham records the legend that, as the monks fled Lindisfarne by sea, the LG leaped overboard rather than be removed from the island, which suggests an unbreakable link between the book and its geographical home. However, the next day, the waters miraculously receded, leaving the book exposed and undamaged, on the shore. The monks found it and carried it away with them (Drogin 68). This legend recalls Mbembe's description of archivization, which calls for a phase between active and archival use in which material is hidden, "concealed in the half-light, set back from the visible world," while a "process of despoilment and dispossession" isolates the document from its former context. This distancing of the material from its previous "life" prepares it for its new place and function in an archive (20). After an appropriate amount of time has passed, "the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life" (Mbembe 21). Like the resurrected Christ in the Gospel of John, the LG allegedly appeared on the shore in the morning, transformed and resurrected. Thus transformed, the LG was a "'reminder and a memorial'" of Holy Island (qtd. in Derrida 23).<sup>9</sup>

#### Locating the Codex: Home is Where (Cuthbert's) Heart Is

According to Derrida, an archive is first and foremost a place, and only secondarily the material stored within it. However, Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown point out that "archives still might be moveable, ...for where the Ark was, there was the word of God" (18).

For the wandering monks of Lindisfarne, the portability of their archive would have been vital. Mbembe writes that “because of its being there, the archive becomes something that does away with doubt.... It is proof that a life truly existed, that something actually happened, an account of which can always be put together” (21). For the Lindisfarne monks, the physical presence of St. Cuthbert’s remains and of a valuable Gospel Book created in his honor validated their former home, their mission to honor the memory of St. Cuthbert, and, most importantly, their continued connection to God, even when separated from Holy Island. Mbembe specifically emphasizes that the place of the archive is significant as a site of interment: the archive is like “a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics” (19). Without a mausoleum or tombstone staking it to the ground, the LG was indeed “preserved like so many relics,” as it traveled along with the very relics that served to identify the community and their saint. In 995, when the community moved from Chester-le-Street to Durham, their bishop, Aldhun, still called himself bishop of Lindisfarne—even though he had probably never been to that place. In 1083, the new Norman church at Durham reestablished a priory on Holy Island, suggesting that nostalgic feeling for Lindisfarne still survived. Because the relics of St. Cuthbert and the LG functioned as an archive of this community’s culture and history, monks who had never been to Lindisfarne still felt justified in calling it their home.

While the forced migration of the Lindisfarne community appears tragic, Brown proposes a strategic and purposeful way of understanding the monks’ wandering. Of course, the Viking threat was only too real, and no doubt the Lindisfarne monks had to abandon Holy Island. But Symeon of Durham reports their route as they made their way to Chester-le-Street, included several other monastic houses under Lindisfarne jurisdiction, including Whithorn, Crayke, and

Norham (Brown 87). Traditionally monasteries were able to establish their authority by carrying relics that had been “suitably enshrined,” in progression around the boundaries of their properties (Brown, *Bede* 10). Brown suggests that “[Lindisfarne’s] carrying of relics bears all the hallmarks of an ecclesiastical progress, a ritual procession around a church’s landholdings with relics to authenticate and confirm its continued authority in those areas” (*Lindisfarne* 88). In other words, even without a place of their own, the Lindisfarne monks wanted to maintain their influence and authority—and the presence of the LG could do it for them.

Like the Biblical Ark, the Holy Island archive, in the form of the LG and the body of St. Cuthbert, was a reminder to the community members and a sign to outsiders of their status and their history during a time of trial and exile. Paradoxically, it also allowed a homeless community to maintain a geographically based identity, while they wandered for more than a century. This archive signified a former home and ecclesiastical authority but also, and more importantly, the constant comforting presence of an invisible and intangible God. For this reason, the guardians of a rare sacred manuscript like the LG emphasized its *presence* rather than its inaccessibility. The proximity to shared memory and history that the LG provided to the Lindisfarne community became even more valuable nearly 1000 years later, when Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the monasteries destroyed countless similar manuscripts.

## II. The Library of Sir Robert Cotton: Judging Books By their Covers

This belongs in a museum!

~*Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*

The Dissolution of the monasteries hugely  
disrupted the libraries of Medieval England,  
but so did Sir Robert Cotton.

~ Colin Tite

The extensive personal libraries of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (Fig. 6) and of gentleman scholars like him hold a unique place in the history of English archives. Between Henry VIII's Dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century and the establishment of the British Museum and Library in 1753, these collectors preserved and cataloged many of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts we have today that otherwise would have been lost. The only evidence for the whereabouts of the LG after its removal from Durham Cathedral during the Dissolution comes from the remnants of annotations made in its margins by these sixteenth-century scholars. Were it not for their desire to preserve the religious and cultural history of England, the LG might have been lost altogether. While it is evident "that the LG were being consulted by scholars who had a particular interest in Anglo-Saxon language and history during the formative period following the establishment of the post-Reformation Anglican church" (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 135), no identifiable owner appears until 1605, when William Camden noted in his *Remaines of a greater work concerning Britaine* that he accessed the codex in the collection of Robert Bowyer, Clerk



of the Parliaments from 1609-1621, and Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 136). Through Bowyer, Sir Robert Cotton obtained the LG, certainly before 1621; he notes a version of the “‘Saxon Gospels a fair Book,’” in a catalog started that year (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 137).

Thus, after a period in Mbembe’s “half-light, set back from the visible world” (20) between liturgy and library, the LG reemerged in a Protestant academic setting. The codex was desirable to both the religious, who were anxious to establish the independent authority of the English church, and to scholars, who were desperate to fill the gaps that the Dissolution created in England’s historical record. Because the LG was created by members of a religious community devoted to St. Cuthbert, who served as an intermediary between the insular and Roman churches in the seventh century, this manuscript was a significant one for English clergy and scholars in the sixteenth century, who once again sought to resolve conflict between the English and Roman Churches. As one of many items in Cotton’s private, secular library, the function of the LG changed drastically, permanently altering future scholars’ understanding of the manuscript’s significance.

#### Historical Contexts: The Birth of the Personal Library

Between 1535 and 1540, as King Henry VIII established a national church independent of Roman papal authority, he and his advisors gradually dissolved the monastic houses of England. Passing a series of increasingly severe laws closing down first the “lesser” and then the “greater” monasteries, the king and his men seized monastic land and property, including the holdings of their libraries (Wright 149). Some of the books (like much of the land) became the personal property of ex-abbots and priors who joined the new Church of England and received

bishoprics and other highly coveted positions in exchange for converting (Wright 150).

Investigative counsels selected other manuscripts for the Royal Library, the king's personal collection.

Catastrophically, many manuscripts were destroyed outright for their alleged heretical content, or traded and sold, both domestically and abroad, for far less than their value (Wright 153). Stories abound of scholars who serendipitously discovered famous, coveted texts, as Kevin Sharpe puts it, "being used by common folk as bungs for barrels or as cloths for cleaning" (49). Cotton himself supposedly stumbled upon one of the original copies of the Magna Carta in a tailor's shop, where he snatched it from the jaws of death, as it were: the oblivious tailor was about to cut the parchment to use as a measure for Cotton's own suit (Drogin 164-65). The sheer luck and coincidence involved in such a rescue and the legendary quality of these tales emphasize the rarity of such occasions. The number of records and manuscripts lost to carelessness, ignorance, or deliberate obliteration after the Henrician Reformation is inestimable.

With much of its national literature wrapped around fish in marketplaces or exported at a fraction of its value, sixteenth-century England fell behind other Western European nations in the collection and cataloging of national literature, records, and cultural memory. During this time, grand-scale libraries were rising on the Continent. As early as 1563, King Philip II of Spain commanded the construction of *El Escorial*, a combination palace, monastery, museum, and library. As the English crown attempted to eliminate Catholicism and so dispersed the nation's body of written material, this institution, one of Philip II's many Counter-Reformation efforts, collected and preserved similar material in Spain (Hobson 150). There, the power of religious continuity supported the collection of patrimonial material. By contrast, in England, the shift from the Catholic to the Anglican Church disrupted and destroyed the tradition of libraries in

sacred spaces. After the Dissolution, scriptural manuscripts were no longer revered as physical incarnations of God, and Henry's administration failed to replace monastic reverence for manuscripts with a secular institution that would protect them as objects of historical, artistic, and textual interest.

As a result, the libraries of individual scholars, antiquaries, collectors, and bibliophiles thrived in England. Gentlemen gathered and cataloged the scattered documents and texts that recorded, described, and represented English history. The first scholars to preserve monastic records after the Dissolution were members of the clergy who attempted to re-write the history of the Anglican Church, in order to prove its independence from Rome. Just after the Dissolution, John Bale, an Anglican convert who would become Bishop of Ossory, set the precedent for this kind of research by gathering manuscripts and records from the dissolved monasteries to use "as his armoury." He intended "to write a history of the English church as propaganda for the Henrician, perhaps too the Protestant Reformation" (Sharpe 8). Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury under Queen Elizabeth I as of 1559, followed suit by defending the Anglican Church against both Catholics and Puritan reformers. Seeking to reveal a continuous English church from the "earliest times" to his own, Parker read extensively and wrote prolifically (Sharpe 8). In fact, he created the first English manuscript library by making monastic manuscripts and chronicles available to scholars and thus "created in England a respect for medieval studies which was uncharacteristic of the humanist scholarship on the continent" (Sharpe 9).

Parker worked with other non-ecclesiastical scholars such as Lawrence Nowell, whose influence significantly affected the development of Cotton's collection. Nowell at one time owned the codex containing the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, and, according to Michelle Brown, may also have used the LG in the 1570s as he worked to publish *The Gospels of the Fower*

*Evangelists*, the first printed version of the gospels in Anglo-Saxon (*Lindisfarne* 132). William Camden, Cotton's teacher and mentor, followed in the footsteps of Parker and Nowell, although his interest in the history of the British Isles extended to the classical age. These scholars and their colleagues increased the demand for a record of English history, creating the need and the potential for a collection like Cotton's. Although these men shared a desire to preserve historical texts and artifacts, most of them collected for their own private libraries, which served their personal academic interests.

Cotton was unique in his emphasis on collecting texts specifically pertaining to insular history, despite the broad range of his personal academic interests. This suggests that he deliberately intended to reconstruct the body of national history lost in the Dissolution by building an archive of English texts and documents. Colin Tite suggests that Cotton, "inspired maybe by the example of the medieval chronicles and annals on his shelves ... was ... endeavouring to provide something of an equivalent for his own time, thereby establishing an archive..., which he and others...might explore, much the way that they had quarried in the chronicles for the history of earlier times" (57). Although he "never published a major work of antiquarian scholarship" (Sharpe 42), Cotton's influence on the organization and accessibility of England's most important records and textual treasures was of the highest importance. Though always called a library, Cotton's collection of books consisted mainly of records and historically valuable texts—this particular library, then, also functioned as an archive. The LG, as a part of Cotton's attempt to chronicle England's history, was thus subsumed into a collection that was incomplete without it, but that also extended far beyond it.

## Personal and Academic Contexts: A New World for Antiquarians

Born in 1571 to an established, wealthy family, Robert Cotton was endowed with a respected name, a thorough education, and a luxurious lifestyle. However, according to Tite, Cotton's family lacked one advantage that would become crucial to his life's work: they had "no previous convictions as collectors of books and manuscripts" (4). Cotton's interest in and propensity for collecting were nurtured outside the home, likely by William Camden, who taught Cotton at the Westminster School, a prestigious institution founded in 1179 by Benedictine monks and supported even through the Dissolution by Henry VIII. Cotton appears to have acquired his first manuscripts in 1588, at which time he was a student at the Middle Temple in London, one of four Inns of Court where apprentices of the law lived and studied together.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, we have no record of how or where Cotton obtained these manuscripts—that Cotton wrote the date of their acquisition in the margins is blessing enough, as he did not do this consistently (Tite 5).

The date on these particular manuscripts is especially significant, because it corresponds very nearly to the formation of the Society of Antiquaries (SA), of which Cotton and Camden were founding members. Epistolary and anecdotal evidence suggest that the SA was founded around 1586, the year that Cotton received his degree from Cambridge and the year of the first publication of Camden's *Britannia*, the first major survey of the Roman history and geography of England (Sharpe 11). The society met weekly to discuss history and culture, and their recovery and preservation. As Camden's influence shaped Cotton's academic pursuits, Cotton's growing manuscript collection symbiotically shaped the work of the SA. Sharpe notes a marked increase in the academic rigor of the studies presented at SA meetings beginning in 1598-99, around the same time that Arthur Argarde, a member of the society, first mentions borrowing a

book from Cotton's collection (19). Sharpe attributes this change to the growing number of historical resources Cotton's collection made available to members of the society. The SA included lawyers Sir James Ley and Sir Henry Spelman, heralds Sir William Dethik and Francis Thynne, Clerk of the Records Thomas Talbot, Deputy Keeper of the Exchequer Argarde, established collectors Joseph Holland and Francis Tate, and John Stow, who edited Chaucer's works and wrote *Survey of London* (Sharpe 17-18). While these men benefited from access to and use of the young Cotton's collection, they also contributed to its growth. Because established and connected scholars knew and respected Cotton's collection, it increased in both reputation and size: grateful patrons often contributed manuscripts to thank Cotton for his support of their studies.

According to Argarde, one of the antiquarians' greatest concerns was the "'Dissolution of our most ancient religious houses'" (qtd. in Wright "Elizabethan Society" 189) and the resultant loss of written records. Along with fellow society members Sir James Ley and Sir John Doderidge, Cotton petitioned Queen Elizabeth I to establish a national academy for the study of history. According to their proposal, such an institution would house and manage a library "'to be well-furnished with divers ancient bookes and rare monuments of antiquity, which otherwise may perish; and that at the costs of and charges of divers gentlemen which will be willing thereunto'" (qtd. in Wright 189). This suggests that the antiquarians were willing to supply a national library "'for the better information of all noblemen and gentlemen studious of antiquity'" (qtd. in Wright 189) from their own collections. The scholars emphasized the practicality of such an institution, suggesting to the queen that "historical knowledge might better equip noblemen for government service" (Sharpe 27). However, it would take more than 150 years for the national library they desired to appear. In the meantime, the personal libraries of



the antiquarians continued to grow. Cotton's library, in particular, stood out among these as a thorough collection of works pertaining to the history of the British Isles. According to Tite, Cotton's library lent "on a scale well beyond that of any English collection" (12), precisely because Cotton "kept his library open to all scholars" (Sharpe 32).

Cotton's patrons ranged from parish priests to the king and queen, with Francis Bacon, John Selden, Royal Librarian Patrick Young and Master of the Revels George Bue falling in between (Sharpe 79). By 1599 the library had garnered such attention that Sir Thomas Bodley asked Cotton to make a contribution to his developing University Library at Oxford, the world-famous Bodleian, which opened in 1602 (Tite 6). According to Tite, these early years of the seventeenth century were "the beginning of a remarkably fruitful and active period...in the development of the Cotton library" (11). From his first acquisitions in 1588, Cotton's collection expanded, despite the fact that there is no record of him ever purchasing a manuscript (Sharpe 61). The resources and expertise Cotton provided to his patrons guaranteed constant gifts to the collection, while his connections with other scholars and collectors created venues for manuscript exchange.

Cotton's political connections also facilitated his collecting: Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton and a chief minister to King James I, obtained for Cotton a government position on a special council appointed to investigate abuses in the navy (Tite 7). This position gained Cotton access to many of the kingdom's records—a privilege it seems he treated somewhat too liberally, as he was more than once accused of helping himself to papers to fill gaps in his own collection (Tite 14). Most notable among Cotton's political connections was King James I, who knighted Cotton in 1603 and even claimed a kinship with him through the Bruce line of Scottish royalty. Cotton's timely combination of political favor and support from his antiquarian

colleagues provided him both the means and the skills to develop more fully his collection that, in turn, served their academic, political, and legal needs. Although the SA ceased to meet in 1607, Cotton's library continued to support the "spirit of cooperation and research" promoted by the society, and Edmund Bolton attested that Cotton was willing to provide assistance to any serious student (Sharpe 36).

Cotton and the resources available only in his library helped to launch the career of James Ussher (1581-1656), later Bishop of Armagh, whom James I commissioned to write the history of the English Church (Sharpe 33). Providing the resources for scholars to write this sort of authoritative English history was exactly what Cotton sought to do with his library. At its height Cotton's library contained fewer than 1,000 items—less than half the number of books owned by some of his peers. However, his "monopoly of certain types of documents and his unrivalled knowledge of the past" (Sharpe 39) increased the appeal of his collection to political figures as well as scholars. Cotton was able to provide legal precedents, genealogical information, and charters for properties where no one else could.

### The Function of the Codex: Reading Between the Lines

As a collector, librarian, and historian, Cotton actively reshaped his books—and, as a result, the record of their provenance. In general manuscripts and records were resources for Cotton, rather than sacred objects in their own right. The vellum transmitted stored information, rather than signifying divine presence. Therefore, he was generally willing to reorganize and rebind manuscripts containing multiple texts so that they were easier for him to access. Rather than preserving the foliation of records and manuscripts he obtained, Cotton lettered the pages to indicate the order in which he wanted them bound. Most manuscripts in his collection, then, lost

integrity as historical artifacts as they were subsumed in a new context and distributed throughout Cotton's growing archive for England (Tite 46). According to Sharpe, Cotton "evidently rebound the bulk of [his manuscripts] for though few of his bindings have survived, he often described books as 'new bound with armes,'" that is, the pages re-ordered, trimmed to a uniform size, and bound in a leather cover with the Cotton coat of arms on the cover (69) (Fig. 7). Much to the dismay of present-day librarians, who can no longer trace the pre-Cotton provenance of many of his manuscripts, Cotton was enthusiastically fastidious in his efforts to organize the history of his nation. "The Dissolution of the monasteries hugely disrupted the libraries of Medieval England, but so did Sir Robert Cotton," declares Tite, who estimates that fewer than half of Cotton's books remain in the "order and arrangement that they exhibited when they came into his hands" (45).

Because the LG contains only one major text—the gospels and supporting material such as canon tables and letters by St. Jerome—rather than a collection of works bound together, Cotton did not dismantle and re-order its parts. However, that does not mean that the LG escaped his desire to assimilate all his holdings into a well-integrated collection. Its pages have been trimmed, nearly eliminating the sixteenth-century marginal annotations that hint at the identities of the LG's previous readers and users. Although we do not know for sure that Cotton was responsible for this particular alteration, as noted above, such remodeling was typical for him (Brown 134). Another bit of evidence for Cotton's influence comes from the LG's current binding. The original binding is lost, most likely broken up during the Dissolution, and there is no definitive description of the codex's cover during Cotton's ownership. However, in 1853, Bishop Edward Maltby of Durham replaced the lost treasure binding with a replica featuring a small silver Cotton coat of arms inside the cover. This tribute, Brown suggests, indicates that

Cotton had the LG bound under his coat of arms, which was later replaced with the replica treasure binding (*Lindisfarne* 134).

Cotton's codices all resembled one another on the shelf, but varied greatly in their contents. In the prefatory material to his 1696 library catalog, Thomas Smith, head librarian under Cotton's grandson Sir John, introduced six overarching manuscript categories that he observed within Cotton's complete library: "Manuscripts written in the Anglo-Saxon tongue" (47), "Cartularies of monasteries" (51), "Lives and passions of the saints and martyrs" (53), "Genealogical tables" (54), "Histories, annals and chronicles" (55), and "Original records of the kingdom" (56). It makes sense that Cotton would attempt to provide access to Anglo-Saxon work, government, family and religious records, since his goal was to gather and organize the history of the English nation. It is important to note that Cotton did not explicitly present these categories as prescriptive for the development of his collection, and in fact they were not made known until Smith published them more than 60 years after Cotton's death. Nevertheless, that Smith was able to divide the collection so neatly into six precise categories does suggest that Cotton at least had these areas in mind while he was collecting. According to Tite, "Expertise in knowing what he was both looking for and looking at was to be one of the important critical contributions Cotton brought to his collection" (10).

Smith's categories provide insight into how Smith and, presumably, Cotton understood the materials in the collection. This is important, because the way that Cotton re-established Anglo-Saxon manuscripts such as the LG altered scholars' understanding of these texts at the time, as well as into the future. Smith scorned the LG's illuminations, formerly revered for their power to connect the reader to God, for failing to represent animals and people naturally and accurately, according to the empirical standards of the time. He writes, "the figures seem crude

compared with those of today, lacking brightness, elegance and symmetry. The art of painting was not so far developed at that time” (49) (Fig. 8). Without an inherent sacred value, then, the LG might have lost a great deal of clout among Cotton’s contemporaries. However, the book was important to these men in a different way. Smith lists the LG under “Manuscripts written in the Anglo-Saxon Tongue,” even though it was written in Latin with the gloss added centuries later. This indicates that seventeenth-century scholars sought the LG for the lexicon of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary it provided and for its historical connection to pre-Norman, even pre-Viking England. The LG no longer signified Holy Island or God, but participated in a complex web of fragmentary signifiers of the English nation. Under Smith’s categorization, the LG gained significance as the earliest extant Anglo-Saxon translation of the gospels—one of the major reasons scholars still study it today.

#### Locating the Codex: Nero.D.iv

In theory, Cotton’s library was widely available to serious scholars during his lifetime. However, the practical possibility of finding, borrowing or using Cotton materials depended largely on where and how the collection was housed and organized. Cotton began his first major attempt at arrangement, and simultaneously the first major catalog of his collection, in 1621, just before he moved from his home in Blackfriars to a property adjoining the House of Commons in London, which would become known as Cotton House (Tite 15).<sup>11</sup> The move to a new house provided Cotton an opportunity to reorganize his collection and assess his holdings. Although Cotton’s library was certainly growing and lending widely in the period before he moved to Cotton House, there are no catalogs from this time period, and scholars do not know where or how this collection was stored and arranged. Because the library was moved from Cotton House

in the early eighteenth century, even a discussion of this central archive space is speculative. However, Tite and others have hypothesized about the physical space of the library at Cotton House, out of which the library's cataloging system would develop. The room was long and narrow, approximately 38 feet in length by six feet in width (Tite 82), and tradition suggests that it was once the Chapel of Our Lady of the Pew and used by Edward the Confessor (Tite 87). Tite assumes that this deliberate placement has to do with connecting to history: "It would have seemed entirely appropriate to Sir Robert Cotton that his manuscripts, many of them dealing with the history of medieval England, should be housed in the chapel in which an English monarch or monarchs had worshipped" (87). However, Cotton was not the first to house books in a sacred setting, and he would not be the last. It is difficult to imagine that he did not recognize the religious significance of enshrining his collection in this way, especially since so many of his manuscripts had been housed in churches and cathedrals for centuries.

Despite the evidence for Cotton's attention to ordering the records and texts in his collection, he did not arrange manuscripts thematically inside his library. He apparently shelved them simply by size, and so they were unlikely to share subject matter with neighboring volumes. It would have been impossible, for example, for a scholar to find one manuscript written in Anglo-Saxon (such as the LG) and then to find similar ones nearby, as a browser might do in a modern-day library organized according to the Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress systems. Instead, a 1629 list compiled by a Privy Council appointed by Charles I to investigate the library reveals the beginnings of an organizational system featuring thirteen numbered presses, or *scrinae*. These presses eventually took on the names of the busts of Roman emperors displayed atop them.



Within this system, each manuscript had a pressmark identifying its location on the shelf. When the system was fully implemented, a scholar seeking the LG, identified by the Cottonian pressmark Nero D.iv, would be able to find it by selecting the fourth manuscript (counting from left to right) from the fourth shelf (D) of the press under the bust of Nero. This emperor system was no more than a method of cataloging books—not a method of organizing them for easy access. As a result, it was very difficult, or at least prohibitively time-consuming, to find a particular manuscript in Cotton's library without first knowing its pressmark—or the archon who knew it. Tite suggests that Cotton's decision to use the busts of the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian may have been associated with King Charles I's contemporaneous purchase of 12 portraits of the same emperors (86). Whatever court events may have influenced Cotton's naming the presses, their number and arrangement seems to have been purely pragmatic, based on the limitations of the room. The space was so narrow that Cotton could only use one-sided presses placed against the walls, rather than perpendicular to them as in other libraries (Figs. 9 and 10). Doors, windows, and alcoves affected the width, height, and number of shelves on each press. All of these would affect the possibility of accessing the library when it was moved from Cotton House.<sup>11</sup>

In 1722, the library, which came under Parliamentary control in 1702, was moved to Essex House in the Strand. This building was declared a fire hazard and the collection moved once again, this time to Ashburnham House in Westminster where, ironically, fire broke out in 1731, damaging and destroying a more than a quarter of the manuscripts. The survivors rotted in storage at the Westminster School, until they were taken up by the newly established British Museum in 1753.<sup>12</sup> Each of these moves affected the organization and usability of Cotton's library. Although the emperor system was nominally preserved, it would have been impossible

to reconstruct its arrangement outside of the Cotton House library. Even the subject catalogs of the 1670s, which allowed borrowers to look up a work by its content rather than by its pressmark, referred back to the emperor system of shelving and so were useless as finding aids when the collection was removed from Cotton House. This, combined with the disappearance of the imperial busts some time between 1722 and 1753 (Tite 87), indicates that every time the library was moved from place to place the books lost their places on the shelves and thus their places within the collection. When the British Museum librarians were charged with the care of the damaged, disorganized collection, they found a fastidious system of identification that did not correspond in the slightest to the physical arrangement of the collection.

The importance of the connection between the space and the collection did not concern Cotton's heirs, as they moved the library out of their house. Their main concern with the collection as it transferred hands and homes was with keeping all of its pieces together. However, it soon became evident that a collection like Cotton's could not work as a traveling archive the way the LG did for its monastic community. The problem of arranging Cotton's library prefigured what it would take British Museum Library staff another century to realize: as Jacques Derrida and Achille Mbembe make clear, archival material does not function independently from space in which it is stored, arranged and displayed. Indeed, the fact that we still interchange manuscript titles with their pressmarks—"Nero.D.iv" and the "Lindisfarne Gospels" are synonymous—suggests that, for archival purposes where a manuscript is—and where it has been—is at least as important as what it contains.

## Coda: Into and Out of the Public Eye

During Cotton's lifetime, his library fell solely under his jurisdiction—and for him, it was always about providing access to the public through Cotton House. He lent his holdings liberally, because he was responsible to no one but himself for the maintenance and preservation of the collection. According to Sharpe, “few requests were denied” for either visits to or loans from the library (75). In 1696, Smith wrote, “it is as if the Cotton library belonged not to a single family but to the whole nation, stored as much by public decree as by will of the founder in the very centre of England at Westminster, where men of distinction congregate from every part of the country for the sessions of parliament and the courts of justice” (23). Smith's prophetic vision of the library stored by public decree was accurate, though his vision was overly optimistic. The Cotton library did come under Parliamentary control at the death of Cotton's grandson in 1702, which raised complicated and expensive issues of authority and collection management.

According to Cotton's will, which passed the library intact to his son, he intended that the library should be settled by “feoffment to continue for the use of Posterity” (qtd. in Tite 33) and should “not be sold, or otherwise disposed of” (qtd. in Tite 35). His son, Sir Thomas, accountable both to the family estate and to the undefined “Posterity,” thus instituted more careful recordkeeping and more stringent lending policies. For the first time, bonds were held in exchange for the privilege of borrowing a book, and some books were denied to borrowers altogether. Cotton's intention that the library should serve posterity introduced a new idea that became vital when the library crossed over into public hands. Up to this point, the collection and the material in it had only served the academic needs of contemporary users. The idea that Cotton's manuscripts had to be preserved for the use of future generations changed the way the

material in the collection could be accessed and used. By the time Sir John Cotton inherited the library from his father, Thomas, it had virtually stopped lending, and the bonds held in exchange for the few items that were lent had increased. However, “if the library had become increasingly a reference rather than a lending library, access was for the most part still readily granted” (Tite 29). This conflict between serving the “private necessity” of the library and the “public good” of its patrons (a distinction coined by Colin St. John Wilson, the architect of the British Library) would plague librarians for decades to come (qtd. in Stonehouse 81).

Neither issue seemed to be in the spotlight when Parliament declared that the library, vested in a body of Trustees after the death of Sir John Cotton in 1702, was to “be kept and preserved . . . for Publick Use and Advantage” (qtd. in Tite 33). The nominal transformation of the library from a private to a public institution resulted in the locking of the library, which sat imprisoned until Parliament appointed a librarian in 1706 (Tite 75). This collection that belonged to the nation remained inaccessible without an archon to manage the manuscripts and the scholars applying to use them. However, this change also ensured that the library would remain intact, and not be divided among the quarrelling Cotton heirs of the next generation.

The political and intellectual climate of seventeenth-century England accommodated the pursuits of private collectors like Cotton, and benefited from their efforts. However, during Cotton’s lifetime, and more obviously as the collection passed into the hands of his heirs, a privately owned collection like his was insufficient to meet the nation’s need for a library or archive. The increased security measures taken by the archons of the public incarnation of Cotton’s library—who were responsible to the government, to the public and perhaps even to the collection itself—indicated that public status provided more protection and stability for the collection over the longer term than a private owner.

### III. The Lindisfarne Gospels in the British Library: An Absent Presence

Major Eaton: We have top men working on it now.

Indiana Jones: Who?

Major Eaton: Top...men.

~*Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*

The idea of building a great library has always been  
(next to a cathedral!) the most haunting of human ambitions.

~Sir Colin St. John Wilson,

Architect of The British Library, St. Pancras

For Sir Robert Cotton, obtaining the LG and incorporating the book into his widely used collection—even re-binding it with his own cover and coat of arms—was the best way to protect it and to ensure its availability to future generations. However, because the LG and the rest of Cotton's collection were part of the British Museum since its inception, that institution did not face the same concerns about gathering and incorporating that challenged Cotton. Instead, the British Museum and British Library emphasized stewardship of the LG and similar treasures through preservation and security, which determine how collections are housed, displayed, and accessed. As architectural and technological developments have responded to concerns about conservation, security, access, and interpretation, each successive building housing the Lindisfarne Gospels has become more integral to contextualizing and using the book than the one before it. Far from its eighth-century exilic owners, the LG has landed, one might say, in the

lap of luxury. The resources expended on its preservation and presentation are impressive, but, they leave their mark on the LG, as surely as Cotton did, coloring perceptions about its function and its importance to those who seek it.

Rather than making an absence present, as it did for the Lindisfarne monks, the LG itself has become an absent presence in the British Library, subsumed in a collection of collections that has been subsumed by the library building. As we have seen, for its creators, the LG was powerful enough to evoke the island of Lindisfarne and its monastery wherever its guardians carried it. Nearly the opposite is true today, as the LG lies enshrined in the British Library at St. Pancras. The codex is available for viewing in the library's Treasures Gallery, but physical access to the book is extremely restricted. As a result, most patrons can only achieve a second-hand impression of the LG through the library's exhibition resources, just as the exilic Lindisfarne community experienced both God and Holy Island in a limited sense through their interaction with the Gospel Book.

### Historical Contexts: Experiments in Museum-Making

Following Cotton's collection from storage at the Westminster School to the British Museum illustrates the way that the museum's Trustees gradually became aware of the influence of housing and display, which they deliberately incorporated into museum renovations. The project of developing the British Museum was an unprecedented one for the mid-eighteenth century: while impressive royal collections abounded on the Continent, many of which eventually were transferred into public hands, the British Museum was the first to be established, funded, and organized as a national, public institution. According to Sir David MacKenzie Wilson, in *The British Museum: A History*, "while the idea of a library and of a cabinet [of



curiosities] was familiar to the Trustees, ...they had to combine the two and make them accessible to the public. This was their unique challenge. Nowhere else in Europe did such a public institution exist" (24).<sup>13</sup>

The death of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), collector, naturalist, and scholar, catalyzed the founding of the British Museum because he left his collection to the nation.<sup>14</sup> Sloane lived about a century after Cotton, but both men were part of the same culture of collecting and cataloging, which was sparked by "curiosities" gathered during the Age of Discovery. Sloane himself traveled to the New World more than once, bringing back drawings and specimens of unknown plants and animals. Cotton and Sloane also were alike, in that both men made the fruits of their labors widely available to others.<sup>15</sup> According to Wilson, "the curious were made welcome in [Sloane's] collections and scholars were encouraged to use them in pursuit of their studies" (14). According to Sloane's will, he intended that his

collection in all its branches may be, if possible, kept and preserved together whole and intire...that the same may be, from time to time, visited and seen by all persons desirous of seeing and viewing the same...that the same be rendered as useful as possible, as well as towards satisfying the desire of the curious, as for the improvement, knowledge and information of all persons. (qtd. in Wilson 19)

The will echoes Parliament's 1702 declaration that Cotton's collection "'be kept and preserved... for Publick Use and Advantage,'" as well as Cotton's will, which designated his collections "'for the use of Posterity'" (qtd. in Tite 33).

With Sloane's will in mind, in 1753 the Trustees of his collection, appointed to oversee the museum's formation, settled on three vital principles. First, the collection would remain together. Second, under the advisement of Parliament, it would be available to the public for

research and observation. Third, the collection needed a home (Wilson 20). Surprisingly enough, this became the most complicated clause of all, and brought about more than its share of financial, political, and architectural frustrations in the following centuries. For now, though, the Board of Trustees and Parliament were interested in acquiring the least expensive building they could find (Wilson 24).

Montagu House, located on Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury, north London, was the most economical choice, although, as time would tell, not the wisest one. Gertrude Rawlings points out that, despite the warning of the 1731 Ashburnham House fire, “another handsome but ramshackle old mansion was chosen as the receptacle for two or three invaluable libraries and the Sloane museum, instead of a building especially and appropriately designed” (55). Newly hired museum staff began the process of moving and arranging the collections in 1755, and the British Museum opened its doors to the public for the first time on January 15, 1759.<sup>16</sup>

As in Cotton’s Westminster library, setting up the British Museum in a former domestic residence meant that the shape and dimensions of each room defined the distribution and display of the collections, rather than serving the needs of the collection, librarians or users (Fig. 11). Just as Cotton’s emperor system developed from the number of presses his library could hold (Tite 86), the arrangement of materials in Montagu house depended on the floor plan. However, museum staff and visitors generally ignored the influence of Montagu House’s limitations, focusing instead on the books and artifacts displayed. While this seems logical enough, this indifference to the museum building changed drastically within the next century.

In 1808, the first description of Montagu House appeared in a published museum guide (Rawlings 59). In that year, the first purpose-built section of the museum opened, the Townley Galleries (Wilson 64). While previous guidebooks had described the collection, the influence of

the building had remained beyond the scope of visitors' attention. However, in planning for this new wing, which would adjoin Montagu House at its northwest corner and house newly acquired Egyptian antiquities, "the Board of Trustees expressed its preference for something more simple, specifically designed to be a museum gallery and not a converted 'family mansion'" (Miller 116). This was the first indication that the Trustees had begun to recognize the functional value of designing the museum's layout to serve their own purposes. The integrity of Montagu House also became important early in the nineteenth century: walls, chimneys, and tiles had begun to fall throughout the house before 1800, and in that year dry rot was discovered in the basement rooms, making them unfit for storage (Miller 196). The original Reading Room, located in the basement corner of the library, had insufficient space and light, and its doors opened directly out onto the expansive museum gardens—hardly a secure place for outsiders to peruse the museum's treasures (Rawlings 61). This room, just one example of many, was not conducive to the study, preservation, or protection of the materials examined there.

In addition to potentially damaging the collections, Montagu House was damaging the reputation of the Museum, according to the Trustees, by limiting the number of people admitted each day to the Reading Room and the Museum. "If Parliament provided the necessary funds, the Trustees would provide more accommodation for readers and the general public," they promised (Miller 123). In 1815, the architect Robert Smirke began half a lifetime of work on the British Museum by planning additions to Montagu House. Smirke's early projects for the British Museum were reactions to problems in Montagu House, which "was by no means fireproof and [according to a House of Commons investigative committee] was not 'well-calculated for the purposes to which it is applied'" (Miller 128). In 1816, construction began on a new suite of rooms that would temporarily provide more storage and gallery space. However, upon

excavating the walls of the library rooms, Smirke found open holes leading directly into flues (Miller 135). This, along with King George IV's gift of his father's magnificent library to the museum, pushed ahead Smirke's long-term efforts to construct new galleries, "chaste and grand and truly classical" (Miller 128), on the same property as Montagu House.

Just as Sloane's bequest originally prompted the establishment of the British Museum, the arrival of (and consequent responsibility for) the King's Library pushed the completion of the new building into high gear. In April of 1827, the royal gift was publicly displayed for the first time in a room designed specifically for it. By November of 1827 the Department of Manuscripts had moved to the new east wing, but the rest of the work was slow going. In 1836, more than 20 years after beginning his association with the museum, Smirke expressed his frustration with Parliament's "parsimony" (Miller 146), which for so long had prevented the museum from housing its materials safely and efficiently. The rest of the library did not move from "the old and crumbling rooms of Montagu house" until 1838, and the project was not completed until 1848 (Miller 155) (Fig. 12). Consisting of four major wings, the new museum building formed a square with an open central quadrangle and featured an immense Neoclassical façade with a fronting courtyard facing Great Russell Street (Wilson 95) (Fig.13). This is the building we now know as the British Museum, and which also housed many of the British Library's treasures until 1997.

Unfortunately for Smirke, by the time each building was completed, it failed to meet the needs for which it was designed or would only serve for four or five years. The library, under Keeper of Printed Books Antonio Panizzi, was growing at an unprecedented pace. By 1850 complaints abounded about the insufficiency of the overcrowded reading rooms (Miller 173). Just as painful to Smirke must have been the fact that, during the twenty-plus years that he

worked on the project, Neoclassical architecture had gone out of style. “The thing is wanting in dignity, in character.... Oh, such botching and patching! We have no words for it,” wrote one critic in *The Builder* (qtd. in Wilson 94-95). By the time the new British Museum building, today considered “an icon among the museums of the nineteenth century, ...perhaps the greatest Greek Revival building in the country” (Wilson 94) was finished, both its form and facilities were unsatisfactory to critics, staff, and patrons. Around 1850, a commission investigating the British Museum as a whole declared the building ““a warning rather than a model to the architect of any additional structure”” (qtd. in Miller 182).

#### Interior Contexts: Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes

As proposals for expanding the museum on the surrounding property abounded, Panizzi, who was promoted from Keeper of Printed Books to Principal Librarian in 1856, designed the addition that completed the new museum building, met the needs of patrons, and silenced critics for nearly a century. Incorporating the central quadrangle, which until this time was “was neither used nor seen” (Wilson 95), Panizzi designed a round Reading Room surrounded by an “iron library,” a nearly fireproof storage area for the library’s growing collection of books (Miller 188). This innovative room, which employed a Neoclassical, domed design just two feet smaller in diameter than the Roman Pantheon, was the museum’s first step back toward physically enshrining books as “sacred” objects (Figs. 14 and 15). In both Cotton House and Montagu House, the printed books and manuscripts had been on display in the galleries, and were part of the museum tour. Now, for the first time, the books were hidden from the view of patrons, as they are today in the British Library.

This change opened up more space in the Reading Room and in the galleries, since the books no longer had to be displayed (although often-used reference books still filled the shelves around the perimeter of the Reading Room). However, it also created a boundary between the texts and the readers, who now could not see the books they wanted without clearance from the museum and the aid of a librarian, an archon. Casual visitors to the museum would never see the books at all. Furthermore, Panizzi's imitation of the Pantheon suggested that the books available there were objects worthy of a reverence akin to worship. The new room garnered public attention that added to its powerful religious quality as the number of visitors flocking to the museum and the number of people admitted to, and kept out of, this imitatively sacred space increased. Panizzi, archon of the Reading Room, controlled access to the space and materials inside by placing more and more restrictions on who could enter, and the room truly became an elite space. In 1916, regular Reading Room user Gertrude Rawlings wrote that the space left vacant by the absence of inferior scholars was "preferable to their company" (90). This sense of exclusion has re-emerged in the new British Library, where in 2006 regular readers reacted bitterly to the library's decision to allow undergraduates into the Humanities Reading Room. According to Tristram Hunt in *The Guardian*, "The studied calm of the reading room has given way to a hum of mobile phone ringtones, chit-chat and pubescent histrionics. It is difficult to get any work done" (Hunt).

### The Function of the Codex: An Unread Treasure

The British Museum and the British Library, charged with the preservation, exhibition, and management of collections, have always had to serve a paradoxical mission: that of preserving treasures for posterity by restricting the vast majority of patrons from using them.

While the Cottonian collection has been preserved for future generations, the numbers of readers who have actually gained access to works like the LG since Cotton's death have been relatively few. As we have seen, Colin St. John Wilson, architect of the British Library at St. Pancras, describes these two functions as the "public good" and "private necessity," respectively (qtd. in Stonehouse 81). The St. Pancras building was not St. John Wilson's first library design. However, it was his first commission in which the "private necessity" matched the building's mandate to serve the "public good," according to Roger Stonehouse, Professor of Architecture and Director of the Manchester School of Architecture at the University of Manchester (1986-2003). In The British Library, the LG is revered for the first time because of what it *is*, rather than what it can do. Like the British Museum, the British Library welcomed the challenge of preserving and sharing cultural and national memory. However, in fulfilling this "private necessity," the library has restricted rare books to glass cases, vaults, and reading rooms. Revered for its contents, the British Library itself is an archive of absent presences like the LG, which now derives its mythic quality from its *absence*, echoing the powerful divinity its *presence* signified in the Middle Ages.

Now more than ever, the LG, one of the most well-known and revered manuscripts in the world, derives much of its renown from the building that contains it. Michelle Brown points out that there is no evidence that the LG ever left Cotton's collection on loan, and the British Library, too, has a history of keeping it close to home. According to Brown, the volume has only left the library five times since the founding of the British Museum, and it has always remained in the British Isles (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 139). Except for a museum evacuation during World War II, all of the loans were for major library and museum tours within the last 50 years. The first was a 1961 display at the Royal Academy in Burlington House, London, "Treasures from



Trinity College, Dublin,” which displayed the codex alongside the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow, codices elaborately illuminated in the same style as the LG and contemporary with it. In 1987, the LG returned to Durham Cathedral, where it was displayed in the cathedral’s treasury to honor the 1,300th anniversary of St. Cuthbert’s death and laid briefly on the saint’s tomb. This gesture reunited book and relics, reenacting the important connection that medieval English Christians saw between the two and briefly reconstituting the Lindisfarne archive. In 1996 and 2000 the Laing Gallery in Newcastle displayed the LG, first as part of an exhibit on the golden age of Northumbria and then in celebration of the millennium (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 139). Each of these exhibits attempted to place the LG in a geographical, chronological, or cultural context. The British Library, in contrast, presents the LG as an individual, isolated treasure.

New resources have allowed for significant progress in the way the library is able to make its most precious resources available. However, the novelty and impressive features of these tools often take center stage, while the material on display recedes into the wings. For example, the library’s digital “Turning the Pages” feature allows users to view high-resolution images of the LG and “turn the pages” themselves, but draws nearly as much attention for the quality of the digital images as for the mastery of the artwork on the page.<sup>17</sup> Even the bright, open design of the library building, in contrast to the British Museum’s warren-like rooms, suggests welcoming openness and accessibility.

### Locating the Codex: An Absent Presence

In 1972, when an act of Parliament established the British Library as separate from the British Museum, the Committee establishing its mission (in contrast to the eighteenth-century Committee in the same position) did not mention the need to house the collection suitably—they

knew that a building would be designed and constructed specifically to suit the library's needs. In fact, architectural plans to construct a separate library building had been underway since 1964. According to Sir Anthony Kenny, former Chairman of The British Library Board, the purpose of defining the library as an institution was to centralize the nation's greatest resources: "The Library hoped that the completed building would enable it to unite all its London reference collections under one roof and would provide room for growth for decades to come" (9). The newly established British Library was to include the collections held by the British Museum, the National Central Library, the National Lending Library for Science and Technology, the British National Bibliography, and the Office for Scientific and Technical Information (Kenny 8). The importance of the building project was such that "throughout the eighties, the Library's *principal role* was to work on the detailed design and use of" the first phases of the building's construction (Kenny 11, emphasis mine). Although the library was established without a building to call home, it was not complete until the major collections were united at St. Pancras.

The new building addressed the collection's storage, study, and display needs better than any pre-existing building could. However, because the current building is as much a part of the British Library's identity as the collection it houses, its deliberate influence on patrons calls for more careful study than that of a pre-existing site like Montagu House. Its design is rooted in the Neo-Gothic philosophies of the English Free School, which, according to St. John Wilson, is based on a reaction to the limiting symmetry of classical and Neoclassical styles. Rather than impressing a predetermined, rectangular shape on a building's design, this style seeks to emulate the "free asymmetries of an organic nature" (St. John Wilson 15). In other words, the building must reflect and meet the unique needs of its users and the materials it houses, rather than conform to a particular template (St. John Wilson 18).

Although St. John Wilson's library reflects the ideology of the English Free School, it makes no attempt to imitate a Gothic cathedral, nor does it resemble the nearby Neo-Gothic St. Pancras rail station (formerly the Midland Grand Hotel) (Figs. 16 and 17). As architect Sir Richard MacCormack writes, "the building is symbolic, but this symbolism is not assertive and it is not about great occasions or collective events. The building seeks relationships with the individuals who use it and visit it.... [Y]ou are invited to be a participant, not merely a spectator" (xiii). Roger Stonehouse also praises the "non-confrontational" (xvii) design, "in which the notion of use is extended beyond the merely utilitarian functional to include experience and the symbolic, where meaning is grounded in each individual's use and experience of the building" (xvii).

Ironically, though, Stonehouse's description of entering and using this sprawling, sleek, postmodern building undermines his assertion that its design is unassuming and inviting of personal participation. His account of the library in the first person plural, describing the shared experience of patrons entering the building, belies his rhetoric that the building allows for individual experience and interpretation. In fact, the library's design has exactly the same effect on Stonehouse that classical temples and Gothic cathedrals had and still do have on their visitors. Dr. John Ashworth, Chairman of the British Library Board when the St. Pancras building opened, describes this effect in his introduction to St. John Wilson's book about it: "As they cross the threshold, visitors will continue to gasp, whether they come as tourists to see the exhibitions of our treasures or as readers to consult the 12 million books housed on the shelves. That is as it should be" (St. John Wilson 6). The British Library is, indeed, a metaphorical cathedral, a temple to knowledge. Its architecture is contemporary and its purpose secular.

However, the building's design commands the reverence and awe of those who come to "worship" just as a true cathedral does—and thus re-sacralizes the texts sequestered within.

The title of Stonehouse's essay, "From Street to Book," describes a visit to the library as a process of moving through layers, from Euston Road to the library entrance, up the stairs and, for the approved, into a reading room and, finally, to the book. This organization is typical of sacred spaces, as far back as King Solomon's temple, with its outer public area through which men, priests, and finally only the highest priests can move to reach the Holy of Holies. At the library's entrance, Stonehouse writes that the visitor will feel "on the threshold of something special.... [I]t is a place for taking stock, of changing our state of being" (4). Upon entering the library, then, a visitor is in a place of transformation, a liminal region: just as a temple or church mediates between heaven and earth, so this entrance is a threshold between the "sacred" reading room and the oppressively noisy Euston Road.

Stonehouse describes the anagogical moment that visitors experience as they move into the library's vast entryway:

Through an entrance lobby, which is low, almost domestic with its doorstep and porch, we enter a space which we sense rising majestically but beckoningly before us.... We are now in a new world, a world which soars and is flooded with light, a space which expands before is and with which we may feel ourselves growing in stature and aspiration. (4) (Fig.18)

This flood of light that draws the eye upward is reminiscent of religious architecture as described by Abbot Suger, the twelfth-century creator of Gothic architecture and builder of St. Denis in Paris (Fig. 19). Having meditated on the beauty of his church and its treasures, Suger writes, "then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe

which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner” (65).

Stonehouse’s description of the library as a sacred space continues throughout his essay. He describes the Humanities Reading Room as “almost chapel-like, with side aisles and a short nave with a vaulted ceiling suffused with warm light” (5). Here, he writes, “the eye is drawn to a calm yet busy growing intricacy of form and light in that familiar raising of the eyes to the light and heavens in thought and reflection” (6) (Fig. 20). St. John Wilson’s description of soaring double and triple heights in the Humanities Reading Room, that “are always adjacent to bays of single floor height” (21) also echoes Stonehouse’s allusion to the aisles and nave of a cathedral. Stonehouse is deliberate and explicit in his comparison of the British Library to a cathedral, and also to a “tomb” and an “ark” (“Composition and Context” 49). However, he either does not recognize or does not choose to acknowledge the full allusive implications of his metaphors. A Gothic cathedral, though open and flooded with light, is designed to glorify holy mysteries permanently beyond the grasp of the believer, who can only attempt to assemble a miracle out of the inadequate sounds, sights, and smells to which he or she is treated. A tomb is a repository for the remains of something dead, beyond the reach of the living. If the museum is like a tomb, then the material inside is not accessible: visitors may come to pay tribute but may not disturb or see the “relics” inside.

Above all, the original Ark of the Covenant is notoriously un-openable and untouchable. According to 2 Samuel, Uzzah, who touched the Ark while transporting it to keep it from falling to the ground, immediately dropped dead. In the biblical tradition, the high priests separated the Ark from the common people by placing it within a Holy of Holies, where only one priest could

enter, once a year. More recently, in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the American government claims to protect the Ark and those who would seek it by burying it in an anonymous warehouse among countless other blank crates. Stonehouse is deliberate in ascribing quasi-sacred power to the British Library's contents. However, he also implies the near inaccessibility of such "sacred" material as the LG.

Stonehouse points out the "altar" at the building's literal and figurative heart: the King's Library, encased in a massive smoked-glass column at the architectural center of the building (Fig. 21). According to St. John Wilson, "It was a condition of the gift to the nation of this great collection...that its beautiful leather and vellum bindings should be on show to the general public and not just to the scholars" (28). The collection is certainly "on show"—however, it remains tantalizingly out of reach of the "general public" as well as serious scholars. Stonehouse acknowledges the physical inaccessibility of the books within the column: a "black granite strip form[s] a 'moat' around the base" ("Composition" 71), between the collection and the would-be reader, who is "separated from them by a void which reverences their special nature" ("Street" 5). The black granite once again suggests that the King's Library is entombed, while the moat serves to defend it from unworthy and worthy alike. The "void," while communicating the "sacred" nature of the books, teases the visitor, who can get close enough to read the titles on the bindings, but can never reach the books or even the glass entombing them.

Stonehouse seems unbothered by this: he allows for the intellectual and cultural power of unopened, generally inaccessible books that he claims "*through their very presence...adjust our state of mind to the purpose of our presence*" (4, emphasis mine). His reaction to the power of these artifacts is not so different from that of the medieval monks and laypeople who experienced God, not always through reading or learning the Word, but simply by coming into

its presence in a manuscript. This parallel appears again when Stonehouse uses the word “casket” to describe the King’s Library column, recalling the reliquaries that housed the remains of saints and the unopenable book shrines, like that of the Cathach or “Battler” of Columcille mentioned in part I.

Through the very presence of these books and, indeed, through our meaningful distance from them, Stonehouse would have us believe that “we are touched by the magic of books, wherein we can acquire and share the greatest treasures of knowledge and art, which belong to all” (5). In other words, for Stonehouse, the King’s Library contains the power to transform the “worshipper” confronting it. He writes like a medieval Christian, for whom both God and Lindisfarne were accessible through the presence of the LG. Here, though, the difference between sacred and secular cathedrals is vital. “[T]he greatest treasures of knowledge and art” cannot be acquired and shared with “all” through the presence of a book. They are attainable, rather, through reading, study, and perusal of the books’ contents.

The kind of power Stonehouse ascribes to entombed, unread texts as sources of knowledge is only feasible when the book, as a sacred object, can produce some kind of force. The Battler of Columcille was fully effective from inside its “casket,” because only its presence was necessary to produce the power of God. The LG today is not similarly effective, because its use and importance have changed. Although today we treat the volume with great reverence as a historical artifact, its “pilgrims” are scholars and its guardians, its archons, the Library Board and a staff of librarians. The British Library’s approach to protecting and respecting the LG is nearly medieval in the way it re-sacralizes this and other rare books. However, in the secular British Library, being in the same building as the book is not enough. Today’s “pilgrims” to the LG



cannot fully experience the artifactual information they seek without physically engaging with the codex: touching, holding, reading, and even smelling it.

The openness of the library's architecture, the visibility of the King's Library through glass, the items on display in the Treasures Gallery and the material available on the Library's website all give the impression that the library's materials are easily accessible. And, indeed, these resources do provide more information about and secondary access to materials by providing digital images, facsimiles, or one page at a time on display for perusal—altogether, that is more information than has ever been available before, to a much wider audience, and that is a good thing. Still, we must not lose sight of the fact that full access to rare codices like the LG remains as restricted as ever.

## Conclusion

The LG today is enshrined in much the same way that it and similar books were in the Middle Ages. As the object of near-worship, scholars seek to approach it, while its guardian archons protect it by limiting access. However, the reasoning behind and purpose for this veneration is different than it was in the eighth century, and this affects the LG's usefulness. In the past, it has always been precious for what it represented, embodied or contained. In the eighth century, clergy and laypeople revered the LG because it embodied the presence and power of God. For Robert Cotton and his peers, the manuscript's Anglo-Saxon gloss was a unique and important addition to his archive of English history. But today when scholars look at the LG, they are seeking no more and no less than *the thing itself*. It is carefully guarded, not because of the divine power it contains, but to protect its material body from destruction and decay—the same material body that its seekers want to approach. “Pilgrims” want to be near the LG, not to learn from the text inside, but to learn from the book itself—its pages, cover, binding, illuminations, special qualities, and defects. In fact, intensive study of and reverence for the artifact that is the LG itself is the only reason a scholar could make a case for obtaining access to it. The importance of the LG has shifted from spiritual or historical to material, and the experience of this material interaction cannot be replicated through technology.

An imperfect sort of access is provided through exhibitions and exhibition technology designed and controlled by the British Library. For example, in the library's Treasures Gallery, the LG is on display under glass, with only two pages visible each day. Online features like Turning the Pages allows anyone in the world with Internet access to “turn the pages” of the manuscript—but only some of them. A limited number of pages are available, and so a viewer can only see the images that the British Library has chosen to post, or that experts like Michelle

Brown choose to include in their books. Even full facsimiles—which do exist—are produced in limited quantities and are prohibitively expensive: 980 copies were made to sell at \$22,500 through Oxbow Books. They are presented on tours practically as if they were the real thing. As the *Bede's World* website reported on a facsimile tour in December 2004, “this is...the closest most people will come to the experience of actually leafing through the Gospel's [*sic*] themselves.” But, as Sîan Echard points out, “none of these channels of transmission is sufficient in itself to allow one to capture the whole book” (200). By archiving the LG this way, and offering only partial access to it, the British Library actually venerates the book itself in a way that is historically unprecedented. In a secular environment overflowing with historical and archival data, the LG has only itself to offer. The LG no longer points to a greater power or bigger picture—instead, other resources point to *it*. Thus, it is no longer a signifier, but is instead signified. Ironically, in a culture of rapid technological advancement, and in a physical environment that attempts to promote scholarship, interaction, and access, the LG has slipped beyond the realm of the knowable, existing only in the bits and bytes selected for inclusion in its own accessible archive of resources.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this section, and throughout the study, I am indebted to Michelle Brown, the preeminent Lindisfarne Gospels scholar, whose exhaustive research and thorough writing on this subject made my path a great deal smoother. Marc Drogin, too, offers helpful insight into the miraculous and magical quality of the written Word at this time.

<sup>2</sup> The works of Colin Tite and Kevin Sharpe were particularly illustrative of the academic and cultural atmosphere that both fostered and called for collections like Cotton's.

<sup>3</sup> The historical work of Sir David M. Wilson and the architectural reflections of St. John Wilson, Roger Stonehouse, and Richard MacCormack were all vital to this section.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to embodying divinity, manuscripts were incredibly expensive and labor-intensive to make. According to Brown, one copy of the *Cosmographers* purchased by Benedict Biscop in Rome was worth the livelihoods of eight families (*Bede* 6). As a result, cutting from them would have been a serious offense. According to Marc Drogin,

"The vandalism, let alone the theft, of a book was a crime worthy to be punished by excommunication" (60).

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Brown's *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society Spirituality and the Scribe* provides the vast majority of historical detail I use in this section. Except where otherwise cited, my references to dates and events in this come from this text.

<sup>6</sup> Raised inside the walls of Monkwearmouth in the late seventh century, the priest and great scholar, Bede, known as the "Father of English History," wrote on a broad variety of subjects. His chief work was the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

<sup>7</sup> While Wilfrid's "empurpled" (Brown, *Lindisfarne* 66) manuscript seems to have been a new phenomenon in England, the practice of chrysography (writing in gold) on dyed purple pages was known in fifth- and sixth- century Byzantium and Italy. Brown suggests that Wilfrid's volume was made in Italy, or at least by Italian scribes (*Lindisfarne* 66).

<sup>8</sup> The Book of Durrow is a seventh-century Gospel Book, possibly the oldest extant exemplar from the British Isles. The Durham and Echternach Gospels, both illuminated Gospel Books from the late seventh or early eighth centuries, were created by the same scribe.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida takes the phrase "reminder and a memorial" from an inscription written to Sigmund Freud by his father inside the younger Freud's Bible, which his father had rebound and gave back to his son as a 35<sup>th</sup> birthday present. This allusion recalls exactly the kind of special ancestral and archival quality that the LG held for the Lindisfarne community.

<sup>10</sup> The three manuscripts Cotton labeled with this date were a 10<sup>th</sup>-century MS (Cotton Vespasian D.XV) consisting of 15 folios on confession and penance, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century MS of the *Polychronicon* (the second half of Cotton Nero D. VIII), and a 15<sup>th</sup>-century MS opening with *De Regimine Principum*, written by Giles of Rome for Philip the Fair of France. Cotton lost this last work, which later resurfaced in 1612 in the Bodleian Library (now MS Bodley 181).

<sup>11</sup> Located within the City of London, Blackfriars was named after the black-robed Dominican monks who lived there before the Dissolution. During Cotton's lifetime it was the site of the Blackfriars Theatre, where many of Shakespeare's plays were performed.

<sup>12</sup> There was no distinction between the British Museum and the British Library until an act of Parliament formally established the British Library in 1972. In this paper, any reference to the collections now held by the British Library as they were before 1972 will refer to the British Museum; after 1972 reference will be made to the British Library and the British Museum as appropriate.

<sup>13</sup> Cabinets of curiosities, the forerunners of museums, were eclectic personal collections of artifacts drawn from natural history, archaeology, geology, and others areas put on display.

<sup>14</sup> Sloane's bequest was dependent upon the condition that Parliament pay £20,000 to his executors. According to Wilson, "if this clause were not to be approved, the collections were to be offered on the same terms to the academies of St. Petersburg, Paris, Berlin and Madrid in turn. If all should refuse, the collections should be sold" (20).

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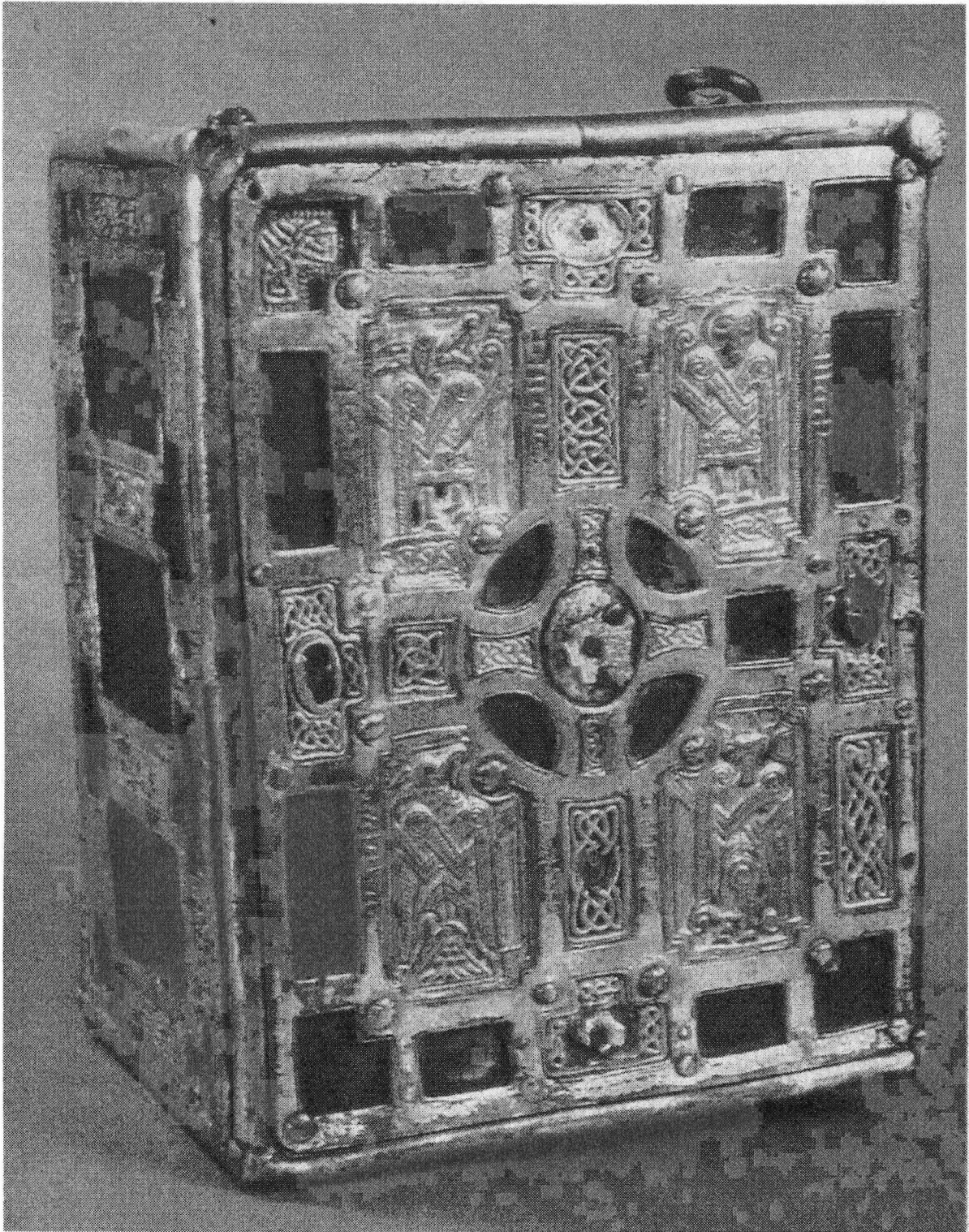
<sup>15</sup> Sloane was impressively distinct from Cotton in that, although his library was far bigger than Cotton's, he managed to fully catalog it and his collection of curiosities by the time he died (Wilson 18). As we have seen, Cotton never managed a full catalog of his collection.

<sup>16</sup> The Reading Room was open to some scholars before the museum officially opened. According to Wilson, the Trustees decided to allow limited use of books and manuscripts in 1757. However, staffing the Reading Room slowed down preparations for the opening of the museum and the practice was discontinued (33).

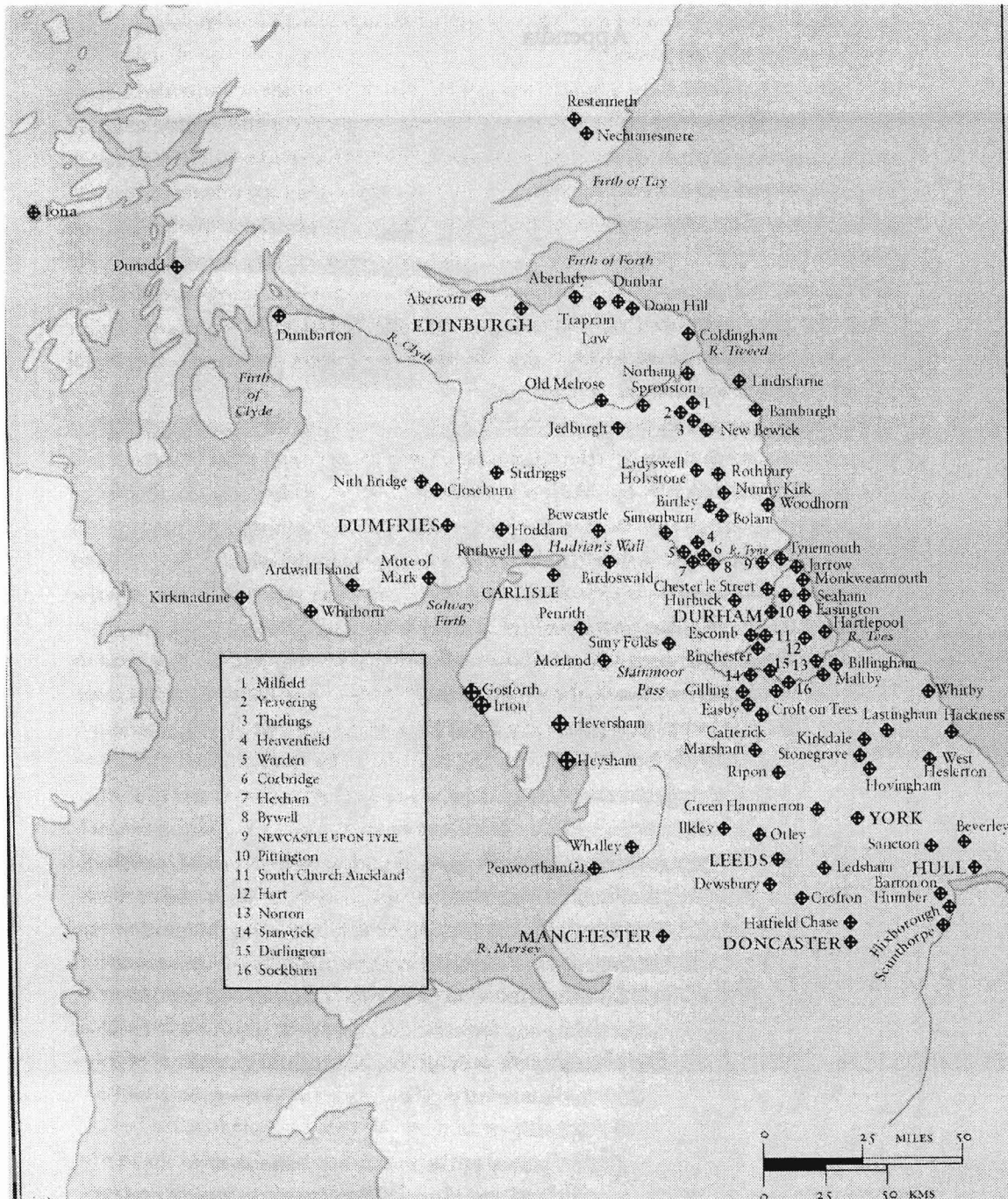
<sup>17</sup> Turning the Pages, a resource available for purchase on CD-ROM as well for free on the British Library website allows viewers to see impressive images of the pages of various valuable manuscripts, including the Lindisfarne Gospels, Lewis Carroll's manuscript of *Alice in Wonderland* manuscript, Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks and others.



Appendix



**Figure 1: The book-shrine for the Cathach of Columcille was not designed to open.**



**Figure 2: Lindisfarne is just south the Scottish border on England's northeast coast. Farther south are Monkwearmouth, Jarrow, Durham, and York.**



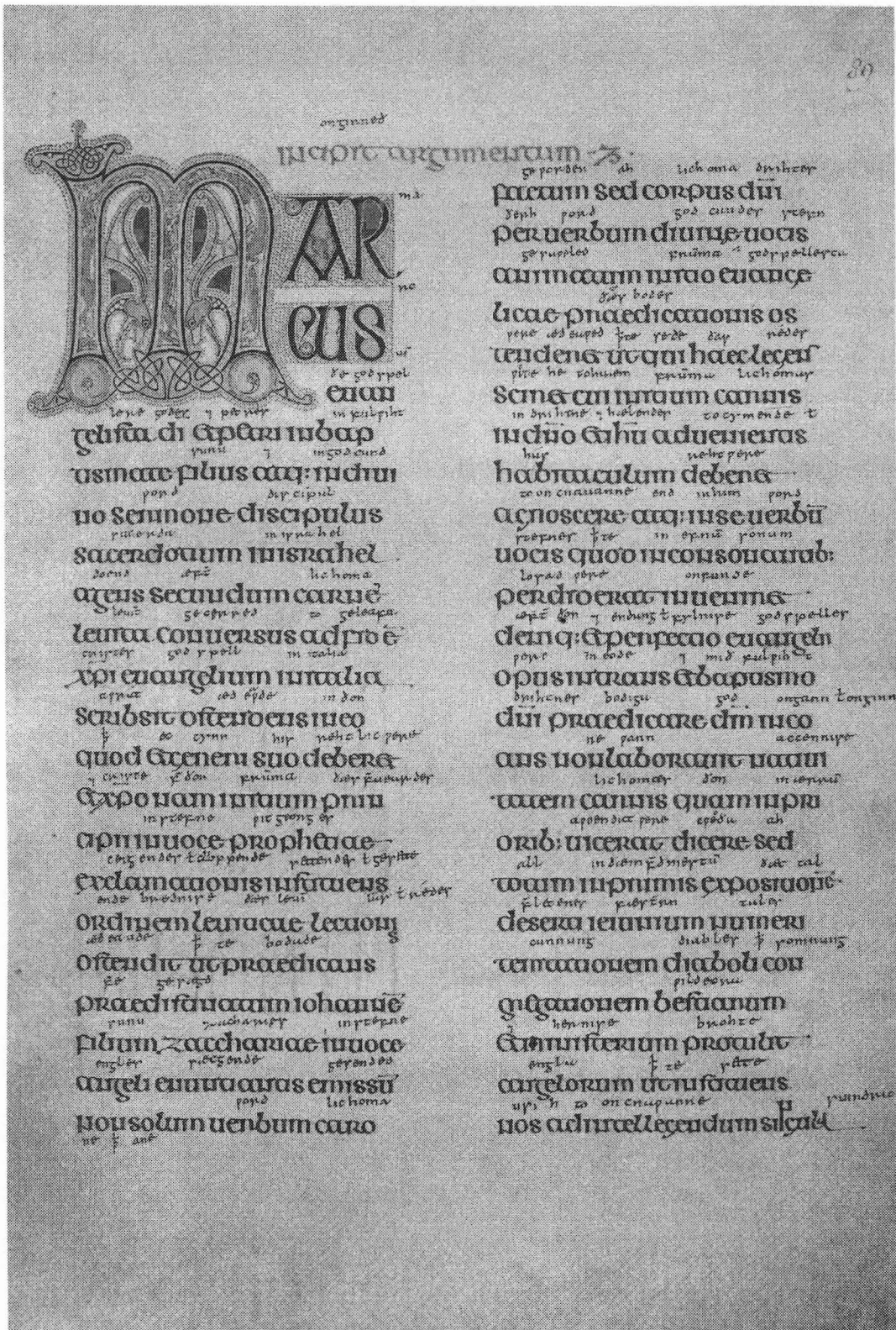
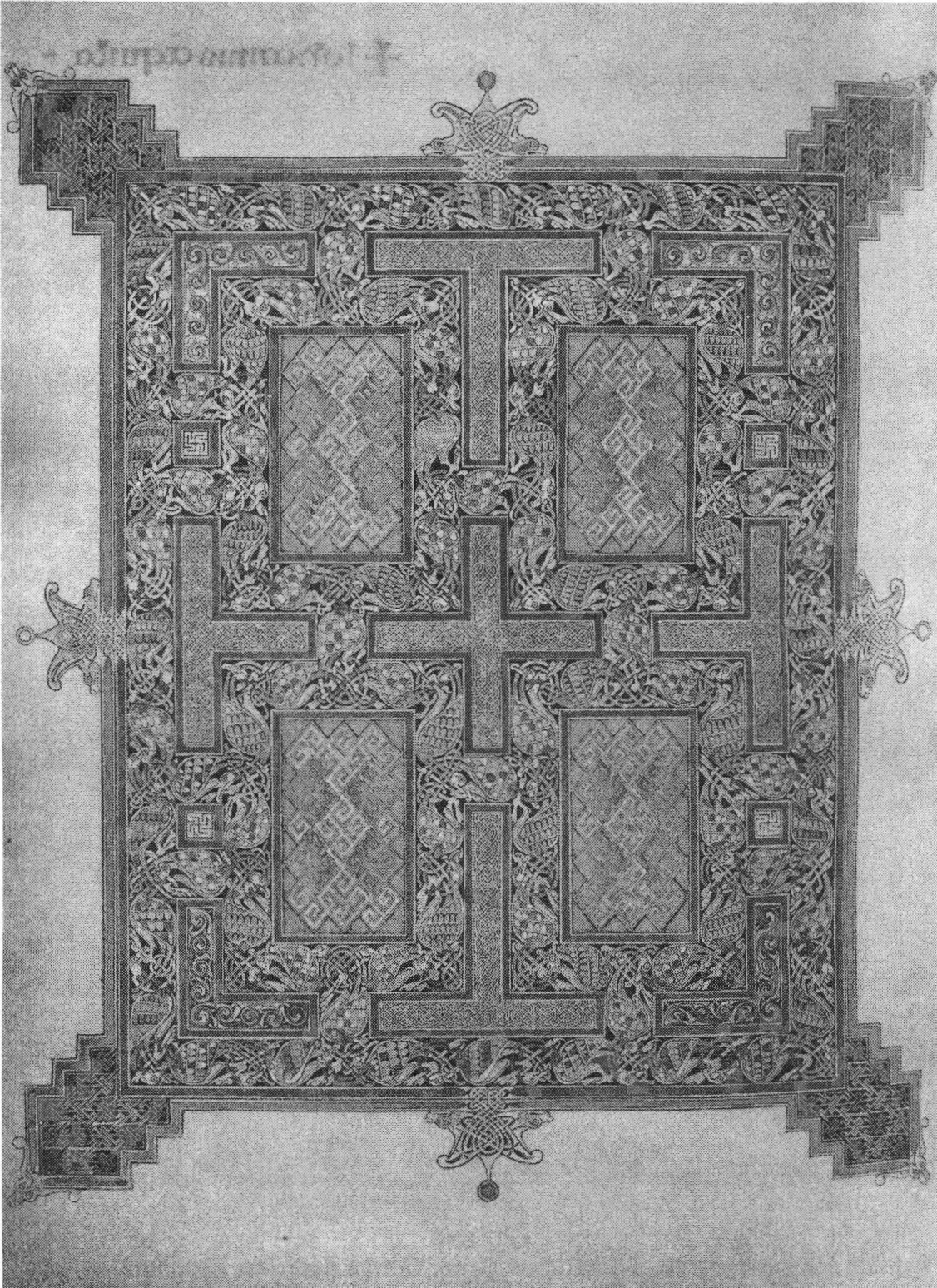


Figure 3: Aldred's tenth-century gloss of the gospels in Old English lies between the lines of Latin.



Figure 4: The LG's 1853 replica treasure cover suggests what the original may have looked like.





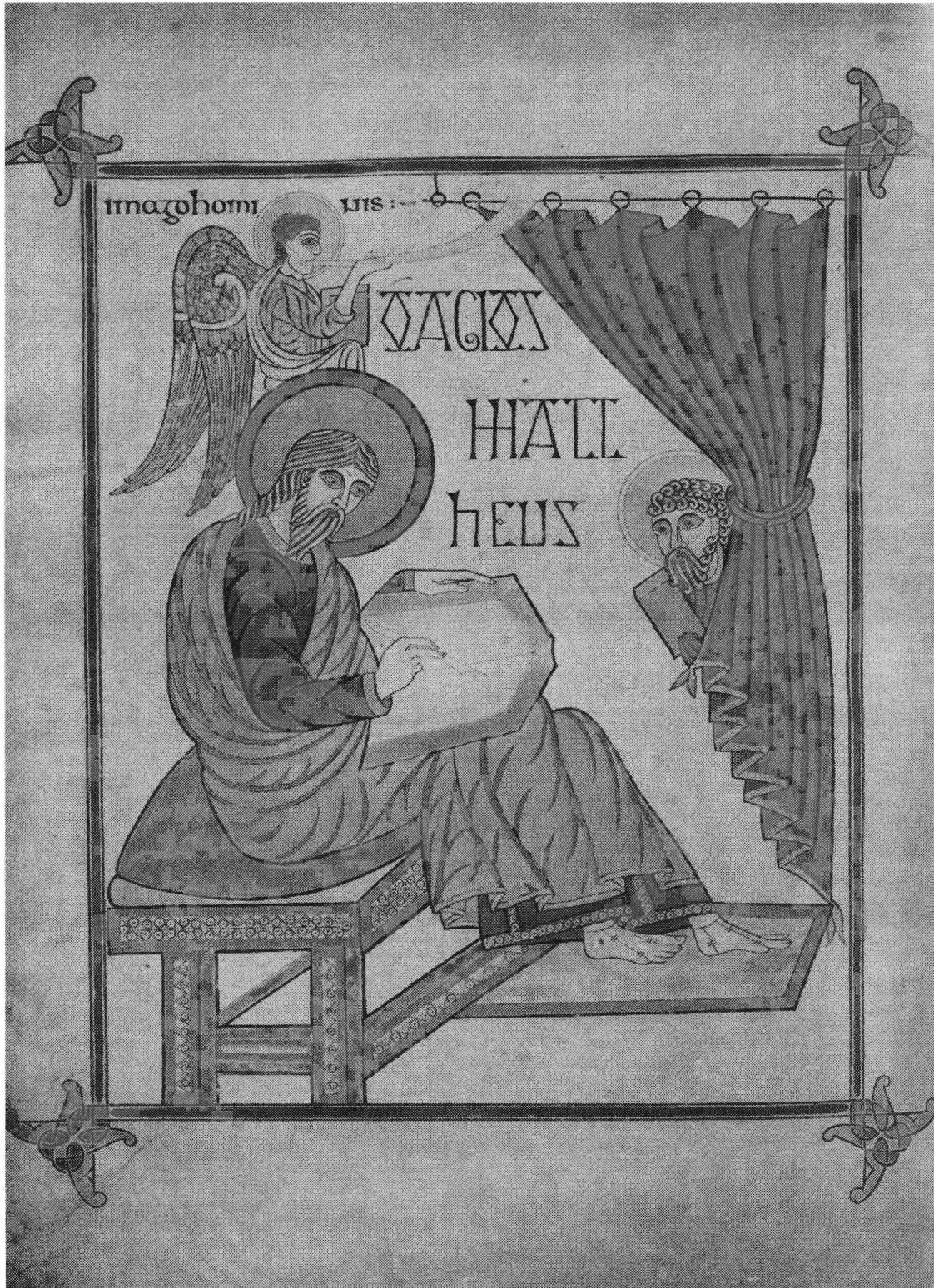
**Figure 5: Designing and illuminating one of the LG's four carpet pages would have functioned as a spiritual pilgrimage for the scribe, as following each of the interwoven lines was a meditative journey in itself.**





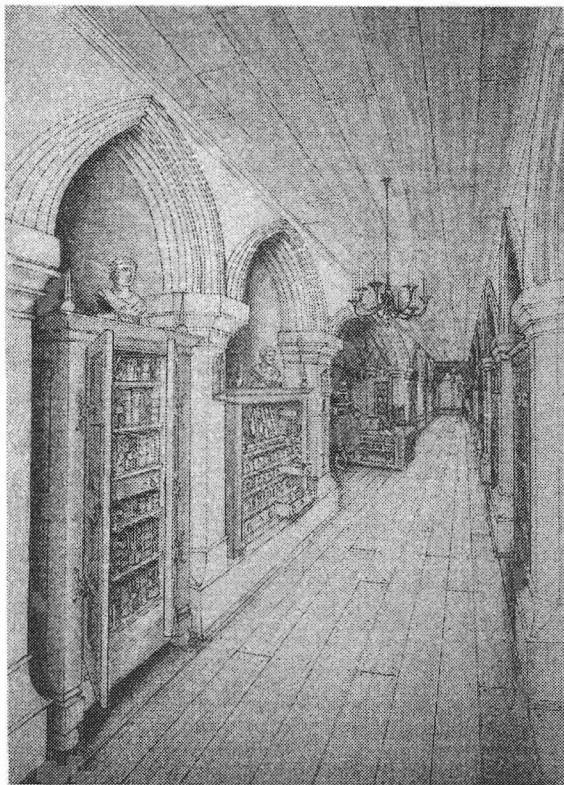


**Figure 7: Sir Robert Cotton re-bound many of his manuscripts into codices like this one, with matching covers featuring his coat of arms.**

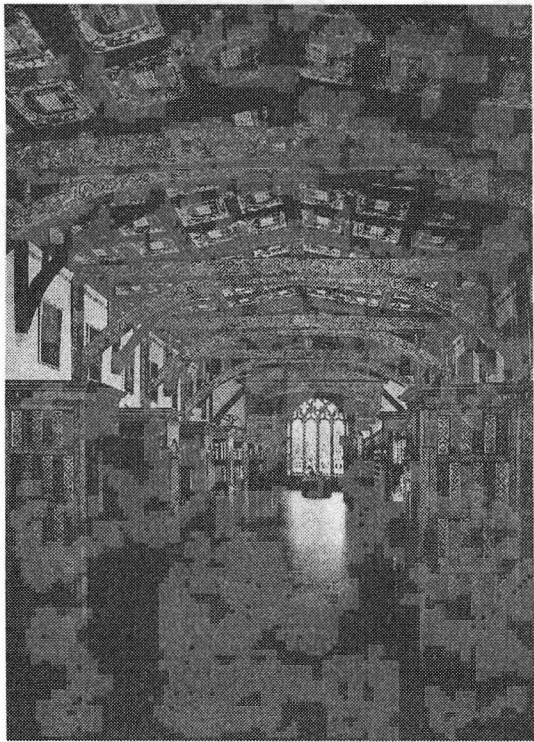


**Figure 8: Cottonian librarian Thomas Smith was not impressed with the lack of naturalism in the LG's illuminations.**



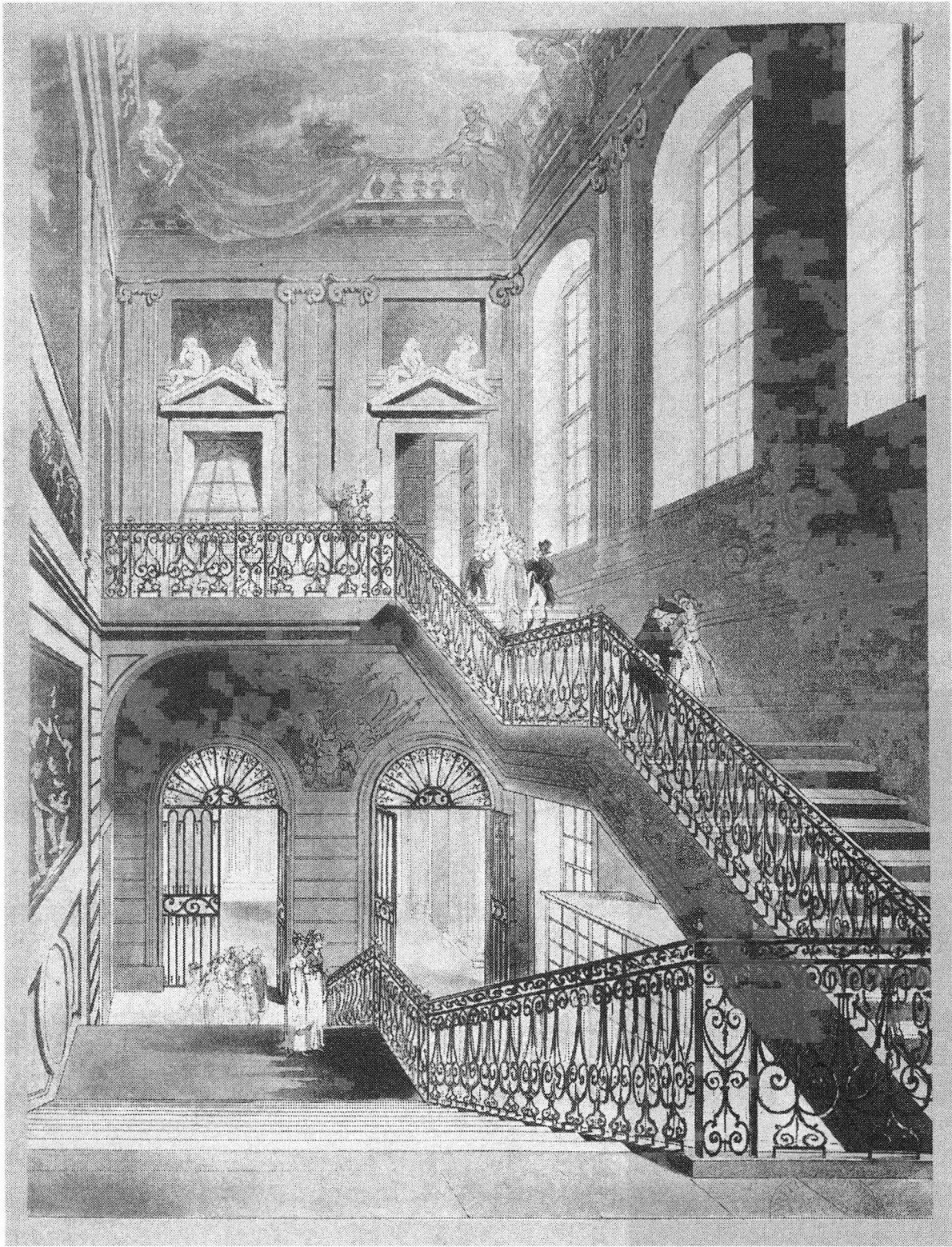


**Figure 9: An artist’s rendering of what the Cotton House library may have looked like.**



**Figure 10: Duke Humphrey’s library in Oxford’s Bodleian Library features presses arranged perpendicular to the library walls, in contrast to those in Cotton’s library (see Fig. 9).**





**Figure 11: The main staircase in Montagu House reminds us that the building was once a private residence, never designed to house a museum.**

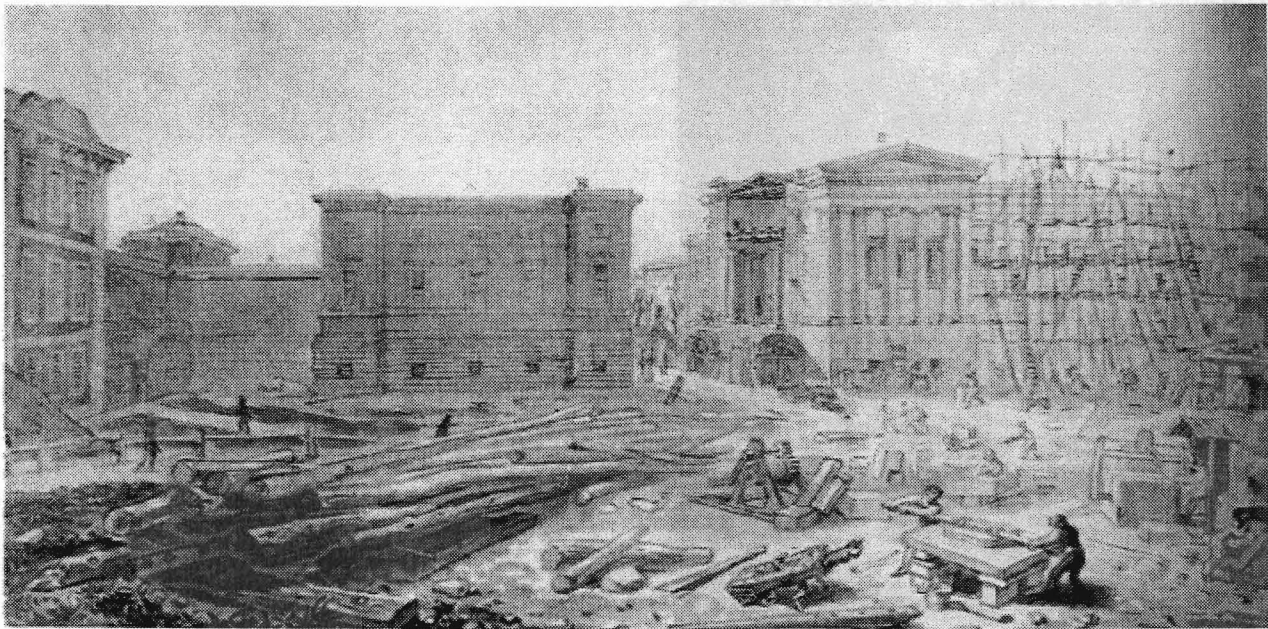


Figure 12: Robert Smirke’s Neoclassical museum rose, wing by wing, through the 1830s.

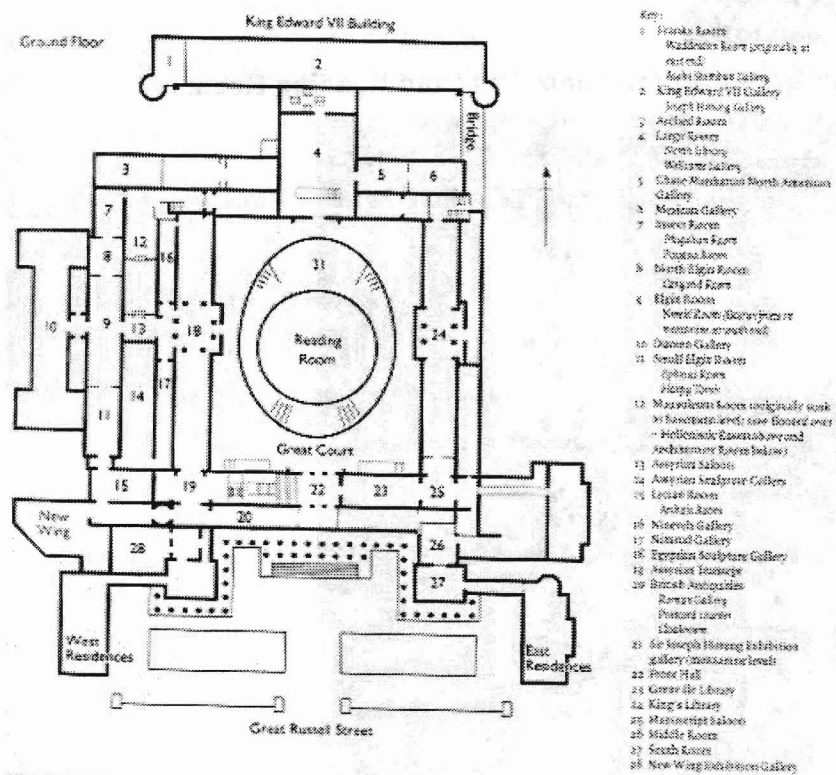
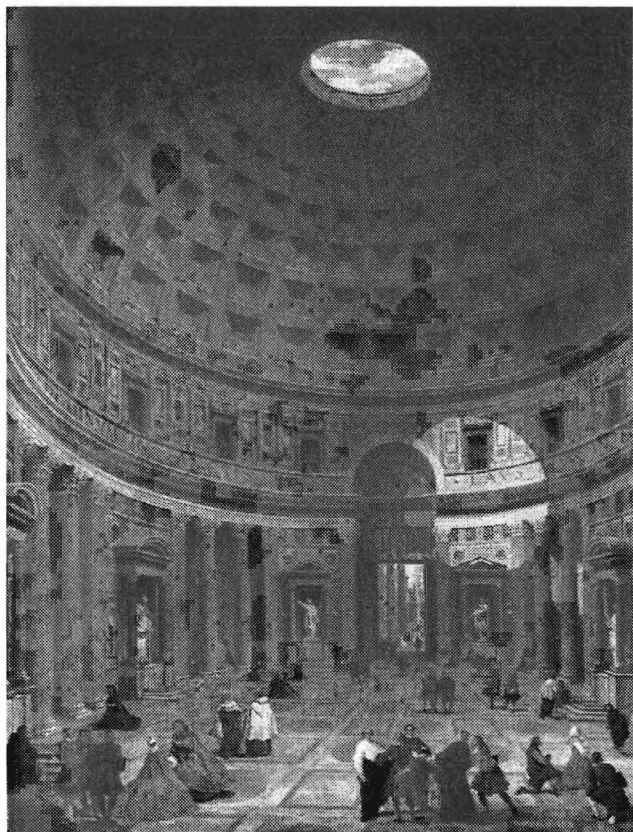
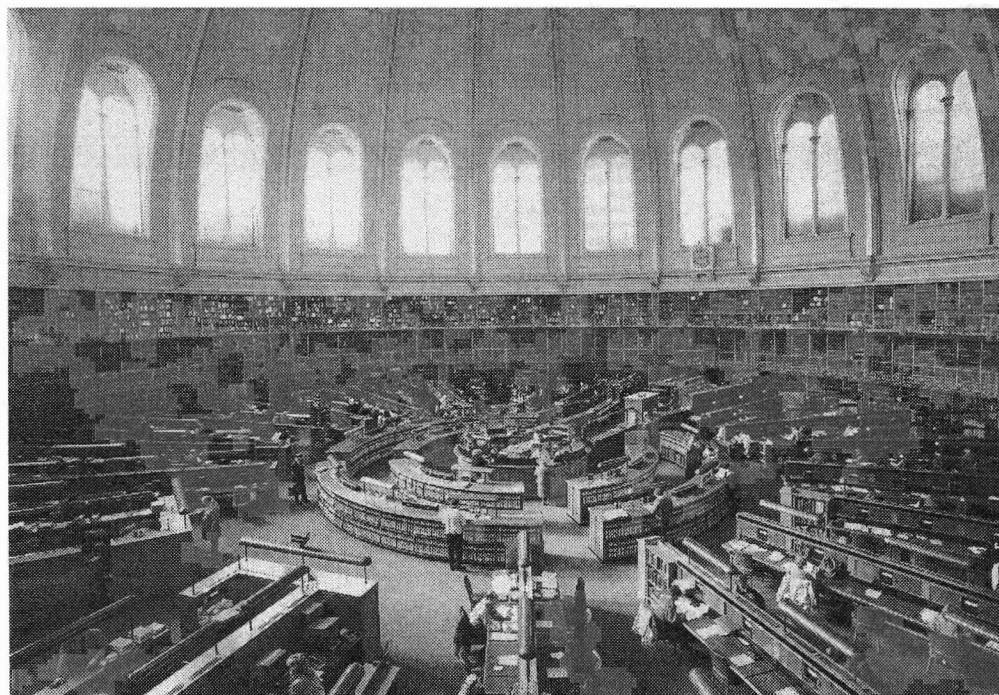


Figure 13: The British Museum’s quadrilateral floor plan perfectly accommodated Panizzi’s central Reading Room. The symmetrical shape of the museum contrasts to the free style of the British Library (see Fig. 22).

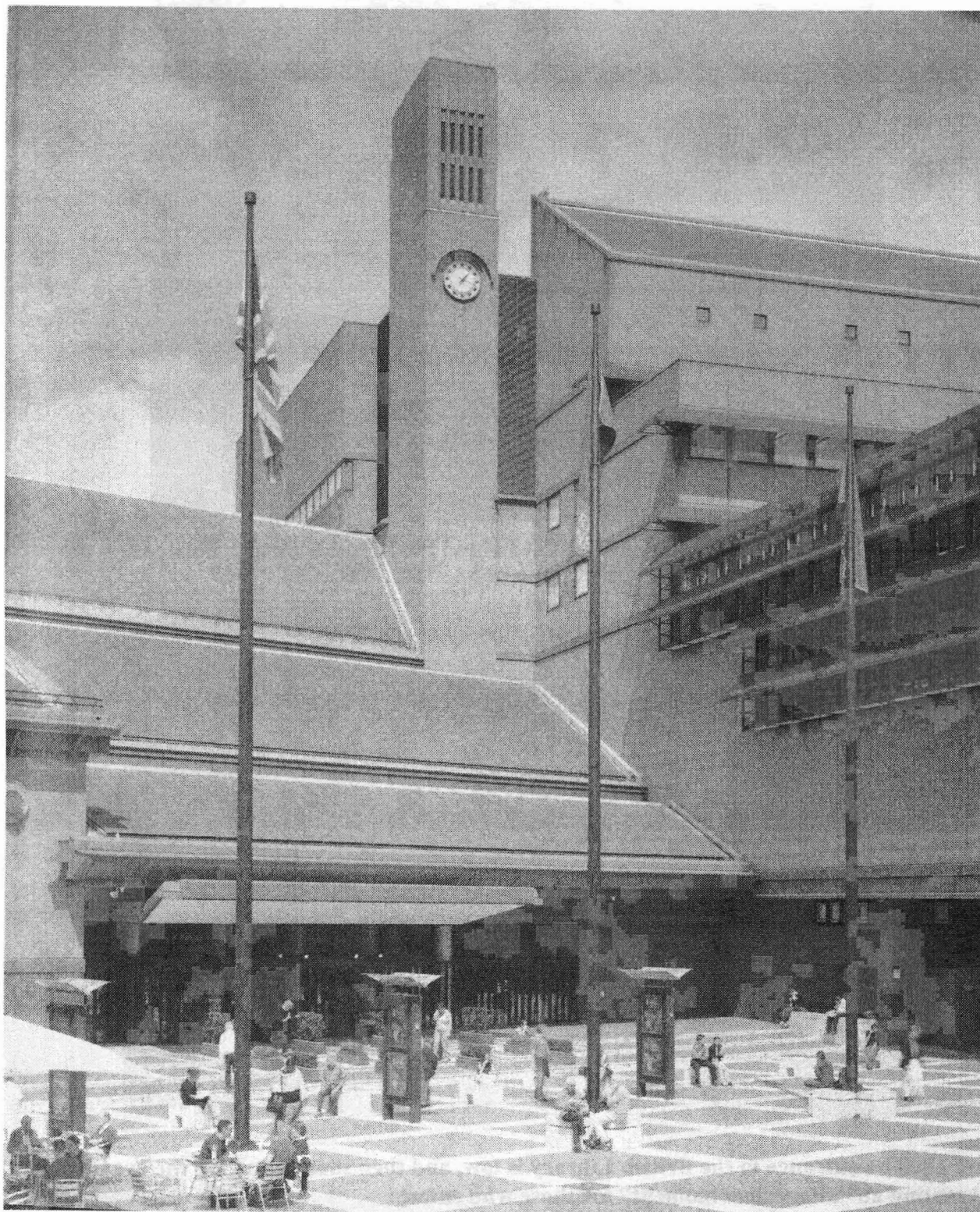




**Figure 14: The shape of Rome's Pantheon inspired Panizzi's round Reading Room.**

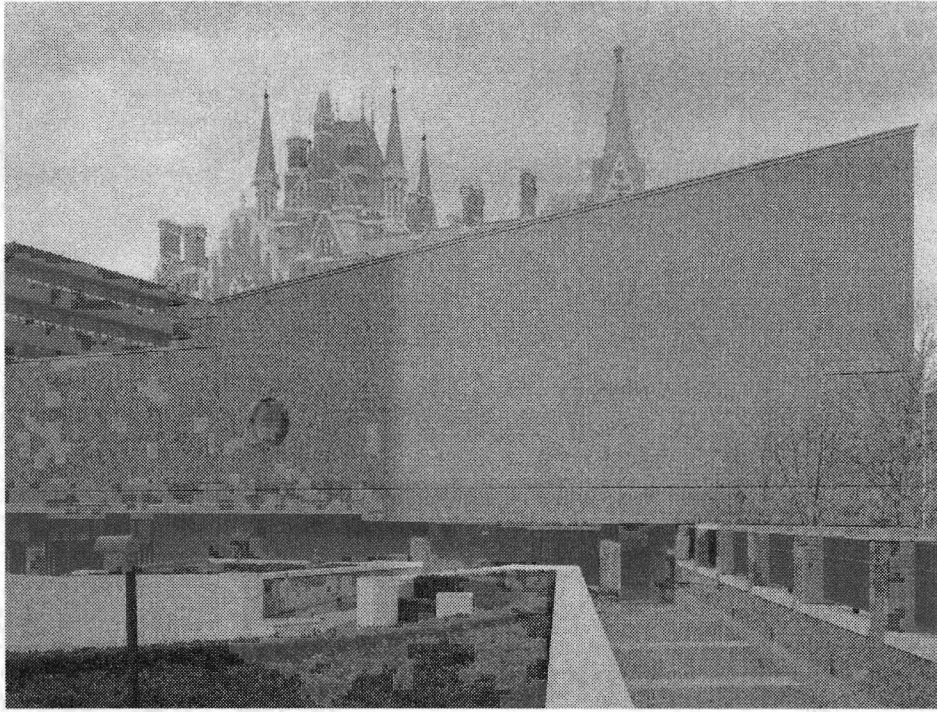


**Figure 15: The round Reading Room, just two feet smaller than the Pantheon in diameter, opened to the public in 1857.**

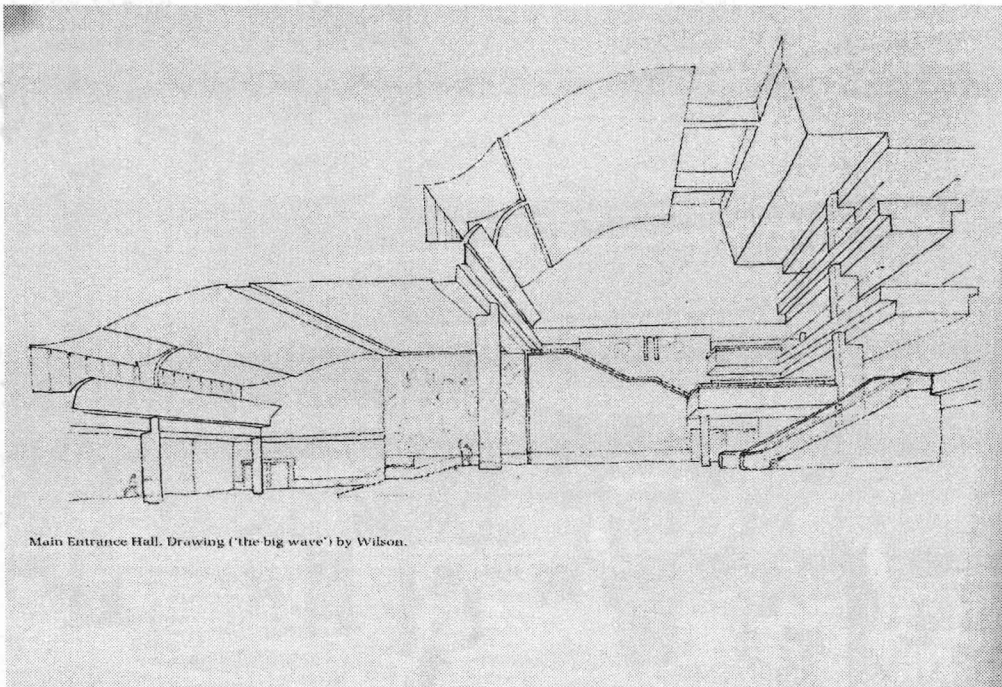


**Figure 16: Exterior view of the entrance to the British Library.**

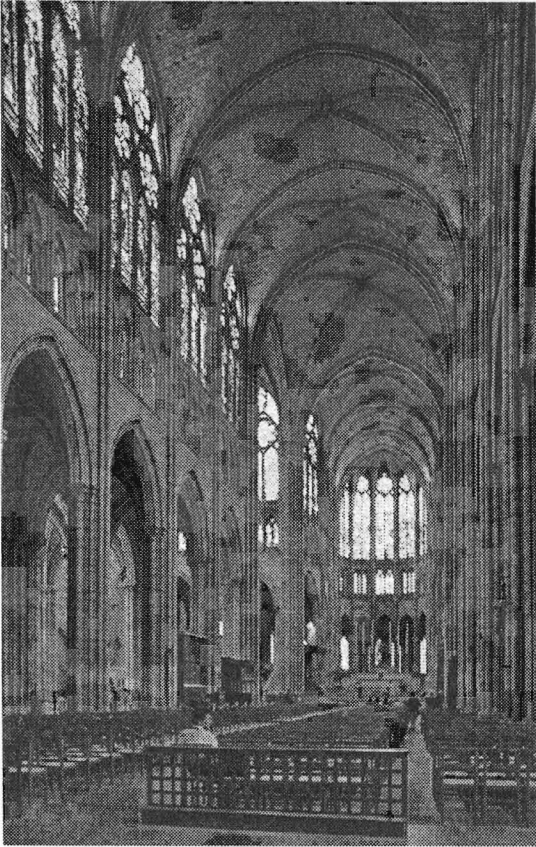




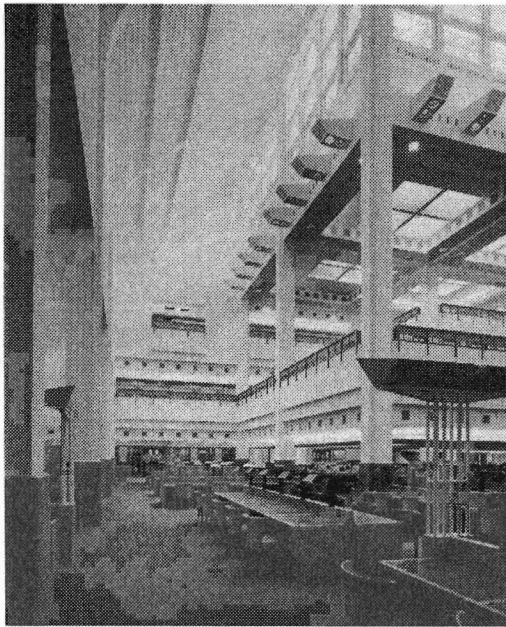
**Figure 17: The St. Pancras rail station is visible behind the British Library, illustrating the contrast in their styles.**



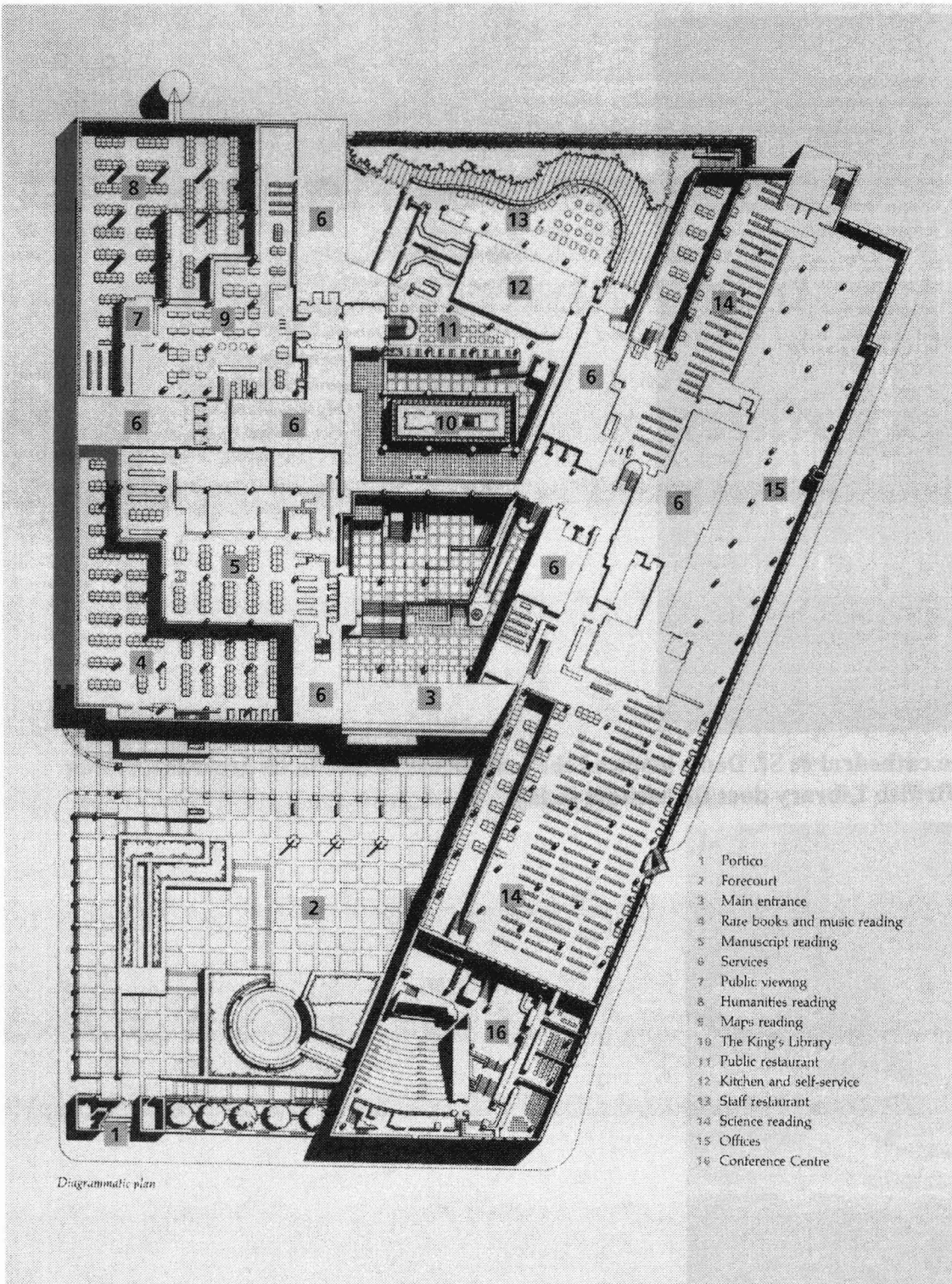
**Figure 18: The entrance to the British Library is low, and then soars, drawing the eye upwards and creating an “anagogical moment” for those who enter.**



**Figure 19: The cathedral at St. Denis inspired the same sense of awe in its architect, Abbot Suger, as the British Library does for visitors today.**

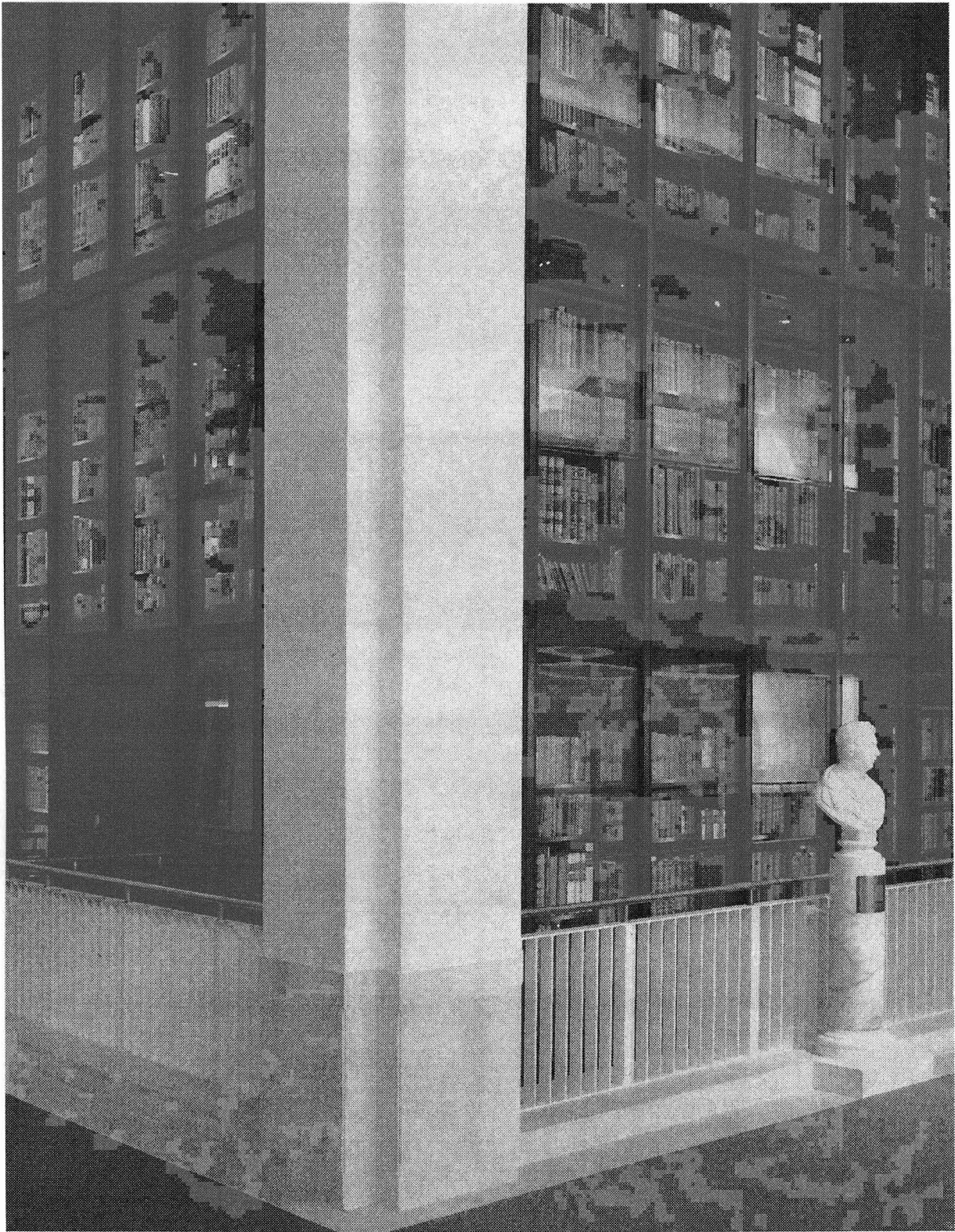


**Figure 20: The varied ceiling heights and sunlit space of the British Library's Humanities Reading Room re-create the feeling, if not the look, of a Gothic cathedral.**



**Figure 21: The King's Library, number 10 on this diagram, is at the heart of the British Library.**





**Figure 22: A bust of King George III looks down the British Library’s main staircase, guarding the King’s Library entombed behind him.**

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