



KNOTWORK

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The term 'knotwork' is one that is widely used to describe that form of decoration that resembles plaiting. It can be intricate or simple, and is frequently described as being 'Celtic'. While it is frequently found on items that were produced by those of Celtic origin during the medieval period, it does not arise only in that context.

There is some evidence that indicates that the originals of knotwork go back beyond the Celts, with some argument that it actually originated from the key patterns found in ancient Greece and Rome. The designs can be very simple and basic, or incredibly complicated and ornate, but the design of interlaced strands remains constant.

The most well known examples of knotwork, however, are those shown on Pictish stones and the elaborate Gospels worked by the monks on the island of [Lindisfarne](#) and other monasteries and abbeys across Britain from about the 6th to 9th Century. In the case of the Lindisfarne Gospels it appears that the artist was a monk called Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne between 698 and 721.

The Book of Kells is a fine example of this work, which was created around 800 AD and is housed in the Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland and available [online](#).

There are many websites that provide wonderful insights as to the work that created using these intricate patterns, frequently also incorporating the 'animorphs', the wonderful intertwined beasties, that are often more identified with Viking decoration but that are also prevalent in Celtic work. A quick search in 'Google' will turn up many pages of work, both in terms of the original documents and modern depictions.

Given that the bulk of these works were created prior to the time of the Viking invasions of Britain from about 800 AD, and it is highly likely that many more outstanding works have been destroyed between then and the Norman invasion in 1066, the similarity in the works is perhaps the foundation of another work far greater than my meagre efforts here to describe knotwork as a form of decoration.

This article is designed only to provide some background information, and to encourage readers to conduct further research of their own. It does not in any way strive to be a definitive work on its own.

How was knotwork used? Some of the earliest forms that have survived appear to be on Pictish stones, although some of these are much worn and have been come quite indistinct. The famous Celtic Crosses show a good amount of this decoration and tend to be later in time than the Pictish examples. A collection of photographs of these stones can be found [here](#).

The gospels are probably the best surviving sources of wonderful and vibrant examples of the artform, and are generally painstakingly worked on vellum using tempura paints.

In what other ways was this decorative form used? This is a difficult question to answer because not a lot of examples of things that it may have been used on such as building interior walls, clothing, armour and weaponry have survived through time to enable them to be assessed today. Sadly cloth and leather are not as permanent as works of stone, or the carefully preserved, highly valuable books that were given the physical and ideological protection by the Christian Church.

Whether it is safe to assume that if it was used on permanent items, it was also used on things that were less permanent is a debate that will go on until such time as more extant examples are found.

I believe that at least until there is any incontrovertible evidence that these designs were not used on all surfaces for decoration, then it is relatively safe to assume that they were. While the beautifully illustrated gospels would not have been available to the general public in the time before mass produced printed books were available, it is likely that the designs used by the monks were at least adaptations of pre-existing designs that they had seen in use around them.

It also appears that the design concept continued right throughout the medieval and renaissance period in one form or another. There are late examples of it found in Edinburgh Castle where it is painted on strips of the ceiling, and also in other Tudor and Elizabethan buildings. While not as elaborate as found in the Gospels mentioned above, it is there in a 'cameo' performance often interposed with floral designs.

Simple knotwork examples are also occasionally found incorporated into the blackwork embroidery designs of Elizabethan and Tudor clothing. A good reference for looking at clothing of this period, both with and without knotwork designs, is www.tudorhistory.org in particular the gallery of 'Who's Who' portraits.



Artwork courtesy of

http://www.webomator.com/bws/data/freart/celtic/celtic_interlace.html