

Decorating Letters



Many of the books that were made during early medieval Ireland are known as illuminated manuscripts. An **illuminated manuscript** is one that has been beautifully decorated. These books were decorated in many ways. One way was to have the first letter on the page much larger than the others, and decorated with patterns, dots and colours. On other pages, borders with patterns were drawn around the page. Sometimes, whole pages were used for drawings of patterns, or illustrations of saints.

Dots and Colour

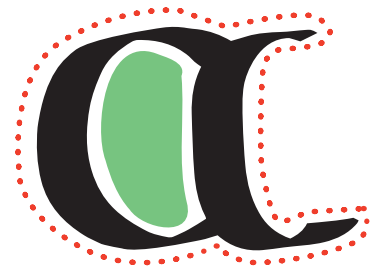
One of the easiest ways to decorate the larger first letter is by using dots and colour. Scribes most often used the colour red to create dots.

To decorate your letter with dots, place a row of dots around the outside of the letter. If you like, you can do two rows of dots around the letter.



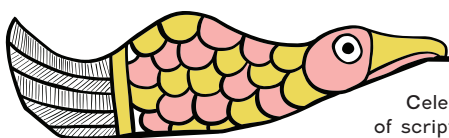
Colour was added to letters by using a technique called '**dropped colour**'. To do this, you colour the inside of the letter but leave a slight gap between the colour and the letter. This can be done on any letter that has an enclosed space, such as o or a.

You can use any colour that you like to create the dots and colour on each of the letters. Red was most often used for dots, and red, green, yellow and sometimes blue, was used for the colour.



Here are all the letters of the alphabet written in the insular majuscule style.
You can decorate these letters using dots and colour.

a b c d e
f g h i j k
l m n o p
q r s t u
v w x y z



Celebrate the magic of manuscripts by learning the ancient skills of script and decoration that once brought sacred texts to life. These worksheets are adapted from *The Irish art of calligraphy* by Timothy O'Neill published by the Royal Irish Academy. Produced for the exhibition by the National Museum of Ireland: 'Words on the Wave: Ireland and St Gallen in Early Medieval Europe'. This is a project of:

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