

Historical Artifact

Illumination from the *Mylar Boke of Hours*.

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Background of the *Mylar Boke of Hours*

The only existing reference to the *Mylar Boke of Hours* is from the fragmentary diary of Bishop Gilebert MacLyre. In 1403, Gilebert visited Iona Abbey¹ in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland. In his diary, Gilebert describes two locally produced manuscripts as being “made from most unusual parchment, extremely thin and strong, but completely without color so that one can see right through to the pages below unless linen cloth be laid between the pages.”² The books had been created by Brother Paulin, a brilliant scribe who died, along with many others in the Abbey, of the plague in 1350. The *Boke of Mylar* was the second and far more elaborate of the two books³.

Gilebert was fascinated by these books and the vivid colors of the illuminations and described much of the books in detail. He questioned Hector, abbot of Iona, about their creation. Hector told him that the parchment was made from Mylar sheep, which were native to the neighboring Isle of Mull⁴. It had been discovered that the skins of these sheep was waterproof, though the sheep were not otherwise used.⁵ Paulin tried using this parchment as he hoped its waterproof quality would increase the life of books in the damp coastal climate. As normal inks and paints tended to rub right off this parchment Paulin, who must have been a brilliant practical chemist, developed specially made inks and paints. The plague that killed Paulin wiped out all within the scriptorium and this knowledge died with them. No written record was found of the process. Apparently it was decided at that time that these books were too expensive⁶ and difficult to continue making, so no attempt was made to rediscover the formulas for the special materials.

¹ Iona Abbey was built in AD 563 by St Columba, one of the earliest footholds of Christianity in Scotland. A thriving community for many years, it could not escape the Reformation in 1560 and was left derelict until it was restored in the 20th century. [Iona CC]

² [Cammer]

³ Gilebert's notes only briefly described the first manuscript (which he did not name) as being small “the pages not much larger than the palm of my hand”. He was apparently much more impressed with the *Mylar Boke of Hours* as he described it in much more detail. [MacLyre]

⁴ Mull, the name by which the island is now known, originally bore the Norse name “Myl” [MacLean]. “The grammar of the combination, with its genitive in r, is, however, still more decisive. It was by exact parity of nomenclature that the Norsemen called the Calf of Mull (Myl) the Mylar-Kálf.” [Neilson]. This grammatical construct appears to have influenced the naming of the *Mylar Boke of Hours*.

⁵ The Aberdeen Bestiary specifically mentions this variety of sheep “Est in insula Myla species ovium unica minime utilis hominibus quia lana crassa habent inepta nendo et caro inedibilis ob sapore foedissimo.” (translates as: There is in the island of Mull a unique species of sheep of no use to men because their coarse wool is unsuited to spinning and their meat is inedible because of its extremely foul taste.) [Aberdeen]. This native Mull sheep no longer exists; it is quite likely that it was wiped out to prevent them from breeding with (and thus contaminating) the more profitable breeds.

⁶ Because of the transparency of the parchment, only one side the page was used so that twice as many sheets of parchment were required. [MacLyre]

Discovery of the Artifact

During recent renovations to Duart Castle in Craignure on Mull, a previously unknown entranceway was uncovered which led to a storage room beneath the castle. It is thought that items within were stored in these rooms and the entrance hidden when the Clan MacLean was forced to abandon the castle after the Jacobite rebellion in 1745. One of the items found was an oak box containing illuminated pages apparently torn or cut out of several different manuscripts⁷. The majority of the illuminations have been reliably dated to the 13th and 14th centuries.

The most extraordinary and puzzling find, however, was a large angel playing a harp on what appeared at first glance to be clear plastic, a material which was unknown until the 20th century. One of the discoverers, B.L. Shyte, commented, "It looks just like one of those decorations my wife sticks on the window at Christmas time"⁸. As there was no obvious explanation of how such a modern material could have been included in the box, researchers under Dr. F. Raud of the University of Glasgow took a second look at it. Specialized equipment was used to perform non-destructive tests on the artifact to determine the materials used. From these tests, it was determined that the plastic-like material was actually of animal origin which had been painted with medieval paint pigments mixed with some undetermined plant extract⁹. This discovery has caused a flurry of excitement in several departments at the University.

Iain MacClane, a student at the University of Glasgow studying the history of Mull and Iona, heard of the find and, remembering the odd entry Gilebert's diary, brought it to the attention of Dr. Raud. Dr. Raud has concluded that based on Gilebert's description¹⁰ and the results of the materials analysis as well as the find's close proximity to Iona, it seems extremely likely that this illumination is from the *Mylar Boke of Hours*.

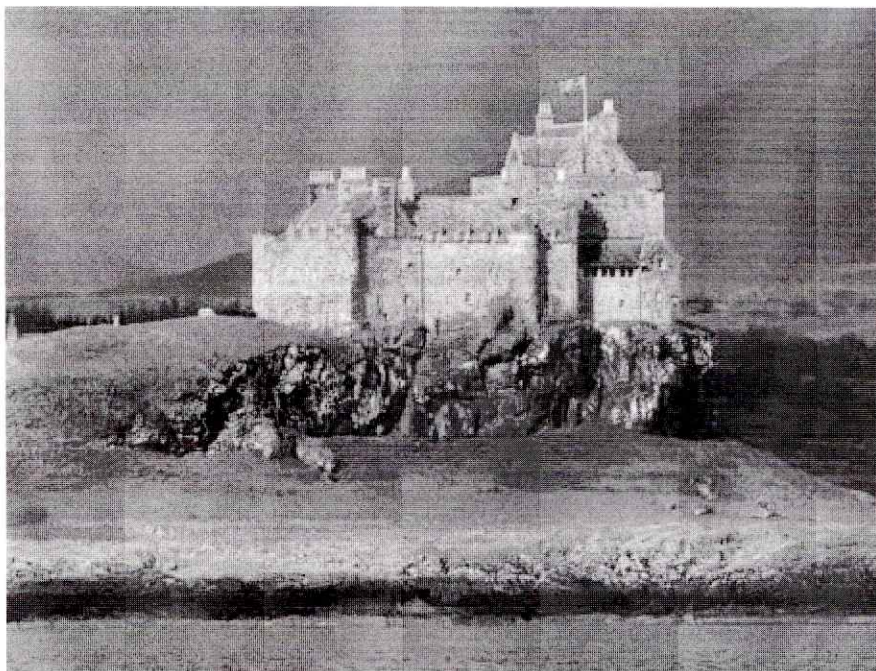
⁷ Many medieval manuscripts were damaged or destroyed in the later centuries by people who cut them up for their 'pretty pictures'.

⁸ [Duart News]

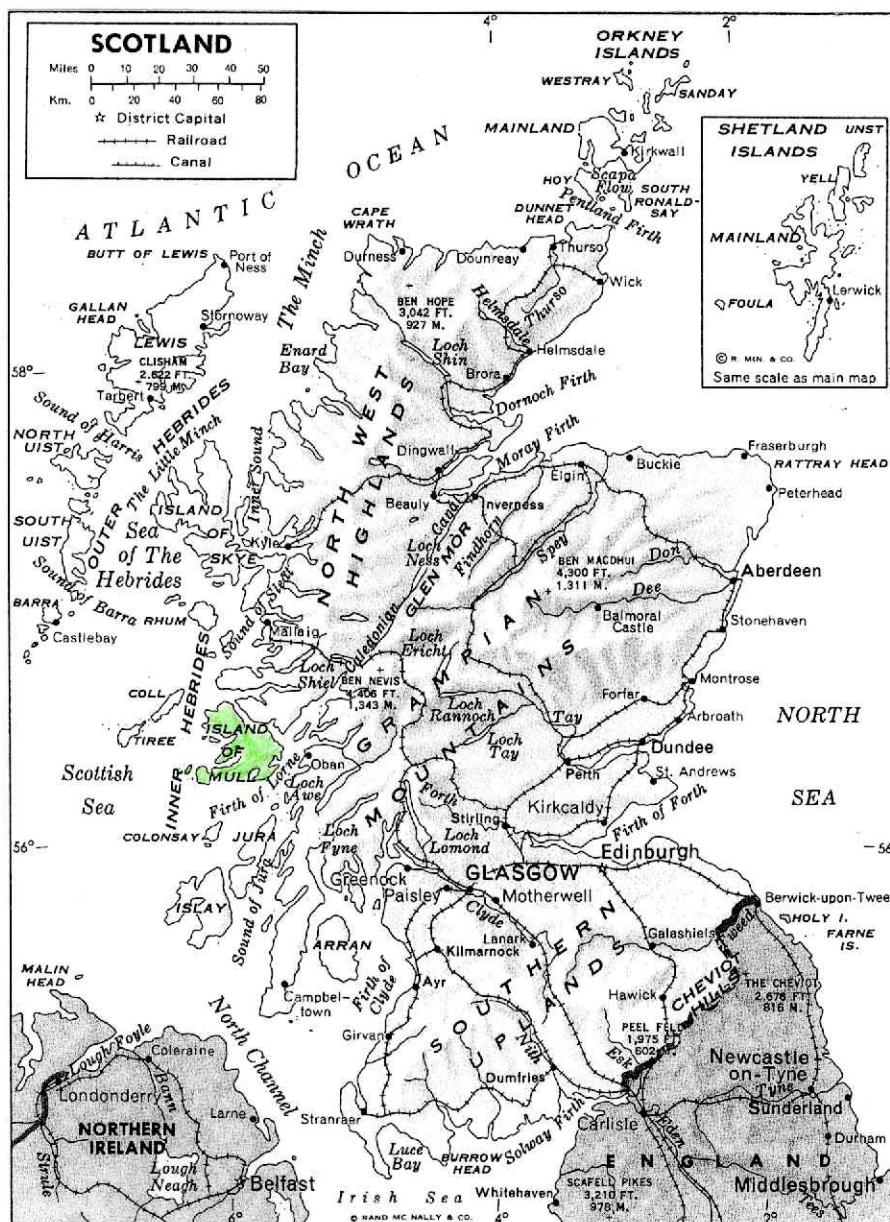
⁹ "In order to determine what kinds organic materials are present we employed Xray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF) and Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR). These indicated the presence of several pigments commonly used in paintings during the 14th century, an animal protein (most likely a size medium) and an unknown chemical that may be a plant derivative. It is possible that this unknown element was what allowed the paint to partially dissolve into the parchment making it more of a transparent stain than an opaque paint." [Raud]

¹⁰ "The pictures are large and have the transparency such as one finds in painted windows. No brush strokes can be seen; indeed it is as if the paint has become one with the parchment." [MacLyre]





Duart Castle
[Duart News]



Map of Scotland
[Merit Students Encyclopedia]

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