

# Intriguing Illumination: Cracking the Gospel Code

## Revealing the secrets of the Anglo-Saxon York Gospels.

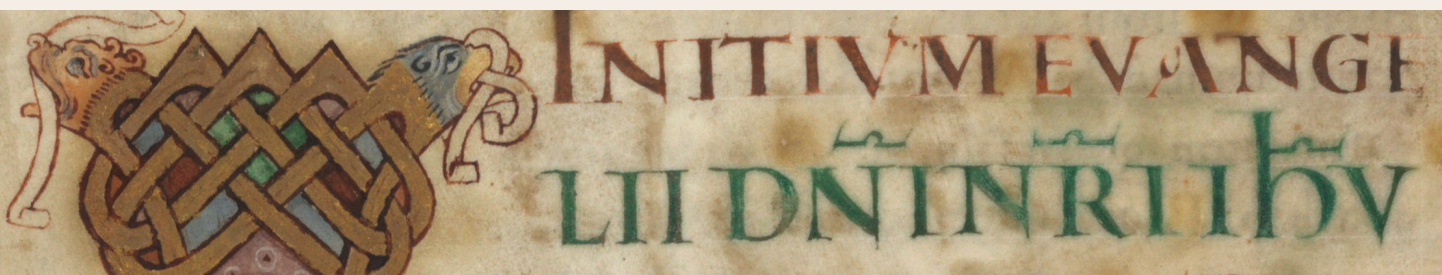
### TEACHERS GUIDE

This resource can be adapted for use with different key stages and the grid below is just a guideline for your planning.

Curriculum Content		
History	R.E.	Art & Design
<p><b>Key Stage 1:</b> Significant historical events, people and places in their own locality.</p> <p><b>Key Stage 2:</b> The Viking and Anglo-Saxon struggle for the Kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor; Further Viking invasions; Anglo-Saxon laws and justice; A local history study; A depth study linked to one of the British areas of study listed above.</p>	<p><b>Key Stage 1:</b> What is the good news that Jesus brings?</p> <p><b>Key Stage 2:</b> What difference does the Resurrection make for Christians? Describe ways in which people use texts/sources of authority to make sense of beliefs and concepts.</p> <p><b>Key Stage 3:</b> What is so radical about Jesus? Expressing the spiritual through the arts.</p>	<p><b>Key Stage 1:</b> Use a range of materials creatively to design and make products; the work of a range of artists, craft makers and designers, describing the differences and similarities between different practices and disciplines, and making links to their own work.</p> <p><b>Key Stage 2:</b> to improve their mastery of art and design techniques; about great artists, architects and designers in history.</p>

### Aims

1. Provide important context about Anglo-Scandinavian York in the early eleventh century.
2. Provide an introduction to key figures: King Ethelred, King Canute, Wulfstan, Emma.
3. Provide an introduction to the York Gospels and their significance (historical, religious, artistic).



## Introduction to key characters

### Wulfstan

Wulfstan was a powerful and influential Anglo-Saxon bishop and writer, serving as Archbishop of York and previously serving as Bishop of London and Worcester. He lived and worked in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, dying in 1023. He was known for his eloquent sermons and legal texts and played a key role in shaping both the religious and the political landscape of early 11th-century England. His works often addressed moral reform and the challenges facing the kingdom during times of crisis.

### King Ethelred

King Ethelred II, "Ethelred the Unready," ruled England during a period of Viking invasions in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Despite a long reign, his leadership was marred by military setbacks and political instability. He relied heavily on advisors and did not always make the best political decisions. He died from illness in 1016. He was succeeded by his son, Edmund Ironside, who reigned only for a short time before dying. Edmund was then succeeded by Canute.

### King Canute

King Canute was a Danish prince who became ruler of England in 1016, later also ruling Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden, forming what is sometimes called the North Sea Empire. In England, Canute is remembered for his efforts to blend Anglo-Saxon and Danish cultures and for bringing a period of relative stability after decades of conflict. Wulfstan also served as advisor to Canute.

### Queen Emma

Queen Emma of Normandy was a central figure in English politics across multiple reigns (d. 1058). She was married first to Ethelred and later to Canute, and she was mother to King Edward the Confessor. Emma was particularly politically astute, and very influential. She later supported her sons claims to the throne. She commissioned a Latin book telling her story, ensuring she would be remembered by history.





## Introduction to story

Ethelred II, often known as “Ethelred the Unready”, was King of England from 978 to 1016. Ethelred was a devout Christian and was married to Queen Emma. During his reign, there were frequent Viking invasions which were a serious threat to England and Christianity. Because Ethelred didn’t know exactly how to rule England and keep the Vikings out, he had advisors to help him. One of these advisors was Wulfstan, who served as Archbishop of York from around 1002 until his death in 1023. In his writings, Wulfstan reinforced Christian morals, social order, and the king’s authority. He emphasized justice, the protection of the Church, and the importance of Christian behaviour. However, despite Wulfstan’s help, King Ethelred couldn’t stay in power, and in 1016, Canute, a Danish (Viking) prince successfully invaded England and claimed the English throne. Ethelred died from illness around the same time of Canute’s invasions. He was succeeded by his son, Edmund Ironside, who reigned only for a short time before dying. Edmund was then succeeded by Canute. Once Canute became king, he immediately married Queen Emma, who ended up helping him as an advisor to integrate into English society and the English Church.

Canute, even though he was a Viking by birth, was a baptised Christian, and really wanted his people to know that he was a legitimate and pious ruler. Wulfstan continued to write law codes under Canute’s rule, helping to stabilize the kingdom and integrate Danish and English populations under a shared Christian identity.

Wulfstan’s main concern throughout his life and career was the preservation and expansion of Christianity in England. He feared the moral and religious decline that could result from war, social disorder, and the influence of pagan Viking invaders. His writings often called for repentance, reform, and adherence to Christian teachings, urging both rulers and ordinary people to live righteously.

One of the most remarkable objects associated with Wulfstan is the York Gospels, a beautifully illuminated manuscript written in Latin and produced in Canterbury, likely around the early 11th century. It is believed that King Canute and his Queen, Emma of Normandy, commissioned this manuscript as a gift for Wulfstan. This may have been a symbol of their support for the English Church and for Wulfstan’s continuing leadership within it.

Wulfstan used the York Gospels throughout the final years of his life. Uniquely, he added four texts to the back of the manuscript in Old English: three of his own homilies (sermons), and a version of Canute’s “Letter to the English”, which he had likely helped draft or edit. Canute sent this letter to England when he was away in Denmark, looking after his people there. This letter encouraged peace and Christian unity under Canute’s rule, reinforcing the king’s legitimacy, his laws, and his commitment to Christian governance.

After Wulfstan’s death in 1023, the York Gospels remained an important part of the religious life of the Church in York. For centuries, it has been used to record important church registers and swear in new members of the clergy, a tradition which continues to this day.



## Significance and description of York Gospels

The York Gospels are a beautiful illuminated Anglo-Saxon manuscript kept in the undercroft of York Minster. The manuscript was probably made in Canterbury in the late tenth century (from manuscript and material evidence), commissioned by Canute and Emma as a gift for their advisor and archbishop, Wulfstan. It was usual in Anglo-Saxon times to use or gift a gospel book rather than an entire Bible. That being said – it was not usual to have such a beautiful manuscript – this was a unique and special gift. Written in Latin, they are a rare surviving example of a pre-Conquest Gospel book, and are handwritten in beautiful calligraphy onto parchment. They have some beautiful illuminations as well as evangelist portraits. There were originally four – one for each Gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), but John has been cut out of the manuscript (stolen) at a later date. Apart from the four Gospels, the manuscript also has canon tables (which compare content in the Gospels) and, Wulfstan added some works at the back of the manuscript: three homilies (one on Christianity, one on heathendom, and one titled 'The Sermon of the Wolf' – his most comprehensive sermon which encapsulated his main ideas). The manuscript also contains a copy of Canute's 'Letter to the English' that Wulfstan had added. This is a political document Canute sent to England while he was away in Denmark, asserting his authority, to which Wulfstan added an additional section at the end. The York Gospels are sometimes compared to the Lindisfarne Gospels, an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon gospel book which, although much earlier, also has beautiful illuminations, canon tables, evangelist portraits (although stylistically different) and has survived well.

## Key vocabulary related to the design of the York Gospels

- **Border:** Design drawn around the writing space in a manuscript.
- **Evangelist portrait:** A representation of one of the four authors of the Gospel account: Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John. The four Gospel writers are typically depicted as scribes.
- **Gold leaf:** Ultra-thin layer of pure gold used to create gold areas on manuscript page.
- **Halo:** A disk of light surrounding a person in a work of art.
- **Illuminated manuscript:** A manuscript decorated with gold, silver or precious metals.
- **Illumination:** Coloured artwork with gold accents in a manuscript.
- **Illuminator:** The person who creates the drawings (or illuminations) in a manuscript.
- **Illusionism:** The technique of making art or drawings look realistic.
- **Lectern:** A reading stand or desk.
- **Manuscript:** Handwritten book.
- **Parchment:** Writing surface made by treating and preparing animal hide.
- **Portrait page:** A decorative page containing the portrait of someone.
- **Scribe:** The person who copies a text into a manuscript.
- **Title piece:** A decorative page containing the title of a work.
- **Witan:** the royal council in Anglo-Saxon England.







## Questions to help pupils engage with the above

1. Who was Ethelred, and what challenges did he face during his reign?
2. What role did Wulfstan play in Ethelred's government?
3. Who were the Vikings, and why were they a threat to England?
4. How did Canute become King of England?
5. Why was it important to Wulfstan that England remained Christian?
6. What are the York Gospels, and why are they important?
7. Why do you think Canute and Queen Emma gave the York Gospels to Wulfstan?
8. Why is it significant that Wulfstan added his own writings to the York Gospels?
9. How do the York Gospels help historians learn about religion and politics in Anglo-Saxon England?
10. Do you think it was important for kings like Canute to show they were Christian? Why or why not?
11. Why do you think Wulfstan went on to serve Canute after Ethelred's death?
12. What might have happened to Christianity in England if the Viking rulers had remained pagan?
13. Should religious texts like the York Gospels be used in ceremonies today? Why or why not?

## Activities

1. **Timeline activity:** place key events in chronological order. Give pupils cards with events (for example, Ethelred becomes king, Viking raids increase, Wulfstan becomes Archbishop, Canute becomes king, York Gospels made, Wulfstan dies) and ask them to order them in the right order. Add broader events for context within curriculum (e.g. Battle of Hastings or previous kings).
2. **Role-play a Witan meeting.** Understand the pressures on kings and the role of advisors like Wulfstan. Set up a mock Witan (royal council). Assign roles to your pupils: Ethelred, Wulfstan, nobles, bishops, warriors. Discuss how to respond to Viking invasions. Let students debate options: pay Danegeld (money to the Vikings), fight them, make peace, etc. Wulfstan must argue for protecting Christianity and writing new laws.
3. **Manuscript exploration:** explore the York Gospels from an artistic perspective. Ask pupils to look for clues – what artistic features can they find? Illuminations, decorative initials, gilding? Resource needed: images of Gospels, key to Anglo-Saxon artistic features. Extension: ask them to design their own illuminated initial for the first letter of their name.
4. **Critical thinking:** who was Wulfstan working for? Encourage critical thinking using evidence. Give pupils different pieces of information: Wulfstan served both Ethelred and Canute, both were Christians, Viking raids threatened Christianity. Ask students if Wulfstan was loyal to the kings or to the Church? Did he help the invaders or resist them? Pupils should write or present their theory using evidence.
5. **Creative writing:** diary entry from the perspective of a scribe working on the York Gospels or from someone witnessing the Viking invasions. Imagine life in early eleventh-century England, and thinking about pride in the Gospel book, religious devotion, fear of attack, etc.
6. **Creative writing:** if you were Wulfstan, and you were writing a sermon or law code to go in the back of the York Gospels, what would you include? What instructions would you give your people?

## Resources

If you'd like to look at the other artefacts of York Minster, you can see some of our undercroft holdings here: <https://yorkminster.org/digital-undercroft/>

## Outcomes

Pupils should be familiar with main characters, the idea of Anglo-Scandinavian York, and the York Gospels.