

## Early copy of the Gospel of Mark is a forgery

### US scholars, conservators and scientists collaborate to prove that a “14th-century manuscript” is a skilled fake

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Emily Sharpe

Not what it appears to be: the Archaic Mark

LONDON. A clever bit of detective work by US scholars and scientists has proven that one of the jewels of the University of Chicago’s manuscript collection is, in fact, a skilled late 19th- or early 20th-century forgery.

Although speculation as to the authenticity of the *Archaic Mark* codex has been rife for more than 60 years, prior to this definitive research many believed it was an early record (possibly as early as the 14th century) of the Gospel of Mark and the closest of any extant manuscript to the world’s oldest Greek Bible—the fourth-century *Codex Vaticanus*.

The earliest record of *Archaic Mark* dates to 1917 when it was listed among the possessions of recently deceased Athenian antiquities dealer and collector John Askitopoulos. In September of 1935, Askitopoulos’s nephew, Gregory Vlastos, contacted University of Chicago biblical scholar Edgar Goodspeed asking if the school wished to purchase the manuscript. The 44-page codex, measuring 11.5 x 8.5cm, was acquired by the university in 1937 for an undisclosed sum.

The ongoing debate as to the codex’s authenticity re-ignited in 2006 with its digitisation, giving international experts an opportunity to examine the work closely for the first time. Beginning in 2007, Margaret Mitchell, Alice Schreyer and Judith Dartt from the university collaborated with research microscopist Joseph Barabe from the Illinois-based lab McCrone Associates, and manuscript conservator Abigail Quandt from the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, to perform a cross-discipline, in-depth analysis of the codex.

Barabe conducted a material and elemental analysis on *Archaic Mark* which involved the use of a wide variety of techniques including x-ray diffraction, raman spectroscopy, polarised light, x-ray spectroscopy and scanning electron microscopy. He was particularly interested in determining whether the codex had undergone an earlier restoration which would account for the presence of various “modern” shades of blue including synthetic ultramarine blue—a material not available until the 1820s. He found no evidence of a prior restoration and most importantly determined that the white colour used contained the pigment lithopone which was not available until 1874, thereby setting an 1874 *terminus post quem* date for the codex. Carbon dating was used to determine that the canvas dates from the mid 16th century.

Quandt, who has worked on the *Archimedes Palimpsest*—a medieval manuscript that includes a group of modern Byzantine-style miniatures that were painted over sections

of the original text sometime in the late 1930s—and various pieces by the so-called Spanish Forger, confirmed some of Barabe’s findings during her reconstruction of the forger’s technique. She noticed several inconsistencies with authentic Byzantine manuscripts including that the forger appears to have painted the miniatures and then added the text—an unusual practice for the medieval scribes. She also noted the amateurish binding and obvious attempt to add age to the edges of the manuscript with the sloppy application of a brownish liquid to create a faux charring effect.

Mitchell, a biblical scholar, undertook the task of analysing the text and found it to include the same errors contained in an edition of the Greek New Testament published by Philipp Buttmann in 1856. This led her to conclude that the creator of the *Archaic Mark* used Buttmann’s text as a guide for his forgery. “I’ve been asked repeatedly if I’m disappointed that the work is a forgery. I’m not. There is no longer a question mark after the date of the manuscript and that is tremendously satisfying,” said Mitchell.

The university intends to preserve the codex and encourage its use for further research into the forger’s techniques. “Those who study forgeries may be the largest beneficiaries of our scholarship,” said Mitchell.

A detailed record of the project is slated for publication in this month’s *Novum Testamentum* journal.