

U of C 'Treasure' Really Just a Fake: Gospel of St. Mark Might Have Once Fetched Millions of Dollars, But It's a Forgery

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By Stephano Esposito

It is considered one of the University of Chicago's "treasures," kept safe in a climate-controlled underground vault.

But that was before scholars and scientists peered closely at the blotchy parchment pages of the U. of C.'s "Byzantine" Gospel of St. Mark. They have now declared the tiny hand-written, hand-illustrated book a fake.

The findings are to be published early next year in *Novum Testamentum*, an academic journal devoted to Biblical studies.

Far from being devastated that the U. of C. was duped when it bought the fake from a Greek family in the late 1930s, the scholars who uncovered the truth are relieved.

"It's actually tremendously satisfying to have a definite result," said Margaret M. Mitchell, a professor at U. of C.'s Divinity School. "Scholarship depends as much as possible [about] being absolutely certain about these things."

The manuscript, written in Greek, originally was believed to have been written as early as the 14th century. But strong suspicions that it might not be nearly so old surfaced in 1989, after it was discovered that a blue pigment on one of the pages wasn't available until 1704, Mitchell said.

It took carbon dating, advanced microscope technology and good sleuthing to discover the faker's crafty handiwork.

Through analysis of parchment, ink and paints used in the book, Joseph Barabe, a senior research microscopist at Westmont-based McCrone Associates, determined the book was created after 1874 using materials not available until the late 19th Century.

"The evidence points quite directly to it being fabricated for the antiquities market," Mitchell said.

The clever faker probably spent countless months on the manuscript, and even smeared a "brownish-black" liquid on the edges of the pages to create a "charring" effect, Mitchell said. Medieval manuscripts often collected soot around the edges after years and years of people reading by candlelight, Mitchell explained.

Even if the manuscript is now worth far less than originally believed, it's still a valuable research tool, Mitchell said, adding that it will help future scholars uncover a faker's fingerprints.