

Museum of the Bible Solves Decades-Old Mystery

Seemingly pulled from the pages of an international thriller, Museum of the Bible and the University of Athens in Greece have collaborated to solve the mystery of a medieval manuscript missing since 1991. The important text will be returned this fall to the university—its rightful owner. In the meantime, it will be exhibited at the Washington, D.C., museum to educate the public about the complexities and challenges of properly caring for cultural heritage, the importance of knowing an object's history of ownership and location from its genesis to the present (known as its "provenance" in the scholarly world) and Museum of the Bible's commitment to ethical collections management.

In 2014 the private Green Collection donated "Manuscript 18," a Greek manuscript of the four canonical gospels copied by a monk in the 1100s, to Museum of the Bible. The manuscript had been sold at public auction in London in 1998 and was owned by a handful of private collectors prior to the donation. In 2015, Museum of the Bible notified the Institut für neutestamentliche Textforschung in Germany about the manuscript's new location. This information was then posted to the institute's public online database of New Testament manuscripts, the Virtual Manuscript Room.

The next year, Professor Theodora Antonopoulou of the University of Athens discovered this particular manuscript had been mysteriously missing from her university's library since 1991. After finding information about the manuscript on the German institute's online database, she contacted Museum of the Bible in March 2018 and began a joint research project with the museum to determine if this manuscript was the missing text. Their findings confirmed it was indeed the manuscript removed from her university without permission. In

keeping with cultural heritage preservation practices and best practices as prescribed by the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Alliance of Museums, the museum will return the manuscript to the university.

“For several years, Museum of the Bible has been undergoing an intensive review of all holdings in its collection and items on loan from more than 40 lending institutions and collectors from around the world,” said Museum of the Bible Chief Curatorial Officer Jeffrey Kloha, Ph.D. “With the assistance of Thomas R. Kline, an attorney with Cultural Heritage Partners whom we engaged in 2017, our staff have painstakingly researched some 3,200 objects and artifacts in our collection and on exhibit at the museum. Our intent has been to verify the provenance of these items and confirm they meet our acquisition policies and museum association guidelines. If not, we follow cultural heritage practices and, in a case like this, return them to the owner so they can be cared for and studied in their original setting.”

In a demonstration of the spirit of cooperation between the museum and the university, Museum of the Bible will display and chronicle the history of the manuscript in a temporary exhibit that opens today in Washington and runs through Oct. 1. The exhibit is designed to educate visitors about the manuscript, its provenance and Museum of the Bible’s commitment to adhering to cultural heritage laws and museum best practices. In addition, the museum and university have agreed to cooperate in the future on loans of manuscripts for display in the museum. Museum of the Bible will also post high-resolution images of the manuscript on its website, to make the manuscript available for study to anyone.

“It is with great pleasure that we are announcing the return to the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens of an important manuscript, a unique Gospel book of the 12th century that went missing three decades ago from one of our libraries and whose whereabouts had remained unknown,” said Professor

Antonopoulou with the university's department of philology. "The manuscript is a witness to the original Greek text of the gospels and to its use in medieval times in the Byzantine Empire. Its return is of paramount importance for the unity of the manuscript collection of the university, to which it had been bequeathed by a distinguished former professor of our university and once prime minister of Greece, Spyridon Lambros, as well as for scholarly purposes and reasons of cultural heritage.

"The Museum of the Bible was instrumental in its return to its place of provenance, and for this reason it is cordially thanked. We are grateful to the museum for their excellent cooperation and the highest level of scholarly responsibility that they exhibited during our discussions, which have permitted the swift repatriation of the manuscript in an amicable spirit, avoiding long bureaucratic procedures. We are also thankful for the beautiful display of this ancient book in the museum until Oct. 1, 2018, which will allow visitors from all over the world to appreciate its value. We hope that this will be the beginning of a fruitful cooperation between our two institutions."

Along with the display of the manuscript, the exhibit will show a timeline outlining the provenance history of the artifact and how it was discovered to be the property of the university. The manuscript will be returned to Athens in October in an official homecoming ceremony.