Art and Identity in an Amulet Roll from Fourteenth-Century Trebizond

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Abstract

This article examines a unique survival from the Middle Ages: an amulet roll, now divided between libraries in New York City and Chicago, which now measures approximately 5 m in width and 8–9 cm in width, which has Greek texts on the obverse and Arabic on the reverse, and a series of very fine illustrations on the Greek side. Analysis of the roll reveals that it originated in Trebizond in the second half of the fourteenth century, and the roll is therefore considered within the cultural and political context of that small but active Greek kingdom. The article pays particular attention to the text and representation of a rare figure, Evgenios of Trebizond, who is included among a series of saints and prophets in order to enact that saint’s protection of the (evidently elite) patron of the roll. And through the series of texts and images about the letter and self-portrait of Christ, the Mandylion, the roll also stated the sacred destiny of Trebizond. The roll generated identity through its Greek Christian texts and images, and made clear the special role God had chosen for Trebizond.

Keywords

Evgenios of Trebizond; Trebizond; Mandylion; Abgar of Edessa; magic; amulet roll; Byzantine art.

Art can be an enduring material declaration of the religious origins of a nation or polity, and this article is concerned with a very unusual survival of this type of art: an amulet roll now divided between the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago (Cod. 125) and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City (M 499). The point at which the roll was divided is not clear, but it happened before the separate acquisitions by those libraries. The New York fragment was bought by John Pierpont Morgan, Jr (1867–1943) in 1912 from Léon Gruel (1841–1923), but it had passed through the hands of a Dominican

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priest, Luis Albert Gaffre (1864–1914), who claimed to have purchased the fragment from ‘a very old Coptic or Egyptian Christian family’ in Egypt.¹ The Chicago fragment came to the United States by a different route, having been bought by the University of Chicago in 1930; the fragment had been owned by Baron d’Honnecourt of Paris and M. Stora.² The roll was divided apparently before it passed into these European hands, and as each fragment shows damage at their ends, the division occurred in the nineteenth century or before.

The striking features of the composite object are plain: the roll, when the two extant sections are added together, reaches a length of 5.1 m and a width of around 8–9 cm. The texts are oriented on the vertical axis of the roll, and they point to the purposes for which the roll was intended. On the obverse, texts in Greek include, in order from top to bottom and starting with the Chicago piece, the initial passages from the Gospels of Mark (1:1–8), Luke (1:1–7) and John (1:1–17), with Matt. 6:9–13 following, then the Nicene Creed, Psalm 68, and on the New York fragment, Ps. 35 and 91, the Epistle of the Abgar legend, and short, poetic invocations to eleven saints. All but one of these last texts were taken from the eleventh-century collection of Christopher of Mitylene (c.1000, d. after 1050 or 1068).³

The length of the extant pieces of the extant Chicago-New York roll—over 5 m—makes clear that the patron’s height was not a determining factor in the scale of the roll. In fact, most of the roll may have survived, because the Arabic text on the reverse appears to be complete. Yet the Arabic prayers do not run to the very bottom of the roll as it is today, so they are not absolute indicators

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