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Firm Assists Greek Orthodox Church in Lawsuit Against Princeton

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January 4, 2019 — Hughes Hubbard is representing the Eastern Orthodox Church on a pro bono basis in its campaign to reclaim from Princeton University four ancient Christian manuscripts that officials say were looted from a small monastery in Greece during World War I.

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople filed a federal lawsuit in New Jersey on Dec. 13, demanding the return of the manuscripts written from 955 A.D. to the 16th century with a focus on Saint John Chrysostom's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.

According to the lawsuit, Bulgarian guerrillas stormed the Theotokos Eikosiphoinissa Monastery in 1917, assaulted the monks who lived there and took off with dozens of ancient texts, including the ones that ended up in Princeton's collection.

The manuscripts were sold a few years later at the auction house Joseph Baer & Co. in Frankfurt, Germany. The monastery says Princeton bought one in 1921 and was bequeathed the other three by Princeton trustee Robert Garrett, who bought them at the Baer auction house in 1924.

"Because the manuscripts were stolen, Princeton was unable to, and never did, acquire good title or any interest in the manuscripts," the 15-page complaint said.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate first requested the return of the manuscripts at Princeton in a letter in 2015 that called them "indelible and invaluable pieces of Byzantine culture" and "hallowed writings that are still cherished and revered by the Eastern Orthodox Church and its faithful."

"We are doing this to right a wrong that was committed over 100 years ago," George Tsougarakis, who is leading the HHR team, told Courthouse News Service.

The lawsuit cites, among other evidence, the 2010 volume, "Greek Manuscripts at Princeton, Sixth to Nineteenth Century: A Descriptive Catalogue," which identifies some manuscripts in the school's collection as having been removed from the monastery by Bulgarian authorities.

"This is Princeton's book, issued by the Princeton press, about Princeton's collection, written by Princeton employees," Tsougarakis told The New York Times. "In our view that's about as concrete an admission as you could get."

The university disagrees. "Based on the information available to us, we have found no basis to conclude that the manuscripts in our possession were looted during World War I or otherwise improperly removed from the possession of the patriarchate," a university spokesman said in an email to the newspaper.

Tsougarakis told Courthouse News Service that Princeton's objections rely on dubious evidence, including the fact that the leader of the Bulgarian guerillas did not include the manuscripts in an inventory he prepared after his arrest.

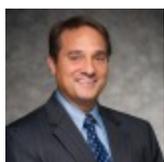
"It is not likely that any manuscript of such religious significance leaves a monastery to go into private hands," Tsougarakis said. "It is very rare for a private collector to come into a monastery and buy something."

HHR is also in discussions with Duke University and the Morgan Library & Museum in New York about the return of additional manuscripts that church leaders believe were looted during the 1917 raid. Two years ago, HHR facilitated the return of the oldest complete version of the New Testament from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to the Greek monastery after a request from Greek Orthodox Church officials.

Tsougarakis was also quoted in The Record. In addition, the lawsuit received a write-up in the Associated Press, which appeared in FoxNews.com, the Houston Chronicle, the Star Tribune and other news outlets.

In addition to Tsougarakis, Michael Salzman, Eric Blumenfeld, Pavlos Petrovas and Nick Velonis are working on the case.

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