



Professor re-examines mysterious document

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WILTON — Ten meters long and at least 1,000 years old, the Joshua Roll is one of the most mysterious documents in history. The sheepskin scroll, which dates back to the Byzantine empire and is inscribed with pictures and Greek text from the book of Joshua, is the only scroll of its kind. No one knows for sure why it was made or even when it was created.

One local scholar, however, has an idea — he thinks the scroll, long thought to be a book, was part of a plan for a monument.

"This is as important to Byzantine studies as Hamlet is to renaissance literature," said Wilton resident Steven Wander, an adjunct professor of art history at the University of Connecticut [UConn], of the Joshua Roll.

Wander believes the huge scroll might have been the preparatory drawing for a triumphal column; a memorial to the Byzantine Heraclius, who lived in the seventh century.

He pointed out that the drawing is likely to be a column because the drawings and text are all drawn on a 10 degree slant, suggesting that the drawings were intended to spiral around a column [rather than be read side to side, like a book], and because of it's length.

"People didn't make a 10 meter scroll without a good reason," he said.

When the document is presented in this way, said Wander, correlations appear between the scenes and text which end up adjacent to one another. In fact, Wander is so convinced that the Joshua Roll was intended to be a column that he teaches his art history classes about the roll by bringing a miniature column to class, wrapped in a copy of the document.

In November, Wander shared his theory with the historians at the 32nd annual Byzantine Studies Conference. His theory was received with scholarly skepticism.

"It is a theory," said says professor Lynn Jones, a professor of art history at the University of Florida and the president of the Byzantine Studies Conference. "The issue is does he have any proof."

The accepted theory of the Joshua Roll is that it dates back to the 10th century, or middle Byzantine period, because the illustrations on the piece are consistent with the style of art from that time, said Jones. The reign of Heraclius, however, took place in the seventh century; the early Byzantine period.

The date of the roll has been debated before, said Jones, but again, there is no proof of the document's age.

"We're dealing with an extreme lack of facts," she said.

Wander, who has a Ph.D. in art history from Stanford University, made a name for himself as an art historian in 1973, when he decoded the images on a group of nine silver plates made in 629. The plates; engraved with images of the biblical story of David and Goliath; are meant to memorialize an event in the life of Heraclius, who was supposed to have killed the Persian general Razatis in single combat.

According to Wander's interpretation of the plates, the emperor is symbolized by David, the Jewish hero who killed the Philistine giant Goliath. Each plate depicts a different biblical verse.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City based their display of the plates on Wander's research.

He left the field in 1978 after his home in Laguna Beach, Calif. was destroyed in a landslide, and moved to Wilton to run his family's New York jewelry store.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Wander decided to come back to his true passion — art history.

Wander had been mulling over the Joshua Roll for some time. His family encouraged him to research his theories.

That was nearly seven years ago. This past summer found Wander sitting in the library at the Vatican, looking at one of the sheets from the original Joshua Roll, while the library director looked on.

Wander wants to research the roll further. He applied this fall for a research grant to the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C.

Michael Ego, vice provost of UConn Stamford, is proud of Wander's research.

"It's gratifying to see one of our adjunct faculty getting recognition," he said.

It is rare that an adjunct would do such research, according to Ego, because adjunct professors are not expected to publish work as tenured staff is. "The rewards system is not there for Steven," said Ego.