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Arts

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The Gospel of St. Mark Returns on Display at Palazzo Meizlik in Aquileia

Reunited after seven centuries, the three surviving fragments of the Gospel of St. Mark will be exhibited till 25 April 2027



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



A view from the south-west of the Basilica at Aquilea. Courtesy of the Fondazione Aquileia.

Time: 3 mins read

On display in Palazzo Meizlik in Aquileia is "The Gospel of Mark. Seven Centuries. Three Fragments. One European Story". Now, for the first time in 700 years, the three original parts of the medieval Gospel of St. Mark—the Codex Forojuliensis, preserved in nearby Cividale del Friuli, and its two other fragments, on loan from the Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus in Prague and from the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice—have been reunited in Aquileia.

It's no coincidence that Aquileia was chosen as the site for this reunion. Thanks to its central location, the Patriarchate of Aquileia gradually became the largest diocese in Europe between 313 and 800 AD. For centuries, it was the crossroads and key meeting point between Rome, Byzantium, the Holy Roman Empire and the Slavic world. One of the most renowned and artistically significant monuments of the Christian West, Aquileia's magnificent Basilica, consecrated in 1031, has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1998.



The gold-plated silver back and front covers of the Codex Forojuliensis now in the the Treasury of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. Courtesy of the Fondazione Aquileia.

The Evangeliary, called the Codex Forojuliensis or the Cividale Gospel Book, on display here, is a medieval manuscript that contained all four Gospels for some 600 years. Judging from its script, it was written on parchment in the Latin Vulgate during the 6th century, probably in Ravenna. We know that it arrived in Aquileia during the 9th century because of a peculiar detail: the signature of Theodemar, the Patriarch from 851 to 872. In the margins of its pages, monks also recorded the names and origins of some 1,500 pilgrims who came to Aquileia from all over Europe. These lists, still clearly legible today, are proof that the Evangeliary was considered not only a sacred text but also a venerated relic. It owed this unique status to the local church's proclamation that the Gospel of St. Mark had been written by the evangelist himself, although this is clearly legend, not fact. Nonetheless, during the 12th century, some 300 years after the Evangeliary's arrival, the Gospel of St. Mark was removed from the Codex to promote this unlikely proclamation, increase local worship, project political prestige and share this powerful holy relic with strategic political allies.



Seal of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV attesting his gift of part of the Gospel of Mark to the the newly-built Cathedral of St. Vitus in Prague. Courtesy of the Fondazione Aquileia.

The three remaining Gospels and two pages (the first and last) of St. Mark's Gospel remained in the region and are now housed in the National Archaeological Museum in the nearby city of Cividale del Friuli.



One of the ivory panels of the cattedra eburnea, depicting St. Mark preaching. Courtesy of the City of Milan.

In 1358, on the occasion of the foundation of the University of Cividale, Patriarch Nicholas donated a valuable part of the Codex, including the last two quires (c. 50 parchment sheets) of the Gospel of St. Mark, to his half-brother, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316–78), who was visiting Aquileia on his way to Rome to receive his imperial crown. Charles brought the quires to Prague to serve as an important sacred relic for the newly built St. Vitus Cathedral, where they've been preserved in the Cathedral's Chapter Archives ever since. Still considered the most important artifact in the Czech Republic, this fragment has now left Prague for the very first time.

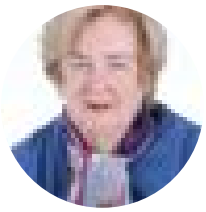
In 1420, after the annexation of Friuli by the Republic of Venice, the Venetians seized the Gospel's first five quires (c. 100 sheets) for the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice as a symbol of the Aquileian Patriarchate's submission to the "Serenissima" Republic of Venice. They linked the prestige of this relic to the remains of the saint himself, kept in the Basilica since 828.

In addition to the two fragments of the Gospel of St. Mark and the Cividale Gospel Book, the exhibition features eight of the fourteen 7th-century panels from the "Cattedra eburnea" (an ivory chair or throne) of St. Mark, on loan from Milan's Sforza Castle; the lintel of the pergola built by Patriarch John II (between 806 and 810) for the Chapel of St. Mark in Saint Euphemia's Basilica in Grado, bearing the earliest known Western inscription with St. Mark's name outside Rome; and the original Prague documents from 1354 bearing the seals of Patriarch Nicholas and the signature of Charles IV.

An interactive installation allows visitors to "virtually turn the pages" of the

manuscripts, while an immersive room reconstructs the millennia-long evolution of the Basilica complex at Aquileia.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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The Latest Discovery in Pompeii: A Human Dimension of the Past

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