HLF helps bring rare medieval treasure back to its natural home

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The rare 14th-century medieval manuscript was sold for £541,250 and is considered to be among the jewels of Welsh civilisation and a crucial symbol of national identity.

The pocket-sized book, written in medieval Welsh and featuring coloured decoration, is one of the earliest manuscript of its kind ever offered in a public sale and was auctioned by Sotheby's on behalf of the Massachusetts Historical Society who were likely to have been given the manuscript as a gift from Welsh emigrants in the early 19th century.

The Laws of Hywel Dda is a long-established descriptive term encompassing the native Welsh laws which were codified in the 10th century in South West Wales. The surviving texts can be found in around 30 manuscripts dating from the 13th to16th centuries in Welsh and Latin.

This small parchment volume is a very early example of a key text in the history of Welsh law and would have been used by an itinerant judge in South Wales in the 14th century. It offers a new window into the development of Welsh identity and cultural life.

Unlike most other Welsh medieval manuscripts, the Boston Manuscript has handwritten additions demonstrating its use as a working law text. It is much closer to the reality and practice of the law at the time and offers plenty of scope for important new research.

Opportunities to purchase medieval Welsh manuscripts are extremely rare, described by Sotheby's as 'near legendary'. With an estimated value of between £500,000 and £700,000 the National Library of Wales applied for a fast-track acquisition grant from HLF to purchase the fragile manuscript and bring it home to Wales after an absence of more than 200 years.

Dr Manon Williams, Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund’s Committee for Wales, said: “This auction was a once in a lifetime opportunity to bring home one of Wales’ true treasures and I’m delighted that we were able to act swiftly and provide the required funding to make it happen.

“The National Library of Wales is the natural home for this rare manuscript and experts can now study, and interpret it ensuring it is better understood for the first time. As well as providing new training opportunities for existing staff, there are plans for apprentices to get involved in developing new research and gain specialist skills while securing this important piece of Welsh history for the future. There will also be exciting opportunities for volunteers to get involved throughout the project.”

The HLF grant of £467,000 will mean that the Library can carry out vital conservation work, create replicas for permanent display and digitise the manuscript, which will provide worldwide digital access. Plans are also in place for a programme of education and volunteering opportunities and a touring exhibition.

The manuscript will undergo full treatment including unbinding the pages, flattening and cleaning the distorted vellum leaves, repairing tears, consolidating fragile initials and rebinding it in a more sympathetic material.

Andrew Green, Librarian, National Library of Wales, said: "The Library is very pleased that it has ensured the purchase of this manuscript and is very grateful to the HLF (and other supporters including the Welsh Government and the Friends of the National Libraries) for their generous support. Without the HLF's support this manuscript would almost certainly have been lost to the public in Wales and beyond for another generation.

"The manuscript now adds an important part to the picture we have of this period and this subject and it will offer an opportunity, not only to scholars, but to children and people of all ages, to view this treasure, not only in its original form at Aberystwyth all over Wales through the use of the facsimile copy and all over the world through the digital copy we're preparing for the web."

The manuscript is will be available for public viewing for a limited period (23 July – 10 August) before being taken into the care of the Library's conservators to be rebound and digitised. This process should be complete by the end of 2012. The manuscript will then be kept at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, alongside other manuscripts of its time and its facsimile and digital surrogates will be made wildly available.

Further information

For further information please contact Eryl Jones or Kate Sullivan on 029 2076 4100.