

Bringing a Trove of Medieval Manuscripts Online for the Ages

By JOHN TAGLIAPIETRA



DOMINGUE BOUQUIN/ARND BRONKHORST FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Stiftsbibliothek, or abbey library, in the Swiss town of St. Gallen. Its collection of medieval manuscripts is being digitized.

ST. GALLEN, Switzerland — One of the oldest and most valuable collections of handwritten medieval books in the world, housed in the magnificent baroque halls of the library in this town's abbey, is going online with the help of a \$1 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

For centuries scholars from around the world have flocked to the Stiftsbibliothek — literally, the abbey library — in this quaint town nestled in the rolling hills of eastern Switzerland, to pore over its vast collection of manuscripts, many written and illustrated before the year 1000.

The collection includes material as varied as curses against

A Swiss abbey's collection is scanned page by page.

book thieves, early love ballads, hearty drinking songs and a hand-drawn ground plan for a medieval monastery, drafted around A.D. 820, the only such document of its kind.

The library is believed to have been founded in the ninth century, about two centuries after an Irish monk named Gallus established the monastery that would become the center of the city that now bears his name. The monas-

tery was dissolved by local authorities in 1805. The library is now the property of the Roman Catholic Church.

Today, as computer technology improves, scanning library collections has become commonplace. Google has embarked on an ambitious project to scan entire libraries into databases. Last month the executive arm of the European Union appropriated \$15 million for a program, known as Europeana, to digitize European libraries.

The idea to scan the library's manuscripts — above all, the 350 that date from before 1000 — was born as a reaction to the devastating floods that swept Dresden, Germany, and its artworks in

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Experts prepare a manuscript for scanning so that images can be downloaded on the library's Web site.

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2002, said Ernst Tremp, an expert on medieval history who is the library director.

What started as a pilot project in 2005 grew sharply last year, when the Gallen project was incorporated into a program to digitize all of Switzerland's roughly 7,000 medieval manuscripts. At the same time the Mellon Foundation agreed to finance the St. Gallen project with a two-year, \$1 million grant, with an option to extend it for another two years after 2009. St. Gallen, Donald J. Waters of the foundation wrote in an e-mail message, "fits into a larger plan to help make key sources of evidence for medieval studies available online."

So now, day by day, a team of scanning experts works in a small room above the library, gingerly arranging manuscripts on two large frames that use suction devices to spread the pages and lasers to ensure that they are not spread so wide as to damage a binding.

High-resolution digital cameras and video recorders then

copy the pages and download the images to a database, where they are prepared for presentation on the library's Web site, www.cong.unifr.ch. Already, about 200 manuscripts are in the database, and 144 are available online.

Christoph Fließler, an expert on early manuscripts who is overseeing the scanning, said the ability to put such a database online affordably was made possible by the reduced price of computer memory, which he said costs about a fifth what it did early in the decade.

"We can now achieve very good quality," he said. "Six or seven years ago, such memory was simply not affordable."

The project has increased the number of visitors the abbey library draws, to an expected 120,000 that year from about 100,000 a decade ago. In addition, an even greater number of people are now studying the library manuscripts on their computers than study them in the library itself.

"The library has become more visible," Mr. Fließler said. "On the Internet we now have more visi-



The project is making the library in St. Gallen, Switzerland, more popular; annual visits are up 30 percent from a decade ago.

Thousands of handwritten books, 144 now on the Web.

tors than in the real library."

The project is also starting to make the library more accessible to local people. Despite regular exhibits of outstanding books, some said, visiting hours were always limited and reception areas narrow; visitors had to line up in a confined hallway, and there was no gift shop or cafeteria.

"It is a jewel," said Dr. Uwe Lüthi, the retired director of gynecology at St. Gallen's main hospital, is a part-time James Joyce scholar and knowledgeable about the town's literary history.

Despite his praise, Dr. Lorenz, like others, has criticisms. "They

should have done a lot more," he said. "I know many people in St. Gallen who have never set foot in the library."

Others have been ranked that foreign money was necessary to put the manuscripts online.

"The government depicted the library on a postcard, with the caption 'St. Gallen can do it,'" the local newspaper Tagblatt said. "All well and good. But America did it."

For much of the city's history, relations between the monastery and the townspeople have been tense. Michael Fischbacher, whose family company, Christian Fischbacher, has traded in textiles, the traditional mainstay of the local economy, since 1839, said the abbey library was "something they're proud of."

"It's the most important thing in this town," he continued.

But the town's history, he added,

had been marked by "division between the townspeople, basically the merchant class and the monks, even before the Reformation."

When the Reformation came, the town turned Protestant, while the surrounding territories, ruled by the monastery's prince-abbot, remained Catholic. The town's Protestant church, a soaring neo-Gothic edifice, stands across from the Catholic cathedral.

"Keeping each other in check," Mr. Fischbacher said. "Very Swiss."

The scanning has increased the requests from museums and libraries to borrow the manuscripts themselves and to use the illustrations in books and other publications. So great have the demands become that Mr. Fließler set up a small company last year to handle them, with the profits going toward financing

the scanning.

Still, he said, online availability would not prevent scholars from visiting the library. "It should always be possible to see the manuscripts physically," he said.

And, of course, the project has lifted the library in the eyes of local people.

"It's really their pride," said David Stern, an American musician recently named principal conductor of the city's symphony orchestra and opera.

That pride apparently will help prevent the project from keeping an eye out for partners. Would it ever link up with Google? Mr. Fließler emphasized that Google's project involved the high-speed scanning of printed books, not the page-by-page scanning of priceless manuscripts.

Still, if someone from Google came to visit, he said, "I would be interested in a conversation."