



Dominic Büttner for The New York Times

The abbey library in St. Gallen, Switzerland, contains a vast collection, including works written and illustrated before the year 1000.

The medieval era goes online

Illuminated manuscripts, lit by glow of computer screen

By John Tagliabue

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 Mellon Foundation.

For centuries, scholars from around the world have flocked to the Stiftsbibliothek — literally, the abbey library — to pore over its vast collection of manuscripts, many written and illustrated before the year 1000.

Its collections include curses against book thieves, early love ballads, hearty drinking songs and a hand-drawn ground plan for a medieval monastery, drafted around AD 820, the only one 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 a monastery that would become the center of the city that now bears his name.

Today, as computer technology improves, scanning library collections has become fashionable. Google has an ambitious project to scan entire libraries into databases. Last month, the executive arm of the European Union appropriated \$175 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 and its artworks in 2002, said Ernst Tremp, an expert on medieval history who is the library director.

What started as a pilot project in 2005 grew dramatically last year, when it was made part of a program to digitize all of Switzerland's roughly 7,000 medieval manuscripts, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation agreed to fund 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, said Donald Waters of the Mellon Foundation in an e-mail, "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 employ suction

devices to spread their pages and lasers to assure they are not spread so widely as to damage a binding. High-resolution digital cameras and video recorders then record the pages and download the images to a database, where they are prepared for presentation on the library's Web site, www.cesg.unifr.ch. Already about 200 manuscripts are in the database and 144 are available online.

Christoph Flüeler, an expert on early manuscripts who is overseeing the scanning, said that the ability to put such a database online at an affordable price was made possible by the reduced price of computer memory, which he said costs about one-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 boosted the number of visitors to the abbey library, to an expected 130,000 this year from about 100,000 a decade ago. Now, however, more people are studying the library manuscripts on their computers than in the library itself. "The library has become more visible," Flüeler said. "On the Internet, we now have more visitors than in the real library."

Some say the project is overcoming a weakness of the library, which failed to make itself accessible to local people. Despite regular exhibits of outstanding books, 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 Lorenz, the retired director of gynecology at St. Gallen's main hospital, describing the library. "But they should have done a lot more. I know many people in St. Gallen who have never set foot in the library."

Some were critical that foreign money had been 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 were tense. Michael Fischbacher, whose family company, Christian Fischbacher, has traded in textiles, the traditional mainstay of the local economy, since 1819, said the abbey library was "something we're proud of. It's the most important thing in this town."

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," Fischbacher said. "Very Swiss."

The monastery was dissolved by the local authorities in 1805, and now its church is the cathedral of the local Catholic bishop and the library is the property of the Catholic community.

The scanning of its manuscripts is not the only step toward opening its halls to the public. Work to enlarge its entrance halls, create a book and gift shop and build a restaurant for visitors is under way and should be completed by the end of this year.

"There has always been an intense relationship between library and town," said Tremp, the library director. "We are the most important attraction for visitors. We are an economic factor for the city."

The scanning has boosted the number of demands from museums and libraries for manuscripts to be put on display and for illustrations to be used in books and other publications. So great have the demands become that Flüeler, the expert on early manuscripts, set up a small company last year to cash in, with the profits going toward financing the scanning.

Still, he says, online availability will 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 not prevent the project from keeping an eye out for partners. Would it ever link up with Google? Flüeler emphasized that Google's project involved the high-speed scanning of printed books, not the page-by-page scanning of priceless manuscripts.

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