Bringing a Trove of Medieval Manuscripts Online for the Ages

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 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 materials as varied as cursars against book thieves, early joust ballads, heavy 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 monastery was dissolved by local authorities in 1865. 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, for instance, the European Union appropriated $175 million for a program, known as Europeana, to digitize European libraries.

The idea is to scan the library's manuscripts — above all, the 350 that date from before 1000 — as a reaction to the devastating floods that swept Dresden, Germany, and its artifacts into Continued Page 5

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 2009 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.cenf.ch. Already, about 200 manuscripts are in the database, and 144 are available online.

Christoph Flieler, 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 to the abbey library, to an expected 130,000 this 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. Flieler said. "On the Internet we now have more visitors 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. Ulrich Loewen, of the library. The doctor, 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. Loewen, like others, has criticism. "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 townpeople have been tense. Michael Fischer, whose family company, Christian Fischer, has traded in textiles, the traditional mainstay of the local economy, said St. Gallen had the abbey library was "something we're proud of."

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

But the town's history, he added, had been marred by "division between the townpeople, 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 stirring Neo-Gothic edifice, stands across from the Catholic cathedral.

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

The scanning has increased the requests from museums and libraries to borrow the manuscripts themselves and to use the Illuminations in books and other publications. So great have the demands become that Mr. Flieler 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 musicologist 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? Mr. Flieler emphasized that Google's project involved the high-speed scanning of printed books and the page-by-page scanning of precious manuscripts.

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