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Book Heritage in Monasteries: The State of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland

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Abstract. Today, there are 65 active monasteries in Switzerland that were founded before 1800. They include women's and men's convents of 13 different orders of the Roman Catholic Church. These monasteries preserve a significant part of the written cultural heritage (manuscripts and prints) in Switzerland. Almost all monasteries are facing great challenges because of today's major social and structural changes, which also have an impact on the book heritage of religious communities. The project *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* intends to create a survey of the current state of Swiss monastic libraries. The articles of this handbook describe the scope, content, condition and challenges of all monastic libraries. Well-known abbeys such as Einsiedeln, Engelberg or Saint Maurice as well as a large number of smaller women's monasteries with less renowned book collections will be covered. The handbook aims at raising awareness for the preservation of monastic book heritage among politicians and the public.

The paper will present first results from the work on the *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* and provide insight into actual conservation issues and research opportunities in Swiss monastic libraries.

Keywords: monastic library, monastery, Switzerland, written cultural heritage, challenges, handbook

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Книжное наследие в монастырях: состояние монастырских библиотек Швейцарии

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Аннотация. В статье представлены первые результаты работы над «Пособием по монастырским библиотекам Швейцарии» и приведены сведения об исследовательских возможностях и актуальных проблемах сохранения швейцарских монастырских библиотек. В Швейцарии насчитывается 65 женских и мужских действующих монастырей, принадлежащих 13 монашеским орденам Римской католической церкви и основанным до 1800 г. В этих монастырях хранится значительная часть культурного наследия Швейцарии: рукописи и гравюры. Монастыри сталкиваются с серьезными трудностями, вызванными большими социальными и организационными изменениями, которые влияют в том числе и на книжное наследие религиозных общин. Цель проекта «Пособие по монастырским библиотекам Швейцарии» – сделать обзор текущего состояния этих библиотек. В статьях пособия будут описаны размеры коллекций, их содержание, состояние и проблемы. Речь пойдет о таких известных аббатствах, как Айнзидельн, Энгельберг, аббатство Святого Маврикия, а также о многих не столь крупных женских монастырях с менее известными книжными собраниями. Пособие должно привлечь внимание политиков и общественности к проблеме сохранения монастырского книжного наследия.

Ключевые слова: монастырская библиотека, монастырь, Швейцария, письменное культурное наследие, пособие

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Introduction

The term “monastic library” covers a wide range of institutions over many centuries. On the one hand, there are famous libraries of medieval monasteries such as St. Gall and Einsiedeln (Fig. 1). They are distinguished by their old collections of manuscripts and by their beautiful baroque halls. While the Abbey of St. Gall was dissolved in 1805 and the library subsequently became a specialized scientific library – it is today also an important tourist destination with over 160,000 visitors a year from all over the world (2019) –, the abbey library of Einsiedeln still has the original monastic character. On the other hand, there is the overwhelming majority of late or post-medieval monastic libraries, many of which are housed in ordinary rooms and comprising

few or no precious books (Fig. 2). They are set up according to the needs of a relatively small group of readers, the community of nuns or monks. Despite their great number, they are hardly known.

The project *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* presented here, tries to remedy to this lack of interest into these numerous monastic libraries. After a short overview of the state of research into Swiss monastic libraries, I will outline my research project, present first results of this investigation and discuss related issues such as conservation, research opportunities and challenges facing monastic libraries. The remarks in this regard represent the first results of the work on the mentioned handbook and are therefore not yet universally applicable for the overall phenomenon of Swiss monastic libraries.

¹ *Лицензиат* (сокращенно Lic.) – это степень, аналогичная степени магистра, присуждаемая в папских университетах и университетах некоторых стран Европейского Союза и Латинской Америки. Термин также обозначает человека, достигшего этого уровня, происходит от латинского *licentia* – «свобода» (лат. *licere*, «разрешить») и применяется в словосочетаниях *licentia docendi* – *получить разрешение на преподавательскую деятельность* и *licentia ad practicandum*, означающее кого-то, имеющего право работать по специальности. Во многих странах есть ученые степени с таким названием, но они могут представлять различные уровни образования. В швейцарских университетах до принятия Болонской конвенции (1999 г.) *лицензия* (Lizentiat) была эквивалентна степени магистра (без предыдущих степеней) и давала ее обладателю право на докторантуру. За названиями степеней следует область изучения (например, *lic. phil.*, *lic. es littres, oec.* и т. д.). В соответствии с Болонским процессом степень была заменена на степень магистра (с введением степени бакалавра). Согласно Конференции швейцарских университетов, совместной организации кантонов и Конфедерации университетской политики, а также Конференции ректоров швейцарских университетов, старая *лицензия* считается эквивалентом нынешней степени магистра (прим. редакции).



Fig. 1. Baroque hall, Abbey library Einsiedeln

Рис. 1. Холл в стиле барокко, монастырская библиотека в Айнзидельне



Fig. 2. Library of the Benedictine nuns in Fahr

Рис. 2. Библиотека монахинь-бенедиктинок в Фаре

Monastic library research

As mentioned above, many monastic libraries are hardly known to the public (General information on the state of research see (Marti, 2012)). For a long time, Swiss monastic library research focused on medieval manuscripts. Therefore, the libraries of medieval monastic orders (Benedictines, Cistercians, Dominicans, Carthusians, etc.) are relatively well researched. It was not until the 1990s that early modern book collections began to attract more interest, especially those of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (Marti, 2016). In addition, the *Handbuch der historischen Buchbestände in der Schweiz* (Handbook of Historical Book Collections in Switzerland), published in 2011, needs to be mentioned (Leu et al., 2011). It provides a historical account and a quantitative analysis of the historical book collections (printings before the year 1900) of 37 monastic libraries in Switzerland. Some of them had never been described before that.

However, our knowledge of monastic libraries is far from complete. In total, there are 65 active monasteries in Switzerland today that were founded before 1800. The history and characteristics of about a third of the libraries of these monasteries have never been investigated or described. Especially the libraries of women's convents are virtually unknown. In general, they are poorly researched because, women's written cultural heritage tends to be undervalued and access is often difficult (enclosure regulations). The ascetic and mystical writings, which usually predominate in women's convents have only recently received greater interest (Hamburger, 2001; Schlothuber, 2018; Wiederkehr, 2013).

Another desideratum for almost all monastic libraries is the research of modern book collections in connection with the library history of the 20th century (Holenstein, 2021a). This century, in particular, saw numerous changes in the holdings and storage situations of monastic libraries, caused by a strong growth of book collections and developments in librarianship. It therefore needs further consideration.

Outline of the Project

The project *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* aims to provide an overview of the current state of as many monastic libraries as possible, whether small or large, important or insignificant. It has been defined a first group of 65 libraries of active and pre-1800 monasteries in Switzerland. They include women's and men's convents of 14 different orders of the Roman Catholic Church: Benedictines (both m and f), Cistercians (m/f), Dominican nuns, Capuchin and Franciscan Friars, Capuchin Sisters, Ursulines, Visitandines, etc. Of course, there are additional younger monasteries in Switzerland,

founded in the 19th or 20th century. However, their libraries will not be considered for the time being.

The handbook will provide a concise overview for all the libraries. Each article on a particular library consists of three parts, starting with institutional indication and user information. Afterwards, a quantitative overview lists the number of manuscripts incunabula and prints dating from a given century (16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th), accompanied by an explanation of the counting method and a list of all current and historical catalogues. The third part of the article describes the inventory, the history of the library, the room situation and finally the library's present state. The articles, whose lengths is strictly limited, aim to document the actual state of monastic libraries and provide the basis for further research into their history.

A printed handbook is planned to be published in 2022. In addition, the articles are published on the new Helvetia Sacra web database (<https://www.helvetiasacra.ch/>) as soon as they are finished. This database contains the data of the index volume of the compendium *Helvetia Sacra* on the history of ecclesiastical institutions in Switzerland, published between 1972 and 2007 in 28 volumes (Bissegger et al., 2007). In 2018, the Abbey Library of St. Gall took over the index data in order to have a new, more modern web database created (online since 2020). It is to be expanded into an information platform on the history of Swiss monasteries. Therefore, the articles of the *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* will be published on this platform. This procedure allows us to update the online articles in the future. This is an important feature because more Swiss monasteries will be closed in the coming decades and possible changes of ownership of library holdings should be documented.

Swiss monastic libraries – a short overview

Overall, there are great differences between monastic libraries in Switzerland. On the one hand, there are large Benedictine libraries like the ones in Disentis or Einsiedeln, whose book inventories cover practically all fields of religious and secular studies (estimated 70.000 and 185.000 titles respectively) (Bernhard, Holenstein, 2019). On the other hand, there exist much smaller libraries like the one of the Capuchin sisters in Tübach (Fig. 3), whose book collection counts just over 3.000 titles and is limited to ascetical and mystical literature (Holenstein, 2018c). In general, the affiliation to one or another religious order is central for the growth and the composition of a monastic book collection. Therefore, Benedictine libraries (but not the ones of the Benedictine nuns) are usually the largest and they have a universal orientation, while the libraries of Capuchin sisters are among the smallest and with predominantly spiritual literature. In between

these two extremes, other monasteries show a great variety of library profiles.

Some Swiss monasteries have a significant historical book collection with manuscripts, incunabula and old printings from before 1800. Such an example is the collegiate church St. Michael in Beromünster (Fig. 4), although it is not a classic monastic community. The canons own medieval manuscripts and several hundred historical prints from the 15th to 18th centuries (Holenstein, 2021b). Others, for example the Capuchin sisters in Grimmenstein, have a fairly modern library that contains very few books printed before 1800 (Holenstein, 2018d).

The inventory history can vary greatly from monastery to monastery: in some places, there is continuity over centuries, favoured by the lack of wars, fires and other disasters. In others, a lot of the cultural heritage has been destroyed throughout history. An example for the latter is the library of the monks in Disentis, which has been destroyed and rebuilt several times since the Middle Ages. Therefore, this Benedictine library has almost no medieval manuscripts, even though a collection of codices is documented as early as the 10th century. Furthermore, there are monasteries that were dissolved in the 19th century for political reasons (period



Fig. 3. Library of the Capuchin sisters in Tübach
 Рис. 3. Библиотека сестер-капуцинок в Тюбахе



Fig. 4. Abbey library Beromünster
 Рис. 4. Библиотека монастыря в Беромюнстере

of secularization) and re-erected in the 20th century, like the Benedictine monastery of Fischingen (Holenstein, 2019). The old library was taken over by the canton of Thurgovia after the dissolution in 1848. As a result, a collection of largely modern monastic books was formed in the 20th century and located in a baroque hall (Fig. 5) after the re-erection of the religious community.

As shown above, there is a great variety of monastic libraries. Hence, not all of them face the same challenges described in the following chapter.

Challenges for Swiss monastic libraries

Maybe the greatest problem – not only for the libraries, but also for the monasteries in general – is the present decline in the number of religious. In this regard, the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin serves as a good example. In 1961, 858 friars lived in 51 convents in Switzerland. By 2019, the number have decreased dramatically to 128 friars in 15 convents. Only 15 of the formers are younger than 60 years (Schweizer, 2019). A similar decline can be observed in almost all religious orders, although not to the same extent as for the Capuchins. The reasons for this significant decline of religious cannot be discussed here. But the consequences must be addressed because they have a strong impact on the cultural heritage of the monasteries, whether books, documents, paintings or buildings.

First and foremost, the decline of religious means a decrease in religious houses. Several monasteries have been dissolved in the past decades. This always raises the question of what will happen to the library. Today, in such cases efforts are being made to transfer the valuable historical book collections to state

libraries. This illustrates the example of the Capuchin convents in Solothurn and Sion. In the former case, the convent was dissolved in 2003 and its complete library was transferred to the Zentralbibliothek Solothurn (Central Library of both the city and the canton Solothurn) (Bider, Borer, 2016). In the second example, although the convent was not dissolved, the historical book collection was handed over to the Médiathèque Valais (Library of the canton of Valais) in 2011 (Fonds de livres..., 2014). The advantages of such state solutions are storage under good conservation conditions and the accessibility of the books to the public. However, the libraries can lose their character as an integral monastic collection, precisely because state libraries usually do not take over an entire monastic book collection, but only valuable or rare books – often the historical book collection. As a result, an essential part of the character of a library that has grown over centuries is lost and the holdings are fragmented. In a similar case, the Abbey Library of St. Gall took over the old holdings (around 200 books printed before 1800) and some selected recent books from the convent of the Capuchin sisters of Wattwil, which was dissolved in 2011. The main part of this monastic library with 19th and 20th century books is still in a room of the former convent and is hardly noticed anymore.

A second problem is the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult in existing monasteries to continue maintaining the library. Since fewer religious have to accomplish the existing tasks, the maintenance of a book collection is not the priority and tends to be neglected. In some monasteries, the library or parts of it have received little attention for several decades. This implies that knowledge about the library, its order and its stock will be lost. Many



Fig. 5. Library of the Benedictines in Fischingen
Рис. 5. Библиотека бенедиктинцев в Фишингене

monasteries therefore depend on external help in handling librarian questions.

As a result, there are major challenges in the area of cataloguing. Most monastic libraries do not use library software, but keep *Microsoft Excel* directories or something similar. It is noticeable that these directories are often defective (mistakes in writing, incomplete book references, etc.), because in many cases they were made by non-experts. In addition, many catalogues are no longer up-to-date, because in the past decades the religious have spent less and less time on cataloguing. It is not uncommon for catalogues to cover only parts of a library, often the younger book collection, which is still consulted by the community. For the historical books, which are hardly used or researched any more, the most current catalogues are sometimes several decades old. Thus, the catalogue of the historical book collection in the monastery of the Cistercian nuns in Magdenau is more than a hundred years old (Fig. 6) (Holenstein, 2018a). At least, a catalogue exists. Many historic book collections of other monasteries are completely uncatalogued.

The critical storage situation in many places also fits in with this observation. Knowledge on professional conservation handling of books is only available in a few monasteries. The historical stock in particular suffers from this situation. Since historical books are hardly used any more, they are stowed away in an unused cell or in the attic. Little attention is paid to the climatic conditions. Some of the books are under thick layers of dust. Other books have been stored unordered in boxes or cupboards for years. In such cases, many religious lack an overview of their library's holdings.

Conclusion

To conclude, it should be pointed out once again that there are monastic libraries that are managed extremely well. Libraries like the one of the Benedictines of Einsiedeln, already mentioned several times, or the one of the Benedictine nuns of Müstair (Bernhard, Holenstein, 2020) can be cited as examples. And there are others, where efforts are currently being made to reorganize the library in a professional way². Such libraries are not equally affected by the problems described.

From the challenges described, it is clear that the written cultural heritage of many monasteries faces an uncertain future with possible changes of ownership. It is precisely the decline in the number of religious that will continue to preoccupy us in the future, and this raises the question of how to deal with the monastic book collections. It is all the more important to document the current state of monastic libraries as well as to educate and raise awareness, both in the monastic communities themselves and among the general public, since the monasteries preserve a significant part of the written cultural heritage in Switzerland. Therefore, questions of research should go hand in hand with questions of preservation or conservation. It is precisely for this purpose that the *Handbook of Monastic Libraries in Switzerland* serves as a basic survey of the written cultural heritage preserved in Swiss monastic libraries.

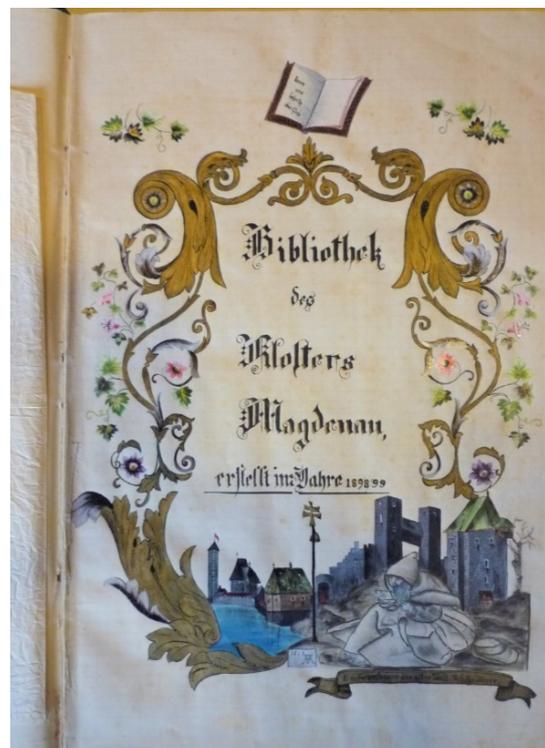


Fig. 6. Catalogue (1898/99) for the historical book collection of the Cistercian nuns in Magdenau
Рис. 6. Каталог (1898/99) коллекции книг по истории цистерцианских монахинь в Магденау

² One example among others is the convent of the Dominican nuns in Weesen, which has hired a librarian to reorganize the monastic library (Holenstein, 2018b).

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