



The Aldus Society
PO Box 1150
Worthington, OH 43085
Aldussociety.com

Reprinted with permission from The Columbus Dispatch

Abbey's Medieval Treasures Captivate Ohio State Expert

(April 16, 2003)

By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

By the time the news reached the Abbey of St. Gall it was almost too late. The Magyars had crossed the Austrian border into Switzerland and were headed west, the abbey directly in their path.

The monks of St. Gall scrambled into the abbey library -- one of the greatest in the medieval world -- and began stuffing manuscripts into their robes to be carried into the neighboring mountains and safety.

Flash forward a thousand years to an abbey library routinely invaded by 100,000 visitors each year, including Anna Grotans, an Ohio State University associate professor of German. Instead of carrying swords and spears, though, these visitors don big, fluffy felt shoes before entering the library -- to protect the old inlaid wooden floor.

"The library has 2,000 (handwritten) manuscripts dating from the eighth to the 11th century," Grotans said. "That's a lot of manuscripts in one place."

Grotans -- whose specialty is Old High German -- said the monks preserved their collection for centuries despite incursions by the Magyars and Saracens and a fire that burned down the library.

"Many of the abbey libraries from the time," Grotans said of the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, "were eventually secularized and their collections dispersed. So St. Gall is special."

Geoffrey Smith is a professor and head of rare books and manuscripts at the Ohio State University Libraries.

"It's been an enduring trait of humankind to spread ideas, to spread knowledge, from the beginning of language to the present," Smith said.

Abbey scribes spent years copying Latin works by Cicero, Ovid, Virgil, Horace and others. In most cases, the originals have long since vanished.

"They didn't just preserve the great writers. They learned logic from Aristotle. The scribes really saved all this stuff for us, for later generations."

The abbey library also has a manuscript in Old High German of The Our Father. Dated circa 790, it is the oldest example of German on the page.

"And look at the script," Grotans said, excitedly pointing to a reproduction of a different manuscript page. "That script is basically Times New Roman, the same script we use today."

The manuscripts are often ornate, brightly colored and laden with gold gilt.

“The Dark Ages is a misnomer when it comes to the abbey,” Grotans said. “They were illuminating manuscripts in the Dark Ages.”

Grotans first studied the manuscripts to learn about Old High German but became fascinated with notes written in the margins, evidence of the life of the abbey.

“The abbey had both an internal and an external school. They taught their own students but also taught the children of the local nobility, to make extra income.”

Grotans came across 1,000-year-old pages filled with schoolboy doodles.

“Look at this,” she said. “This student drew caricatures of the monks with balding heads. And there are doodles of swords and warriors fighting.” Another is of a young boy, his face full of what look like pimples.

“Another page depicts a beer vat and includes a poem about beer,” Grotans said. “It was written by a famous monk, Akkehart, to a friend fond of drink.”

The library also houses the architectural plan for the abbey, a plan “detailed down to the last toilet.” A history of the abbey, written around 1050, sheds even more light on the daily life of its inhabitants.

“These manuscripts are not entirely unlike computers. They really engage the senses,” Grotans said.

“They are made of leather and stink like it. . . . The pages are medieval versions of hypertext. You have a main body, ornate embellishments, marginal notes. There are several different ways into a text.”

Grotans wanted to know what it was like to live at the abbey, how Latin was taught, how students were disciplined and what the monks made of their sources.

Pointing to another facsimile page, she said, “See how all the words are run together? That’s because no one read silently. You added the breaks as you read aloud.

“You can really reconstruct this medieval world by letting the manuscripts talk.”