

Heimarbeit

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The Abbey library of Saint Gall

The Abbey library of St. Gallen is recognised as one of the richest medieval libraries in the world. It is home to one of the most comprehensive collections of early medieval books in the German-speaking part of Europe. The library consists of over 160,000 books, of which 2100 are handwritten. Nearly half of the handwritten books are from the Middle Ages and 400 are over 1000 years old. The manuscript B of the Nibelungenlied is kept here. The library books are available for public use, but the books printed before 1900 must be read in the Reading Room.



The Rococo style library hall

Lately the Stiftsbibliothek has launched a project for the digitisation of the priceless manuscript collection, which currently contains over 400 documents that are available on the Codices Electronici Sangallenses webpage.

The library also preserves a unique 9th-century document, known as the Plan of St. Gall, the only surviving major architectural drawing from the roughly 700-year period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the 13th century. The Plan drawn was never actually built, and was so named because it was kept at the abbey library, where it remains to this day. The plan was an ideal of what a well-designed and well-supplied monastery should have.

The library hall, designed by the architect Peter Thumb in a Rococo style, is considered the most beautiful non-sacred room of this style in Switzerland and one of the most perfect library rooms around the world. It is open to the public. It also holds exhibitions as well as concerts and other events.

Saint Gall and Saint Othmar

Gallus (c. 550 - c. 646) was an Irish disciple and one of the traditionally twelve companions of Saint Columbanus on his mission from Ireland to the continent.

Gall and his companions established themselves with Columbanus at first at Luxeuil in Gaul. In 610, they travelled further south, up the Rhine River to Bregenz, but when in 612 Columbanus traveled on to Italy, Gall had to remain behind due to illness. He recovered and led the life of a hermit in the forests southwest of Lake Constance, near the source of the river Steinach. He died around 646-650, and his feast is celebrated on 16 October. After his death a small church was erected, which developed into the Abbey of St. Gall.

Othmar (c. 689 - c. 759) was a priest appointed as the first abbot of the Abbey of St. Gall. He rebuilt the hermitage Gallus had left behind, and he is called the founder of the monastery. He introduced the Benedictine rule, which was in effect until the closure of the monastery in 1805. He also founded the monastery school, which became the foundation of the famous Stiftsbibliothek (Monastery library).

He died as an exile on the small island of Werd in Lake Constance on false accusations by two neighboring nobles. His feast day is November 16. He is buried in St. Gallen, where he had been taken secretly ten years after his death. It is said that his body was still completely intact when he was taken over Lake Constance to the town of Steinach and further to St. Gallen. As the weather was very hot when his men rowed his body over the lake, they became thirsty. Legend has it that the barrel of wine they had would not become empty, regardless of how much they drank. Therefore the wine barrel became one of his attributes.

Heimarbeit

As long as embroidery was handwork, it was almost exclusively women's work. This changed abruptly with the introduction of embroidery machines. The work on the machine was men's work, the women (or children), however, were still required as helpers. They had to replace broken needles and thread them.

Some historians looked favourably on Heimarbeit. They saw in the long factory working hours the reason for weakened family ties and welcomed the opportunity to work at home. However, the Heimarbeit incomes were very low. The workrooms were often damp and cold and poorly ventilated.