



LIGUE DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES EUROPÉENNES DE RECHERCHE
ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Manuscript Librarians Group

Switzerland – Backgrounds

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Introduction

Switzerland's federal structure is mirrored in its network of libraries and archives. In every Canton there is a library in charge of storing the cultural documentary heritage (mainly books and manuscripts), as well as a State Archive. The two national institutions, the Swiss National Library and the Swiss Federal Archives, both located in Berne, both created after the birth of the Federal State in 1848, keep very few documents prior to the 19th century.

The main manuscript collections are held in cantonal libraries and in convents. The web page www.codices.ch, which is maintained by the Curatorium for the cataloguing of medieval and premodern manuscripts (see below), contains information on Swiss collections and compiles a list of catalogues and other finding aids. An inventory of the manuscript transmission of German medieval texts is kept up to date by the project group '[Handschriftencensus](#)', which counts Rudolf Gamper of the Vadiana Library of St. Gall among its members. As a major development for scholarly research on manuscripts, the E-Codices project '[Virtual manuscript Library of Switzerland](#)' makes several hundred complete digital copies of manuscripts available on the internet. Only the major Swiss collections are mentioned below.

[Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen](#)

Included in the UNESCO list of global cultural heritage sites in 1983, the Abbey Library of St. Gall is the oldest library in Switzerland, and one of the earliest and most important monastic libraries in the world. The abbey was founded in 612, and followed the Rule of St. Benedict from 747 onwards. The first indication of the existence of a library and scriptorium appears in the famous plan of the abbey dating from around 820. At the core of the collection today is the largely indigenous corpus of Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts dating from the 8th to the 11th centuries. The Baroque Hall of the library, which houses exhibits, is one of the major cultural attractions of Switzerland. The monastery was dissolved in 1805. Today, the Abbey Library is owned by the Catholic Administration (*Katholischer Konfessionsteil*) of the Canton of St. Gall.

[Kloster Einsiedeln](#)

The Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln, founded in 835, in the canton of Schwyz, is still active

and is an important pilgrimage site. The 'Great Library' Hall has early Rococo decorations. Despite disasters, pillage and fires, the library today holds 1230 manuscripts (500 of them written before 1500) and 1100 incunabula and early prints (up to 1520).

[Universitätsbibliothek Basel](#)

The University Library of Basel, first mentioned in 1471 (the University was founded in 1460), is the oldest secular Swiss library and keeps over 1700 medieval manuscripts, many of them of indigenous origin. Among the collections inherited from monasteries, the Greek manuscripts of the Dominican theologian John of Ragusa, who played an important part in the Council of Basel, deserve special mention.

[Burgerbibliothek Bern](#)

The *Burgerbibliothek* in Berne, which belongs to the civic community, houses a well-known collection of medieval manuscripts, the *Bongarsiana Codices*, assembled by the French humanist and diplomat Jacques Bongars (1554-1612) whose heir, Jakob Graviseth (1598-1658), married the daughter of a Bernese aristocrat and gave the collection to the community in 1632. Other manuscripts were added to this collection which comprises about 650 medieval codices.

[Zentralbibliothek Zürich](#)

The Central Library of Zurich stores about 650 medieval manuscripts, including quite a few Hebrew and Oriental documents. It inherited the libraries of the Cathedral chapter of the Grossmünster, as well as of the Rheinau Monastery. Among its most famous manuscripts are a red Psalter (Zürcher Purpursalter, 6th century) and the World Chronicle of Rudolf von Ems (around 1340).

[Bibliothèque de Genève](#)

The Library of Geneva keeps two major collections: the 88 manuscripts from the Petau library (Paul and Alexander Petau were French members of Parliament in the late 16th and early 17th century) acquired in Paris in 1720 by the young Genevan minister Ami Lullin, who bequeathed them to the library in 1756, and the Comites Latentes collection, property of a foundation, deposited at the Geneva Library in 1977. Many of these manuscripts are illuminated (the Geneva collection is renowned for its relevance in the field of history of art), and come from France and Italy.

[Bibliotheca Bodmeriana](#), Cologne

Near Geneva, in Cologne, the *Bibliotheca Bodmeriana*, owned by a foundation created in 1971 by the collector Martin Bodmer (1899-1971), houses a distinguished collection of books and manuscripts, on display in a museum designed by the Swiss architect Mario Botta in 1999.

[Zentral- und Hochschulbibliothek Luzern](#)

The Central and University Library of Luzern holds about 175 medieval manuscripts, most of which come from the Franciscan monastery of Luzern and the Cistercian Abbey of St. Urban that was dissolved in 1848.

Private archives

In this paragraph we will leave aside public archives. Only private archives will be mentioned, as many of them are traditionally kept in historical libraries of Switzerland. Useful information can be found on the web page of the [Swiss Association of Archivists](#). The following article presents an overview of archives in Switzerland: Barbara Roth-Lochner and Rodolfo Huber, 'Les Archives en Suisse', in *Archivpraxis in der Schweiz/Pratiques archivistiques en Suisse*, Baden 2007, p. 29-45.

[HelveticArchives](#) — Database of the Swiss National Library; includes the cumulative index of private archives that was printed in 1992 (Anne-Marie Schmutz-Pfister. *Répertoire sommaire des fonds manuscrits conservés dans les bibliothèques et Archives de Suisse/Repertorium der*

handschriftlichen Nachlässe in den Bibliotheken und Archiven der Schweiz, im Auftrag der Vereinigung Schweizerischer Bibliothekare und der Vereinigung Schweizerischer Archivare, herausgegeben von der Allgemeinen Geschichtsforschenden Gesellschaft der Schweiz. 2. stark erw. Aufl. bearb. von Gaby Knoch-Mund. *Quellen zur Schweizer Geschichte*, Neue Folge, Abt. 4, Handbücher, Bd. 8a. Basel, Kommissionsverlag Krebs, 1992 (1st edition 1967)). Unfortunately it is quite difficult to keep the data base up to date since the input of information is organised on a voluntary basis and each library or archive is responsible for its contribution.

Private archives of persons, families and corporate bodies are accessible in public archive centres (Cantonal Archives, local archives, Federal Archives), in historical libraries, in thematic collections as well as at certain private corporate entities (NGOs, firms). Traditionally, 'cultural' (in a wide sense) private archives are kept in libraries, whereas more politically or socially focused private archives are directed to public archive centres. All libraries that retain manuscripts also keep several hundred private fonds of families of their canton, of intellectuals, artists, scientists, scholars, writers, etc. The Burgerbibliothek in Berne, for example, owns the archives of Albrecht von Haller and Jeremias Gotthelf; the Basel Library the Amerbach family archive with manuscripts of Erasmus of Rotterdam, archives of several generations of the Bernouilli mathematicians; the Geneva Library the archives of the Reformators (Calvin, Beza), of Charles Bonnet, of the Saussure family, of Henry Dunant; Zurich the archive of Johann Jacob Bodmer, of Elias Canetti, of the Escher and Gessner families. Libraries also keep collections of modern manuscripts, autographs and letters.

In Berne, the Swiss National Library houses the [Swiss Literary Archives](#) (SLA) which collect documents connected to the literature of all four linguistic regions of Switzerland: French, German, Italian and Romansh, with particular emphasis on the 20th and 21st centuries. The SLA keeps the archives of Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Patricia Highsmith, who spent the last years of her life in the canton of Ticino

There are several other special collections of private archives that must be mentioned: in Zurich, the [Archiv für Zeitgeschichte](#) (Archives of Contemporary History), housed at the Swiss federal Institute of Technology in Zurich since 1947, holds about 400 fonds of persons and institutions in the specific area of political and economic history, as well as Jewish contemporary history. Also in Zurich, the [Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv](#) (Swiss Social Archives) keeps private papers and corporate archives in the field of social – mainly unionist – activities since 1906. In Basel, the Swiss Economic Archives ([Schweizerisches Wirtschaftsarchiv](#) (Swiss Economic Archives), a department of the University Library founded in 1910, holds archives of all sorts of firms and industries.

Collaboration

There are several forums for manuscript curators that meet on a regular basis. The oldest and most informal group is supported by BIS (*Bibliothèque Information Suisse*), the Swiss national association of libraries and librarians. Meetings are held at least once a year. Two more formal working groups are sponsored by the [Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social sciences](#) (SAGW/ASSH):

- The [Kuratorium "Katalogisierung der mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Handschriften der Schweiz"](#) (Curatorium for the cataloguing of medieval and early modern manuscripts), whose goal is to help smaller libraries to find qualified scholars to catalogue their manuscripts. It takes responsibility for the scientific quality of these finding aids.
- The [Codices electronici Confoederationis Helveticae \(CeCH\) Curatorium](#) that "works to further the digitization of medieval manuscript holdings and the application of digitization technologies and techniques for manuscript-based scholarly research in medieval studies". On the e-codices site, several hundred complete digital reproductions of the manuscripts are linked with corresponding scholarly descriptions.