



**BETH**

**BETH Bulletin  
2024**

---

No 02

Hannie Riley and Jussi Hyvärinen

# The Reorganisation of the Library at Mariastein Abbey: An Adventure with a Happy Ending

**Gabriella Hanke Knaus**

Director of the Mariastein Monastery Library,  
Kloster Mariastein, Switzerland

In the summer of 2013, the congregation of the Benedictine monastery of Mariastein (Switzerland, [www.kloster-mariastein.ch/en/](http://www.kloster-mariastein.ch/en/)) had to decide whether to close their library or to radically reorganise it. For the monks of Mariastein, who live their lives according to the Rule of St Benedict and the maxims 'ora, labora et lege' (pray, work and read), this moment was a great challenge. It was not easy to admit that, despite all the work done for the library over the past 50 years, its condition in the summer of 2013 required such a critical decision. And it was quite understandable that there were feelings of resignation, anger, and incomprehension when the monks talked about the library. In 2013, far too few people were aware that the state of the monastery library was a reflection of the history of the monastery since 1874. The monastery had already been dissolved in 1798 during the revolutionary period, then rebuilt at great expense from 1802, but the second dissolution took place in 1874 as a result of the Kulturkampf (cultural war). However, the Swiss government made a commitment to maintain the pilgrimages. The abbot and monastery settled down in Delle, France. In 1906, they established their new home in Bregenz on Lake Constance. In 1941, driven away by the Nazi regime, the monks took refuge by returning to Mariastein. In 1971, the monastery was rebuilt under civil law following a cantonal referendum. The complete renovation of the abbey complex began. The project was successfully completed with the renovation of the church in 1999-2000 (Benediktinerkloster n.d.).

From 1874 to 1941, and until 1971, the Mariastein monastery was always geographically fragmented. Some monks remained in Mariastein to look after the pilgrimage, while the majority of the monks were in exile in Delle and Bregenz. In order to maintain a foothold in Switzerland, the monks of Mariastein also took over the care of the Karl Borromäus

College in Altdorf (canton of Uri) in 1906. In Mariastein, Delle, Bregenz and Altdorf, spiritual reading and the reading of scientific and literary works were an important part of Benedictine life, so libraries were established in all the places of activity. With the restoration of the abbey in 1971, the monastic life of the monks moved back to Mariastein. In 1981, the Bregenz and Altdorf sites were abandoned and their libraries also moved to Mariastein. In that same year, Father Lukas Schenker, the former Abbot of Mariastein, began to merge the three existing library collections into one. Given the volume of books, this was a Herculean task, and it is only thanks to a team of library specialists that the reorganisation is now complete.

In 2013, none of those involved could have imagined that, in 2022, two full library halls with a large number of uncatalogued books and a further 11 external depots of uncatalogued books would once again be a functioning library in a new spatial design, with a catalogue that is now available online worldwide. The new library electronic discovery tool is found at [www.klosterbibliothek-mariastein.ch](http://www.klosterbibliothek-mariastein.ch).

The journey from an unusable collection of books with many duplicates to a library with a clear profile in terms of its collection, preservation, and use was only possible thanks to the Conventuals' realisation that a library is something very dynamic that goes beyond the physical space and needs to be constantly maintained. This dynamic began with the development of a collection concept. It comprises the following focal points:

- Dealing with duplicates: Duplicates are not kept, with the exception of publications on Mariastein and works that are always needed in the monastery (breviaries, commentaries on Rules of Saint Benedict, and so on);
- Restrictions on the acquisition of illustrated books with the exception of works on Mariastein;
- Dealing with damaged and broken media;
- Dealing with the estates of confreres;
- Acquisitions and donations: donations are only accepted according to the criteria of the collection concept;
- Reduction from 757 journal titles to 98 current and 211 expired journals;
- Determination of the thematic focus of the reorganised monastery library on the areas of theology, history, fine arts and music, literature, philosophy, and natural sciences.

The collection concept was approved in 2015 and made it possible to define the strategic objectives of the reorganisation. In addition to the collection concept, all aspects of the reorganisation were described in a few words.

1. the monastery library has adequate, secure rooms, and a reserve of space that will ensure its further development over the next 30 to 40 years;
2. the monastery library has an effective collection concept that guides the further development of the library and grants the persons responsible for the library the corresponding competencies and duties;
3. the holdings of the monastery library are catalogued and can be accessed and used in the rooms of the monastery library according to their physical nature (historical book holdings or modern editions);
4. the monastery library has an appropriate library management system for cataloguing and use;
5. the implementation of the reorganisation will take 10 years.

Since the start of the actual reorganisation in January 2016, the collection concept and strategic goals have been the 'common thread' guiding all steps of the reorganisation, which have been described in a comprehensive concept and whose implementation has now also been calculated in terms of working hours and financial costs.

The start of the actual reorganisation was difficult. While the Conventuals approved the measures to reduce duplicates and journals, as well as the preservation of the collection, they rejected the first feasibility study for the architectural reorganisation for cost reasons. It took more time and initial results in the restructuring of the library collection before a second feasibility study by Co.Architekten Bern was approved in 2019 (Co-Architekten n.d.). The initial feasibility study envisaged merging the two existing library rooms and presenting the catalogued media of the non-historical book collection (books published after 1850) in an open-shelf library. The new library room was to become a place for reading and studying, which thanks to its spatial concept could also be used for other events organised by the monastery (such as readings or concerts). The historical book collection and the music collection, on the other hand, were to be stored in a space-saving underground room with a mobile shelving system. The main reason for this was the proximity to the monastery's underground archive, which has been suffering from a lack of space for years. A new secure room would also have relieved the pressure on the monastery archive.

In the second feasibility study, of 2019, the construction of an underground archive room with a mobile shelving system was abandoned. Instead, the two library rooms were to double as the archive room. Instead of freestanding shelves, the open-shelf library was now given a mobile shelving system. This does not apply to the historical book collection, which is kept under lock and key in different mobile racks. The old historical bookcases from the 19th century have been incorporated into the new spatial concept and the idea of an open-shelf library: they are used to display the current year's periodicals and new acquisitions of monographs, and provide quick access to the most important encyclopaedias and Bible commentaries. Architecturally, they provide the framework for the newly created reading room at the centre of the now combined halls. Visually, this design element is arranged in such a way that the mobile shelving system, which now houses the entire monastery library and music collection, appears unobtrusive.



[Image 1] A new library room with study and reading space (photo by Silvan Dietrich)

With the decision not to expand the library in terms of space, but rather to condense it structurally, the collection concept had to be supplemented by internal guidelines for individual sub-collections. In the theology section, all books on catechetical practice (teaching materials) were removed because, on the one hand, they no longer correspond to current teaching practice and, on the

other, none of the monks are still active in catechesis. Similarly, in the case of works with several editions, it was decided to keep only the first edition and the most recent edition, since the latter usually revise earlier editions. To date, other internal guidelines have been added (e.g. for books with dedications and facsimile editions). The decision to classify books and new acquisitions not yet catalogued in a new system according to the library's subject areas and the size of the book has also contributed to consolidation. In contrast to the old

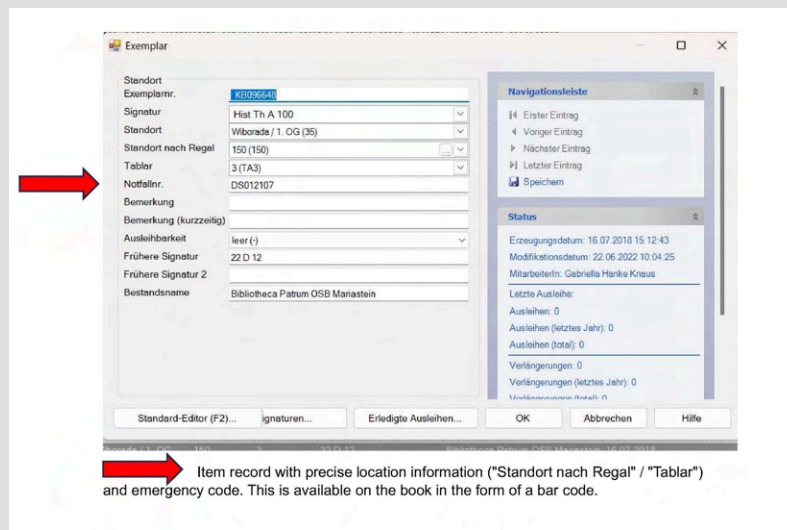
shelving system, this has resulted in a very practical space-saving arrangement. The old system was based on the principle of assigning book signatures according to *NUmerus Currens* and was not very user-friendly for searching. All these internal guidelines complement the new collection concept, and help to ensure that all steps remain traceable for the Convention once the reorganisation is complete.

A major challenge in the reorganisation was the fact that 11 external book depots outside the library were full of uncatalogued books that needed to be compared with the existing card catalogue in the library hall. To transport these from an external book depository to the card catalogue was logistically unmanageable. We decided that the books should not be brought to the card catalogue, but rather the catalogue to the individual book depots. This was only possible by retro-converting the card catalogue and transferring the existing catalogue data to the library management system netbiblio from Alcoda (Bern, [www.alcoda.info/homepage](http://www.alcoda.info/homepage)). For the Mariastein monastery library, the method of outsourcing data entry by the company Medea ([www.medea.eu](http://www.medea.eu)) was chosen. All the cards in the card catalogue were digitised by Medea and entered into netbiblio by their team. The Mariastein monastery library team defined the standard for input to netbiblio based on RDA and MARC21 and supervised Medea's work. The retro-conversion process lasted from May 2017 to the end of 2018. With each data delivery by Medea, the electronic library catalogue of the monastery library was expanded by several hundred titles. For the library team at Mariastein, this meant that the logistical burden of triaging the external book repositories quickly decreased. This was also due to the fact that it became possible to use netbiblio offline in the external depots. What was originally presented as a solution to the logistical problem of efficient triage and de-duplication of book collections outside the library premises turned out to be the basis for the online catalogue of the monastery library ([www.klosterbibliothek-mariastein.ch](http://www.klosterbibliothek-mariastein.ch)), which has been accessible worldwide since 2022.

The electronic library catalogue was also used to manage the logistics of removing all the books during the library's renovation. The new layout meant that after the remodelling, no book would be in the same place as before. This meant that neither moving boxes nor pallets could be labelled with the previous shelf numbers, as these would no longer exist after the move. The new arrangement of the books in the new rooms had to be taken into account even before the move. This was the only way to

ensure that the right moving box was delivered at the right time to move the books. Thanks to the collaboration with the company Docusave, which is advising on the conservation of the collection, their object recording system could also be used for the logistics of the removal and re-stacking, and linked to the library management system netbiblio. This system (docusave, [www.docusave.ch/en/services/logistics-and-inventory](http://www.docusave.ch/en/services/logistics-and-inventory)), originally developed for emergency situations in libraries and archives, ensured that every book in the monastery library could be located by barcode throughout the entire process of removal, return, and new location in the monastery library, regardless of shelf information or shelf marks. As the books were moved, the new location of each book was continuously recorded using the Docusave object recording system. Once this work was completed, the information could be imported into netbiblio using the data import function. Once the books had been moved, the library team had a precise overview of where each book was located in the redesigned library (shelf and tray number). This logistics system enabled the library team to avoid weeks of additional work after the books had been shelved. This has been particularly beneficial for the historic book collection (books published before 1850), which was only recorded in an emergency inventory before the renovation. Thanks to the unique individual identification of each book with a barcode, its location can now be found immediately when cataloguing. This is particularly valuable in the case of multi-volume works, which were not recognised as such in the emergency inventory, but are now physically grouped together in the cataloguing process. Mariastein monastery library will continue to use the 'dual' system of signature and barcode for new acquisitions and new catalogues: the

[Image 2] A new system (photo by Gabriella Hanke Knaus)



purpose of the barcode is no longer to facilitate removal logistics, but to serve as a permanent object code for emergency rescue, which hopefully will never be necessary.

Although the reorganisation of the monastery library is now largely complete, the library team will keep its dynamism. Instead of moving and building, the team is now planning to better address the public, whether through readings from the book collection, interactions with the Instagram account (@mariastein\_klosterbibliothek), or perhaps other forms of dialogue. Mariastein has been given a new lease of life; indeed, perhaps the title of this paper should not be 'an adventure with a happy ending' but rather an ongoing one.

## **Bibliography**

Benediktinerkloster Mariastein n.d. "Be a Blessing: History of the Benedictines of Martiastein." Accessed April 3, 2024. <https://www.kloster-mariastein.ch/en/monastery/history>

Co-Architekten n.d. "Projektbeschreibung: umbau Klosterbibliothek Mariastein." Accessed April 3, 2024. <https://www.co-architekten.ch/projekte/umbau-klosterbibliothek-mariastein.html>