Between tradition and innovation: Web portals on medieval studies in Germany

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am m pleased to give you today an overview of the German web portals. Considering the available time it is necessary to limit to the most important and well-known examples. Philippe Depreux and Olivier Richard have already put them to the link collection of the project »Ménestrel« (→ http://www.ccr.jussieu.fr/urfist/menestrel/mnstde.htm), but most of the German portals are largely unknown and even rarely used in Germany. That is why it can not be wrong to direct the attention of the international mediaevalists to these fundamental instruments again. Before I continue with it, let me first return to some problems which have been already discussed in the introduction lecture.

In Germany as everywhere else, computers and the World Wide Web are indispensable meanwhile for mediaevistic research. Today scientific essays, monographs and critical editions can impossibly be written without the application of electronic text processing like an efficient global literature search without the Online Public Access Catalogues (OPAC) of the university libraries. E-mail has been established as a medium of scientific communication; panels and chatrooms play a subordinated role in the exchange of scientific research and results so far. The online access on digitized latin and vernacular sources facilitates and accelerates the research and critical edition of medieval texts equally. Such collections are for example the »Patrologia Latina Database« published by Chadwyck and Healey in 1995, or the »Library of Latin Text«, former CETEDOC, now administrated by the Brepols Publishers from Turnhout, Belgium, which is both available on CD-ROM as well as online (→ http://www.brepolis.net/index.html)

Despite of these useful instruments, electronic books and periodicals in common are rarely used, because online-presented material suffers from bad reputation in contrast to printed media. That is why web portals – described by Michel Vivant as »omnipresent but mostly unknown objects of the virtual universe« (VIVANT 2004, 52) – are indispensable for scholars and students to get further information about the basics of medieval studies. There is no generally acknowledged definition of the term ›web portal‹: In Germany it is only described as a »collection of weblinks and materials serving as a starting point of information and navigation in the World Wide Web« (STURM/ZIRBIK 2001, 158; WEICHSELBAUMER 2005, 61). It is remarkable, that the most useful German web portals are neither created by central organisations (for

example the »Association of Medievalists in Germany«; their link-collection dedicated to medieval studies and texts has not been updated since 2003) nor by the most famous and traditional institutions and staffs of medieval studies such as the »Monumenta Germaniae Historica«; the homepage of the eldest institution of medieval studies in Germany (→ http://www.mgh.de/) is not useful at all. According to the political structure of Germany, there are no programes to create a central portal like the French »Ménestrel« because education and research are determined by each of the federal states of Germany. Most of the portals are created and administrated by small editorial staffs of younger academics situated at several departments of history or German literature.

1. Mediaevum.de:

→ http://www.mediaevum.de/

In 1999 Mediaevum.de was founded by three young scholars of several German universities as a private enterprise independently from institutions of research or departments of universities. Some of the pages are made in cooperation with departments of single universities. The aim of Mediaevum.de »…is to provide an extensive and reliable compilation of current information, sources and tools for medieval studies. Its centerpoint is the German and Latin literature of the high Middle Ages as well as that of the later Middle Ages and humanism.« (→ http://english.mediaevum.de/haupt/7.htm) Beyond that, many for the mediaeval studies generally and for different disciplines particularly usable materials are made available. The portal offers current and reliable information in a clear, alphabetical order. Usability and graphic organization are outstanding. The portal includes the following categories: »Adresses and Homepages«, »Research« (eg conference calendar, projects of the German Research Foundation [DFG]), »Bibliographical Information« (with links to the most important online catalogues and meta-catalogues in Germany and Europe), »Databases and Tools« (online texts, dictionaries), »Literature on the WWW« (digitized sources in Latin and vernacular), »Manuscripts on the WWW« (manuscripts databases, tutorials for palaeography, codicology and epigraphy), »Other Disciplines« (links to the most important portals for history, theology, history of art, philosophy and so on; that is why Mediaevum.de is consequently a meta-portal, too), »Tools for Under-graduates« and the category »*Satura mediaevalis*« (literature in movies, links to reenactment groups). All offered links are fully commented, so that the user can evaluate them and report incorrect or defective links immediately to the editors. Particularly recommendable links are highlighted. A sitemap and a »guided tour« facilitate the use. The mainpage is available in German and English, the subordinated pages so far only in German.

The portal »The virtual Middle Ages« (Mittelalter virtuell, →
http://web.uni-bamberg.de/split/ls-bennewitz/w3m/) works in the same
way. It was created by the specialist in german studies Ruth
Weichselbaumer at the university of Bamberg from 2001 to 2004.
Weichselbaumer collected and commented links of the most important
web portals, search-engines, online-editions, bibliographies, manuscript
and library catalogues. Besides she directed her attention to online-
learning. She supplemented her portal with the book ›Mittelalter
virtuell. Mediävistik im Internet‹, in which she also discussed
opportunities and problems of the New Media and the World Wide
Web.

2. Virtual Library Geschichte – Mittelalter

→ http://www.phil.uni-erlangen.de/~p1ges/ma_fenster.html

Since 1997 the historian Stuart Jenks, professor of mediaeval history at
the university of Erlangen, has made up one of the most extensive web
portals on medieval history. The »Virtual Library Geschichte –
Mittelalter« forms a part of the »Virtual Library Geschichte
Deutschland«, which belongs itself to the world-wide bibliographical
network »Virtual Library History« established at the University of
Kansas (JENKS/ TIEDEMANN 2000, 57sq.). The »Virtual Library Geschichte
– Mittelalter« includes hundreds of web-addresses supplemented with
more or less detailed commentaries. They are arranged alphabetically
for the most European countries. The portal includes the following
categories: »General Matters« (online-manuals, encyclopedia,
dictionaries), »News« (scholarships, grants, conferences), »Research and
the Web« (online archives, digitized editions and edition-projects),
sources and source-collections, mailinglists of German medievalists,
homepages and research reports of the historical departments of
universities in Germany, »Historical Auxiliary Sciences« such as
palaeography, heraldry, codicology, diplomatics, bibliographical
auxiliaries, instruments and online catalogues, contents of the most
important german periodicals on medieval studies, online periodicals,
manuscripts and incunabula of the European countries, some
bibliographies on history of some countries during the Middle Ages (eg
the Empire, Prussia, England, France, Spain, the Patrimonium Petri and
others). The user may also report incorrect or defective links
immediately to the provider per Mail.

3. Regesta imperii online

→ http://regesta-imperii.uni-giessen.de/

The Regesta Imperii, an inventory of all charters and historiographic
sources of Roman-German kings from the Carolingians to Maximilian I.
and of the Popes of the early and high Middle Ages, is one of the major
sources of German and European history. Like the »Monumenta

Germaniae Historica« it is also one of the most famous, traditional and established projects of historical research in Germany. The undertaking was started by Johann Friedrich Böhmer (1795-1863), city librarian in Frankfurt, who started to collect and publish charters of German emperors and kings in 1829. He originally saw his work as a preliminary step into the creation of the MGH, but the »Regesta Imperii«, using a broader approach developed by Böhmer, gradually became a project in their own right. 1967 prompted the foundation of the »German Regesta Imperii Commission«. At first, this commission was founded by the German Research Foundation, but later became a long term project at the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz, Germany. (→ http://regesta-imperii.uni-giessen.de/lang_en/fr_inst_gesch.html) The homepage of this project includes the following sections similar to a portal:

1) The cooperation project »Regesta Imperii Online« of the regesta commission in Mainz and the Bavarian State Library in Munich makes all published volumes of the Regesta Imperii free of charge available, both as searchable full text and as images of the book pages.

2) The »Regesta imperii«-OPAC, which is both an online bibliography of the literature quoted in »Regesta Imperii« publications and a freely accessible, comprehensive database of literature on the European Middle Ages, including publications of all disciplines (e.g. archaeology, history, literature, music, history of art, philology, philosophy, theology). In addition to the texts quoted directly in the publications of the »Regesta Imperii« this OPAC includes publications relating to all periods, but mainly about the medieval history of all areas of Europe. Particular emphasis is put on various texts such as essays and papers from the periodica »Historische Zeitschrift«, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung«, Zeitschrift für historische Forschung«, »Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins« etc. and contributions to commemorative volumes. The main focus of this instrument is directed to sources and research on sources, archives and libraries, auxiliary sciences, political, constitutional, and legal history (emperors and kings, regions and countries), history of the church (popes, bishoprics, convents, monasteries), social history (nobility, citizens, peasants), local and regional history. The »Regesta Imperii«-OPAC is a tool for academic research, not a library catalogue, and therefore does not provide any information on availability etc. (→ http://regesta-imperii.uni-giessen.de/lang_en/index_lit.html)

Finally, the page includes the history of the »Regesta-Imperii«-project and some special weblinks, for example to the MGH, the »Virtual Library« Erlangen and the Archive of pictures in Marburg.

4. Besides these portals determined to a larger circle of users, most Departments of History of the German universities offer mostly uncommented linklists as basic service for their students, graduates and

scholars. A characteristic example is the linklist prepared on the homepage of the Institute of Early Medieval Studies of the Westfälische-Wilhelms-Universität in Münster by Franz Neiske (→ http://www.uni-muenster.de/Fruehmittelalter/Service/links_ifma.htm). The collection includes links to several departments of history, the Collaborative Research Centres of the »German Research Foundation« and other institutions in Germany and Europe, to library catalogues, online bibliographies and medieval sources and last but not least to some other web portals, for example to the »Virtual Library« or to »Ménestrel«. Certainly the collection is not completed, but however it contains the most important web addresses, which are also specified in the larger portals.

5. Humanities Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte

→ http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/index.asp

Since 1996 the online-forum 'Humanities Sozial- und Kulturgeschichte' (in German known as »HSozKult«) has been offering information and communication services for historians. This network forms a part of the American public-sponsored »Humanities-Net« (→ http://www.h-net.msu.edu/), which is dedicated to promote education and research in the humanities. The editorial staff of the German part is located at the Humboldt-University in Berlin. Today more than 1100 historians subscribe as members of the HSozKult-network to get information on congresses, scholarships, grants and jobs, reviews of published books and contents of the most important printed periodicals on medieval studies. All information are available at the HSozKult-homepage and are sent to the subscribed members of the network by newsletters weekly.

The introduced German web portals are altogether very different, they are wide-spreaded from simple linklists up to information networks and well-structured portals. The web-design depends on the ability of the editors and their actual aims. All portals mentioned in my paper include the most important and most useful links and are well commented. But the open and »democratic« structure of the World Wide Web is reponsible for an important problem of both link-collections and elaborated web portals: to find and evaluate new pages which could belong to the matter of the actual web portal, and to keep the whole portal up to date. Furthermore, if some of the included links and web-adresses are out of order, the portal can not serve as a starting point of research and investigation in the web. However it is impossible for one person or a small editorial staff with limited jobs to fulfil this task because the World Wide Web expands almost exponentially. In my opinion only the united efforts of scholars, web-operators, network-administrators and last but not least of many attentive users can guarantee the function of a web portal as a reliable instrument of research.

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