

# Archival Review: The International Centre for Archival Research (ICARUS)

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KARL HEINZ



The International Centre for Archival Research (ICARUS) is a network of archives and archival institutions that aims to promote exchange among participating institutions at all levels. ICARUS is legally an association under Austrian law with headquarters in Vienna but

considers itself as a supranational organization without national orientation or preference.

## Foundation and Partners

ICARUS was founded in 2008 and can be seen as the successor organization of a loose consortium that had already been formed in 2004 in the course of the organization of the document platform Monasterium (see below). The main concern from the very beginning was to convey to the participating institutions that a regular exchange and a joining of forces in achieving goals is more resource-saving and effective than going it alone. Currently (fall 2021), ICARUS includes more than 180 members from 35 countries from Europe and overseas, including



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archives of various types and sizes (state and national archives, provincial archives, municipal archives, diocesan and abbey archives), universities, research institutions and partner networks.

In the meantime, very active sister organizations have been developed in various regions of Europe (ICARUS Hrvatska, ICARUS Italia), which are increasingly taking care of the association's concerns in their catchment areas.

## **Activities**

One focus of the association's activities has been and continues to be the initiation and support of digitization projects in the archival field and the provision of expertise in the various related projects of the partner institutions. In this context, a mobile scanning unit has been in use throughout Europe for several years to digitize document collections of smaller and larger archives. On the other hand, improving the exchange between archives and their users has been a major concern of ICARUS, too.

A core activity of the association in recent years has always been the participation in projects funded by the European Commission within different framework programs, in which ICARUS several times was the lead partner. Examples of larger EU projects under the administration of ICARUS, running up to four years and already completed, were CrArC - Crossborder Archives ([www.crossborderarchives.eu](http://www.crossborderarchives.eu)), ENArC - European Network on Archival Cooperation (<https://enarc.icar-us.eu>) and Co:Op - Community as Opportunity: the Creative Archives' and users' Network ([www.coop-project.eu](http://www.coop-project.eu)).

Currently, ICARUS is participating in the European project 'European Digital Treasures: Management of centennial archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'

([www.digitaltreasures.eu](http://www.digitaltreasures.eu)) within the Creative Europe programme. The project aims to improve the visibility of archives as the custodians of Europe's historical heritage in the perception of a wider public. The implementation of this plan will be achieved through a huge variety of activities, such as transmedia exhibitions across Europe with very current topics, the development of new business models for archives, the programming of smart games to introduce the younger generation to the archives, or the involvement of the older generation and their special skills in reading old documents through crowd sourcing initiatives for the transcription of serial primary sources.



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## European Digital Treasures: Management of Centenary Archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Key facts

European archives are fundamental primary sources for discovering and reinforcing shared European culture and history. The project **European Digital Treasures** aims at bringing joint European heritage, and especially its digital versions, major visibility, outreach and use. European Digital Treasures addresses the challenges of the **digital society**, related to the management and transmission of **European historical and documentary heritage**.

### Project consortium

The project consortium is comprised of **7 partners from 7 countries** uniting a multi-stakeholder team. Each partner has specific qualifications that together form an effective consortium.

- Spanish State Archives (project lead)
- Cork Institute of Technology (Ireland)
- ICARUS – International Centre for Archival Research (Austria)

- National Archives of Hungary
- National Archives of Malta
- National Archives of Norway
- National Archives of Portugal

### Mission: Unlock the past to build capacities

Develop new business models for European archives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century enabling its uptake

A very forward-looking initiative is the participation in the Time Machine project ([www.timemachine.eu](http://www.timemachine.eu)), which aims at a technological revolution in the digital processing of archival material. Innovations in scanning technology and the further development of machine handwriting recognition are intended to provide the prerequisites for the most comprehensive possible digital recording of initially serial resources throughout Europe, and the linking and networking of Local Time Machines created in this way all over the continent is to provide with the time answers to historical questions at the push of a button. The leading body to promote this idea and to drive the development forward is the Time Machine Organization (TMO), which has its headquarters in Vienna.

As mentioned above, one of the main concerns of ICARUS was and still is the unbureaucratic exchange of information and experience on a collegial level and the overcoming of institutional and national hurdles and restrictions. In practice, this is carried out at biannual network meetings, the ICARUS Conventions, which are always hosted by a different partner institution in always other parts of Europe and take place in the spring and fall of each year.

## **The ICARUS Portals**

ICARUS itself meanwhile operates three major digital platforms.

### *Monasterium*

Monasterium ([www.monasterium.net](http://www.monasterium.net)) is the oldest platform of ICARUS and one of the world's largest digital resources for medieval and early modern charters, which are presented in words and images, enriched by metadata of different indexing depth. The portal started in 2004 with the

first 20.000 charters from the abbey archives of the province of Lower Austria. In the meantime, around 660.000 medieval and early modern charters from 192 archives from 15 countries are shown in the portal with all together more than 900.000 images. The data are structured according to the standard of the Charters Encoding Initiative (CEI - [www.cei.lmu.de](http://www.cei.lmu.de)), which, based upon the TEI standard, was created especially for the description of the source genre 'charter'.

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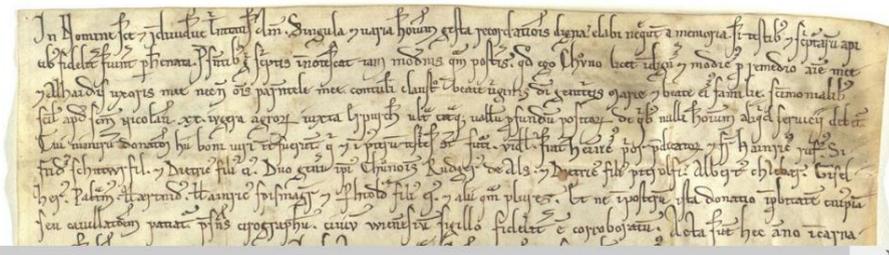


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\* *Chu/ono* gibt für sein, seiner Gemahlin *Alhaidis* und seiner Verwandtschaft Seelenheil dem Kloster der heil. Jungfrau Maria, d. h. den Nonnen bei S. Nikolaus, 20 Joch Aecker *iuxta Erpurch*, dies- und jenseits des Tiefen Grabens (*Vallum profundum*) gelegen.

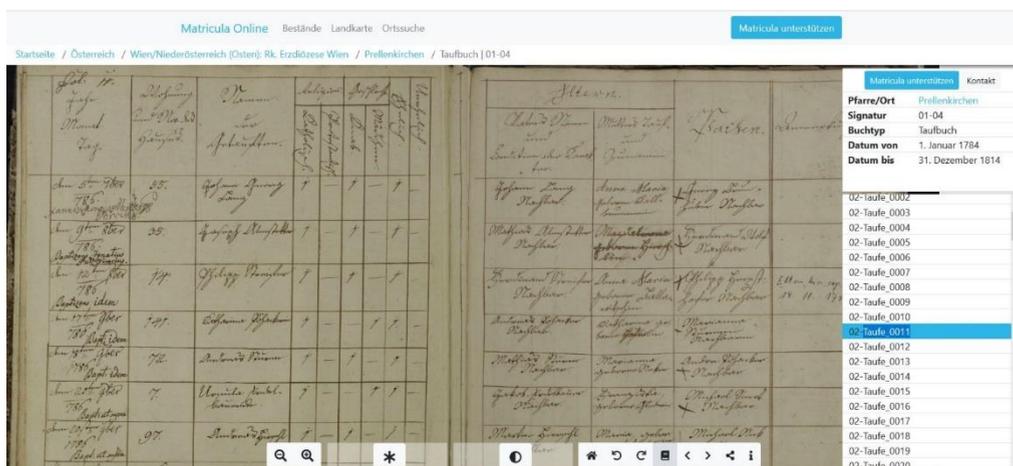
Quelle Regest: Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Wien, Bd. II/1, Nr. 3

In addition to the classic archive holdings, Monasterium also has so-called 'collections'. In this context, this term refers to collections of documents that do not form a classic archive fond but are thematic compilations. These can be virtually merged, former archive holdings, which in reality have been widely dispersed but also digitized editions (charter books) belong to the area of collections.

The system has a collaborative editing environment through which improvements and enhancements can be entered individually online and new holdings can also be uploaded. As a special feature registered users are enabled to create personal collections according to their research topics. Another speciality is that the system is available in 14 different languages, mirroring the countries, contributing to the virtual archive with their holdings.

Currently, a new conception of the portal is under discussion, which should bring this resource up to the latest technical standard.

## Matricula



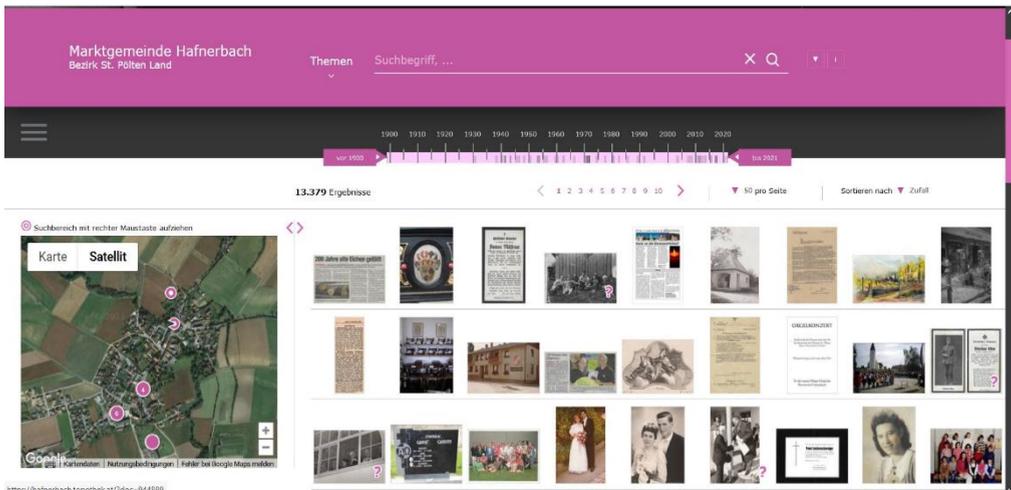
The Matricula-online portal ([www.matricula-online.eu](http://www.matricula-online.eu)) provides several million digital images of church records (baptism, marriage, and death registers) of different religious communities (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish) from eight countries (Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Poland, Serbia, Italy and Bosnia-Herzegovina). By eliminating the need for lengthy and costly travel to view these sources, Matricula has proven

to be indispensable for the vast community of family and genealogical researchers all over the world in recent years and has recorded by far the largest number of hits in a comparison of the three portals of ICARUS.

## Topotheque

The third portal – the Topotheque ([www.topothek.at/en](http://www.topothek.at/en)) – houses materials that are of great importance for local and regional lore, such as old photographs, postcards, films or other documents that illustrate the diversity of life in the community. These are mainly privately owned objects that are particularly at risk of being lost. But the aim is not only to secure and publish the material, but also to make its content accessible through dating, geo-referencing and keywording, thus making the source material, which has now grown to over one million items, searchable. In total, there are about 400 ‘Topotheques’ in 15 European countries.

The feed of data is decentralized via local topotheccarians based in the individual municipalities, who work on a voluntary basis and receive the analogue materials from the owners, digitize them, upload them to the system and ensure that they are indexed accordingly. The great



advantage of this is that questions about content can be communicated to the entire population via the site and thus previously white spots in the tradition can be erased.

A common feature of all three portals is the low-threshold and completely free access to the material (charters, church records, local history material), what can be seen as a direct contribution to bringing people closer to their own history.

## **ICARUS4all**

According to the statutes, membership in the ICARUS network is only possible for institutions and corporations. Nevertheless, it is primarily individuals who benefit from the work of the network and the digital offer of the described resources. In order to be able to give users a better insight into the world of archives 'behind the scenes' and also to perceive suggestions from the user community, the friends' association ICARUS4all was founded in 2016. Within the framework of this association, current developments in the archive world are regularly communicated to interested parties, excursions to domestic and foreign archives are organized, and archivists can be directly interviewed at 'meet & greet' events. In addition, ICARUS4all gives members the opportunity to directly support ICARUS and ensure the maintenance and further development of the portals.

## **Outlook – Agenda 2023**

In order to ensure that the network continues to be optimally geared to the needs of its members in the future, an internal reorganization process (AGENDA 2023) has been underway for some time, which is

intended to sharpen the profile of ICARUS and redefine the way in which the network functions.

All important areas such as community, communication, event management, project acquisition, but also the future technical-strategic orientation of the existing portals is to be evaluated and, if necessary, adapted to the changing requirements. The plan is to lead this reform process through 2023 and complete it by the fall of that year.