REALONLINE - IMAREAL's Digital Image-Server

Ingrid Matschinegg

Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters
und der frühen Neuzeit, Krems

ABSTRACT

REALonline was launched as a web server in spring 2001 by the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period (IMAREAL), which is affiliated with the Austrian Academy of Sciences. This image-server has evolved from a computer-supported project dealing with the collection and analysis of medieval pictorial sources, mainly of central European provenance, with regard to their information on everyday life and material culture (Thaller 1984:219-228). A continuously growing photographic archive of thousands of elder black-and-white photographs and newer colour slides represents the basis for these investigations. The digitization of this photo-collection has been completed; any new records are immediately stored as digital images. In its present state (June 2003) REALonline contains approximately 16,000 objects from the Middle European area, covering a time span from 1200 to 1600. Furthermore, the systematic photographic documentation activities of the institute yield an annual increase of about 1,000 documents (Vavra 1999:156). The database includes panel paintings, mural paintings, manuscript illuminations, sculptures and preserved original objects (objects of every day life, arms and armours, all kinds of instruments etc.).

TEXT AND IMAGE

REALonline is a searchable image and text database. The verbal description of the images is based on a standardized data-model: The first and essential part of every description contains the formal documentation of the image, i.e. all of the available documentative information on the work form, the type, the title, the artist and the date of the creation as well as the place, country and name of the institution where the work of art is kept and bibliographical references. The second part comprises the iconographical description of the contents of the image. This section consists of a definition of the scene or scenes - one image may consist of a number of different scenes - with subordinate groups for the depicted actions, people and objects (Jaritz 1993:23-39).

Departing from these specifications, we developed a model which arranges and displays the information in hierarchical relations. Our data-model is comparable to the new XML-document-type-definitions with nested structures of repeatable elements and attributes. The images are described in German language and in standardised terminology. Using verbal descriptions of pictorial sources (or of original objects), we are creating our own texts. We thus have to provide the means to make the documentation and description as standardised and as close to the source as possible. Moreover, the terminology we use should be accessible to other researchers in history or cultural studies. At the same time we have to decide to what extent we can use contemporary language in order to classify codes or a terminology derived from the language of medieval written sources. Finally, we must be aware of the fact that our descriptions of the images will never be complete but that we are working with a "living database" to be modified, corrected and extended, whenever new information is available (Jaritz 1993:17).

THE WEB-INTERFACE

The input data is organised according to the rules of our database-software-system KLEIO. Developed by M. Thaller at the Max-Planck-Institute for History in Göttingen/Germany in the 1970s, this program caters for the specific demands of research performed in history and cultural studies (Thaller 1989). The web-interface for REALonline was constructed by Thaller (now at the Institute for Computer Sciences in Humanities University of Cologne/Germany) (Thaller 1998).

In order to search the database, you have two options (see illustration 1). You can choose the main-criterion for your search on a dropdown-list which includes terms such as "topics" or "scenes" and "personal names" as well as "social ranks", "actions" or "gestures". Apart from selecting a main criterion, you can also restrict your search to a specific time in between the years 1200 and 1600. Finally you can determine whether you would like the display of the results to contain basic or extensive information, documentation and details of the respective images by ticking the relevant boxes. In addition to the browsable list of search terms, the program also offers a field for free search.

If, for example, you need material on medieval castles, you can either select the catalogue containing "material objects" and proceed to find the term castle on the browsable list of terms in this specific catalogue. Or you can go to the end of the navigation bar and enter the term "castle" into the search field which also allows right truncation using an asterisk. If you first want to find out whether the database contains any material on the topic in which you are interested, you can use the button "Show terms". The program will then select the closest match on the list of available search terms. If, however, you prefer to use the button "show images", this particular search will process a number of minimized pictures of
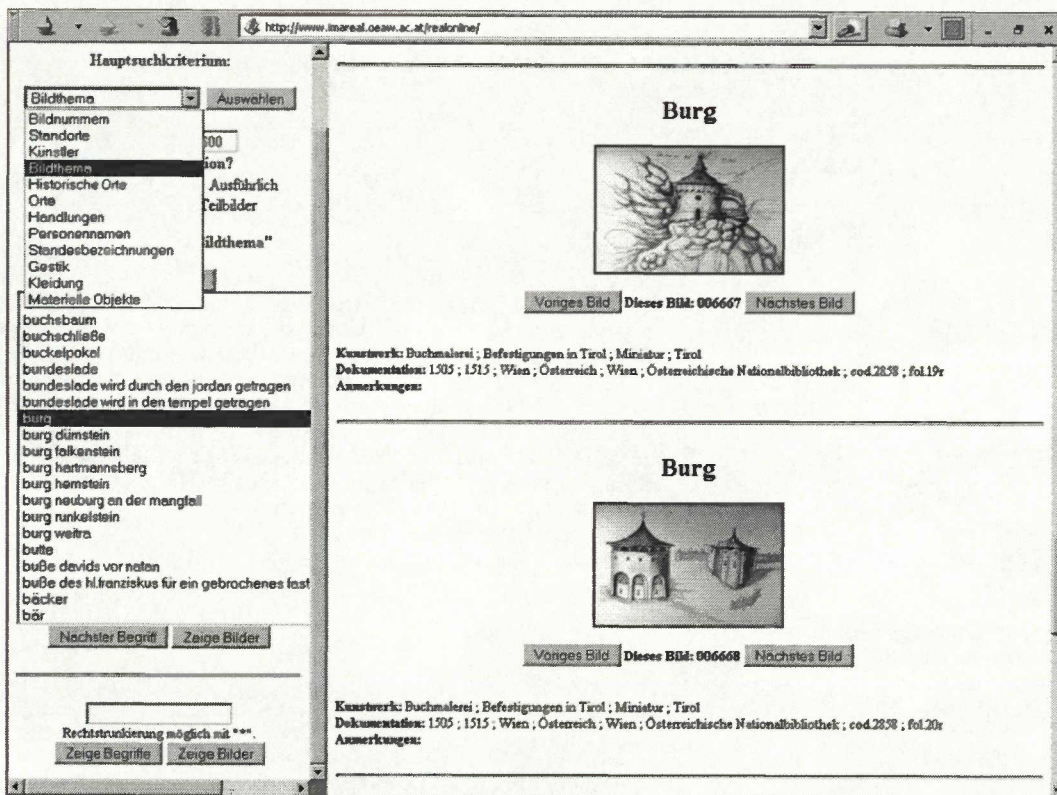
Figure 1

castles in the main frame. In order to view larger versions, you can click on the thumbnails. Some of the thumbnails will not load a larger version of the respective image but inform you that the owner of copyright did not give permission for the institute to provide a higher resolution version on the internet. The thumbnails include extensive descriptions which also list details of the depicted objects. Specific terminology used for the descriptions of medieval clothing can be looked up on a linked clothing dictionary. Other hyperlinks provide information on artists, bibliographical references and text from the bible.

IMAGES OF MEDIEVAL EVERYDAY LIFE?

Images contain information on people, objects, situations etc. and their connections or relations respectively. They have to be analysed with an awareness of their role as media for communication between humans, either as their producers, artists, patrons or the theological authority on the one hand, or their recipients of different status, knowledge and needs on the other. Images consist of signs and symbols to make this communication possible. These are based on patterns of intention (Baxandall 1985:1-11). Hence, the interpretation of images certainly does not end with the description of their contents, but must aim to analyse these communicative elements. In trying to come closer to the everyday life and the material culture of the Middle Ages, we are interested in the signs, symbols and patterns of intention. A very important role, for example, is played by medieval symbolism. An image was intended to motivate its spectators, above all the illiterates, in a moral or didactic way. It had to contain such signs and patterns as made those motivations possible and easily applicable. These signs were often elements drawn from the everyday knowledge of the people. They were based on things which were very well known or even used by the beholders. They did not stand for themselves, but were to lead the recipients to the (theological) message of the image. When investigating the image's role as a source for everyday life in medieval society, we must always be aware of this fact. The main emphasis in using the database REALonline, therefore, has been placed on finding signs, on analysing their relevance and on interpreting the `reality' of such sign-bearing objects in everyday life (Jaritz 1993:17-18).

Homepage of REALonline (http://www.imareal.oeaw.ac.at/realonline).

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