

WWW.ARCHION.DE – CHURCH REGISTERS IN THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Bettina Wisshöfer, Gabriele Stüber, Harald Müller-Baur

Landeskirchliches Archiv Kassel, Zentralarchiv Speyer, Kirchenbuchportal GmbH Stuttgart

200.000 church registers are the central resources of evangelical archives. Archion seeks to professionally present digitalized versions of these church registers on the internet and strengthen church identities in the general public. Additionally, the portal represents a forum for prosopographical sources and a platform for genealogical and scientific discourse.

In the starting phase, 38,000 church registers with 3.8 million digitalized pages will be available worldwide for research. This number will be continually expanded. The goal of the project is to not only present the resources of various church archives, but also to make further resources that contain personalized information digitally available through cooperation with other archives. Both a blog and a newsletter preceded the activation of Archion, and since August 2014 a fully running beta version of the site has been available.

Archion

- presents cultural goods in the internet for future generations, financially self-supporting through user fees,
- creates a platform "Made in Germany" in which all relevant data are maintained under the high standards of German data security laws,
- protects the original church books and other original sources from overuseⁱ,
- makes research more efficient and more attractive by making the digital construction of complex information structures possible,
- makes the material accessible to new user groups through an increased public awarenessⁱⁱ,
- relieves archives of commissioned research,
- offers a forum for researchers,
- creates an added value for the long term security of work with and in archive inventories by generating income from online research and other services.

History

After years of preparation by the Association of Church Archives in the EKD (Verband kirchlicher Archive in der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) and in cooperation with the Fraunhofer-Institut für Arbeitswirtschaft und Organisation (IAO), Kirchenbuchportal GmbH was founded in Stuttgart in 2013. Currently, 11 other regional church organizations in addition to the EKD form the main shareholders of the company.ⁱⁱⁱ

The project began in September 2006. At a symposium in Hanover titled "Access to Church Registers in the times of digitalization and the Internet (Kirchenbuchnutzung in Zeiten von Digitalisierung und Internet)", participants discussed the capabilities offered by these new media.^{iv}

Since the end of June 2007, the domain www.kirchenbuchportal.de has provided information about the ambitious project (Stage 1). Because the initiative was started by the Association of Church Archives (Verband kirchlicher Archive), the immediate focus was on German language evangelical church registers. In this first step, information for both genealogical research and scientific research was provided as proof that inventories of church registers

were being collected in a central location. Informations about the 32 participating institutions - including Catholic archives and the State Archives of Speyer - demonstrated the early interest of a range of archives for the project.

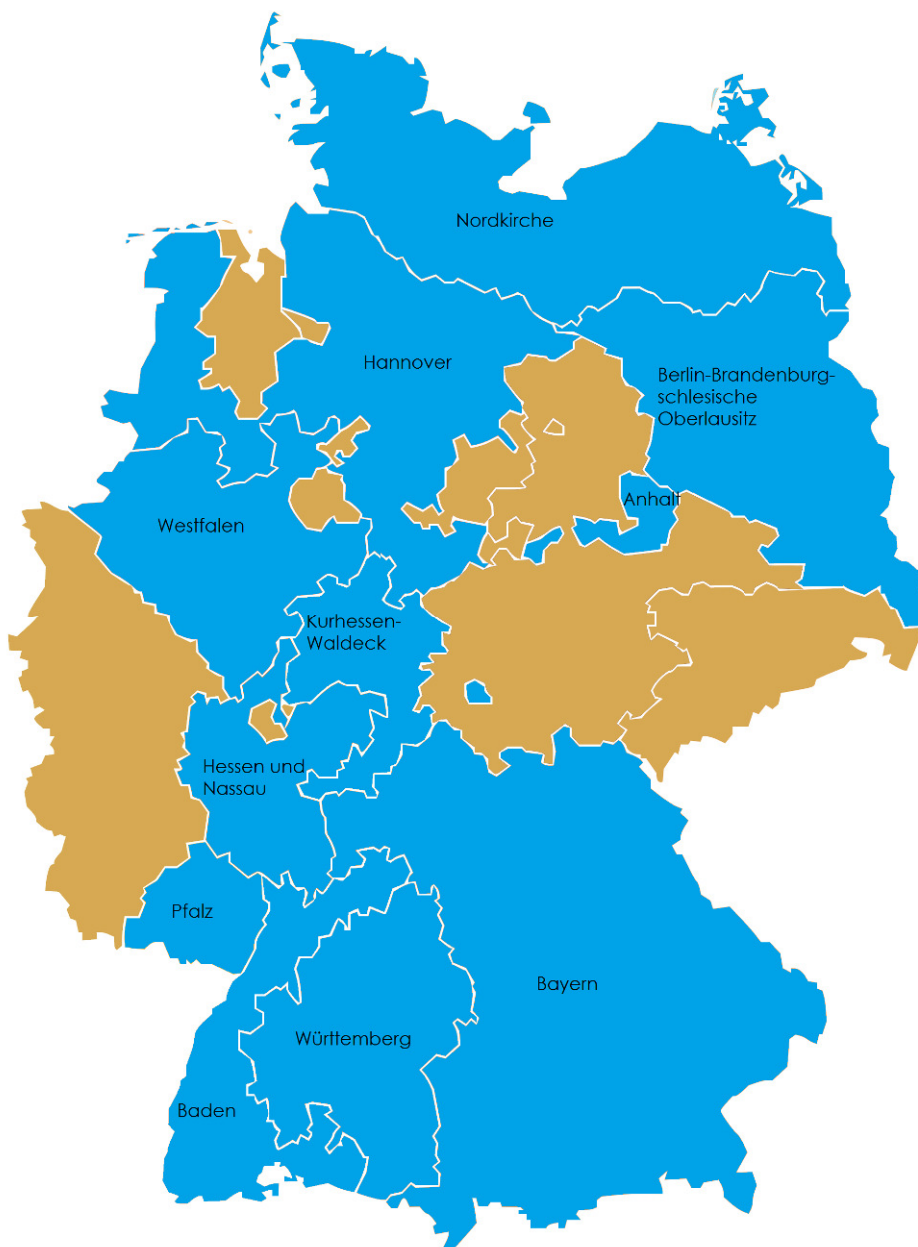
In light of the rapid development of the Internet, participants were concerned with taking a clear position and clarifying to what extent the church archives could and wanted to act independently. An accompanying working group developed standards for the recording of metadata in church registers; the standards were then implemented in Stage 2. This information has been made available to anybody interested free of charge.

The next phase (Stage 3), and with it the final step to an active Internet portal, proved to be difficult and rocky. Above all, it required acquiring the necessary startup capital for the implementation of the portal and defining both the opportunities and the risks of such a large project by creating a formal business plan; the potential volume of the portal is, after all, around 200,000 church registers from evangelical archives alone.^v The promise of a loan from the Evangelical Church of Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) allowed preparations to begin. The digitalization of the archives found in regional churches continued and a formula for the careful recording of normed metadata was finalized. Together with the Fraunhofer IAO, a vendor was selected that could provide the necessary IT services for the project. At the same time, the first experiences were collected in a pilot phase at ICARUS (International Center for Archival Research) with the "Matricula" portal. Because the operation of a portal involve significant costs, and these could not be covered exclusively by third-party funds, the working group began thinking about the creation of a fee-based church registers portal that could refinance itself through the collection of user fees.

After the approval of the loan by the EKD, the Kirchenbuchportal GmbH was founded in Stuttgart in May 2013. The EKD and 11 other regional churches formed a GmbH (=limited liability company) that is responsible for the continuing operation and future preservation of a fee-based church registers portal. Further institutions will work together with the company in various constellations.



Archion, a trademark of Kirchenbuchportal GmbH (Logo).



The member churches marked in blue here are shareholders in Kirchenbuchportal GmbH. The Evangelical Church of Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) is the primary shareholder. Other shareholders include the Evangelical Regional Church of Anhalt (Evangelische Landeskirche Anhalts), the Evangelical Regional Church of Baden (Evangelische Landeskirche in Baden), the Evangelical Regional Church of Bavaria (Evangelisch-lutherische Kirche in Bayern), the Evangelical Regional Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lausitz (Evangelische Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg-schlesische Oberlausitz), the Evangelical-Lutheran Regional Church of Hanover (Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers), the Evangelical Regional Church of Hessen and Nassau (Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau), the Evangelical Regional Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck (Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck), the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Northern Germany (Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Norddeutschland), the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate (Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz),

the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen) and the Evangelical Regional Church of Württemberg (Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg).

Technical Structure of the System

The architecture of the portal consists of three main blocks

1. The "normal" portal functions, such as the discussion forum, user administration, and a content management system for the maintenance of the site;
2. The actual church register module, with functions for viewing images, the indexing of books, and other search functions;
3. The billing module, in which payment flows can be securely processed.



Archion Homepage

Archion goes in a new direction

In order to make such a large project financially possible, an economic approach has been taken in which fees paid by users will fully support the portal. This model also gives other institutions the possibility of placing their own prosopographical sources online.

Price model during the test phase starting in Fall 2014

- A monthly pass for €19.90 with 50 downloads
- 20 freely selectable days of access within one calendar year for €59.90 with 50 downloads
- A yearly pass for €178.80 with 600 downloads
- A pass for business users for €199 per month with an increased download capacity

These prices are introductory prices, and will be adjusted according to further developments in database use. As of now, 30% of the available church registers are online, and it will take a few years until all of them are digitally available. Currently, Archion is thus a partial alternative to customary archive visits.

In the coming years there will be a shift in the use of church registers within church archives. The transition to more digital and online use will lead to a change in the behavior of users of these materials. The result of this upheaval, in connection with the services offered by Kirchenbuchportal Company, will have effects on currently existing archives and their income that are difficult to fully predict today.

The users are the central focus of the portal. They can exchange ideas in the forum and can upload their own analyses of research data into the portal to make it available for others. They also have the possibility to have church registers transcribed or indexed. In this way, the content of entire church registers, sections of the registers, or even individual pages can be processed and then searched through.

The idea of community is critical for the online use of these resources. The availability of monthly and yearly subscriptions is intended to allow users continual access. This has its advantages: by actively participating in lively forums, users can help each other and at the same time reduce the burden on the Kirchenbuchportal and archives in general. At the same time, users will be able to more intensively take advantage of the possibility for transcription. These copies created by users will be searchable, and will create new users for the Kirchenbuchportal in the long run. The user generated content, and the indexing that goes along with it, represents an incredible added value that is not to be underestimated.

Data Security

The full page image of any given church register page provided to users in the viewer is a reduced resolution thumbnail. When a user zooms into a specific part of the page, this very page is tiled in up to 300 individual pictures. The process ensures a quick transmission of images via Internet, and guarantees at the same time that the entire page is not available in a higher resolution, and thus cannot be downloaded. The higher resolution images are generated based on the part of the image that a user selects: the smaller the selection, the higher the resolution of the image presented. The image data itself cannot be downloaded through the website. It is possible, however, to generate a pdf file that contains the selected image and source of information. The number of available pdf files that can be generated is

limited to 50 per month for each user (Monthly Pass). An individual user can only register for one account.

The resources are presented authentically in accordance with archival standards.

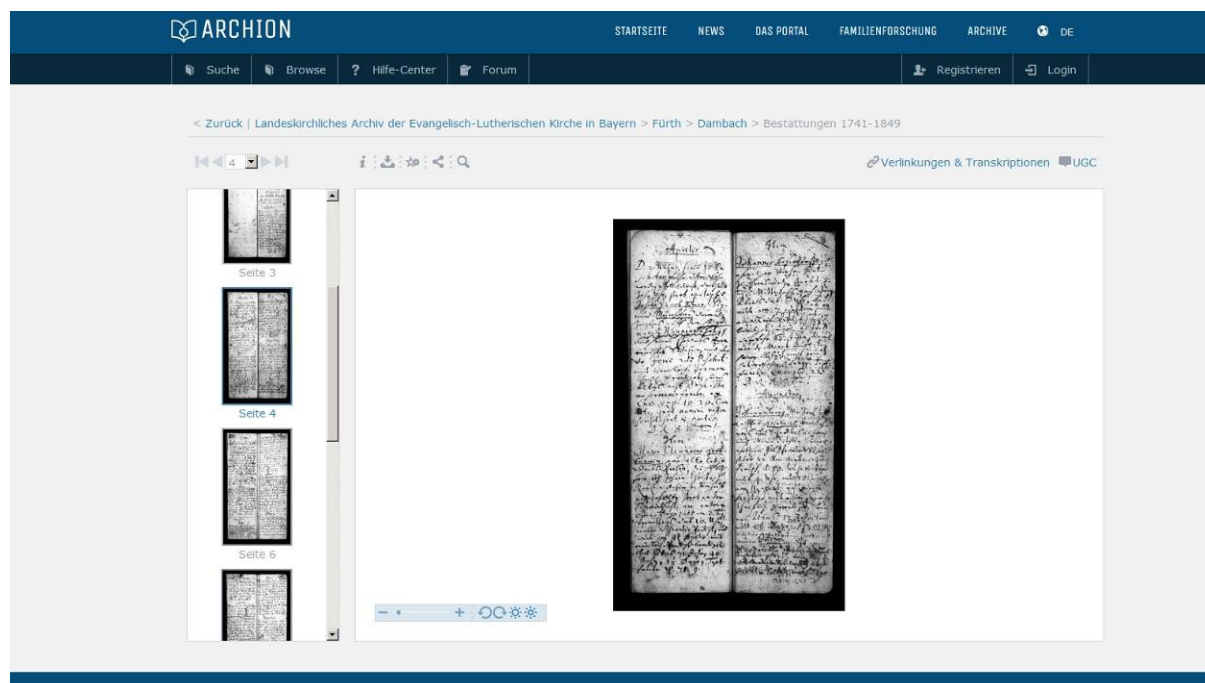


Image within the Viewer

USP (Unique Selling point) and UGC (User Generated Content)

Archion is entering uncharted territory, and the Kirchenbuchportal GmbH brand is oriented towards the future.

Church archives preserve and maintain the original church registers. That is their USP (unique selling point) and is what gives them a clear advantage over currently available church registers databanks on the Internet. The Archion portal guarantees the authenticity of its sources and ensures that churches are able to retain control and security of their archival resources. Church archives and their personnel are the experts in the maintenance and indexing of church registers. The same goes for the non-church archives and their source groups that are presented by Archion.

Currently the largest group of users consists of family researchers and genealogical organizations. These groups are encouraged to interactively integrate their knowledge and work into the project. The creation of user generated content is a top priority of the portal.

Archion will not be limited solely to church archives. The company seeks to work together with other archives from interested sponsoring institutions both domestically and abroad, as long as relevant historical resources exist. This follows the principle that there is further strength to be had in numbers. Within this context, Archion's focus extends beyond church registers resources alone to prosopographical documents of all kinds.

Bibliography

- FINK, Bertram (2007). „Familienforschung zwischen archivischer Dienstleistung und Kommerzialisierung. Indexierung und Digitalisierung der Kirchenbücher auf Kooperationsbasis – eine Perspektive für kirchliche Archive?“. Aus evangelischen Archiven n. 47, p. 64-96.
- JÜRGENSEN, Werner (2007). „Gesetzliche Beschränkungen bei der Nutzung von Personendaten in Kirchenbüchern“. Aus evangelischen Archiven n. 47, p. 108-126.
- STÜBER, Gabriele, WISCHHÖFER, Bettina (2009). „www.kirchenbuchportal.de goes to ICARus – Start der internationalen ökumenischen Pilotphase im März 2009“. Archivar n. 62, p. 269-272.
- STÜBER, Gabriele (2012): Das Kirchenbuchportal der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD). Ein Sachstandsbericht im Frühjahr 2012. Pfälzisch-Rheinische Familienkunde n. 61, Bd. XVII Heft 7, p. 369 – 381.
- WISCHHÖFER, Bettina (2013), „Das EKD-Projekt Kirchenbuchportal im Internet – Eine Geschichte mit Happy-end“. bibliothemata. n. 26, p. 61-72.
- Wischhöfer, Bettina (2009). „Open Access oder „Turning Archival Databases into Goldmines? – Überlegungen zu einem Kirchenbuchportal der deutschen Kirchenarchive im europäischen Kontext“. En: Joergens, Bettina (ed.). Biographie, Genealogie und Archive gemeinsam im digitalen Zeitalter. Detmolder Sommergespräche 2006 und 2007, Insingon: p. 221-227.
- WISCHHÖFER, Bettina (2007). „Kirchenbücher im Zeitalter von Digitalisierung und Internet“. Archivnachrichten aus Hessen n. 7/2, p. 19-20.
<<http://www.archion.de>>.
<<http://www.kirchenbuchportal.de>>.

Notes

ⁱ For decades, such protection has already been implemented by the filming of documents and the access of documents exclusively in film form. Technical developments enable such sources to be made machine readable and thus enable the documents to be simultaneously accessed by an expanded circle of users.

ⁱⁱ This is in the interest of currently existing archives, as it helps reduce mental hurdles to using real archives.

ⁱⁱⁱ (Wischhöfer, 2013, p. 61-72), (Stüber, Wischhöfer, 2009, p. 269-272), (Wischhöfer, 2009, p. 221-227), (Wischhöfer, 2007, p. 19-20).

^{iv} (Fink, 2007, p. 64-96, (Jürgensen, 2007, p.108-126).

^v According to conservative estimates by the Diocesan Archives, there are ca. 130,000 catholic church books. After exploratory talks with these organizations, the catholic archives are not currently participating with the Kirchenbuchportal project.