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MALTESE EXPERIENCE WITH DIGITIZING CULTURAL HERITAGE

Charles Farrugia

***Abstract.** The article gives an account of the various microfilming initiatives taken in Malta during the last thirty years. Various archives have managed to microfilm their holdings under co-operation agreements with international societies, or manuscript libraries. The advent of digital technology is now posing new challenges and opportunities for the archives sector. The idea of a National Memory Project that will try to bridge the different approaches in the preservation of records in the various public, private, and ecclesiastical archives in Malta is discussed. Technical challenges are highlighted, as are the opportunities that arise from collaboration and active participation in international projects such as the European Visual Archives (EVA), and the SEEDI initiative.*

***Keywords.** Archives, Audio-Visual Archives, Cultural Heritage, Digitization, Malta, National Archives of Malta National Memory Project*

Introduction

Malta is a small island (450 km²) located in a very central position in the Mediterranean Sea. Its population does not exceed 400,000, yet its territory is very rich in cultural heritage. If one considers that no less than five pre-historic sites are situated within such a small territory, one appreciates the concentration of heritage on such a small island. These sites were declared world heritage sites by UNESCO. This paper does not attempt to delve into the diverse areas of cultural heritage, but restricts itself to archives. The perspective of this study is that of an archivist, greatly influenced by Malta's Euro-Mediterranean identity. It also brings in some of the experiences of a profession struggling to keep its identity in a country which formed part of the Commonwealth as from 1964, and the EU as from 1st May 2004.

Maltese Archives

Archives provide the bedrock for our understanding of the past. They show us and future generations, how we came to be what we are as a nation, a community or an individual. They are a hidden national asset and constitute the very essence of our heritage. Malta is rich in archival holdings with Maltese notaries practising their profession and thus creating archival records way back into the 15th century. Archives in Malta are administered under different authorities and governing bodies, depending on whether they are public, ecclesiastical, or private. The main public archives i.e. those records created, maintained or received by institutions performing a public function, are: the National Archives, Notarial Archives, Public Registry, National Library (Archives Section), Department of Information (DOI) and Public Broadcasting Services (PBS).

Ecclesiastical archives are repositories administered either by the Diocese of Malta, or by the Cathedral of Mdina, or by any other religious order. The main archives are those of the Archiepiscopal Archives in Floriana, the Cathedral Archives in Mdina, Parish Archives, Religious orders, and the Wignacourt Museum.

Under the term private archives, we group together all those institutions whose functions are private, or whose shareholding in their administration is private. The main Maltese private institutions holding archives of national significance are the Strickland Foundation, Social Action Movement, Commercial Banks, Political Parties, Chamber of Commerce and the Times of Malta.

The main challenge is how to overcome the fragmentation of the sector with archival records under the responsibility of the National Archives (1530), the Notarial Archives (1465), the National Library (1107), the Public Registry (1863), the Law Courts (1900), Church Archives (c. 15th Century), and Private Archives (1296) [*Dates in brackets represent the approximate dates of the first documents held in a particular archive.*]. In order to bring together archival cultural heritage into a sort of one-stop shop for the general public, the idea of creating a virtual archives started gaining ground. The ultimate aim is to provide the Maltese/European public with easier access to the richness of Maltese archives.

National Register of Archives

In order to facilitate research, the idea to compile a National Register of Archives was repetitively put forward by a number of experts. This is a relatively inexpensive and effective way of putting together all available catalogues on line on one portal. This would facilitate access to the public and guarantee more security to the records. This recommendation was made by Ann Williams in 1971 during the conference 'Maltese History: What Future? [1] More than thirty years later, computer technology can facilitate such a task and eliminate the logistical problem of where to house such a register. In fact, it is encouraging that on 27 September 2004, a new Archives Bill was presented before the Maltese Parliament by the Minister of Education Hon. Dr. Louis Galea. One of the articles in the new Bill provides for the setting up of the National Register of Archives [2]. In view of the available technology, it is hoped that the National Register of Archives will also have links to extensive digitised holdings that can be viewed from the comfort of ones' own home at the press of a button. With this aim in mind, the National Archives started a long term project of creation of digital content for the eventual register. [*The first two projects were the digitisation of the first thirty years of documentation from the Consolato del Mare records (1697-1730), and the publishing of an audio-visual cd entitled Political Personalities in Malta 1800-2004.*]

Digitising Holdings

The first consideration was the digitization of the holdings. Several holdings were already microfilmed in the early 1990s either by the Hill Monastic Library of Minnesota or the Genealogical Society of Utah. Tests and analysis on the feasibility of having digitization from microfilms were conducted by two Italian firms, Global Microfilm Digital S.R.L. and Datadisc.it. The end results showed that images of high quality were possible in the case of microfilms that were preserved in adequate atmospheric conditions. [*The recommended conditions in line with the BS5454:2000 are almost impossible to apply in Malta (even after making the adjustments due to the geographical variations) without controlled environmental chambers for the storage of microfilms.*]The same cannot be said to parts of collections from the Cathedral Museum, where the low quality of chemicals used at the production stage, coupled with the inadequate storage conditions in which they were stored, led to early symptoms of vinegar syndrome and eventual disintegration of the films.

A proposal for the automated identification of Medieval texts has also been made by MaltaLinks, a commercial

enterprise researching into software applications for analysis of medieval texts. Tests have been made using records from 16th century notarial archives and 19th century National Archives records.

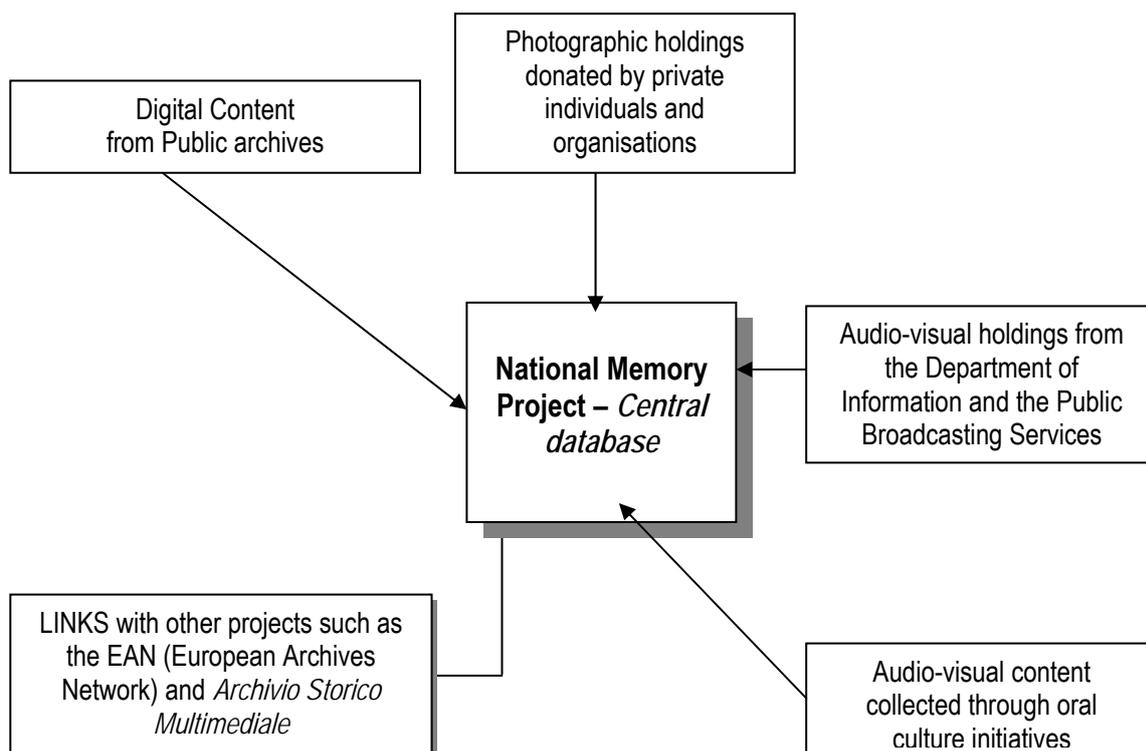
An archives of considerable importance for the study of Maltese toponymy and legal rights is that of the Notarial Archives. With the oldest documents going back to the 1460s, the archives provides the reading public with notarial deeds, wills, property transfers, loans, power of attorney etc. The cultural value of these holdings started being appreciated when a poem dating to the 1530s known as the Cantilena written by Pietro Caxaro was found on one of the end pages. The volumes form part of the notarial deeds of Notary Don Brandano Caxaro. A considerable part of the collection is already microfilmed and the conversion to digital will mean the creation of a preservation surrogates, the enhancement of accessibility to the holdings from the National Archives and also the future possibility of providing the contents via web-technology.

Several religious orders who are still active in Malta own extensive archival holdings of great historical and cultural value. The Augustinians, Dominicans, Franciscan Conventuals, Franciscan Minors, Capuchins, Jesuits and the various monasteries, preserve their records, some of which date back to the 14th and 15th centuries. Notwithstanding, accessibility is hampered and the reading public cannot appreciate the cultural value of such holdings. It is hoped, that through the national drive to digitise cultural heritage, these records are captured into a centralised system of access. An experiment was done last year with the digitisation of a volume from the Franciscans Conventuals archives of Rabat. A Guiliiana Antica dated 1638 was digitised and it is hoped that the authorities will appreciate the advantages of this joined national effort to create digital content and hence providing it to the international academic community.

Another active participant in the attempts to digitize Malta's cultural heritage was made by the University of Malta. The archives section of the University library holds the papers of prominent Maltese academics. As the first pilot project in digitization, they opted for the compilation on cd of all the papers of Fr. Karm Psaila, Malta's national poet. The cd includes an audio recording of the poet himself reading three of his poems.

National Memory Project

The National Archives of Malta is the country's leading institution obliged under the 1990 Archives Act to preserve the archival heritage of the country. In order to make best use of digital technology to fulfil its mission, the National Archives of Malta has just launched an initiative called the National Memory Project (NMP). It aims to collect, preserve, and provide to the general public, Malta's photographic and audio-visual archives. It tries to bring together all stakeholders who are responsible or involved in the upkeep of cultural heritage in Malta and is also open for any initiative of collaboration with institutions from abroad.



The first phase of the project, which was inaugurated by the then President of Malta H.E. Professor Guido de Marco on 22nd March 2004, is the National Portrait Archive. It brings together portraits from archival records, portraits by prominent Maltese photographers and portraits donated by individuals, groups or organizations. A series of photographs of particular interest are the passport applications photos which total to around 100,000. Emigration dominated Malta's socio-economic history throughout the 19th and 20th century. The images captured with passport applications starting in 1915 provide ethnographic and historical detail of great value. All applications have been microfilmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah and plans are in the pipe-line to provide access to the images via the web in the near future.

The second phase of the NMP is the digitisation, cataloguing and intellectual control of thousands of historical photos. A public request was made for individuals and organisations to donate photographic material of historical value to the National Archives. In cases where private individuals wanted to keep the originals, scans were made and the bibliographical details recorded. Cataloguing fields prescribed by the International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD(G) and other standards for the cataloguing of photographs were used. It is hoped, that during 2005, the demo of this project will be available to the general public and that parts of the holdings will also be integrated with the European Visual Archives (EVA) initiative.

The third and final phase of the NMP will be the setting up of the Film and Sound Archive. Thousands of films in 16mm or 35mm are deposited in repositories ill-fit for such a purpose. The best available technology has to be identified to convert the images on durable and readable formats. Cataloguing has to be done in line with modern practices. This is no easy task as the cost involved is considerable. However, a small state such as Malta cannot afford to loose the audio-visual heritage it has generated throughout the last century. It represents its transition from a fortress colony to an Independent Republic. The images in question record Malta's salient socio-political events, the building of tourism as Malta's main economic base and depict the way the Maltese lifestyle developed and changed to its present state.

Conclusion

Digitising Maltese cultural heritage is not an easy task. It was only lately that new structures were set-up to manage effectively such heritage. The enactment of the Cultural Heritage Act, the setting up of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, and Heritage Malta, as the agency responsible for the management of Malta's heritage brought with them major changes. The archives sector will soon pass through a similar reform. With the legal structures in place, and an ever-growing awareness amongst the general public, the prospects of a quality leap forward are very good. Malta's accession to the European Union has facilitated to movement of expertise and personnel. It is hoped, that digital technology will be used to its utmost to promote the country's heritage treasures. In an ever-growing globalised economy, Malta needs to promote its cultural heritage in the most attractive and widely accessible manner. It is hoped that collaboration with projects such as SEEDI, and European and Mediterranean initiatives, make it possible to share expertise, make best use of human resources, and facilitate the paths to be followed in order to avoid duplication of efforts, and create centres of information that can be easily accessible throughout Europe, and world-wide.

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