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Digitization the Malta experience

Sometimes when people ask me where I come from and I answer Malta they frown. That leads me to explain and answer by saying the locations of Malta – that is South from Italy and North from Libya and Tunisia.

When I was asked to participate to this event this explanation came to mind. This is due to the cross cultural artifacts that could be found on the island. Being situated in the ‘middle’ of the Mediterranean Malta formed part of empires and was a very popular port in trade routes.

History shows us that Malta has always been a bridge between the Northern and Southern shore of Our Sea – Mare Nostrum. The Basin of Culture as the region is sometimes referred to be was also home to great civilizations from both shores.

It was from the first moments of Malta’s EU accession on 1 May 2004 that our cultural Heritage was showcased to Europe. The special occasion was commemorated with a visual show, consisting of digital images of our heritage projected on the bastions of Fort St. Angelo, one of our fortification jewels in the natural Grand Harbor near Valletta, our capital city.

Therefore it comes as no surprise that since joining the European Union Maltese organizations, both from the public and private sectors, have been active to promote our culture in various ways amongst which through the use of digitization.

A major actor in Digitization of Culture in Malta is Heritage Malta, the national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage. The formation of the national agency facilitated the participation of Malta in various projects at national level.

The latest development on digital access to cultural heritage by Heritage Malta has been implemented at the Museum of Fine Arts, where a trial system called Smartmuseum, partly funded by the European Commissions' FP7 programme has recently been put in place. The overall objective of the project is to develop ICT solutions for smartphones and PDAs that enhance on-site access to digital cultural heritage, by providing personalised visit recommendations and selecting information based on the visitor's interest profile, thus taking full advantage of the digitised cultural information available. The Smartmuseum solution takes into account the user's personal interests and visit purposes. The valuable statistical information reflecting user interests is made available for participating museums.



The 600 or so collection objects at the Museum of Fine Arts have been digitised and catalogued. The system is being fine-tuned to allow videos, audio and pictures to be transferred faster from the main Smartmuseum system server to the PDA guide through a WiFi (wireless) system for a better visitor experience. The digital library hosting documents, pictures, audio and videos related to fine arts will eventually be made available online to Europeana EU cultural portal and on the Heritage Malta website.

Within the framework of this project, Heritage Malta was able to purchase and help develop a customised cataloguing system code named MUSES that has allowed it to catalogue its artifacts at the Fine Arts Museum according to international standards known as the Categories for Descriptions of Works of Art. These standards describe the content of art databases by articulating a conceptual framework for describing and accessing information about works of art, architecture, other material culture, groups and collections of works, and related images.

Smartmuseum is only one of a number of local efforts being undertaken by Heritage Malta in the area of digitisation. Similar efforts include the 3D documentation at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, funded by the EEA/ Norwegian Financial Mechanisms. The project will see the creation of a 3D digital model of the site recording all its features in high detail, together with extensive monitoring of the environment within the site.

Malta's national authority for heritage conservation is also taking part in other EU initiatives such as the European Digital Library Initiative; Athena, which brings together relevant stakeholders and content owners from all over Europe, to facilitate the inclusion of new digital content into Europeana; and CARARE, a successful digital libraries project proposal under the Competitiveness and Innovation programme of the EU, set to establish a best practice network to improve the interoperability of digital content relating to Europe's heritage sites with Europeana and possibly other services.

Heritage Malta is also constantly enriching its digital library of over one million digital assets in the form of images, documents and videos related to Malta's National Collection. This is achieved by its documentation and ICT department, using innovative techniques and equipment in the field of digitisation. The department also services the Conservation Division in the field of documentation of conservation and restoration interventions through services such as infrared photography, ultra violet photography and computer aided design technology.

Another important player is the National Archives. This institution has been successful in participating in the following projects:

Leonardo Mobility measure - sent 8 persons from the staff for a one or two week hands on experience in archives in Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria. The persons in question were trained in digitisation as it is carried out in different institutions and also under different political and



administrative systems.

Interreg IIIB - Aristhot project - www.aristhot.eu This project made it possible for the National Archives to train its staff on the management of scientific documents and hundred of images are now on-line on the site of the project. It also provided to effective collaboration with the private archives of the Wignacourt museum. These were the first digital images that were ever put online by any cultural entity in Malta.

APENet project - under the e-Content Plus Programme of the EU: This will run for three years and aims to develop the European Archives Gateway - www.apenet.eu Under this project staff from the National Archives are actively participating in technical meetings aimed at solving the issue of how metadata from the different archival systems of EU Member States' National Archives can be tackled. Basically we are talking about millions of cataloguing entries compiled over the last century in line with different standards to be collated into one system that will make it possible for the European citizen to browse through the catalogues from any point in Europe. We have roped in Paragon Europe with us to manage this three year project.

The National archives have three laboratories working on the following:

- ✓ The digitisation of legal records (court cases) from 1530 to the 1700 from the Banca Giuratale section in Mdina.
- ✓ The digitisation of the Customs department records - here we have shipping lists for the period 1800 up to 1900 from the Head Office in Rabat. The three labs together generate around 2000 images daily.

Furthermore, the National Archives has proposed the following projects for the future:

Project A: The building of a state-of-art extension to the present building on the adjacent abandoned archaeological remains in Rabat. The project can turn an eyesore at the centre of Rabat into a tourist attraction of high cultural value and solve the acute storage space problem while build on the current infrastructure the National Archives developed during the last twenty years.

Project B: The setting up of audio-visual archives as part of the National Memory project to be based in the repository in Mdina. The project consists of the logistical capacity building of the repository and the technical equipment needed for such a task.

Project C: The building up of digital storage capacity for the National Archives. This will make it possible for the thousands of images available to be preserved and made accessible to various projects such as Europeana.

The final development by the National archives of Malta is the launch of its own new website, containing access to a wealth of digitised material from its collections:



www.nationalarchives.gov.mt

Another two institutions that have relevant content for our country and that are contributing to digitization are the National Library and the Department of Information.

The National Library has been successful in applying for and accessing European Structural Funds for the digitisation of its collections. This is an e-accessibility project aimed at providing digital access to Library's collections to researchers and the public alike. The National Library has unique treasures which it is its duty to safeguard but at the same time to make available to scholars, researchers and the general public for educational purposes. Hence the importance of digitizing its collection. In this way users, regardless of location, will gain direct access and use a range of digitized materials relating to Malta and its history, thus promoting an understanding of Malta and its cultural heritage to those who may access the collections from overseas. Barriers of physical accessibility will be overcome and people who are housebound or residing abroad may access documents from the comfort of their own home or in other outlets where the internet is available.

The e-accessibility of National Library material to all users falls in line with Government policy regarding the availability of government documents to the general public. Such a project would also generate innovative activities, thus fitting into the country's policy which aims at improving the quality of life and forming a society capable of making full use of information and communication technology.

During 2009, the Department of Information implemented a digitisation project of audiovisual material, where historical 16mm footage documenting a series of important national events were cleaned and transferred to digital format. The final edited material has been published in DVD format and, following its public screening during Notte Bianca on 3 October 2009, has been released for sale to the public.

In the private sector AcrossLimits, thanks to Director Angele Giuliano's keen interest in the subject, has been participating in major digitization projects at European level. The company's involvement as content aggregators in digitization projects such as Europeana and EuropeanaLocal is important for the digitization of popular culture. Let's not forget that Malta's geographic position played an important role in the Mediterranean history. This led to big events that have been recorded in a way or another.

Our mission is to try and reveal as much of these hidden treasures as possible and enrich our contribution in exposing our country to more people.

We are reaching our goal by promoting digitization amongst the local population and encouraging them to share their own story in forms of pictures, text, film and audio. Moreover, we train the locals through the EU co funded Lifelong Learning project I'm your guide to do their own digitization.



Looking positively at the theme at hand work is being carried on and progress has been made. I believe that it is time for Mediterranean stakeholders to collaborate together. Like in Homer's Odysee we can open a window on Our Culture that culture that makes us all Mediterranean. The best results may only be achieved through our best practices and try new innovative methods to achieve our results.

Thank you for your attention!