

Malta

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Introduction: The Maltese Cultural Sector

The main objective of this report will be to provide a brief overview of the progress being achieved by the Maltese government in the area of cultural digitisation. In this regard as well it must be also stated that in conjunction to the digitisation efforts being undertaken by the public sector the ensuing NRG report has also made a concerted effort in recording as well the efforts being partaken in the private and voluntary sectors whom between them are the custodians and managers of a significant amount of cultural heritage and property. In fact, Heritage Malta as well considered to highlight the achievements made by the following major players in the local cultural sector i.e. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti (Foundation of Maltese Patrimony), Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna (Foundation Our Country's Heritage) and Din L-Art Helwa.

Heritage Malta continued with its efforts in promoting the continued digitisation of cultural heritage in Malta. 2005 was the year whereby the Maltese cultural scene pursued with additional vigour the objectives ameliorated not only in the Lund Action Plan but even in the ensuing *Dynamic Action Plan*, where Malta was represented by this same institution. In other words, the digitisation of their cultural inventories, which have already have started in the 1990: when the National Library and the National Archives started microfilming their manuscripts.

To this extent, Malta's cultural sector identified, as one of its main priorities, the continued digitisation of both its tangible and intangible assets, since such a policy will, amongst other things, enable the Islands to promote themselves better not only amongst its European counterparts but as well assist in the country's identity in the World. On a more tangible level, the continued digitisation of Malta's cultural assets will ensure that the unique features of the local landscape will be better promoted not only amongst the innumerable number of foreigners whom opt to visit these Islands on an annual

basis, but even amongst the local themselves, whom in most instances are unaware of the cultural richness of their own country, since this is either hidden or else not that obvious to the naked eye.

This will be mainly achieved through private public partnerships and in Heritage Malta's continued participation in a number of EU programmes; whereby, it is seeking in not only digitising the cultural inventory that it has assumed under its custodianship but as well to update its human resources, so to better manage its increased content. Furthermore, Heritage Malta is utilising the results and by-products achieved from these projects to valorise, aggregate and exploit the digital resources ensuing from digitisation. Therefore, create new products that then after could be utilised by the wider cultural community.

The commitment towards digitisation was further confirmed during MINERVA workshop held by Heritage Malta at the Old Univesity in Valletta on February, under the auspice of President Emeritus Ugo Mifsud Bonnici. Hereby, one must note the significant participation that this same seminar attracted not only amongst the public sector; but even amongst the private cultural sector. In fact, this seminar acted as a shot in the arm to many organisations to continue with their digitisation efforts, for it provided an unique opportunity for these same organisations to join forces and even start coordinating their digitisation efforts, so to accelerate the process even further. In this regard, Heritage Malta assumed a role of an intermediary between the different entities operating in this field, by providing its expertise and advice on ongoing digitisation projects. Moreover, Heritage Malta's expertise was further augmented by the Malta government's decision to amalgamate the Malta Centre for Restoration with Heritage Malta, so to ensure greater synergy. Through this amalgamation, Heritage Malta has greater access to the technologies that the Centre has developed, in particular photogrammetry, laser scanning and theodolite total station; collectively known as Thealasermetry.

The private sector, was also provided with more power and authority in relation to the cultural properties that they are managing on behalf of the national and local governments. Another boost that these organisations achieved from the Government was the publication of the *White Paper on Non-governmental Organisations*. Hereby, this document proposed for the first time the establishment of an obligatory legal framework for the Maltese civil sector. Such a move will enable these organisations to participate in a number of EU programmes that require that their participants have a recognised legal framework.

A. Users and content

Malta digitisation efforts in 2005 focused mostly on the tangible heritage sector; an effort that will be further augmented in the coming years through the cooperation agreement it has struck with the Maltese software house Linguamine that specialise in the development of software that recognises text from scanned and digitised objects. This is only inevitable by virtue of the fact that the Maltese Island possess one of the highest cultural property per square mile in the world and in fact they only come second behind Rome in this respects. Therefore, most of the digitisation efforts undertaken in the Maltese Cultural Sector involved either the 3D scanning of a selected number of cultural properties of world importance such as the Megalithic Sites of the Hagar Qim and Imnajdra in Malta and Ggantija temple site in Gozo. In fact, these activities did not solely involve the 3D survey of the structures themselves but as well the scanning of the adjacent environments. As well as the continued digitisation efforts made by the aforementioned private cultural organisations whom notwithstanding the incredible odds stacked against them, were able to continue with their digitisation efforts with respects to their cultural inventories and more importantly cultural properties that they have under their custodianship. The 3D scanning works on the Imnarjda and Hagar Qim temples were entrusted to *Appalti Bonifiche Costruzioni*, who initiated works on site in August. Works were completed in September. Heritage Malta is now awaiting final submission. In the case of the Ggantija temple in Gozo, these were financed by the Solidarity Funds, after the freak storms of September caused significant damage to the latter structures; and the tender was awarded to General Engineering, Divisione ABC in

December. Site work was commenced in January. The results of the 3-D Survey were formally presented to Heritage Malta by the Minister for Gozo in a ceremony held at the Ggantija Temples on 28th of April, 2005. Adjacently, Heritage Malta (through the National Museum of Archaeology) and the Works Restoration Unit (part of the Minister for Resources and Infrastructure) were co-project leaders in a Culture 2000 Project entitled "The significance of cart-ruts in ancient landscapes". Hereby the involved entities initiated the 3D scanning and digitisation of the cart ruts that intersect the local countryside, as part of a larger project that aims to study and analyse the significance of these landmarks in collaboration with partners from Italy and Spain upon the Mediterranean landscape. Heritage Malta has also start digitising the Island's intangible wealth; thanks in part to the sterling work conducted by Heritage Malta's staff, whom under the Culture2000 project entitled Trimed started to record the oral histories and the folklore related to the agriculture sector that still is prevalent amongst the older generations. With the aim in making these interviews available in digital format, so that they could be accessible via the project's Website. Moreover, both the National Archives and the National Library: whom between are responsible in managing most of the archival documentation on the islands, are continuing with their micro-filming and digitising programmes. These programmes are financed by American benefactors, whom from the 1990's have provided both institutions with expertise and technology so to implement such initiatives. Some of the documentation that was digitised during 2005 include: Records from the "Magnia Curia Castellanea". These documents date from the 16th century and are one of the primary sources utilised by local researchers to analyse the economic well-being and legal status of the Maltese population during the times of Knights. Furthermore, both organisations also have plans to make available these inventories online. In fact, are in the process in finding a strategic partner that will assist them in this endeavour. In the private sector, the participating organisations: Din L-Art Helwa, Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna and Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti commenced digitising a significant amount of their cultural inventories. The cultural properties include a number of small chapels dating from the 17th century, private medieval palaces situated in Mdina that date back to the 14th century. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti has also the intention in digitising the

cultural inventory that it has at its disposal and which includes old manuscripts, 15th century armaments and armour; and 17th century furniture and other 2D objects such as coins dating from the Roman Period. One must also state that these undertakings are being partaken by a selected number of experienced and trained volunteers.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention one of the largest capital projects currently being undertaken on the Islands: the Manoel Island Project where the developers have commissioned a 3D modelling of the historic chapel found within Manoel Island as well as the Old Quarantine Quarters during the knights of Malta better known as 'The Lazzaretto'. Hence, illustrating the practicalities that digitisation could bring about to the conservation and re-use of historic properties.

In terms of users, most of these digitisation projects are in general aimed at the interested general public by providing him with the facility in being able to browse a number of artefacts that are not usually exhibited to the public from the comfort of his own home. The National Archives and the National Library on their part viewed their digitisation efforts as part of their general strategy in improving their customer service and facilities to the innumerable scholars and students that avail themselves that visit their premises on a daily basis; whilst at the same time ensuring that the manuscripts themselves are not damaged in the process. Therefore, the digitisation of their inventory will enable these same organisations to, on the one hand, protect the manuscripts from either the elements of nature or the roughness of an untrained hand; whilst on the other ensure their accessibility to the research community, whom for their studies would require to consult primary historical sources.

B. Technologies for digitisation

The technological approach adopted by the Maltese Cultural Sector with respects to digitisation is dominated by the Thealasermetry approach that was jointly developed by the Malta Centre for Restoration in collaboration with other international partners that hailed mainly from the Southern Mediterranean littoral, under the ambit of the Ikonos Project which achievements were highlighted in the 2004 NRG Report. This approach was particularly useful and even tested during the digitisation

exercises undertaken with respects to the aforementioned temples, and as well the Kordin Temples which acted as a test-bed for this technology. Another technology that has as well grown in prominence is 2D scanning; in fact, in this regard Heritage Malta has just signed a collaboration agreement with a Maltese software house (Linguamine) that specialises in the provision of state of the art 2D scanning technology and has as well developed an innovative software solution that will enable the scanner to read the original texture and handwriting of the same document. Hereby, this same organisation will be offering not only the latest technology in 3D and 2D scanning technology free of charge and it will be also obliged to train Heritage Malta's personnel in utilising this same technological platforms. In the case of the archival and documentation sector, the use of micro-film still predominates, since it is the most cost effective method available.

The private cultural sector due to their extensive collaboration with Heritage Malta have also started utilising the same aforementioned technological platforms; albeit on a more limited scale. This illustrates the point in how serious these organisations are taking their digitisation initiatives and also the extent of the transfer of technology there exists between and within the public and private cultural sectors. Furthermore, a significant majority of Maltese cultural operators have all expressed their intention in further developing their Websites and platforms, so to ensure that their online content and inventory could be easily accessed and the user will be able to browse through all the content without encountering any significant problems.

C. Sustainability of content

The sustainability of the content will be ensured, since it is the objective of Heritage Malta to develop the concept of a 24 hour online museum such as is the case of Britain. This will be achieved under the MICHAEL Plus Programme that is partly financed by the eTen Programme and it will kick-off in June 2006. Furthermore, all the public heritage institutions i.e. Heritage Malta, National Archives and the National Library have all developed, or are in the process of developing digitisation strategies so to ensure that all of their inventories are digitised in the foreseen years. In fact Heritage Malta has already made digitisation as one of its pillars for its

recently launched programme as stated during the MINERVA workshop with the assistance of David Dawson (Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission – UK) and Giuliana De Francesco (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali – Italy). This will be achieved mainly through the private public partnership mechanism.

Hereby, the private sector will be invited to sponsor for an envisaged period some digitisation initiatives that will be undertaken by the subsequent institution; similar in line to the Linguamine sponsorship agreement. A similar initiative has been undertaken by Maltacom the leading telecommunications provider on the Island, which sponsored the digitisation of the map collection of Herbert Granado: one of the most prominent politicians in the 19th century and that was entrusted to Heritage Malta and as well the establishment of 'Fondazzjoni Memorja' also sponsored by Maltacom, whose objective would be to undertake a number of digitisation activities throughout the year. For further information please refer to this link:

<<http://www.memorja.org.mt/home.php>>.

Concurrently, this same line of thought can be also detected in the digitisation strategies of the private cultural sector. Not only this, but the private sector view the digitisation process as an unique opportunity that will enable them to increase their revenues, augmented their membership base and even be in a stronger position to attract sponsorships from the corporate sector, since they will be able to promulgate and disseminate their work, and cultural inventories to an even wider audience. Subsequently, ensure the sustainability of the content that they will be delivering, since they themselves will be in a stronger financial position. A fact, that can be illustrated in Din L-Art Helwa's, decision to mark their 40th year anniversary by commencing the digitisation of all their cultural property that ranges from the prehistoric to the early 20th century town-houses.

Furthermore, it must be stated that the sustainability of the content will also be ensured, since almost all of the cultural operators in Malta have adopted a staggered approach; so to ensure that the content they have already digitised is of optimal quality and also not to become overstretched in terms of resources and manpower. This will be further augmented in the case of Heritage Malta, through the provision of training and updating of its human resources, thus ensuring that this organisation would always have at its disposal a trained pool of professionals whom would be able to update

and sustain the online content already available. It must be also mentioned that these professionals will not only be of benefit to Heritage Malta, but their expertise will also be enjoyed by other cultural organisations, which Heritage Malta has fostered excellent relations with.

D. Digital preservation

Malta is still in its infancy in relation to the preservation of digital resources such as film, due in part to the limited amount of audiovisual material that it has at its disposal. Most of these materials are archived either at the Public Broadcasting Service or else housed in the news section of the Department of Information that falls under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister. In this regard, the Department has just recently issued a tender in the restoration and preservation of its audiovisual archives that dates back to the early 1950's. Furthermore, some private film studios have also expressed their intention in preserving their audiovisual archives and to this extent have registered their intent in start participating in the MediaPlus Programme, which amongst other things provides these organisations to send their staff to undertake training in other media institutions in the European Union, such as in the techniques of the preservation of audio-visual material. Moreover, Heritage Malta has also expressed its intention in preserving data as part of its large archival project that it is going to commence in the near future. Already a number of organisations have shown interest in assisting Heritage Malta in this respects. Thus further confirming the strong interest that the commercial sector is showing towards the digitisation programmes that Heritage Malta is either undertaking or else participating in.

Conclusion

The year 2005 was therefore a turning point on the issue of digitisation in Malta. Society, government and private institutions have all now realised the importance and benefits arising from digitisation and progress is being closely monitored in all the above areas. The results of the MINERVA Plus project and NRG keep helping our country to move forward and their dissemination will continue in the coming years thanks to Heritage Malta and other committed private entities.