

Bibliographic tools for Maltese historical research in the Electronic Age: some considerations

William Zammit

University of Malta,

Head, Dept of Library Information and Archive Sciences.

Since the middle of the 1970s, the output of published and unpublished scholarly research on an increasing variety of areas pertaining to Maltese history, has been considerable. This has been the case particularly when assessed in the light of local constraints, namely of limited professional opportunities for Ph.D history graduates, coupled with an equally limited reading audience. Running parallel – indeed a contributing factor to this – was a gradual process of opening up of overseas archival holdings to researchers, or else making those already accessible better known.¹

The opening up of major ecclesiastical archives in Malta, such as those of the Cathedral and of the Inquisition in the late 1960s have resulted in a good amount of studies which utilised what, until then, were virtually untouched sources covering practically every aspect of Maltese political and social history. The setting up of the National Archives of Malta has similarly made available as never before the state archival patrimony, particularly (but not exclusively) of post-1800 vintage. While most of the overseas archival and manuscript holdings bearing relevance to Malta have been open for consultation since a much earlier period, this has not always been reflected in their utilisation, often because their Malta holdings were simply unknown.

My intention here is to briefly discuss the present situation where accessibility to archival, manuscript and published sources for Maltese history is concerned with a view of presenting a model as to how this can be improved, making possible research in new areas or in those which have been more or less ignored due to lack of sources. Greater knowledge and use of sources should also result in more complete historical studies where factual historical knowledge and its interpretation are concerned.

Archival and Manuscript Collections

The work on compiling reasonably detailed descriptions of archival and manuscript holdings which are relevant to Malta dates back to the publication of Alfredo Mifsud's pioneering *Appunti sugli Archivi di Malta* in 1913.² During the 1930s down to 1950, the Institute for Historical Research Malta published a

¹ A major example of the former has been the opening of the Archive of the Congregation of the Faith (formerly the Congregation of the Holy Office) by the Vatican, in 1998.

² *Archivum Melitense*, II, 13-16 91912-13), 9–67.

series of monographs describing the holdings of Maltese archival and manuscript material in Malta and in the UK.³ The Institute was primarily set up to foster interest in Maltese history while at the same time counter-balancing the *Regia Deputazione di Storia di Malta*, which in turn was publishing inventories of Malta material in Italian archives.⁴ The Malta Historical Society, founded in 1950, took up where the pro-Italian and pro-British initiatives had left. In *Melita Historica*, the Society's annual journal, a good number of bibliographical descriptions of archival holdings have been published, particularly of foreign repositories, some of which have only become accessible in recent years.⁵ The initiative of publishing detailed descriptions of the Archive of the Order of St John held at the National Library of Malta has constituted a massive and fundamentally important project, albeit still far from complete.⁶ More recently, the University of Malta embarked upon the publication of key medieval and early modern documentation from both local and foreign archives.⁷

The quite massive microfilming and currently ongoing digitization projects carried out on Maltese archival collections, generally in collaboration with foreign institutions, particularly with the Malta Study Center within the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library of St John's University, Minnesota, have comprised practically all of the major Church and State archival collections on the islands.⁸ The required metadata for these projects has generally resulted in making available online reasonably detailed bibliographic tools describing the volumes within the different fonds. Even if far from comparable with the extent of detail made available through older, hardcopy sources, such as the *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St John*, these online tools encompass a much larger amount of material, both where distinct archival collections are concerned, as well as in terms of describing the entire material within each collection. Thus, while the *Catalogue of the Records* describes less than a fifth of the total volumes within the AOM archive, its HMML counterpart provides an albeit much more basic title and format description of each volume in the entire collection of over 6,576. The online listing of fonds held at the National Archives of Malta is similarly useful, though providing only a basic description of the fond and not of the individual volumes as yet.⁹ Thus, while descriptions of Maltese archival fonds – even if varying in extent as to the detail of information provided – are being made available online, the digitised content of the archival and manuscript collections is not. A welcome exception to this has been the archdiocese of Malta archives website. In this case, both a basic description of the volumes in the various fonds as well as the digitised images of the pages are available online to registered users free of charge.¹⁰

³ A total of seven monographs were published by the Institute of which five consisted of repertories of archival and manuscript collections in Malta or overseas.

⁴ Its journal, *Archivio Storico di Malta*, was published between 1929 and 1942 and included some important description of Malta-related archival collections. Particularly important was Vincenzo Laurenza's transcriptions of the Angevin documents pertaining to Malta in the archive of Naples, since these were practically destroyed during World War II.

⁵ *Melita Historica* has been published annually since 1952.

⁶ This publication project, bearing the name *Catalogue of the Records of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the Royal Malta Library* (since 1975 the National Library of Malta) was launched in 1964. Since then various sections of the archive have been included in this catalogue, with work carried out by various researchers, including the present author.

⁷ Series entitled *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* and starting in 1996, in which documents from a number of Maltese and foreign archives were published.

⁸ <http://www.hmml.org/centers/malta/>. Accessed: 7.ii.13.

⁹ <https://secure2.gov.mt/nationalarchives/default.aspx>. Accessed: 7.ii.13.

¹⁰ <http://archives.maltadiocese.org/>. Accessed: 7.ii.13.

The online availability of archival and manuscript material pertaining to Malta and held beyond its shores is an area where much remains to be done. This is particularly true for the pre-1798 period. Whereas the material in British and French public collections is by and large described online, or at least in published or manuscript catalogues, the same cannot be said where the Hospitaller and earlier periods of Maltese history are concerned. The Vatican-owned archives are an important exception to this, as they provide good descriptive tools for Malta material, even if generally not online. The central, state-owned Italian, Iberian, Russian and Turkish archives to name but a few among the most obvious ones undoubtedly contain much Malta material which as yet remains for the most part obscure and undescribed. The rich potential of such holdings have been made amply clear through the work of researchers in specific subject areas; yet for the most part their holdings remain unexplored.¹¹ Even more so are the holdings of peripheral and provincial archives throughout Europe. Undoubtedly much remains to be discovered in archives where often even the more basic descriptive tools are non-existent. Non-state collections, particularly church archives constitute a further potentially rich source of Malta-related material and one crying out to be better known.

Printed Melitensia Sources

While the printed Melitensia collection in the National Library of Malta is understandably the most extensive one in existence, it also suffers from some considerable gaps. These may conveniently be discussed under two distinct categories, namely locally published Melitensia and the often more elusive foreign published material. With respect to the first category, lacunae exist both where pre-1925 material is concerned as well as for the post legal deposit period.

(i) Missing Melitensia: local pre-1925 publications

Local publications before 1925 were not automatically acquired by the library through any legal deposit obligations. Such material was either bought, donated, or else given to the library for copyright protection reasons, as required by the 1888 ordinance referred to above. The books thus purchased by the library were listed in the *Malta Government Gazette* and, for a time, on single-sheet notices. Other such Melitensia was acquired by the National Library years following its publication through the donation of collections by private individuals. The best examples of this were the donations of Count Giovanni Messina and that of Dr Louis Galea, in the 1920s and 1970s respectively. Even prior to legal deposit obligations, the local administration seems to have customarily deposited a copy of official publications at the library. Pretty much the same practice was followed by the London administration, particularly where official publications relating to the colony were concerned.

Notwithstanding such attempts at acquiring Melitensia, the lack of legal deposit obligations has rendered the pre-1925 collection particularly incomplete.¹² For the period prior to the granting of local press freedom in January 1839, very considerable lacunae exist in the collection. Such material justifies being considered as Melitensia simply on the basis of having

¹¹ Some of the Malta material in these archives has been traced and made use of by Roger de Giorgio, Elizaveta Zolina and Arnold Cassola, among others.

¹² During the 1950s, Ġużé Gatt had already referred to such lacunae in the national collection; see Gatt, Ġ., 'Nuqqas ta' Kotba ta' Malta fil-Biblijoteka: Kalendarji u Almanakki', *Il-Berqa*, 7.1.1953, 7 and 8.1.1953, 3.

been printed locally, given the fact that local typographical production between 1642 and 1839 was limited. Much of the locally printed matter up until 1839 can actually be identified through archival sources, particularly through the surviving registers pertaining to the Order's printing press and which functioned between 1756 and 1798.¹³ The locally published works for the period 1642 to 1656 (when the first local printing press was active) and those pertaining to the French period (1798-1800) have been described in published bibliographies.¹⁴ Research has shown that the National Library does not hold more than 30 to 35 per cent of all such locally-published material. After 1839 the bibliographic control of locally published works becomes more complex due to the large number of private printing presses that were set up. Thus, the period 1839 to 1925 presents considerable challenges where the acquisition of missing material and bibliographic control is concerned. The newspaper and periodical collection of the National Library similarly suffers from some glaring gaps. It is ironic that while the first newspaper to be published in Maltese, namely *Il Kaulata Maltia*, exists in the British Library, it is lacking from its Maltese counterpart. The collection of the important nineteenth century Maltese newspaper *Brighella* went missing from the National Library decades ago and the collection has remained without it since.

(ii) Missing Melitensia: local post-1925 publications

With the first legal deposit stipulations in 1925, the acquisition of Melitensia by the National Library became more systematic. Notwithstanding this and particularly as a result of the massively increasing volume of publications, the National Library has never had the legal and administrative resources to be in a position to acquire all the published literary production of the island. Besides the inherent limitations of the 1925 and subsequent legal deposit enactments, there are the practical difficulties of actually getting to know what is being published and ensuring that the law is enforced.

One example in this regard is the printed political matter produced locally since the mid nineteenth century onwards. Political leaflets, satirical material, and electoral programmes among other, were produced in abundance, with such material being primarily intended to influence public opinion. As such, its availability is indispensable for any serious study of the development of Maltese political opinion and the forces which moulded it. Yet, this material is conspicuous by its absence from the national collection. Another obvious example is published advertisement literature and, including that pertaining to the theatre and to other forms of entertainment.

(iii) Missing Melitensia published outside Malta

Melitensia published outside the Maltese islands cannot fall under legal deposit obligations, even if the library may oblige researchers to give a copy of any published work of theirs if based on research carried out in the library. By and large, the National Library acquires foreign-published Melitensia either through its donation by the author or publisher or else through purchase. Foreign published Melitensia constitutes a vast ocean, with such material going back to the dawn of printing in Europe. By and large the larger book-type Melitensia publications do get acquired

¹³ See Zammit, W., *Printing in Malta, 1642–1839* (Malta, 2008).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* For a bibliography of locally publications during the French period see Zammit, W., 'Communicating a New Regime: The Maltese Printed Product during the French Occupation (1798–1800)', in Zammit, W., (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1999* (Malta, 2002), 1–51.

by the National Library; however serious gaps exist in the case of other genres of books and particularly of pamphlets and ephemera. Occasionally, foreign published periodicals and newspapers contained important Malta-related material that certainly justifies their acquisition for the national collection. Obvious examples of this are the considerable number of books and pamphlets on Malta published in Italy during the Fascist period and particularly following Italy's entry in the Second World War. Italian newspapers, notably *Il Corriere della Sera* and *Illustrazione del Popolo*, among other, published impressive illustrations of Italian attacks on the island, drawn by such artists as Achille Beltrame and Walter Molino. All this material could hardly find its way to Malta during the war, while much of it was probably destroyed following Italy's defeat. Consequently this type of Melitensia is scarcely available on the island and mostly lacking from the national collection. Similarly, a vast amount of studies related to Malta are to be found published in foreign books and journals. Even if some selectivity has to be exercised, much of this material certainly deserves a place in the national collection.

(iv) The compilation of Bibliographic tools for Melitensia

Besides the need to acquire retrospective and currently published Melitensia for the national collection, the updating and compilation of bibliographic tools is also in dire need of attention. Priority should be given, in this regard, to the re-cataloguing of the Melitensia within the National Library collection. The present cataloguing system is both antiquated and inconsistent. Besides, important sections of the Melitensia collection are catalogued or listed separately and thus the researcher may easily overlook their existence. Other Melitensia material does not seem to have ever been catalogued. An example of the first is the Louis Galea bequest already referred to, while items of uncatalogued Melitensia are to be found bound within *miscellanea* volumes, as well as within manuscript ones. Some of this material is extremely rare, if not unique. The re-cataloguing of the Melitensia collection in the National Library admittedly constitutes a formidable task which is, however, absolutely indispensable. Besides cataloguing the collection according to international standards, the exercise would enable the creation of a much-desired online catalogue of the collection.

Published bibliographies of Melitensia are also lacking. Before 1983 the Malta National Bibliography was not published which means that bibliographic control of Melitensia published prior to that year is generally patchy. Published bibliographies of Melitensia have generally been the result of individual interest and research and mostly cover specific subjects and time-frames. Many of the more important ones have been published years ago, and they have long been out of print as well as in dire need of updating. Moreover, many of the standard bibliographies of Melitensia are, strictly speaking, bibliographies of the Order of St John rather than of Malta. The setting up of a bibliographic centre would also help in this regard, both by producing bibliographies itself and also by coordinating efforts and indicating areas of dire bibliographic attention to other stakeholders, such as the University, the Malta Library and Information Association (MaLIA) and the Malta Historical Society. That said, the compilation of comprehensive retrospective bibliographies of Melitensia can hardly take place unless preceded by the re-cataloguing of the national collection referred to above.

The publication of the Malta National Bibliography from 1983 onwards by the National Library has been a major development in this regard. Equally impressive has been its continued

publication to date, in spite of the dearth of required resources. As in the case of other national bibliographies, it should ideally be also published in an online format.

Recommendations

The following main recommendations are being put forward for discussion

1. The creation of such presently lacking descriptive tools for Maltese material in foreign collections is a *desiderata* which needs to be worked on.
2. Running parallel with this would be the setting up of a website which would list, describe, and/or provide links to archives known to hold Malta-related material.
3. Improving the financial and human resources allocations to the National Library of Malta as befits the institution which is primarily responsible for the preservation and dissemination of the nation's intellectual heritage. Assistance from the European Union and from local and foreign institutions may be sought to achieve this.
4. Studying the possibility of having other Maltese libraries, including the University of Malta Library, participating in the responsibility of preserving the national collection of Melitensia by being assigned specific areas to collect and preserve.
5. Formulating a clear and comprehensive definition of what constitutes Melitensia. This would form the basis of a written national collection development policy where Melitensia is concerned. The updating of legal deposit legislation and legislation aimed towards encouraging the donation of rare Melitensia to the national collection should then follow.
6. Setting up of a National Bibliographic Centre responsible for all aspects pertaining to the acquisition and bibliographic control of Melitensia where the national collection is concerned.
7. The cultivation of contacts with Maltese and foreign libraries and collectors. The sale of Melitensia in auctions and on the internet should be monitored so that missing material is acquired or at least recorded.
8. The re-cataloguing of the Melitensia collection in the National Library in accordance with modern practices and making the catalogue available online.
9. Creation of a Melitensia database, describing items missing from the National collection with a view of their acquisition in the original or in electronic copy format.