

Facilities in Maltese Libraries for the Research Worker in the Humanities: the Research Worker's point of view

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Apart from the Central Bank Library, the Medical Library and, to a lesser degree, the Theology Library at Tal-Virtu, there are not in Malta, to my knowledge, any specialized libraries. This is an important premise to make because all research is, to a greater or lesser degree, specialized by its very nature. Therefore, both the Humanities and the Social Sciences have to make do with what is available, namely the country's two large libraries: the National Library and the University Library. (For practical reasons I am considering the Valletta, BeltisSebh and Gozo libraries as one institution. Moreover I am not going into the merits of lending facilities which are provided by the Beltissebh section of the Public Library system and by the whole University Library complex, except, of course, its reference section.)

From the research worker's point of view our two main libraries have a few advantages and some of the disadvantages of big, central libraries. First of all the advantages:

The avoidance of duplication of acquisitions is the most basic principle to be followed in library budgeting in a country of such a limited physical size and even more limited financial resources. And this is made possible only by central libraries at the expense of specialized ones.

Another advantage is that of having as much as possible under one roof, because no matter how specialized a piece of research might be, there is always need to refer to less specialized reference works or to literature of a different or related discipline (eg. Archaeology - Classics). For this purpose a good up-dated catalogue, preferably a union catalogue to avoid excessive duplication between the major libraries, is indispensable.

A further advantage that a user of any one of our two main libraries enjoys over

the user of mammoth libraries, like the Bibliothèque Nationale and the British Library is that he/she does not have to wait so long between the placing of an order and its delivery. It's normally there within a few minutes (... or not there at all), but this, it might be objected, arises from the fact that the Maltese libraries are relatively small. And, I must add it, I have no answer to that, other than that I agree.

An added bonus offered by the University Library (but which can also have its setbacks) is its open shelves, i.e. almost total access by the user to all the shelves. This tends to make things much easier and quicker for the reader. In libraries where this is not the case, I have very often felt inhibited from ordering more books I needed to just glance at or to check a date or reference in.

The most important advantage big, central libraries have which our two libraries do not have is a huge, by comparison unlimited, budget. We are all too familiar with the ridiculously low levels the budget of the University library has been reduced to, in terms of real purchase value.

The major disadvantage I can think of that besets the researcher in the University library is the dispersal in many, unrelated sections with their respective classification marks, of books that to the specialist appear to belong to his subject. This might not be the case for researchers in English literature, for example, or those in Philosophy. But it certainly is the case for the archaeologist. It is hard enough for him to have to look up books on Roman buildings in the Architecture section, Roman coins in the section of Numismatics, and every publication of an archaeological excavation in that section of the History classification belonging to the country where the excavation took place. This, apparently, is the fault of the Congress classification. Nevertheless, in time and after regular use, one tends to overcome these hurdles. What an archaeologist finds most difficult to understand is, for example, how a book on Farming in Prehistory finds its place in Agriculture (or some such section) and not with Prehistory.

As far as their book collections are concerned, between them these two libraries can satisfy all the requirements of undergraduate research, and most of the basic requirements of graduate research up to the Master's level. But their holdings are very inadequate for any research beyond that level. Except perhaps in one or two cases of research dealing purely with things Maltese, the researcher has no other option but to refer to specialized libraries abroad. The latter is made even more necessary owing to the totally inadequate availability of scholarly journals.

Off-hand I can count only six or seven journals currently available on Archeology in the University library, compared to the several hundred subscriptions on the same subject available in the library of the Istituto di Archeologia at the University

of Catania.

If one wants to produce a scientific paper on a topic related to Maltese Archaeology but in its Mediterranean context, one cannot but depend heavily on specialized libraries abroad. Fortunately, the University library subscribes to two or three basic bibliographical journals such as the *Bulletin Signalétique*, the *Fasti Archeologici* and the *Année Philologique*, so that one can prepare a lot of basic bibliographic reference work here and then waste less time in collating these when abroad. The only disadvantage of these bibliographical tools is that they are often two to five years behind the time. For this reason the first thing I normally do when I set foot in a specialized library abroad is to go quickly through the current numbers of the relevant journals.

If, on the other hand, a paper or a booklet is being prepared exclusively on Malta, with but little reference to the context around it, (eg. an archaeological guide, or a study of the social set-up of Maltese prehistoric society) especially if it is for local consumption, then the research worker might find that the local holdings of our two libraries are sufficient.

This is made possible by the continuous efforts being made by both libraries to acquire as much as possible all that is printed in Malta and on Malta for the respective Melitensia sections. In this respect the National Library is on a financial and administrative advantage because by law copies of anything published and printed in Malta has to be given to its collection. I look forward to an immediate amendment to the law whereby a similar provision is made to supply the University Library with such copies.

Certainly the best facilities that the National library offers, which can never be equalled by those of the University library, are in its priceless collections of manuscripts (particularly those relating to the Knights of St John and their presence on the Island) and of printed works dating from the XVI to the XIX century. I gather it has also an unbeatable collection of most, if not all, newspapers printed in Malta to date.

Any research, especially historical research, involving the examination of these three types of literature renders long but not unexciting sessions in the reading hall of the National Library indispensable. Moments of utter frustration, however, are not guaranteed against, owing to, often inexplicable, gaps in the documentation.

Even research in Maltese archaeology could be enriched by a thorough search through the Bibliotheca and other manuscripts as well as old printed works as I had the occasion of experiencing myself when I was assigned to duties in that institution.

I hope I have not disappointed anyone by not going through the many practical facilities offered by Maltese libraries to the research worker such as the photocopy service, inter-library loans, assistance in searches by well-qualified personnel in the Reference section and the long overdue access to foreign databases via the computer. Dr Xuereb has discussed these in a recent issue of *The Sunday Times* much better than I could ever do here!¹ This does not mean that I or any of my colleagues are not appreciative of these facilities. On the contrary, we very much hope that the two libraries will very soon start receiving better funds in order to expand and make them run even more efficiently.

A very useful instrument in the hands of the research worker, given the limitations listed above, is a union catalogue not only between the two libraries but also including the smaller, more specialised libraries. So far as I can see, it could be achieved by a simple exchange of catalogue cards, and I fail to understand why it is taking so long to materialize.

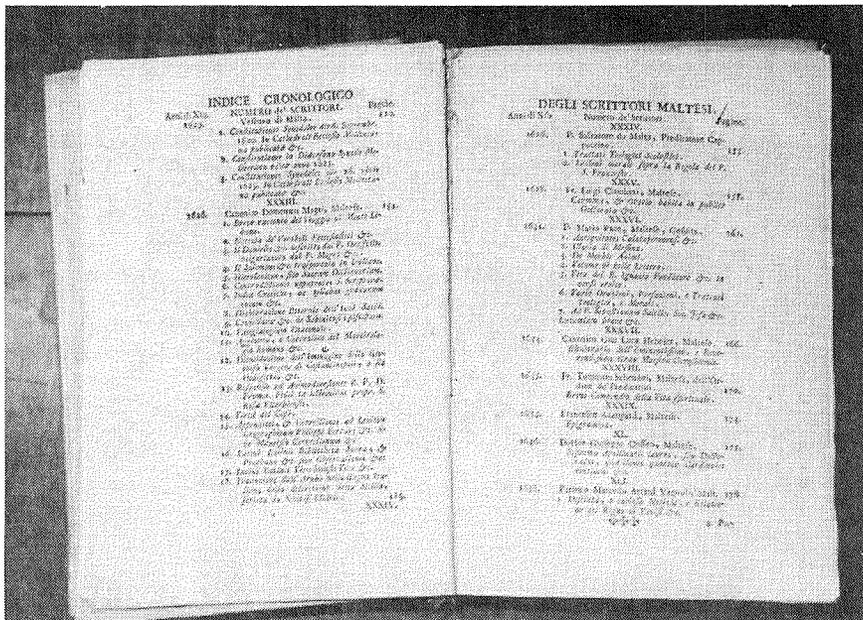
Before ending I cannot help mentioning, in connection with the facilities of on-line searches in foreign databases, that when I was in Italy last year I was told that there exist at least two such networks which provide via satellite this type of information free of charge to Universities. They are called BITNET and EARNET. I am sorry I do not know much more about them but when I discussed them with our computer experts here at the University the latter either professed ignorance of these networks or played down the free-of-charge part of the services. Nevertheless, I feel that these facilities should be enquired into because they are a source that could be tapped when we have the right equipment.

I apologize if in my overview of the research facilities available in our libraries I might have appeared to be stressing so much the inadequacy of their holdings for the production of a scientifically acceptable piece of research and the need for complementing any research done here with reference to libraries abroad.

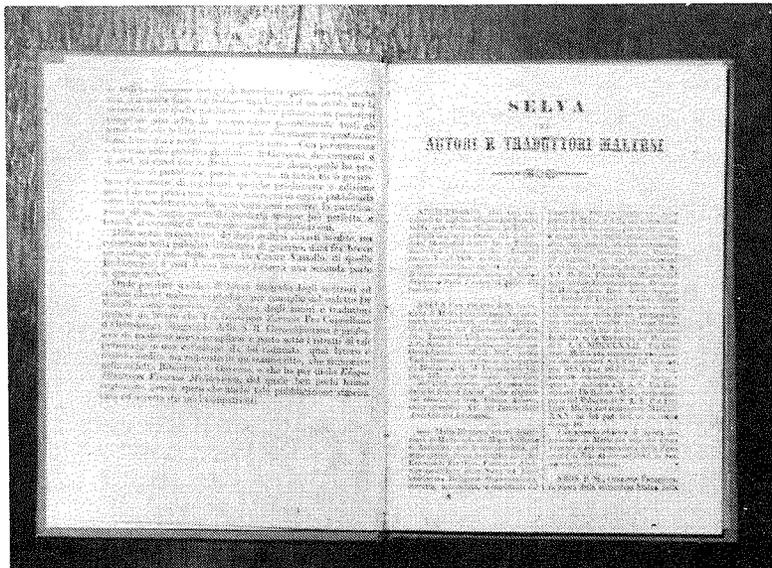
To make up for it, I do not want to fail to show my appreciation of the great achievements made by the Library of our Alma Mater and by the man who has been running it in the last twenty years in spite of the great many setbacks and stumbling blocks. After all it is the Library's 20th birthday and a pat on the shoulder and a word of encouragement for a much brighter future will do nobody any harm.

REFERENCE

1. Paul Xuereb. For students and scholars. *The Sunday Times*, September 20, 1987, p.20-21.



I.S. Mifsud, *Biblioteca maltese* (1764)



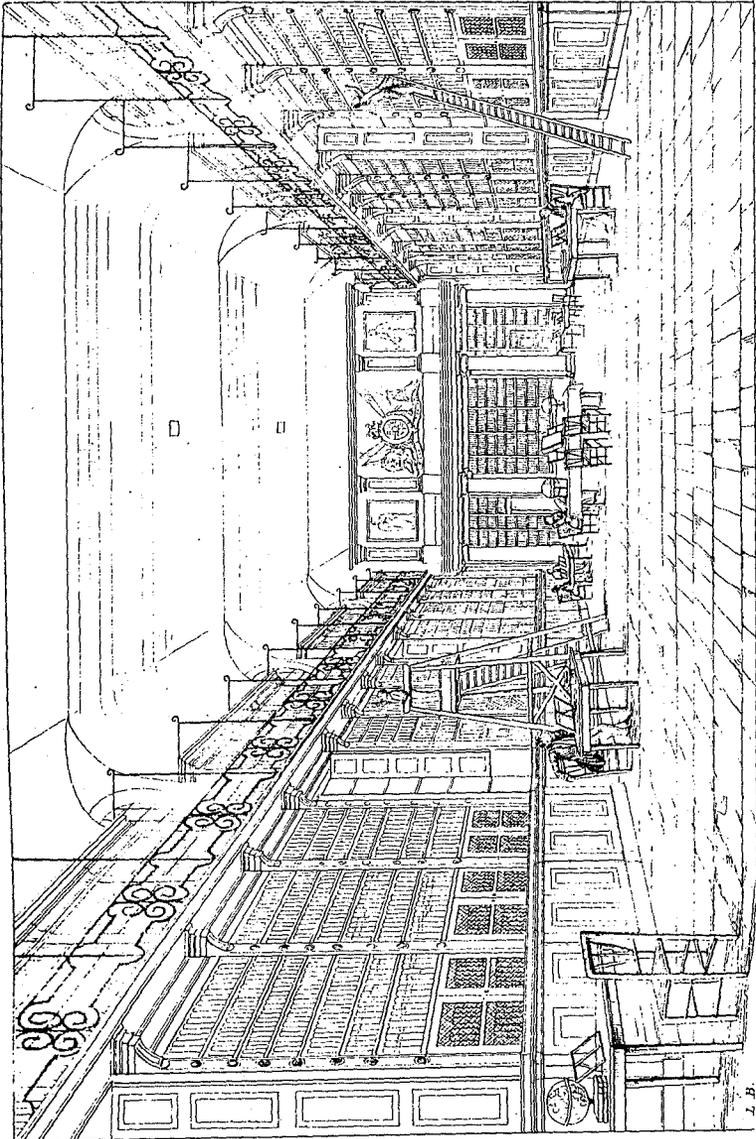
Antonio Schembri, *Selva di autori e traduttori maltesi* (1855)

MALTA PENNY MAGAZINE.

No. 39.

Saturday, June 6th. 1840.

[Price 1d.]



Public Library

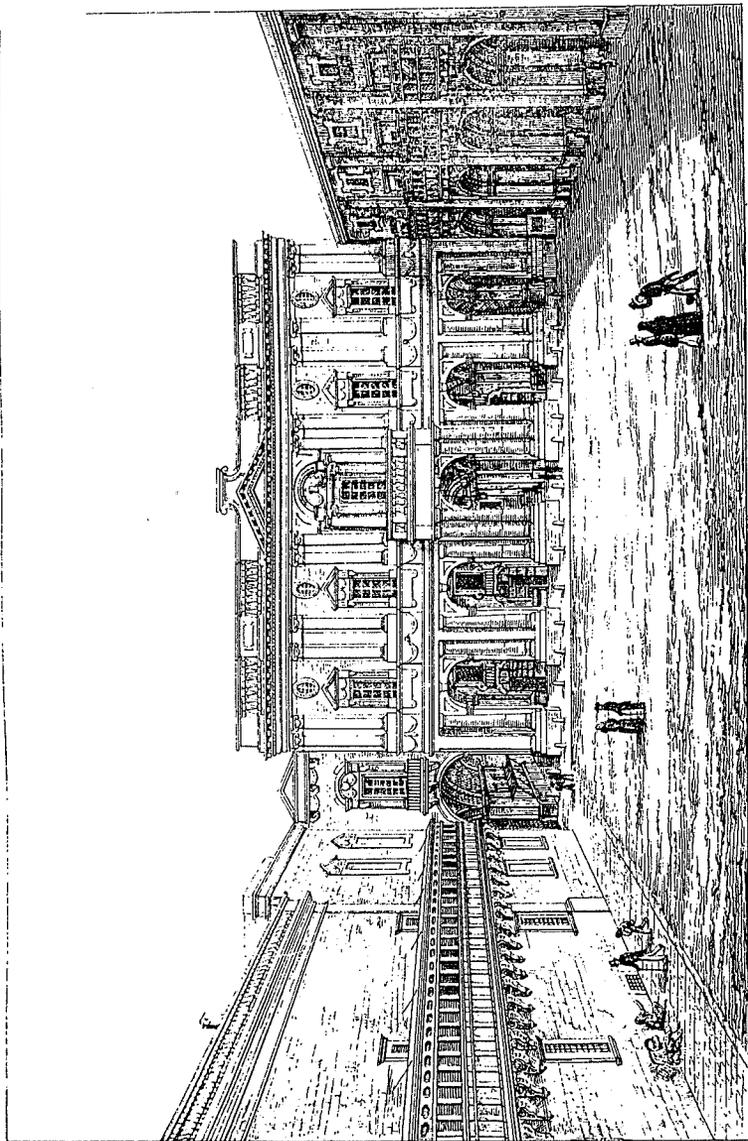
The main reading-room, National Library of Malta (Malta Penny Magazine, no. 39, June 6th 1840)

MALTA PENNY MAGAZINE.

No 40.

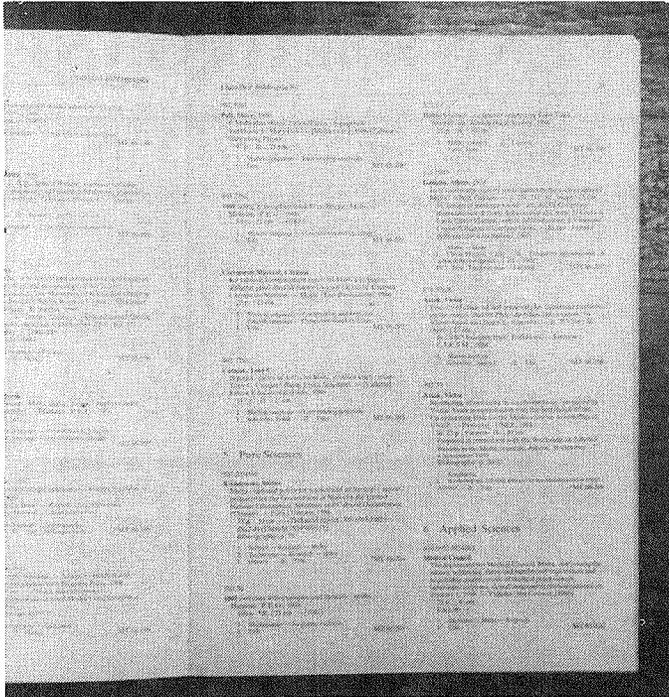
Saturday, June 13th. 1840.

[Price 1d.

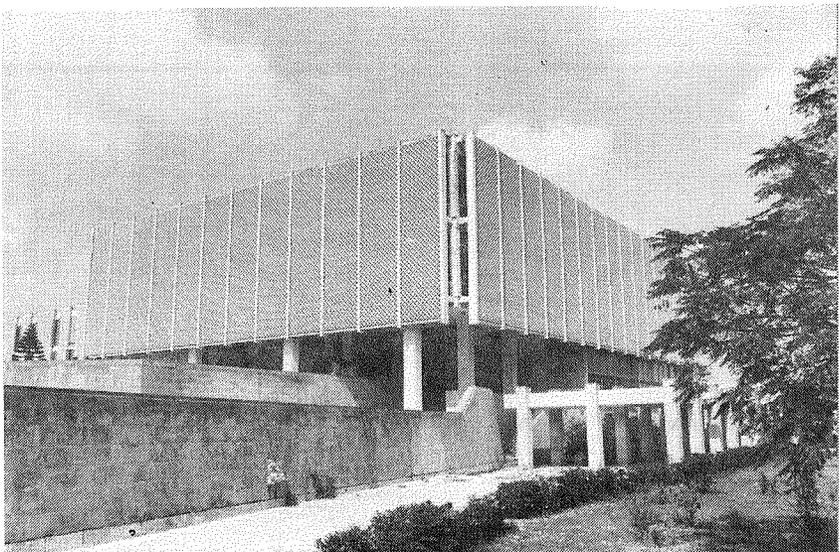


Public Library.

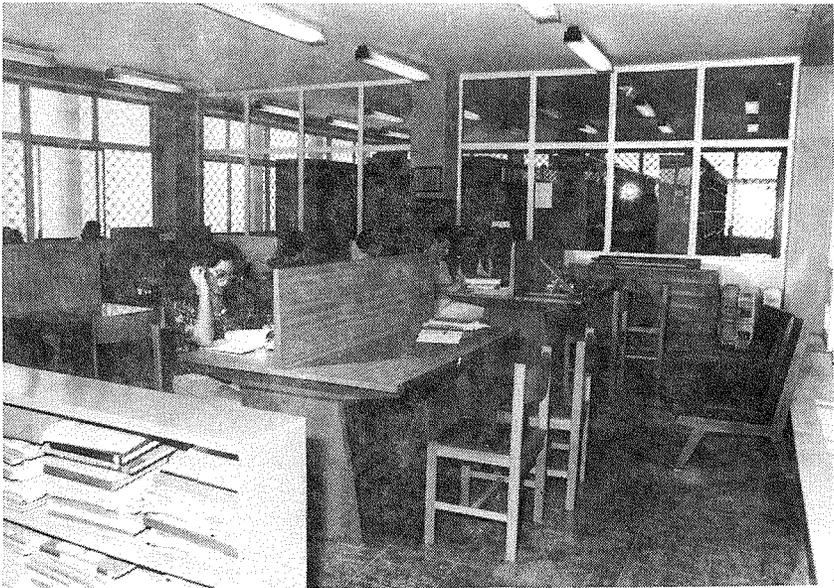
The National Library of Malta, a 19th century view (Malta Penny Magazine, no. 40, June 13th 1840)



Typical page from the Malta National Bibliography



The Main Library, University of Malta, Msida



The Melitensia reading-room, University of Malta Main Library



*Barclays Room (general reference and periodicals),
University of Malta Main Library*

L'Epitaffio

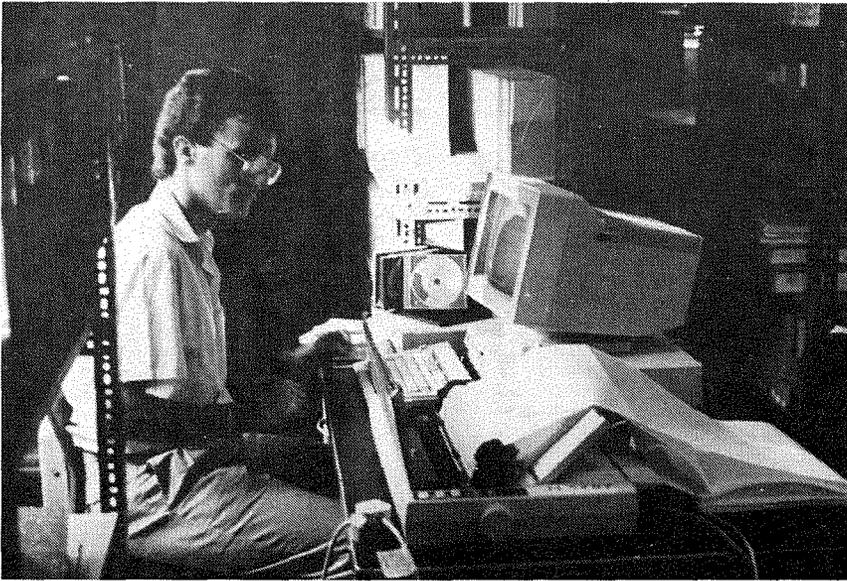
Del Signor Tommaso
1766. 1767.

Deorum manuum, jura sancta
sunt.

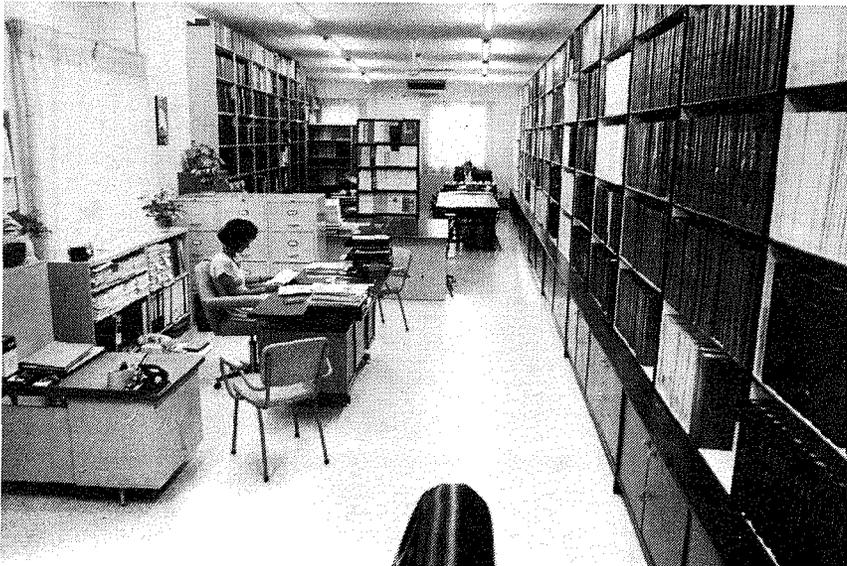
(20. fol.)

Ud all' tas njar tas cipress^u go l'ogħra
tas d'ogħra infangha l'ghid u angos idsa
tal ma'at ta' raggħa^u nista u semu oħrova
fug l'art qħalpa ma t'adha de l' barga
stegħa ta' h'ezzer u ta' h'ezzer; meta
ta' sc'ghat ta' q'zzer ma p'ogħra uja
tal h'ezzer ta' b'art m'adha f' q'zzer u angos
ma n'ed mama nonn qħanetok k'atit h'el
il vers ta' q'zzer u j'ebbi f' qħanja r'ina,
angos go q'zzer ma t'adha njar
u' h'el tal b'adha u ta' l'Ap'adha
- n'ed ta' bagħħa qħat ta' ta' h'ezzer
u' t'adha njar ta' l'gh'adha qħadha
manu l'ed u ta' l'ed u ta' m'ed u'adha
fug l'art u f' q'zzer u' b'adha l'gh'adha manna
u' t'adha njar ta' l'adha l'adha
d'adha ta' m'ed l'adha u'adha mill'ogħra;
u' l' h'ezzer k'adha k'adha u' m'ed
f'ad d'adha ta'adha u' q'zzer ta' ma l'gh'adha
l'adha njar u' l'adha l'adha l'adha
u' l'adha njar u' l'adha f'ad u'adha
tas em'adha u' ta' l'art b'adha qħadha

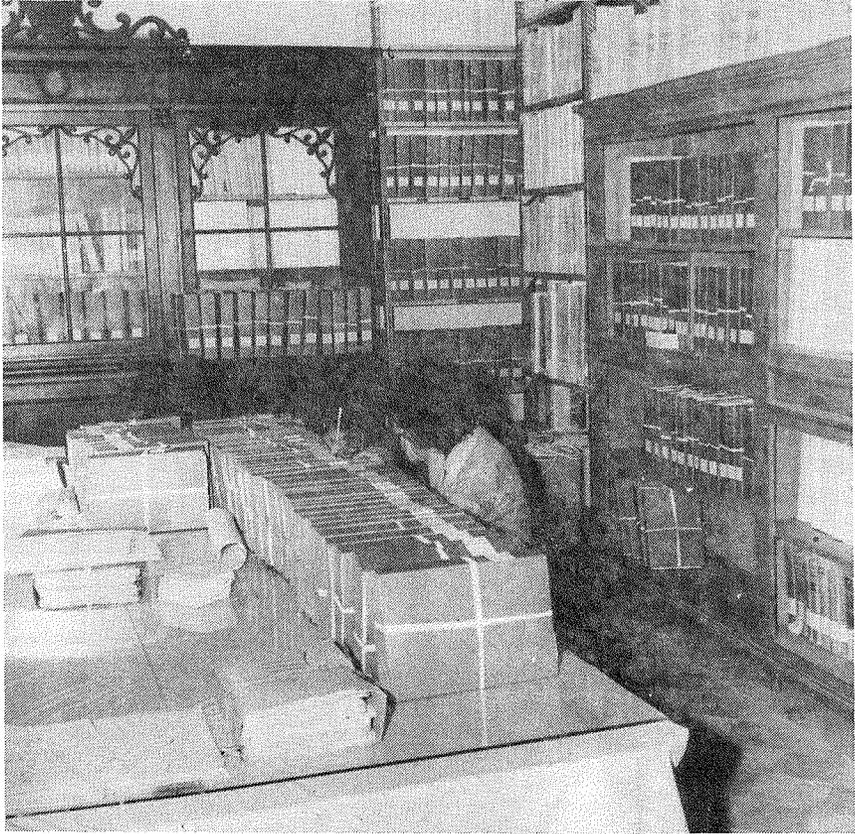
Dun Karm's translation of Foscolo's *I sepolcri* (Ms 21111,
University of Malta Library)



The Medline database on CD-ROM in use at the University of Malta Medical Library, Gwardamangia



Ċentru ta' ricerca u dokumentazzjoni, Partit Nazzjonalista, Pietà



The Cathedral Archives, Mdina