

MELITENSIA

THE MALTA STUDY CENTER AT THE HILL MUSEUM & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

Winter/Spring 2011

The Latin word Melitensia denotes "things pertaining to Malta," and it is most frequently used in the world of rare books and manuscripts to describe written collections of the history and culture of the island of Malta.

This newsletter reports the activities of the Malta Study Center, and features information about the history of the Knights of Malta and the history and culture of the country of Malta itself.

We welcome your comments and your communication about others who might share an interest in this core program of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library.

Above: As Theresa Vann and Nadine Genovese prepare a register for digitization, they determine the possibility of photographing a folded document stitched into the binding.



Setting Up a Studio *The Notarial Archives*

The intrepid field directors of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library have considerable experience photographing manuscripts under less than ideal conditions. They've microfilmed and digitized manuscripts in libraries and archives that lacked electricity, running water, and occasionally four walls and a roof. Working in conditions that would horrify the average American rare-books librarian, HMML's field directors have shot millions of manuscript pages in almost fifty years. Therefore, the conditions in the older section of the Notarial Archives of Malta were neither the best nor the worst that HMML has ever

encountered. The challenge was that for the first time, HMML would preserve medieval manuscripts that are still official government documents. The photographers could not alter or change them in any way. They could not number the folios nor remove any documents stitched into the binding. The format of the registers, some of which are easily the thickest volumes HMML has ever photographed, introduced additional technical complications.

Any other digitization project would have considered the purchase of expensive digitization systems consisting of high-tech automated book cradles that positioned the volumes for the camera while also automatically counting the pages as they turned.

Theresa Vann, curator of the Malta Study Center, knew that such equipment would not be robust enough for this project. The oldest notarial registers are housed in a 17th-century palazzo on a narrow street in Valletta. The reading room is located at the top of a winding monumental stone staircase. Delivery would be difficult, the power supply inadequate, and importing parts and repairmen would be impossible. Instead, she obtained a grant from the Laura Jane Musser fund to bring Wayne Torborg, HMML's digital guru, to Malta. Torborg's mission was to create an inexpensive low-tech digitization rig that would accommodate the notarial registers without damaging or altering the manuscripts.

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Torborg, who has compared the logistics of setting up a studio to planning a military campaign, began researching book cradles and making mock-ups. He adapted HMML's multi-positional field cradle (patent pending) to accommodate volumes with massively-wide spines. In an inspired moment, he realized that the camera could be positioned to the side of the volume as well as directly overhead, which facilitated the digitization of outsized registers. At the same time, he compiled the packing list, deciding what could be shipped ahead and what he and Vann could carry with them on the plane.

The HMML team landed in Malta February 27th, 2010. Setting up the studio and training the staff at the Notarial Archives went without a hitch. Dr. Cora Vella, the Government Notary, provided employees and space for the project. Nadine Genovese, the Notarial Archives employee assigned to oversee the project, quickly understood Torborg's digital practices and procedures. Paul Camilleri, the clerk assigned to the old Notarial Archives, began compiling information about the size and scope of the collection for metadata harvest. Joan Abela, the representative of the Friends of the Notarial Archives, generously shared her research and answered the reporters' questions in Maltese during the press conference that announced the project.

The Friends of the Notarial Archives had carefully selected the volumes of one notary for the pilot project because of their historical significance and because they would be relatively easy to work with. But Vann wanted the pilot project to test, as realistically as possible, the kinds of technical difficulties that the studio would encounter with the unique registers. She poked around in



the rooms of the palazzo until she found a run of volumes from a 16th-century notary that contained a variety of formats represented in the collection, from wide spined-registers to narrow folios. These are being included in the pilot project.

Torborg and Vann left Malta after a week, leaving behind the equipment at the Notarial Archives. They follow the statistics that the studio reports on Google Documents and wonder about the story behind the stats: are the volunteer workers showing up regularly? Is the camera rig working? How long does it take to produce how many images? The numbers provide data to answer some of these questions. Between March 1st and September 30th 2010, the pilot project at the Notarial Archives digitized 25125 images from 25 volumes in 205 hours. But it wasn't until the first digital images from the Notarial Archives arrived at HMML in December that they were able to assess the quality of the work.

Above left: An HMML book cradle adapted to accommodate a thick notarial register.

Above right: The studio set up in the reading room of the Notarial Archives. The first volumes selected for the pilot project are in the bottom right of the photograph.

The Pilot Project at the Notarial Archives

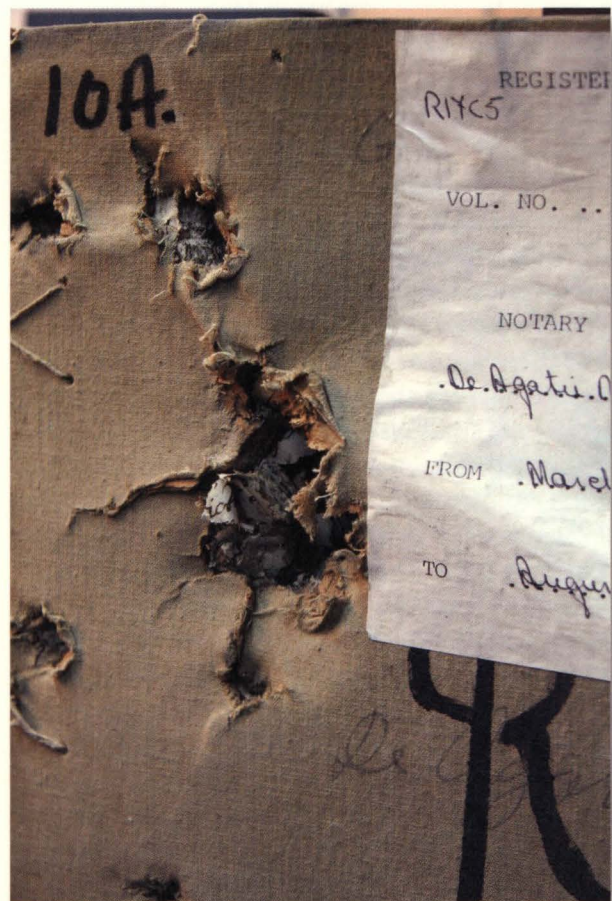
The Notarial Archives of Malta are under the jurisdiction of the Notary to Government, Dr. Cora Vella. The Notarial Archives contain registers that date back as far as the 15th century. Notaries retained custody of their registers until Grand Master Lascaris ordered the creation of the Notarial Archives in 1640. Until 1850, the Notarial Archives stored registers in Valletta and Mdina. After 1850, the registers housed in Mdina were moved to Valletta, where they were stored in the Auberge d'Italie.

In August 1939, in anticipation of the outbreak of war, all the original registers were removed from the top floor of the Auberge d'Italie and into the basements of the Auberge and of a house at 88 Britannia Street. In February 1941, the house in Britannia Street was destroyed during a raid. All the volumes it contained were moved to the Auberge. In the Auberge, the collection was divided between the volumes of the notaries' rough drafts (the *bastardella*) and the registers of the clear documents copied from the *bastardella*. The clear copies were stored in the basement, because it was considered more secure against aerial bombardment, while the scrawled *bastardella* were housed in the upper floors.

But anything can happen in warfare. The Auberge was bombed twice in April 1942. The first bomb bounced into the basement, where it exploded. The second bomb destroyed part of the roof. The entire collection was severely damaged, but the clear copies got the worst of it. Salvage operations began immediately, and continued until the archives were transferred to 24 St. Christopher Street, Valletta, where they are located now. St. Christopher Street contains the "historical" notarial records, which are still considered active government records. The more recent and current registers are housed at the Main Office of the Notary to Government, 2/3 Mikiel Anton Vassalli Street. In 2009 the Malta Study Center received \$5,000 from the Laura Jane Musser Fund to set up a pilot project to digitize forty volumes in the old Notarial Archives in Valletta. On March 1, 2010, representatives of Notarial Archives of Malta and the Notarial Archives Resources Council, Dr. Cora Vella and Mrs. Joan Abela, signed a contract with HMML to initiate a pilot project digitizing the oldest volumes

in the Notarial Archives. The pilot project will digitize forty volumes, beginning with the eleven volumes of Dr. Nicolo Agatii (dating from the late 16th century) to establish best practices for digitizing the historical notarial registers. The trial period is necessary because the size and format of the registers, many of which still exhibit the damage done to the collection by World War II bombs, require specialized handling.

The content of the historical Notarial Archives rivals and, in some ways, surpasses similar collections found in the cities of Barcelona and Venice. The Notarial Archives contain the official acts witnessed before public notaries from the 15th century until the present day, which are recorded in notarial registers. The registers are a rich source for the history of the Maltese people. The notaries recorded wills, household inventories, marriage dowries, sale contracts, and ordinary business agreements. These documents also record the commercial interactions between the Maltese and their rulers, the Knights of Malta. In addition, the notarial archives contain gems like the *Kantilena*, a poem that is the oldest example of written Maltese and dates from the year 1450.



Right: Splinter damage from World War II has punched holes clear through the register that the notary Nicolode Agatii of Mdina maintained for the year 1545-1546 (R 202 vol. 10a).

The Parish Archives

The eighty-four parish churches of Malta and Gozo are the spiritual centers of their communities. They also are important depositories of the islands' art and heritage. The earliest evidence for parishes in the island of Malta dates from 1436, when twelve parishes plus the Cathedral clergy in Mdina served an estimated population of 20,000 people.

The parishes began keeping records when the Council of Trent (1545-1563) required all parish priests to register the baptisms, marriages, and deaths of parishioners. In Malta, the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Mdina had begun keeping baptismal records in 1525, before the Council of Trent, but the earliest years are missing and the surviving registers start with the year 1539. There was no systematic implementation of the Council of Trent's directive in Malta's parishes. Compliance was at the initiative of the parish priest, so the parish records start in different years. The parish of St. Catherine in Zejtun, one of the oldest parishes in Malta, did not begin keeping parish records until 1580. The earliest parish records are from Naxxar, which began keeping separate registers of baptisms, marriages, confirmations and deaths in 1546. Zebbug started its one-volume register of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, deaths, and pious bequests in 1550, and didn't start a second volume until 1615. Siggiewi began its archives in 1555, with three separate volumes for baptisms, marriages, and deaths that remained in use until 1671, while Gudja registered all its records for the years 1555 to 1675 in one 900-page volume. The registration of births and deaths in the parish of Birkirkara began in 1557; the parish began registering marriages the following year. Qormi began with one volume for baptisms, marriages, deaths and confirmations in 1563; it began a new volume in 1585 which also included the *Status animarum*, or the condition of the families of the parish. In comparison, Zurrieq started in 1567 with one volume for baptisms and one volume for marriages, deaths, and confirmations; the parish did not maintain separate registers for baptisms, marriages, confirmations, and deaths until 1607 and 1609.

The early registers were not standardized. Just as some parish priests recorded births, marriages, and deaths in one volume while others used three, some priests recorded the minimum amount of information required while others also noted historical events in the life of the parish. The parish priest of Ascjack briefly described the French occupation of Malta (1798-1800) in volume 3 of the parish register; the parish registers of Gharb in Gozo recorded the destruction of a cupola by lightning in 1786, the blessing of a new cemetery in 1814, and the outbreak of cholera in 1837; the priest of Siggiewi not only recorded pious donations but also some complete testaments; the priest of Zabbar celebrated the baptism of Grandmaster Alof de Wignacourt's goddaughter in 1616; and the parish church of Zejtun testified to the high mortality of the Maltese during the French occupation of 1798-1800 and again during the cholera outbreak of 1837.

Msgr. John Azzopardi, the director of the Mdina Cathedral Museum microfilm project, persuaded the pastors of 26 parishes in Malta and Gozo to bring their precious archives to Mdina to be microfilmed. Today the parish archives are an important source for demography, prosopography, and cultural history. Scholars have used the archives to study marriage practices, attitudes towards death, and relations between the laity and clergy in eighteenth-century Malta. The collection is also used by people researching their family history. The parish archives are still under the jurisdiction of the individual parish priests, and HMML cannot copy the microfilms without their permission. Some parishes have authorized digitization of their microfilms. All researchers are welcome to use the microfilms at HMML.

List of parish archives microfilmed by the Malta Study Center, HMML:

(available online at <http://www.hmml.org/centers/malta/cathedral/parish.html>)

Asciack (15 mss, 1626-1908)
Attard (11 mss, 1581-1917)
Birkirkara (51 mss, 1557-1869)
Cospicua (205 mss, 1587-19th century)
Casalis Gargur (11 mss, 1599-1914)
Ecclesia Cathedralis S. Pauli (42 mss, 1539-1974)
Ecclesia Collegialis S. Laurenti Civitatis Victoriosae (20 mss, 1558-1876)
Gharb, Gozo (12 mss, 1679-1887)
Gudja (1 ms, 1555-1675)
Lija (1 ms)
Mqabba (2 mss, 1599-1675)
Naxxar (22 mss, 1545-1895)
Qormi (Curmi) (3 mss, 1563-1634)
Rabat (173 mss, 1588-1966)
Senglea (23 mss, 1585-1912)
Siggiewi (3 mss, 1555-1671)
Valletta (Our Lady of Damascus, Greek Catholic Church) (1 ms, 1584-1977)
Valletta (St. George, Orthodox Church) (1 ms, 1815-1920)
Valletta (Porto Salvo) (46 mss, 1573-1830)
Valletta (Ecclesia Collegialis S. Pauli Civitatis Vallettae) (105 mss, 1595-1873)
Xaghra, Gozo (47 mss, 1689-1986)
Xewkija, Gozo (6 mss, 1649-1904)
A. P. Zabbar (5 mss, 1616-1811)
Zebbug (Rohan) (6 mss, 1550-1720)
Zejtun (Sanctae Catharinae) (43 mss, 1580-1866)
Zurrieq (22 mss, 1567-1904)

Carmen Borg, who is writing a book about her father's life, frequently comes to HMML to use its collection of microfilmed parish archives from Malta.

Who are you?

I am a person in search of family. Except for my father, all my Maltese relatives are in Malta and Australia. Before he died, I was videotaping him and getting his history. He did not know who his father was – he only knew his stepfather. This inspired me to research the rest of my family.

What brought you to the Malta Study Center?

I found the Malta Study Center on Google, and all the Latin blew me away. At first I was intimidated by all the Latin, but all the documents are well-organized, and everyone is super nice and helpful.

I remembered when I first walked in here, I said "I hit the motherload." I was really excited. The Malta Study Center has everything I need. I found my grandfather, and got a picture of him to show my father. I found my father has two half sisters. I introduced him to his half sisters, whom he had never met before. They had grown up in an orphanage, because my grandfather hadn't married their mother and the church took the two girls away when she died. The orphanage only let them see their father twice, because he began living with another woman. My father has another half-brother, too.

I have found a lot. I have found four hundred people, but not the one I'm looking for: my great-grandmother, Carmen Spiteri. I think she was a foundling who was adopted by a family. I can't find a record of her birth or her death. I keep finding all kinds of Carmen Spiteris... but not the one I want.

The Friends of the Malta Study Center

The Malta Study Center began in 1973 when Joseph S. Micallef suggested to HMML Director Julian Plante that the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) microfilm manuscripts on the island of Malta. What began as a small project evolved into a major opportunity for HMML to preserve the history of Malta, including the Archives of the Knights of Malta. Today, the Malta Study Center is the world's largest repository of Maltese archival holdings, and it is the only place in the world that maintains an online catalogue for these archives. The Center serves researchers from around the world, and has achieved an international reputation.

The successful completion of the Malta Study Center NEH challenge grant marks a new beginning for the Malta Study Center. In order to help the Center and its curator articulate and attain its long-term goals, the HMML Board of Overseers approved the establishment of the "Friends of the Malta Study Center" advisory committee at its May 4th, 2009 meeting. This committee is an advisory group that cultivates relationships with individuals, groups and organizations interested in advancing the work and mission of HMML's Malta Study Center. The Friends are committed to providing advice and support regarding the direction of the programming and activities of the Malta Study Center,

its curator, and staff. It reports to the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library's Board of Overseers through the executive director.

The Friends held their first meeting on June 26th, 2010, at Saint John's University, where they agreed upon a mission statement, reviewed the Center's progress, and discussed future challenges and opportunities for the Malta Study Center. The members of Friends of the Malta Study Center are:

Joseph S. Micallef K.M.
Chair, Founder Emeritus

Nicky Carpenter, D. M.

Frá Elie de Comminges
*Conservatore dell'Archivio e Biblioteca del
Gran Magistero*

Eric Hollas, OSB
Magistral Chaplain, Order of Malta

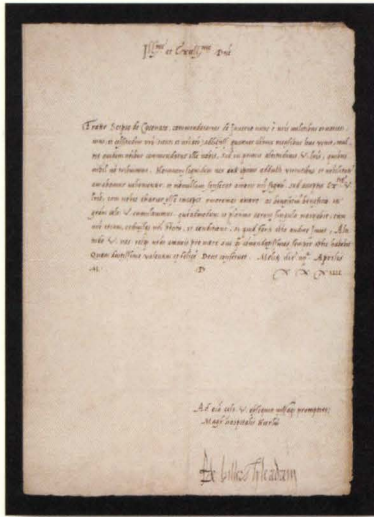
Lucy Jones

H. E. Amb. Robert L. Shafer
*Permanent Observer for the Sovereign
Military Order of Malta to the
United Nations*

Robert Weyerhaeuser
Ex officio members:

**Tom Joyce, Erin Lonergan,
Columba Stewart OSB, Theresa Vann**

Recent Acquisitions



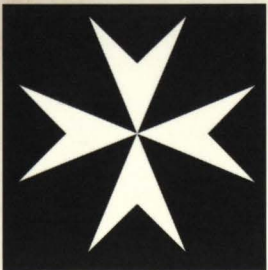
The Malta Study Center recently acquired an original letter dated April 4th, 1534, signed by Grandmaster Phillipe Villers de L'Isle Adam and addressed to the Duke of Milan. The letter introduces Frá Scipio de Coconato to the Duke as one of the most distinguished members of the Order, noble, discreet, and worthy of admittance into the Duke's presence.

Documents that the Center microfilmed in the Archives of the Knights of Malta provide the background to the letter. On April 1st Fra Scipio received a license to travel through the Priory of Lombardy to collect the monies that the Priory owed to the Common Treasury on Malta. The new acquisition shows that the members of the Order who travelled on the Master's business received letters of accreditation and recommendation to the rulers of Europe. This letter provides insight into the Order's diplomatic relations with the other rulers of Europe, and is a welcome addition to the Center's holdings.



Paris, BN Lat 6067 is a beautiful illuminated manuscript of Guillaume Caoursin's late-fifteenth history of Rhodes and the Hospitallers. The priceless original is one of the treasures of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The Malta Study Center is happy to acquire the facsimile edition of the manuscript, *El Sitio de Rodas: [Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Lat. 6067]*, published in Madrid by Club bibliófilo Versol in 2006. The high-quality photographic reproduction of the original manuscript also includes commentaries on the art and the texts written by Alfonso Garcia Leal and Juana Hidalgo Ogáyar, with contributions by Hugo O'Donnell and Carlos Morenés y Mariátegui.

Above: Master Pierre d'Aubusson overseeing the construction of the city of Rhodes.



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