

# MELITENSIA

THE MALTA STUDY CENTER AT THE HILL MUSEUM & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

SPRING 2010

*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.*

## Pirates of the Mediterranean

Theresa M. Vann

The fifteenth-century volumes of the *Liber bullarum* of the Order of the Hospital tell of the naval exploits of the Knights. The Order fought at sea since the early fourteenth century, when it captured the island of Rhodes and began encountering Turkish pirates. Outfitting and maintaining a fleet was expensive, however, so the Order permitted the commanders and crews of its ships to operate as corsairs and keep a share of the plunder. The Master of the Order also issued licenses to Christian seamen to arm ships against the Turks. These corsairs paid the expenses of outfitting a ship in return for a percentage of any captured prizes. This could be extremely profitable, especially when the Pope ordered the Knights to enforce papal prohibitions against trade between Christians and Muslims by confiscating the ships and the contraband cargo they carried. The *Liber bullarum* record numerous complaints made by Christian merchants that the vessels of the Order improperly seized their ships and cargoes. Merchants had to appeal to the Master of the Order to claim their goods. Recovery was not always certain, because the corsairs sold their prizes in the nearest port and contributed a portion of the proceeds to the Order's Common Treasury. To prevent such losses, both Christian and Muslim merchants obtained safe conducts from the chancery of the Order, which would get them past any Hospitaller ship without incident.

More than one corsair turned pirate. But in at least one instance, an apparent pirate was a corsair caught in the middle of a changing political situation. This was the case of Michael of Malta, who first appeared in the Archives of the Order when Master Jacques de Milly issued him a corsair's license in February 1460. That year a Turkish force raided the Hospitaller islands in the Dodecanese. At the same time, the Order was involved in a dispute over the succession to the throne of Cyprus. The Hospitallers supported Charlotte, the oldest legitimate daughter of John II of

Cyprus. The Mamluks of Egypt and the Venetians supported her illegitimate half-brother, James. This dispute led to open conflict between the supporters of Charlotte and James, pitting the Hospitallers against the Venetians and the Egyptians. But when the Venetians turned against the Egyptians and the papacy recognized James as king of Cyprus, the Order accepted James as a legitimate ruler.

The next reference in the Archives to Michael of Malta is dated February 1467. That month a council convened on Rhodes to hear a



complaint about the Order's corsairs. One of the ships of the Order had captured Michael and a small flotilla of ships under his command. The ships were brought to Rhodes. James of Lusignan, King of Cyprus, demanded the return of the two large Cypriot ships captured with Michael. The council decided that the Order would keep all the ships and their contents for now, and James would have to ask the Master of the Order for their return.

Michael's capture and hearing occurred when Master Raymond de Zacosta and all the chief officers of the Order were in Rome for a papal investigation into charges of magisterial misconduct. Their lieutenants back in Rhodes had already responded to news of a Turkish ship in local waters when Michael's case came up. The complaints of James of Cyprus for the return of his ships put more pressure on the local authorities. Then, in April, news came from Rome of Zacosta's death, which occurred right after he had been cleared of all charges. The local authorities had to secure all of Zacosta's papers until the new Master arrived in Rhodes, which delayed the resolution of Michael's case.

Giacomo Bosio, the great 16<sup>th</sup>-century historian of the Order, described Michael as a famous corsair who had been killed by a knight of the Order during this incident. In retaliation, James confiscated the extensive Hospitaller properties on Cyprus until the case was settled to his satisfaction. These circumstances are missing from the record of the meeting of the special council, which concentrated on the legal disposal of the captured ships.

The last reference to Michael appears in the Cypriot archives, in *Le livre des remembrances de la secrète du Royaume de Chypre*, dated August 1468. It is a charter of King James of Cyprus, who authorized the daughters of Michael of Malta to pay Cyprian Pouch, the commander of one of the king's galleys, 300 bezants. It seems that James looked after Michael's family and provided a dowry for his daughters, which suggests that Michael, corsair or pirate, was a very important man in Cyprus.



# Preservation Then and Now



Fr. Oliver Kapsner, OSB, trains William Zammit on the microfilm camera.



Michelle Arias at work in the digital studio at the Banca Giuratale.

Thirty-four years after the Malta Study Center of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library began microfilming the Archives of the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, the Center returned to Mdina to begin digitizing the Magna Curia Castellania in the Banca Giuratale branch of the National Archives of Malta. The Malta Study Center signed an agreement with the National Archives of Malta in October, 2007, to digitize the Acta originalia of the Magna Curia Castellania, a secular tribunal set up by the Grand Master and headed by a knight known as the Castellano. The Acta record civil suits and criminal trials concerning domestic violence, assault, theft, fights, or appointment of guardians for children. There are 1,411 surviving registers of the Acta, the earliest dating from 1545. Between 2007 and 2010 the digitization studio has captured 362,123 digital images, comprising 376 volumes covering the period between 1543 and the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The technology of preservation has changed in the past thirty-four years. Then, manuscript photography required a heavy overhead microfilm camera that shot reels of black and white film. The unprocessed film was shipped to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Xerox (later University Microfilms) developed it, checked it for quality, and duplicated it to send 35 mm reels of microfilm back to Malta and to Collegetteville. During photography, the open

manuscript was placed under the stand. The camera operator swung it up and squashed it against a pane of glass to flatten the pages for exposure. This was considered “best practices” at the time; now it is extremely doubtful that any librarian or archivist would consent to the procedure.

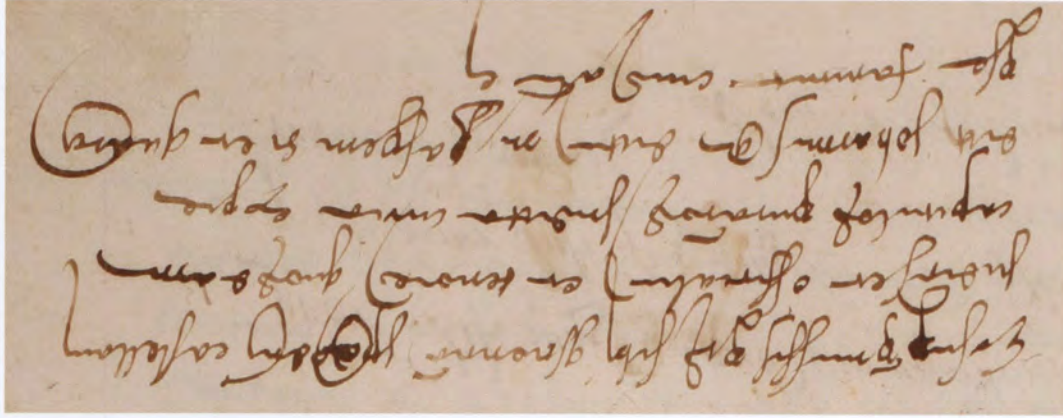
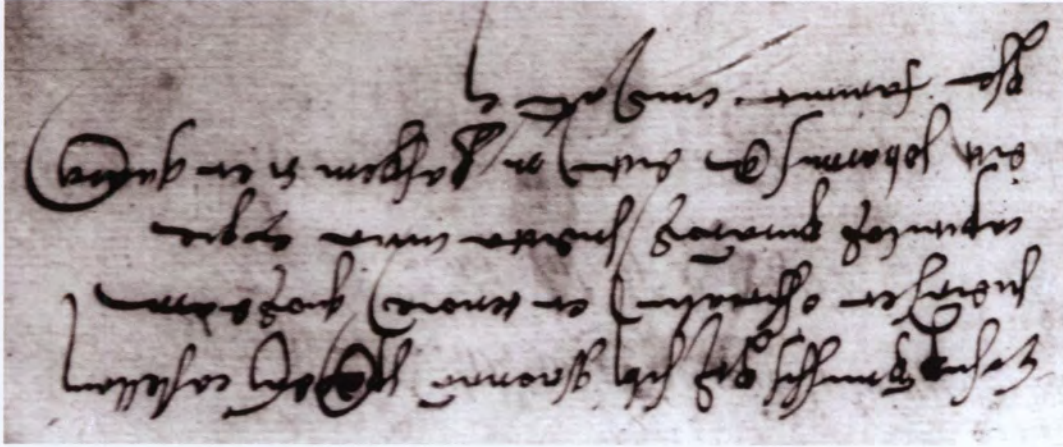
The digital studio that the Malta Study Center set up in the National Archives is custom built, based upon HMML’s pioneering work in cost-effective digitization of delicate manuscripts in Ethiopia and the Middle East. The camera is a high-quality Nikon or Canon digital slr camera, the same model that professional photographers use. The camera stand was originally manufactured for Polaroid cameras, and was repurposed to mount the digital camera. There are any number of mechanized book cradles on the market that use puffs of air or other means to automatically turn pages. These, however, are expensive, difficult to transport to HMML’s field studios, and difficult to repair once there. HMML manufactures its own cradles. They are simple in design, easy to transport, and have few moving parts. The camera operator turns the pages for each capture, and can determine on the spot if an image needs to be reshot.

HMML microfilmed in black and white; the digitization process produces color images. The digital image captures color and



texture better than the microfilm image. This is important for Malta's archives, because the documents are written in inks that have faded or darkened over time. For example, compare the microfilm image of Magna Curia Castellania, Acta Originalia, (1543-1566) Volume 1 with the digital image of the same paragraph (below). The microfilm camera photographed the ink as one dark color and picked up distracting noise from bled through and smears. The color digital image registers variations in the intensity of the ink, making it easier for the researcher to decipher the script from the background.

The success of the digitization project is only a part of providing better access to the Magna Curia Castellania. Sample images are available on Vivarium, HML's online digital object database. But it is impossible to find images without metadata. Therefore, the staff of the National Archives is entering basic catalogue information about the collection into OLIVER, HML's main manuscript database. In addition, there are on-site finding aids in the Banca Giuratale, which will be converted into electronic format in the future. For more information about the collection, contact Dr. Theresa Vann at the Malta Study Center at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library or the National Archives of Malta.



Comparison of microfilm image of NAM, MCC, A01, f. 3r (top) with digital image (bottom)



## The Friends of the Malta Study Center

A new advisory committee, the Friends of the Malta Study Center, has been formed to support and guide the Center's efforts to realize the vision outlined in the successful NEH Challenge Grant. The Friends report to the Board of Overseers of HMML. Their responsibilities include developing ideas for expanding, improving, and promoting the Center; advising the curator on program policy and implementation; serving as advocates for the Center and its mission; and planning for the future of the Center. The Friends have a long-standing interest in the Center's preservation work in Malta and its work with the Priory of Rome. The chairman is Joseph S. Micallef, a long-time member of the HMML board who played an integral role in its foundation of the Malta Study Center. The other members of the Friends share similar close connections with the Center. They include: HMML Board Members Nicky Carpenter and Robert Shafer; former HMML Board Member Lucy Jones; Frà Elie de Comminges, Curator, Grand Magistral Archives and Libraries; Robert Weyerhaeuser, a long-time supporter of the Center; and Fr. Eric Hollas O.S.B., former Executive Director of HMML. The first meeting of the Friends will take place on the campus of Saint John's University in late Spring 2010.

## Guardians of Memory

The National Archives of Malta has published a book of essays

entitled *Guardians Of Memory: Essays in remembrance of Hella Jean Bartolo Winston*. Bartolo Winston was a prominent figure in Maltese archival management who mentored a generation of archivists and historians. The tribute to Bartolo Winston also includes two articles about the Malta Study Center: Msgr. John Azzopardi's description of the early years of the project and Theresa Vann's account of the Center in the age of electronic access. The volume, edited by Charles Farrugia, is available from the National Archives of Malta.

## Center Receives Grant Money

The Malta Study Center received a \$5,000 from the Laura Jane Musser Foundation to develop a pilot project digitizing the Notarial Archives in Valletta. The pilot project will determine the best practices for photographing the registers in the Notarial Archives. 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, 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, dating from the year 1450. More information about the pilot project will appear in the next issue of *Melitensia*.

## Malta Study Center at CITRA

Mr. Charles Farrugia, Director of the National Archives of Malta, invited Dr. Theresa Vann to exhibit the work of HMML and the Malta Study Center at the 41st International Conference of the Round Table on Archives (CITRA), "Imagining the 21st Century Archivist: New Strategies for Education and Training," held in Malta, November 17-21, 2009. CITRA is sponsored by the International Council of Archives, the professional organization for the world archival community. CITRA brings together the heads of national archival institutions, presidents of national professional associations and the ICA sections and committees. This was the first time CITRA visited Malta, and it was a huge success.



Right to left: The Hon. Dolores Cristina, Minister for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport; Charles Farrugia, Director of the National Archives of Malta; and Theresa M. Vann. (Photo: Stephen Bussitil.)





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The Banca Giuratale, the location of the Magna Curia Castellaniae, in Mdina, Malta.

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