Dear Melitensians,

I am often asked whether or not the Malta Study Center has its own rare book and manuscript collection given that the Center’s primary mission remains the digitization of the endangered manuscript heritage of Malta and the Order of Malta. I am always happy to reply that the acquisition of rare Melitensia has been part of the Center’s history since its foundation in 1973.

Our acquisition policy is an important part of our long-term preservation mission. These works, both manuscript and printed, help us catalog items in collections photographed by HMML and allow us to participate in international exhibitions. By acquiring rare documents, we can preserve them in our collection and make them accessible to the public for study. Over the next few issues we will be highlighting some of these recent, notable acquisitions as related to our mission to preserve the cultural heritage of the Knights of Malta and the Maltese people.

In January, we released our first major digital humanities project, helping create the next generation of online finding aids dedicated to our microfilm and digital preservation projects. The Malta Parish Archives Project, discussed in this issue, resulted from an international collaboration that involved Dun Gwann Azzopardi and Mario Gauci of the Cathedral Archives, Fr. Nicholas Doublet of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Malta, the Malta Study Center, and Michael Buhagiar of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Grace Museum and Archive. I want to thank all of you for helping us realize this project.

Sincerely,

Dr. Daniel K. Gullo
Joseph S. Micallef Curator of the Malta Study Center

On the cover: Genealogical tree of the Gisulfo family, 1750. Palazzo Fafson Historic House Museum, Mdina. HMML project number PFM 00019.
Malta Parish Archives Website Published Online

In January, the Malta Study Center launched the Malta Parish Archives website, a free online finding aid and digital resource for the parish archives from Malta and Gozo microfilmed by the Center during the 1980s. The website was designed to aid the novice and advanced researcher, particularly those interested in Maltese genealogy and local parish history. It contains a variety of features that facilitates a user’s ability to find, study, and view those microfilms that have been scanned and made available in vHMML Reading Room. People who use the site will find a lexicon helping describe the contents of parish archives in addition to a timeline showing which parish records were microfilmed by the dates of the records.

The simplified catalog and geographic map are the primary features of the website. The catalog provides information on the basic content, dates, and location of each manuscript. The manuscript record is also linked directly to vHMML Reading Room, allowing users to see images of the manuscript if they are available. The map allows users to identify where the parish archives are located in Malta and Gozo and includes information about the number of manuscripts microfilmed at each location.

The Malta Parish Archives Project was developed using metadata harvested from vHMML Data Portal, which allows scholars to collect and analyze data from vHMML Reading Room for digital humanities projects. The Malta Parish Archives Project is part of HMML Digital Humanities, or vHMML DH, a website that provides researchers with tools for studying manuscripts.

Above: Malta Parish Archives home page.

Above: Map of parish archives microfilmed by the Malta Study Center.

Right: vHMML Reading Room displaying a record from the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Grace Archive, Żabbar.
The Archivum de Piro is found in the palazzo of the Casa Rocca Piccola in Valletta, Malta. The collection contains items from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, including account books, wills, legal documents, and correspondence mainly issued by Giovanni Pio de Piro (1673-1752), first Baron of Budach and first Marquis de Piro. Gio Pio, as he is often called, held important positions in the administration of the Order of Malta and local government. His marriage to the wealthy Anna Antonia Gurgion, whose father was maestro di sala at the Magistral Palace, only increased his influence within the city.

The Marquis de Piro was heavily involved in the affairs of the island, including being named secreto of Malta, Gozo and Comino with administrative powers over the Order of Malta's financial dealings in the islands. An example of this power can be seen in the account book Esito fatto dal segreto Barone de Piro dal primo maggio 1721 per tutto ottobre 1721 (below), which describes the archipelago’s expenses related to the Order’s properties that he administered.

As a private archive, the collection contains documents with personal details about the family's history. Letters from Gio Pio’s sons and other relatives fill the collection narrating their lives as the family expanded its influence in Malta, Italy, and France. For example, a 1732 letter (above) written by Eugenia de Piro to her brother Vincenzo informs him about the family’s health and thanks him for the gifts that he had sent to her.

In 2017, the Malta Study Center completed the digitization of the pre-1815 records of the Archivum de Piro in partnership with the Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti and the de Piro family.

- Dr. Valeria Vannesio
The Malta Study Center has acquired an important manuscript that helps us understand the power and privilege of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem in France during the eighteenth century. The Mémoire pour Monseigneur l’ambassadeur de Malte contre la damoiselle Prevot was written by Fra’ Jean Jean-Jacques de Mesmes (1675-1741) as slander against the dancer, Mademoiselle Françoise Prévost (1680-1741). Originally published in 1726, the Mémoire was intended to shame Fra’ de Mesmes’ lover, Mademoiselle Prévost, whom he accused of cheating on him with a younger man. The Mémoire contains de Mesmes’ complaint and Prévost’s response, where she noted that the Knight of Malta had failed to pay an annuity and deliver a promised loan of 6000 livres. For de Mesmes, the Mémoire had the opposite effect, as the Parisian aristocracy mocked him for his relationship with the dancer contrary to his religious vows. Prévost, on the other hand, took her case to court where she won and received the money owed to her.

Fra’ Jean Jean-Jacques de Mesmes entered the Order of Malta as a minor in 1676. He was the son of Jean-Jacques de Mesmes (1630-1688), Président à mortier of the Parliament of Paris, and Marguerite Bertrand de la Bazinière. His brother, Jean-Antoine de Mesmes (1661-1723), Premier président of the Parliament of Paris, helped secure Fra’ de Mesmes’ position as ambassador of the Order of Malta to France in 1715.

Françoise Prévost was one of the most celebrated ballerinas of the eighteenth century. She was born in 1680 to humble origins in Paris. Prévost debuted in Ballet des Saisons in 1695 and at the Académie d’Opera in 1699 in the ballet Atys. In 1708, she introduced pantomime to the final scene of Les Horaces, bringing popular technique to Pierre Corneille’s (1606-1684) ballet. Her career was immortalized with her solo ballet Les Caractères de la danse choreographed to the music of Jean Ferry Rebel (1666-1747). She was the teacher of Marie Camargo (1710-1770) and Marie Sallé (1707-1756), retiring as première danseuse in 1730.
Center’s Archivist Presents at Sapienza University

In January, Dr. Valeria Vanesio, Archivist of the Malta Study Center, and Dr. Valentina Burgassi of the Sorbonne, presented the talk “L’Albergia della Lingua d’Italia a Malta. L’avventurosa storia di un palazzo e delle sue carte, (secoli XVI-XIX)” at Sapienza University, Rome. Drs. Vanesio and Burgassi discussed how the Auberge of Italy, the residence of the Italian Knights, came to define Valletta’s urban context as a convent-city.

As the home of the Assembly of the Knights from the langue of Italy, the auberge served as a center for the Italian Knights’ administrative activities in Malta and Italy, holding its own archive detailing their dealings within the Order of Malta and the langue. As a Renaissance palazzo, the auberge stood as a symbol of the Italian Knights’ cultural and religious power on the island, serving as both a residence for the professed Knights and as the official center of power of the langue in Malta.

Right: Dr. Valeria Vanesio, Archivist of the Malta Study Center (left) and Dr. Valentina Burgassi (right) at Sapienza University, Rome.
Malta Study Center Sponsors Session at the Renaissance Society of America Conference

The Malta Study Center sponsored a session at the Renaissance Society of America’s annual conference held in Toronto, Canada, March 17–19, 2019. The session focused on the history of eighteenth-century slavery and redemption in the early modern Mediterranean. The panelists included Dr. Oumelbanine Zhiri, University of California San Diego, who presented a paper “Ahmad ibn al-Qâdî in Malta,” and Dr. Daniel Gullo who delivered the paper, “The Confraternity of Charity and the Redemption of Maltese Slaves in the Mediterranean.” The session was organized by Dr. Eric Dursteler of Brigham Young University and chaired by Dr. Daniel Hershenzon of the University of Connecticut.

Workshop at the Mediterranean Seminar, Captivity and Ransom in the Mediterranean

Dr. Gullo participated in the workshop panel, “How did Gender and Captivity Shape each Other in the Premodern Mediterranean?” at the spring meeting of the Mediterranean Seminar held at Brown University on May 4–5, 2019. Dr. Gullo’s intervention discussed the problems of masculinity, gender, and slavery for members of the Order of Malta after the 1565 Great Siege of Malta. His paper analyzed the increasing importance of gendered notions of violence and the emasculation of the Turk and North African Muslim within the engravings and woodcuts of the statutes of the Order of Malta. He discussed how these engravings created concepts of masculine identity and hierarchy within the Order as it emerged from the devastation of the Great Siege to reestablish its membership under the authority of the Grand Master.
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Friends of The Malta Study Center

The Friends of the Malta Study Center is an advisory group that meets annually to support the mission and vision of the Center. The Friends provide oversight in financial matters and ensure that the organization has the resources it needs to fulfill its cultural preservation mission.

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