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Historical Archive of the Aegean - Ergani: Documentation, Management and Publication of Cultural Heritage Resources on the Semantic Web.

Summary

This paper introduces the Historical Archive of the Aegean, its archival resources and the ways in which this material is treated using Semantic Web technologies and tools to the benefit of a wide community of users and researchers.

Ergani is a civil, non-profit organisation based in Mytilene, Greece. Ergani aims to collect, document, preserve, research and exhibit archival evidence which demonstrates Lesvos' role and importance in the financial, social and cultural life of the north-eastern Aegean Sea area. Ergani currently owns and manages an important cultural resource, the Kourtzi family archive. This archive encompasses numerous types of evidence, including text documents, diaries, records, newspapers, photographs, amateur movies (Pathé Baby 1924-27), postcards, architectural and industrial designs, advertisements, magazines, works of art and various other objects.

Ergani constantly evolves together with its cultural resources, and is rapidly turning itself into a state-of-the-art memory preservation organisation. Ergani achieves this goal by electronic documentation and management of the entire Kourtzi family archive, digitisation of selected evidence from the archive, and sharing of documentation and digital substitute resources with specific target groups through dynamic (portal/web study space) and static (dvd) productions. Primary archival documentation work in Ergani produces ISAD descriptions at evidence level, encoded in XML following the EAD DTD and RLG recommendations for interoperability. Further study of the material - historiographic or otherwise- and documentation work spanning multiple parts of the archive is semantically supported by the CIDOC CRM ontology.

The Historical Archive of the Aegean - Ergani is a civil non-profit organization, based in Mytilene, the capital of the island of Lesvos, situated not far from the

Asia Minor coastline on the border of Greece and Turkey, as they were marked off after 1922. The organisation aims to collect, document, preserve, research and exhibit archival evidence of the financial, social and cultural life of the island of Lesbos in the northeastern Aegean Sea area and the wider area of the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Ergani uses the archival material it possesses as well as its human and material resources in order to reinforce the existing knowledge and inform the public on the history of the area for the period between late 19th century and early 20th century. Ergani recognises its role as an agent of protection and promotion of Cultural Heritage and is oriented towards the cultural and educational reinforcement of the community.

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Ergani is the beneficiary of copyrights that entitle it to use and promote the historic material that constitutes the Kourtzi family archive. The said family is a unique and prominent example encompassing and accentuating the conditions under which marked entrepreneurship and innovation developments were achieved on the island of Lesbos and the northeastern Aegean Sea area during the period 1870-1930.

The island of Lesbos was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912 and was mainly inhabited by Greek Christian populations that maintained tight bonds with the Asia Minor coastline, having developed important financial, social and cultural relationships. The Greek community, while under Ottoman-Turkish administration, had managed to prevail in every sector of financial life after the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire and lead the island to the threshold of industrial capitalism and urbanisation. The Greeks were successful in trading, manufacture, banking and developed a particular urban lifestyle that kept up with the respective developments in Western Europe. However, the emersion of Balkan nationalisms and nationalist wars aiming at dissolving the Empire and redistributing its territories played a catalytic role in the development of the island and the Greek bourgeoisie. Thus, November 1912 was a milestone on the history of the island, with the landing of the Greek

army in Mytilene and the liberation and integration of the island into the Hellenic national state.

Although the upper classes of the society of Lesbos maintained good relations with their Turkish commanders, they were dissatisfied with their subordination at the level of administrative structure. Driven by this discontent, the bourgeoisie of the island of Lesbos supported the effort to join the island with the rest of Greece. However, the results of this choice shook the foundations of prosperity and progress, bringing the island into a new geopolitical and economic framework. The island was re-oriented towards a new capital – the city of Athens – which was extremely distant and economically unprofitable. Historical documents of private correspondence between members of the bourgeoisie show that the bourgeois never imagined the forthcoming exclusion of their activities from their natural eastern markets¹. A series of events to follow, World War I, the October revolution and the tragic end of the 1922 invasion of the Greek army in Asia Minor, sealed the loss of those vital markets and finally led to the geopolitical demarcation of Lesbos, through its integration into the narrow borders of the Hellenic national state.

The Kourtzi family, its archive and the history it documents, follow this fatal course. They begin with the development of all kinds of profitable and innovative entrepreneurial activities within the fluid borders of the Empire, throughout the eastern Mediterranean Sea, from Alexandria to Skopje and from Cyprus to Trieste. Family members developed successful activities in shipping, mining, hôtellerie, banking and the olive oil industry, while they distinguished themselves in technological innovation and the arts and humanities. After 1911 however, there follows a series of successive bankruptcies due to the alteration of geopolitical conditions, the creation of hard national borders and the consequent financial suffocation with the loss of markets in Asia Minor.

It has to be noted that the history of our principal historical agents of the time poses a series of questions that can potentially enrich and, at times, question the analytical axes of Greek historiography. How can we explain the fact that part of the Greek population did not share the common aesthema and feel the need to be liberated from the Turkish yoke? Why did local ship-owners carry Turkish troops to Crete to suppress the 1896 revolution? How is it possible for Greeks of Constantinople not to welcome and answer the command of national integration, but envision a new Ottoman identity that would incorporate them? The official national historiography had neglected or suppressed these facts and their interesting interpretations.

The insistence of historical analysis to unevenly manage the multitude of historical and political discourses is often due to their intrinsic, insurmountable character and their resistance to being consumed into simple causal relations.

¹ Sifnaiou, E. (1996) *Lesbos, Economic and Social History (1840-1912)*, Mytilene: Trochalia-Municipality of Mytilene.

Furthermore, they often oppose dualistic epistemological pairs, such as Greeks/Turks, national subjection/economic prosperity etc. The structure of these essentialist differences has prevailed in all official historiographies of nation-states in contemporary European and even global post-colonial historiography. This hegemonisation, always ideological and commonly rigid, resulted in the exclusion of more provocative narrative alternatives and the expression of memories that comprise the local history of communities trapped within the impasse of nationalist and religious clashes of a given period.

We believe that these events can be explained as a result of a multiplicity of causal relations and structural effects that constitute them, however always within the framework of their appearance and representation as historical information and material. As Discourse and Material, they constitute grids of relations that disrupt dual structures, open up the horizon of meaning and interpretation and enable multidirectional navigations into all possible meaningful interpretations. The apocalyptic picture made probable by such analysis does not pose a threat to national identities. It stands as educational wealth and hermeneutical catharsis in our attempt to interpret the historical experiences of these communities in the context of the eternal power relation of national identity discourses over their local versions.

The intention of our methods of electronic documentation and digitisation is to create a semantic basis – content and associated toolset – which enables the vertical disintegration of established hierarchies, the creation of ontology-based evidential relations through historical analysis and a consequent re-writing of historical analysis through hypertext. This semantic basis can act as an enabler of knowledge-rich, contemporary historical discourse, overcoming past silences. However, it remains but a technical catalyst of scientific production which will undoubtedly receive its share of criticism in the future; to quote Christopher Tilley, *correct stories of the past are dependent on a politics of truth linked to the present*².

Our methodology can be ultimately resumed as the following twofold:

- i. ensure the optimal coverage and accessibility of documentary evidence by detailing an initial structured and authoritative view of the archive through complete and native application of archival description and interoperability standards³, extensive use of thesauri⁴ and normalised signalling of personal, temporal and geographical information;

² Tilley, C. (1990) *On Modernity and Archaeological Discourse*, in *Archaeology After Structuralism*, Bapty, I. And Yates, T. Editors, London: Routledge.

³ ISAD descriptions encoded in XML following the EAD DTD, indexed in a native XML database together with metadata extracted according to RLG recommendations.

- ii. open documentary evidence to historical analysis and materialise and creatively visualise the resulting discursive structures by interconnecting documentary evidence through the instantiation of a central knowledge model⁵.

In general, such methods can offer a very flexible way to search and interpret historical information. Beyond the standard historical claims, all interconnections are possible towards all directions, but always based on relations that the elementary discursive structures accentuate through the threads of our narratives. On the one hand, this discursive paradigm composes an interpretative horizon with multiple narrative paths often fragmented and imprisoned by the material itself – namely diaries, letters and business reports. On the other hand, one finds the discursive multiplicity of interpretative and hermeneutical tools that the study of historiography demarks. As a result, the interpretative grid created is a new hermeneutic universe.

This complexity of relations, links and flows of events and discursive instances and their representations as historical material and memories preserved within the Kourtzi family archive, composes the canvas of a continuous navigation which is none other than narration itself, each time different and unique. The introduction of new technologies as a field of exercising and reconstructing narrative paths and structures constitutes another instance of epistemological advancement in the course of the multidisciplinary project that the research and study of the archive constitutes.

⁴ Getty AAT and TGN, Library of Congress TGM I and II, and the UNESCO Thesaurus.

⁵ The CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model.