



**PAM** Pokrajinski  
arhiv  
Maribor

*Moderna*  
**arhivistika**

Časopis arhivske teorije in prakse  
Journal of Archival Theory and Practice

Letnik 5 (2022), št. 1 / Year 5 (2022), No. 1

Maribor, 2022

Prejeto / Received: 15. 06. 2022

1.02 Pregledni znanstveni članek

1.02 Review Article

<https://doi.org/10.54356/MA/2022/FJTS9838>

## **CORFU GENERAL STATE ARCHIVES FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL: KNOWLEDGE, INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY AS KEY FACTORS IN THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE**

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### **Abstract:**

*The article aims to present the importance of archival institutions not only for local history and culture, but also for the history of a broader geographical area. As repositories of historical documents, archives furnish valuable insights into many topics. The Ionian Islands form the best example of social, economic, political and cultural osmosis in the Mediterranean world. This uniqueness makes the Archives of Corfu an invaluable asset for research. Since the contemporary crisis, such as the coronavirus pandemic, has served to illustrate that cultural institutions should explore new avenues of cultural management, the article also suggests that the level of innovation and creativity achieved during the crisis should be maintained to ensure that our new normal is part of a brighter future.*

### **Key words:**

*Corfu, General State Archives, cultural management, innovation*

### **Izvleček:**

**Krfski državni arhiv od lokalnega h globalnemu: znanje, inovacije in ustvarjalnost kot ključni dejavniki pri pravilnem upravljanju naše kulturne dediščine**

*Prispevek želi predstaviti pomembnost arhivskih ustanov ne samo za lokalno zgodovino in kulturo, ampak tudi za zgodovino širšega geografskega območja. Kot hranitelji zgodovinskih dokumentov ponujajo arhivi vpogled v številne teme. Jonski otoki so odličen primer družbene, ekonomske, politične in kulturne prepletenosti v Sredozemlju. Krfski arhiv je tako edinstven v smislu dostopa do neprecenljivih raziskovalnih virov. Nedavne krize, med katere sodi tudi epidemija koronavirusa, so pokazale, da morajo kulturne ustanove raziskovati nove načine upravljanja s kulturo. Članek predlaga, da določene inovacije in kreativnosti, ki smo jih razvili med krizo, ostanejo kot del nove normalnosti za lepšo prihodnost.*

### **Ključne besede:**

*Krf, državni arhiv, upravljanje s kulturo, inovacije*

## Preface

The notions local and global in the title assume a double meaning here. First, it means that the content of the local archives is sometimes very important not only for local history and culture, but also for the history of a broader geographical area. The second meaning is that the Information Technology and Communications could help local archives turn their content accessible to a global audience and be more user-friendly and innovative.

## 1. Introduction

When archival institutions began to play an important role in the development of cultural awareness and historical thought, a number of issues related to the safe recovery, restoration and management of archival material started to concern scholars of relevant disciplines. When proper management guidelines are adhered to, archival institutions can work as repositories of collective memory on multiple levels. As such, they allow for the transmission of cultural experience and historical knowledge. They facilitate access to authentic low-cost information, play a key role in its dissemination and enhance the transparency of institutions. As repositories of historical documents, archives furnish valuable insights into many topics. They preserve knowledge that could fall into the wrong hands or otherwise be lost, destroyed or forgotten. In that sense, they provide a coherent narration of the history and culture of a community (Kokkinos, 1998; Matthaïou, 1989; McKemmish, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

In the past, archives generally supported the science of history. However, in the present day, other scholars recognise the benefits they can derive from deepening their cognitive background on societal structure, the natural environment, economic trends, social attitudes and mindsets, etc. For that reason, today, the public who is interested in the archives has greatly expanded, consisting not only of historians but also of art lovers, professors of literature and other subjects, geographers, architects, lawyers, genealogists, sociologists and even filmmakers and screenwriters (Bilel & Mkadmi, n.d.).

## 2. Content and importance of the General State Archives of Corfu

The General State Archives of Corfu has always served the community by providing historical material and enriching its knowledge base. It preserves an archival series dating from the fourteenth century to the present day.

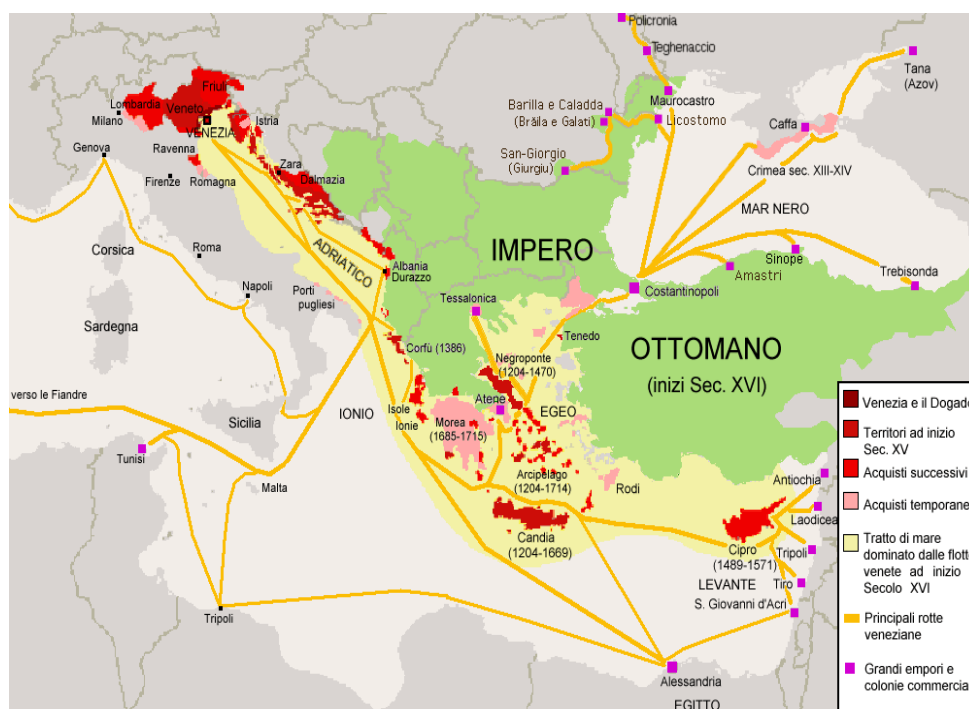
While the rest of Greece was conquered by the Ottomans and became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1453, the Ionian Islands had a completely different history, as they became part of the Venetian *Stato da Mar*. The Community of Corfu asked Venice to rule their island and signed an act of voluntary submission in 1386. The Venetian rule was very different from the Ottoman and proved crucial for the islands, because since then their history and culture became more connected to the West.<sup>2</sup> Local culture was deeply influenced by the higher level of Venetian culture. Furthermore, after the fall of Constantinople, the islands became centres of preservation of cultural heritage. The unique culture of the Ionian Islands is a result of the constant communication with the

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<sup>1</sup> German historians, since 1848, (e.g. Ranke, Niebhur, Droysen), French historians, since 1870, (e.g. Monod, Lavisse, Langlois, Seignobos) and others all over the world formed institutions, founded scientific journals and promoted the best methodological practices: editing the sources, using archives as the main sources of history, editions of diplomatic documents, rules for citation, the academic seminar, etc.

<sup>2</sup> West here assumes the meaning of Europe in contrast to the Ottoman Empire to the East.

West (Orfanoudakis & Borri, 2013). During the Venetian rule stretching from Venice and Bergamo to Famagusta, a large territory that now includes seven countries (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece and Cyprus) shared cultural identities and history. Nowadays, the architecture is the most evident characteristic of this legacy, but there are many more hidden aspects in the dialects, gastronomy, institutions and other cultural traditions, which can be studied through the archives. When the Community of Corfu in 1443 asked the Venetians to form an archival repository where documents concerning the community could be kept (mostly in order to keep documents of their privileges), they set a lasting example of preserving public documents.<sup>3</sup> (Voulgaris, 1880).



**Picture 1. Venetian State of the Sea (Stato da Mar).** Source: Benvenuti G. (1989). *Le Repubbliche Marinare. Amalfi, Pisa, Genova, Venezia, Roma: Newton & Compton.* Retrieved 12.6.2022 from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Repubblica\\_di\\_Venezia.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Repubblica_di_Venezia.png)

Due to successive foreign interventions and dominions (Venetians, French, Russians, British), the interest and relevance of these documents exceed the geographical boundaries of the Ionian region. Rather, it extends to both the East and the West. This was markedly evident from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards and highlights the fact that the Ionian Islands were an open society. The more local societies function as open systems, the more they share identities and mental outlooks with their national and European counterparts. This is especially true within the Ionian community, where the more open-minded definition of a border concept was reflected in the daily practices of the people and the shaping of their ideas and viewpoints. The Ionian Islands form the best example of social, economic, political and cultural osmosis in the Mediterranean. This uniqueness makes the Archives of Corfu an invaluable asset for research. With almost 11 linear kilometres of documents, they broaden the fields of

<sup>3</sup> Very important series from this time are: the Archives of the Notaries (with wills, agreements of all kinds, etc.), the Archives of the Domestic Administration (Enhorios Diaheirissis) (property management of citizens and institutions), Venetian Administration (Enetiki Dioikissi) (decisions, laws, etc.), Sanità di Corfu (the Quarantine/Health Authority) (demographic information, departures and arrivals of ships and passengers), Archives of the Orthodox Church (Pagratis, 2011).

observation for cultural and historical studies of the Ionian Islands and the Mediterranean in general.

Archival material was originally produced by the authorities as part of their normal function. The public and private sectors create documents in order to preserve their everyday routine and activities for further use. When documents accumulate, they form archival series so these recordings acquire another dimension that allows the reconstruction of the continuous time that becomes the time of history (Politis, 1989).

### 3. The Ionian State Archives

At this point, this paper will use as example archival material from the period of the Ionian State (1815–1864).<sup>4</sup> After successive dominions (Venetians, Democratic French, Russians-Ottomans and Imperial French), the Ionian Islands were ceded to the British and became a British protectorate in 1815. The British found an already organised local society that was well-informed of the notions of modernity of the nineteenth century (Gekas, 2016; Brégianni, 2017).

British policy formed a new administrative system with a new bureaucratic structure and organised institutions that influenced local island communities. It is indeed a happy coincidence that archival series were saved in the General State Archives of Corfu, which are sources of constant historical research and discussion.

The Ionian State archives provides researchers with a wide range of economic, political, social and cultural readings that offer information not only about major historical events but also long-term history (the 'longue durée').<sup>5</sup>

The numerous archival series reveal the economic functions of the state and the different administrative bodies, the existence and the role of associations and workers' unions, the salaries and the pensions of the public functionaries, the *Monte di Pietà* organisation, arrivals and departures from the port as well as maritime and commercial affairs. Censuses and statistics provide data on the population, the naturalisation of foreigners, education, agriculture, animal raising, fish farming and salt pans. Information is provided on road construction and other public works on infrastructure, philanthropy and the operation of the theatre and the Ionian Academy.<sup>6</sup>

The electoral process and the lists of candidates and voters are also an interesting field of research that highlights the political culture of the Ionian Islands long before corresponding institutions were created in the rest of Greece. The files of the notaries with the number of contracts and legal acts they contain are also important.<sup>7</sup> Dowry agreements, wills, inheritance arrangements reflect aspects of family and social life. The wills reflect, for example, the degree of the authors' benevolent disposition, the historicity of charity, the intensity of the phenomenon in times of crisis, the fear of death, and the ethics associated with that fear. Work arrangements between employers and employees such as painters, craftsmen, laborers, domestic staff, members of the clergy, and other financial arrangements reveal the working relationships, as well as the social groups that participated in the economic life.

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<sup>4</sup> *Stati Uniti delle Isole Ionie (United States of the Ionian Islands); also called Ionian State.*

<sup>5</sup> *The term here as it is used by the French Annales school of historical writing.*

<sup>6</sup> *The Ionian Academy was the first University on Greek territory. It was founded in 1824.*

<sup>7</sup> *Notarial Archives in General State Archives of Corfu include roughly 10,000 wills (2,230 from 1805 until 1844 were catalogued) and other notarial acts and contracts on 3,262 pages from 1472 until 1869.*

The Passport Index (Nikiforou, 2003a) is another example of an important research tool that goes beyond local interest, highlighting the significance of the local testimony in the general history of a geographical area. Passports not only reflect to some extent the mobility of the nineteenth century, but also the typology and portrait of these movements. As the mobility of individuals and groups increased exponentially in the nineteenth century and the issuance of passports became associated with similar practices in other countries, we are able to approach an aspect of everyday life. This also opens a new field of research that provides information on state and politics, administrative and diplomatic history of the states, as well as on anthropological and demographic studies of nineteenth-century Europeans, since the names of the holders, their physical characteristics, gender, occupation and age largely map the profile of these travellers.

Files about fortifications, reconstruction work, building permits and other relevant Ionian State documents reflect the changes in the architecture of the town and the fortifications during the British period while also giving information about the previous condition, as it had been formed mainly by the Venetians during the 400 years of their presence on the island and secondarily by the French.<sup>8</sup> The architectural approach of the buildings, the changes of the owners, the rental and purchase contracts and the design and construction tradition provide a privileged field of research orientated in the human made environment and its cultural readings.

Corfu's town architecture reflects a developed Greek and mostly orthodox society that followed the West for many centuries and created an environment that corresponded to its standard of living and combined Western elements with the local artistic tradition (Agoropoulou-Birbili, 2002). Documents of that time stand out as valuable assistance for the deeper understanding of the history of the buildings and the way the urban space was built with its multi-storey buildings, narrow pedestrian streets, fortresses and fortifications. They provide information about old street names (the 'calle') and quarters of the town or the structure of the church system that reconstitutes not only the landscape of the neighbourhoods but also the social relationships, as groups of families gathered around their fraternity churches. The aesthetic interventions that took place after the arrival of the British evoke a new concept that was more geometric and rational (Karapidakis, 2002). The aforementioned elements not only contributed to the characterisation of the old town as 'historic'<sup>9</sup>, but they are also necessary parameters in decision-making on maintenance and restoration of historic buildings (Nikiforou, 1993; 2003; 2006; Stanelos, 2016).

Birth, marriage and death records from 1841 to 1932 do not just provide births or marriages. Their study is crucial for family history research, the natural movement of the population, fertility, marriage rates, mortality, the rate of population growth and the degree of urbanisation at that time.<sup>10</sup>

Judicial records are witnesses of social upheavals and changes in values and ideologies (Benveniste, 1987). Judicial institutions intervene in the relations of the individual with the authorities, and by compiling what we call 'judicial records', they produce testimonies for the societal reality of that time and compose a cultural model. Sociology and geography of crime, the anthropological view of violence and marginalised social groups can benefit from the study of court records and shift the interest to deviance and its identity.

<sup>8</sup> *Ionian State Building permits in Files 1 & 2, sub-files 12 & 45 (1819–1863).*

<sup>9</sup> *The old town of Corfu became a cultural UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007 during the 31<sup>st</sup> session.*

<sup>10</sup> *Birth, Marriage and Death Records: 1,198 recordings (1841–1932), and Registrar File 33 (1841–1863).*

However, optimal utilisation of the archival cultural heritage depends upon preservation, organisation and access. In the past years, memory institutions (libraries, museums, archives) were not always eager to make their content available to the public. Their visitors were more or less restricted to researchers or colleagues. Access to information—a legal right of every citizen—was possible only via the original copies, by visiting the location where those copies were kept. The use of original documents causes inevitable damage, beyond normal aging of materials, and poses another problem concerning their preservation.

#### 4. Innovation and digitisation

The General State Archives of Corfu participated in the initiative ‘Education and Culture’ of the Operational Programme ‘Information Society’.<sup>11</sup> Digitised copies of birth, marriage and death records (1841–1932) were made available on the Internet. An important aspect of this initiative was that it procured and provided basic equipment for the recording to all public archive departments throughout Greece and ensured international access to the material.<sup>12</sup> However, since then, no other major digitisation project concerning the state archives took place.

Contemporary crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic, can serve to illustrate that cultural institutions should explore new avenues of cultural management. They should seek to ensure better access to cultural heritage archives and engage local communities in order to strengthen a sense of social cohesion. Cultural institutions can adopt a system of inclusion and a process of participation throughout the community. By doing so, they can play a key role in reinforcing a sense of belonging to the European family while simultaneously respecting cultural diversity and developing an awareness of cultural pluralism.

A positive development is that these same cultural institutions have demonstrated great resilience and creativity during the pandemic. In order to counteract the sense of isolation and encourage continued research, they were mobilised from the outset to maintain a viable degree of activity within the restrictive parameters they faced. Throughout the period of successive lockdowns, the General State Archives of Corfu helped researchers and students to continue their work by digitising thousands of pages and sending them by electronic means.<sup>13</sup> New technologies and artificial intelligence increase accessibility, promote transparency, cooperation and education, engage the society and offer opportunities for new learning approaches. They can also be used to develop a new set of creative models. New information and updates for the public can also be made available. However, there are also numerous challenges, such as underfunding, new legal obligations/restrictions, fewer visitors, preservation of digital archives. Gaps in digital competence of the public and the archive staff has to be dealt with. Professional development courses and interdisciplinary training are necessary. Unfortunately, heritage is sometimes seen as an obstacle to economic development, when the opposite is true. Heritage can boost the economy and promote sustainable

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<sup>11</sup> *The project (2007–2013) was co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund and national funds, and it offered digital copies of 7,360,000 pages dating from the 17th to the 20th century.*

<sup>12</sup> *Digital copies of General State Archives in: <http://arxeiomnimon.gak.gr/about/index.html> and <http://arxeiomnimon.gak.gr/browse/index.html?code=GRGSA-KER> Retrieved 26. 3. 2022*

<sup>13</sup> *It has to be mentioned here, judging from the author's personal example, that the GSA of Corfu was more than helpful with researchers and students who were working on projects based on archival material. Numerous pictures of files from the Criminal Court archives were sent to us via WeTransfer which allowed us to continue with our research and meet the deadlines, and we are more than thankful for the help.*

development (Poulios, 2015). European Union strategies and programmes support cultural heritage and creative industries.<sup>14</sup> Still, there remains much more to be done in order to achieve a higher level of performance in this new digital era and increase the positive perspective of creation and availability of digital content, but this mainly needs more funds and more staff.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, we only mention that traditional relations between the cultural sector and the audiences need re-imagining while promoting civic engagement and cultural education in general. As we can now look forward to (hopefully) the end of the COVID-19 era, this level of innovation and creativity should be maintained to ensure that our new normal is part of a brighter future.<sup>16</sup> For this endeavour, archives can act as innovative cultural hubs for the collaboration and dissemination of culture.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Cultural Routes' (as part of the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region EUSAIR) is an example of action that aims to enhance cultural interregional cooperation, reinforce the participation of civil society and strengthen the cultural tourism sector. The 'Creative European ARCHives CR.E.ARCH. Project' aims to transmit a part of the rich heritage of popular traditions and habits of our European culture through creative storytelling based on visual, digital and transmedia performances.

<sup>15</sup> The staff of the archives in the era of Digital Humanities should be encouraged to receive interdisciplinary training and attend professional development courses.

<sup>16</sup> See also: UNESCO Declaration (2020).



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## POVZETEK

### KRFSKI DRŽAVNI ARHIV OD LOKALNEGA H GLOBALNEMU: ZNANJE, INOVACIJE IN USTVARJALNOST KOT KLJUČNI DEJAVNIKI PRI PRAVILNEM UPRAVLJANJU NAŠE KULTURNE DEDIŠČINE

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Ko so arhivske institucije postale pomembne za razvoj kulturne zavesti in zgodovinske misli, so številni raziskovalci z različnih področij začeli razmišljati o temah, povezanih z varovanjem in upravljanjem arhivskega gradiva. Ob pravilnem upravljanju lahko arhivske institucije na mnogih ravneh služijo kot skladišče kolektivnega spomina. V tem oziru omogočajo prenašanje kulturne izkušnje, izpostavljajoč motivacijo in zgodovinsko znanje. Pravzaprav omogočajo dostop do avtentičnih, poceni informacij in so ključne pri posredovanju le-teh, prav tako pa večajo transparentnost samih institucij. Kot hranitelji zgodovinskih dokumentov nudijo arhivi pomemben vpogled v različne vsebine. Ohranjajo znanje, ki bi lahko padlo v napačne roke, bilo izgubljeno ali pozabljeno. V tem smislu podajajo smiselno zgodbo zgodovine in kulture neke skupnosti.

V preteklosti so arhivi v glavnem podpirali zgodovinsko znanost. Danes pa njihovo vrednost prepoznavajo tudi raziskovalci drugih znanstvenih področij. Poglobljajo svoje znanje o strukturi družbe, naravnem okolju, gospodarskih trendih, družbenih odnosih in miselnosti itd., zato je zanimanje javnosti za arhive naraslo in ne vključuje samo zgodovinarjev, ampak tudi ljubitelje umetnosti, profesorje literature in drugih predmetov, geografe, arhitekto, pravnike, rodoslovce, sociologe in celo scenariste oziroma ustvarjalce filmov.

Državni arhiv na Krfu je bil vedno v službi skupnosti, saj ji je omogočal uporabo zgodovinskih dokumentov in tako bogatil njeno znanje. Arhiv hrani gradivo vse od 14. stoletja do današnjih dni. Zaradi nenehnih vpadov tujcev in njihove nadvlade (Benečani, Francozi, Rusi, Angleži) pomembnost teh dokumentov ter interes zanje presegata geografske meje Jonske regije.

Zadnja kriza je privedla do spoznanja, da se morajo kulturne institucije zateči k novim načinom upravljanja kulturne dediščine. Poiskati morajo načine boljšega in lažjega dostopa do arhivskega gradiva, vključiti lokalne skupnosti in prevzeti ključno vlogo pri utrjevanju občutka pripadnosti evropski družini in hkratnega spoštovanja kulturne raznolikosti ter tako razvijati zavest o kulturnem pluralizmu. Obstajajo številni izzivi – naj omenimo samo premalo finančnih sredstev, nove zakonodajne določbe, manj obiskovalcev itd.