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### Assonitis, Alessio, project dir. The Medici Archive Project. Database

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**Assonitis, Alessio, project dir.**

**The Medici Archive Project. Database.**

Babylon, NY: The Medici Archive Project Inc., 1995. Accessed 28 April 2022. [medici.org](http://medici.org).

To call the Medici Archive Project a digital humanities project is somewhat akin to referring to an aircraft carrier as a boat. MAP, as it is often known, looms large within the field of early modern history and has become not just a digital collection of archival materials but also an entire school and course of study built around the growth and publicization of that collection. Originally founded in the 1990s by Hester Diamond and Edward Goldberg in order to “foster the study of the *Mediceo del Principato*,” it now encompasses much more than this collection of Medici correspondence (“About”). As of 2022, it contains three large-scale archival databases, operates eight distinct programs of study, hosts multiple conferences a year, and employs a staff and fellowship of some forty people. Since 2009, Alessio Assonitis has been its director and has overseen what can best be thought of as an institution unto itself. For users seeking digital access to Florentine documents, especially those relating to the Medici family from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, MAP is a hugely important and beneficial resource.

The three “databases” collected in MAP are, really, digital portals for document viewing, annotation, and collation. The first of these is the BIA (Building Interactive Archives) platform that came online in 2012 and hosts the epistolary collection of the *Mediceo del Principato*. To facilitate its use, the MAP team created an accompanying paleography module in 2014. The success of the BIA gave the project the space and drive to build further, and it created the MIA (Medici Interactive Archives) platform with a Mellon Foundation grant that ran from 2015 to 2019; the MIA was launched in 2020. Critically, the MIA is user-built, with crowdsourced archival photos, annotation, and metadata. The end goal here is the long-term digitization of much of the five collections of Medici-related materials of the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF). The third platform, coordinated by Stefano Dall’Aglio, is the Falconieri database of correspondence by the Roman diplomat Ottavio Falconieri dating from 1655 to 1675. Much of this correspondence went to Leopoldo de’ Medici.

These three databases are the core of what we might call the “digital humanities project”: a large-scale digitization effort, much of which is user-driven

and which constitutes a portable archive of annotations, metadata, markup, and cataloguing where users can both store and share their ongoing research. The MIA is a remarkable platform for tackling the daunting task of digitizing a massive archive such as the ASF, and a clever workaround to the limits of archival funding. It is an active site: as I write, some fourteen “inputs” have been created in the past four hours (you can see the ongoing work of other scholars in a dedicated window in the main MIA portal). Users can search through these activities to discover documents, or documents related to certain people, or documents attending to certain places. The interface is fairly intuitive to someone familiar with the basics of databases and archival photography. Users can create dedicated “projects” that organize their collections of uploaded manuscript photos and store these images in undifferentiated folders. They can create “documents” from uploaded images that give a space for annotation and metadata and build up the broad holdings of the digital archive.

The BIA functions similarly but is a curated, rather than crowdsourced, collection of documents. At the time of writing, my Firefox browser is warning me that the connection to BIA is not secure and that I should not enter my password; this is perhaps a minor break in the website coding, and one that can easily be fixed (I have sent a note to the MAP team and this may be corrected by the time of publication). The Falconieri database is somewhat of a pet project but useful to the community of diplomatic historians of early modern Europe who can access a significant database of resources. A major, though perhaps nitpicky, downside to these databases is the need to register separate usernames and passwords for each (the MIA notes that credentials from the BIA *might* work, but not vice versa, and since I am staying out of BIA due to security concerns, I am unable to test this possibility). Primarily an inconvenience, the need to register three separate sets of credentials might drive some users away if they do not have a dedicated need to access these sources.

In terms of usability, the project has both positive and negative aspects. The MIA interface is attractive, and it appears that design concerns around accessibility (e.g., sans-serif fonts, colour choices) have been taken into account. One shortcoming to note is that the linking to the databases from the main project landing page is done in the same tab rather than a new tab, so you lose the landing page when you go to the databases. The only user guide that I could locate is a ten-minute YouTube video posted at the bottom of the landing page. Some users may find that sufficient, though probably many will not. The

landing page itself is crowded with news, event notices, publication notices, program advertisements, and a thumbnail Instagram feed of Florentine art. There is, in short, a lot going on here and a lot of diverse information being presented somewhat cacophonously. Once users can navigate through the top menu, however, the databases themselves are powerful and usable, and that is the core requirement for most of MAP's users.

In the genre of digitized archival collections, MAP is a major success. It began with ambitious-enough goals and has proven, through output and multiple large grant cycles, that it can deliver a highly usable interface for accessing, annotating, and researching Florentine documents. But from its seed project, it has grown into a mighty digital oak and now must be viewed as much more than a "digital humanities project." Much of its output—including six books published with Harvey Miller (an imprint of Brepols) and four more with other publishers, multiple residential fellowships, and dedicated offices at the ASF—lives in the physical world.

All this is to say that MAP provides resources, space, and longevity to the research projects of students and junior scholars in Florence, as well as a platform for the global community of Florentinists to interact and share their archival work collaboratively and productively. It appears to have a sustainable base of resources and a successful track record of project grants from major funding bodies. Overall, the Medici Archive Project is an excellent example of an institutional digital humanities project.

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