

# insights

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Archives and people in the digital age

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Interview: Antonella Ambrosio | University of Naples Federico II

## Digitisation in Italian

Antonella Ambrosio is not only a historian, she is also enthusiastic about the possibilities of information technology for the humanities. Thanks to the EU-funded programme “community as opportunity” (co:op) she has been able to pave the way towards a digital future at her home institution, the University of Naples Federico II. As head of the didactics group within the co:op project, she talked to insights about the past four years of work with ICARUS and her visions for the future.

by Dagmar Weidinger | photos: University of Naples Federico II

**Antonella Ambrosio, tell us a little bit about your activities that connect you with ICARUS.**

I am a researcher in the areas of palaeography and diplomatics, specialising in medieval documents. My activities are focusing on three areas: didactics, research and other projects such as the organisation of conferences, workshops and the promotion of digital representations of archives online. It is this last point that specifically connects me with ICARUS.

**What motivated you to introduce digital technologies into your work?**

It is all Georg Vogeler's “fault” (laughing). When I first met him in 2007, I was simply amazed by the new possibilities I could gain for my research through the new technologies. We soon started to cooperate on Monasterium, working on a translation from German into Italian. Ever since then we have been collaborating on various projects and together organised two conferences on digital diplomatics in 2011 and 2013.

**When did you start using Monasterium and MOM-CA for your students?**

I was so eager to test the new technologies that I started teaching in this new way already in 2008. That was unique in Italy at that time. The two disciplines of palaeography and diplomatics are generally taught in a very traditional way here. I know what I am talking about as I myself studied archival sciences, palaeography and diplomatics at a very traditional institution, the Scuola Vaticana at Archivio Segreto Vaticano. It is only today that some of my colleagues start to change their perspectives and try out this new approach.

**I find it quite surprising that you managed to be so open-minded in such a working environment in Italy – how come?**

I guess it was not so difficult for me to be open-minded as I was familiar with the archival point of view right from the beginning. During the early

years of my career I worked at archives quite a lot. Thus it was obvious to me that digitisation would make our work a lot easier. What is more, I think that my choice to pursue digital projects is also due to my husband (laughing). He is working in the field of information technology, and I simply could not ignore him telling me about the great possibilities that would open up to me by using computers in my work.

**I understand that you have not studied IT yourself. Where did you get your knowledge from?**

Myself and my little group of researchers and tutors in Naples, in particular Maria Rosaria Falcone and Vera Schwarz-Ricci, have learned a lot in the direct co-operation with ICARUS' MOM-CA work group. ICARUS has always provided us with an environment to learn. I guess it is with them that we started to grow, too.

*“It is only today that some of my colleagues start to change their perspectives and try out this new approach.”*



**Antonella Ambrosio** enjoys to take her students into the archives to make studying the originals possible.

And we also attended international conferences and courses on the topic.

**In 2008 you founded Monasterium South Italy and in 2014 Monasterium Italy. Why do you think Monasterium is particularly relevant for your country?**

Monasterium constitutes a primary point of access to the Italian archival patrimony. Its intention is to make our heritage known to an audience not only of specialists. Digital technologies can give visibility and usability to the Italian documentation. Being able to reconstruct monastic archives with dispersed documentation and kept at various places of conservation is a very important factor. What is more, it allows to interconnect with other portals, archives and resources from the web. In this context I would like to highlight that the development of Monasterium Italy would not have been possible without the support of the two EU projects Enarc and co:op.

**How was your new approach received by your students?**

Very well. They liked it very much. Before Monasterium some of my students found the work we do rather annoying. Now it is something fun for them. The training has become much more effective. And I am proud to say that some of our students now even manage to do critical digital editions themselves. This is not only important for the world of science but also gives the students the feeling of doing something useful, of contributing in a larger, European context. They realise that the work they do here in Naples is collocated in a big community of researchers, teachers and archivists under the roof of ICARUS. Some students have already written or are currently writing graduation theses that provide for the use of MOM-CA and digital technologies in general.

**Can you give me a concrete example of the way you work?**

My courses consist of two phases. First of all we take a look at the documents on Monasterium in the classroom, trying to examine them in as much detail as possible. This way we can save a lot of time in the archives where we are actually dealing with the originals. This is important as there is always too little time there. Therefore good preparation – as we can do thanks to Monasterium – is everything! As already mentioned the second step is to examine the originals in the archives.

**What is your wish for your future work in Naples/Italy?**

There is one thing that still has to change and that has to do with the kind of courses we offer. You see, I am a trained diplomatist and palaeographer who has studied the possibilities of digital technologies later on. But what we really need are scholars who learn to combine the two approaches, the one from history and the one from information technology, right from the beginning as digital humanists. I do think that many young people are going in that direction anyway. Of course I would also like to continue co-operating

"Good preparation – as we can do thanks to Monasterium – is everything! The second step is to examine the originals in the archives."

**First name, last name:**  
Antonella Ambrosio

**My favourite memories from my professional life:**

Realising while im writing this answer that I have so many beautiful memories to choose from.

**When I am alone at the archives, ...**

I think life has been generous to me because it allows me to do the job I love.

**Coffee or tea?**

Is this a serious question to ask a Neapolitan? Coffee, of course!

**I am impressed with...**

people who, with intelligence, commitment, courage and perseverance, have managed to achieve goals in their field that others consider particularly difficult.

**I am good at ...**

linking ideas and concepts seemingly without connection and daring to implement them in concrete projects.

**Three things I love about archives:**

Sharing the silence of the reading room with other scholars, waiting for a document to consult for the first time and the life perceived in the documents that have not yet been sorted.

**My connection with ICARUS:**

I value the professional partnership and especially the human interaction.

portrait

info

The Didactics work group

The Didactics work group was established during an ICARUS meeting in Poznań (Poland) in June 2011. It currently consists of 36 members (researchers and professors of archival sciences, palaeography, diplomatics and medieval history) from 15 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Hungary).



Since Ambrosio discovered the digital world with her students, working at the archives is even more fun.

with the ICARUS partner universities. I have managed to organise three Erasmus projects within Europe for my students, in Serbia, Austria and the Czech Republic. These stays are very special for my students because they can perfect their skills in an international environment. At the same time, I hope that international students can take advantage of the knowledge offered by our university.

**Finally I would like to ask you what your personal research focus is.**

I am most interested in medieval charters and private deeds from southern Italy from the 12th to the 13th century. One monastery that I have particularly done a lot of rese-

arch on is Santa Maria della Grotta of Vitulano near Benevento as all the documents of this monastery are in archives here in Naples. The abbey does not actually exist anymore. Nevertheless the place and its history are very important for the local identity. It was thus very special for me to get in touch with the community there during my research. At the end I even received an honorary citizenship of Vitulano not only for traditional research, but also for the creation of the digital collection of Santa Maria della Grotta on Monasterium. Vitulano is a lively, yet a bit isolated village in the mountains. Feeling that through their documents and photographs in Monasterium and in the To-

potheque they were part of a larger and international community was something very special and unique for the people living there.

#### **Name of the institution:**

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II – Dipartimento di Studi umanistici/Monasterium Italy Working Group

#### **Web address:**

[www.studiumanistici.dip.unina.it/dipartimento](http://www.studiumanistici.dip.unina.it/dipartimento)

Facebook: [www.bit.ly/2Nka2Cy](http://www.bit.ly/2Nka2Cy)

#### **Oldest collection:**

The collection "Biblioteca della Società Napoletana di Storia Patria", series Compre e vendite, charter 2 AAIII 1, 15 July 987.

#### **Oddest object / best-known archival item:**

A forgery of the notary Ruggiero Pappansogna who has a very strange surname that suggests that he maybe did not exist ...

#### **Overall volume of digital copies:**

More than 7000.

#### **Most loyal visitors of the online portal Monasterium and the Topotheque:**

Students, trainees, historians, local history researchers, archivists and passionate scholars studying charters and implementing data.

fact sheet

## From the team`s point of view

Maria Rosaria Falcone (Project coordination Monasterium/Topotheque and didactic tutor): " I have been collaborating for about ten years in the teaching and research activities promoted by Antonella Ambrosio in Italy, especially for Monasterium. Our team has formed around the digital archives, the digitisation of medieval charters of Southern Italy. Under Antonella's leadership and enthusiasm, we achieved excellent objectives on the Scholarly Digital Editions of medieval charters and also in the teaching field, thanks to academic courses in Palaeography, Diplomatics and Archival Science with the support of the Monasterium and Topotheque platforms. An very stimulating environment!"

Martina Canonico (Student): "During my studies I attended the Palaeography, Diplomatics and Archival Science courses and seminars by professor Ambrosio and also wrote my bachelor thesis in Palaeography. On this occasion I worked directly with Monasterium where I published the collection 'The Virtual Archive of the Monastery S. Gregorio Armeno'. Currently, I am working on a digital exhibition on this special monastery."

Vera Schwarz-Ricci (Monasterium Scholarly Digital Edition; Communication): "I started working with professor Ambrosio some time ago and I like the diversified project work and the nice working atmosphere. I especially appreciate Antonella`s curiosity about everything that brings innovation to the research sector."

**Dagmar Weidinger** is an art historian and works as a freelance journalists as well as a University lecturer at the University of Vienna (AT).



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