

# ccess to Cultural Heritage Networks Across Europe

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Interview with the ATHENA project coordinator  
- **Rossella Caffo**, Ministry of Culture, Italy  
by **Monika Hagedorn-Saupe**

Rossella, you are the coordinator of the ATHENA project, which contributes to the Europeana development. But it's not the only important project you coordinate. Can you give an overview of how you came up with the idea of the ATHENA project?

In 2008 the series of MINERVA projects ended; the results achieved, as testified by the Commission, were higher than expected. The policy action undertaken by the MINERVA consortium had a very strong impact on the European decision makers on digitisation of cultural heritage.

MINERVA contributed also to creating a common vision on the digitisation of cultural heritage and the sharing of standards and guidelines for interoperability and quality of digital cultural contents and access services.

The cohesion of this network didn't fade at the end of the projects: more new ideas and project proposals circulated, including the ATHENA proposal. In fact the MINERVA experts and decision makers are involved at their respective national levels in various digitisation activities, including the aggregation initiatives. Many of them come from the museum sector while other ones deal with cross-domain projects, in particular the national portals (Culture.fr, BAM, CulturaItalia, the Finnish National Digital Library etc.).

The ATHENA challenge was born in such a context with the purpose of preserving the richness and variety of museum digital content in a European cross-domain aggregation landscape and giving Europeana enriched data.

The MINERVA project finished with some great achievements such as a network of people and institutions, NRG taken over by the Commission and guidance, which are in use by many others. Could you describe each of these achievements, please?

This would take the whole ATHENA Journal!

However, the MINERVA results can be summarised in two main types: political results and technical results.

At the political level the MINERVA network guaranteed a close cooperation among the Member States, and between these and the European Commission. MINERVA gave visibility to the national initiatives, promoted the exchange of good practices, and ensured the spreading and awareness of community policies and programmes at both national and local levels.

In fact MINERVA was born in support of the National Representatives Group for digitisation (then institutionalised by the Commission as Member States' Expert Group) and the tight liaison between digitisation activities and EC policy was a key factor in its success.

The annual NRG Progress Report on digitisation that was published between 2002 and 2007 is still one of the most requested and downloaded MINERVA publications.

In 6 years - corresponding to the projects MINERVA, MINERVAplus, and MINERVA-EC the original consortium grew up from the seven original countries and contained almost all Member States plus Russia and Israel and more than 100 cultural institutions contributing to the network's activities. Such a wide network demonstrated very good cohesion so that it is still alive and productive.

Besides the political approach, MINERVA faced many issues related to digitisation and proposed practical solutions to overcome gaps and problems related to digitisation. MINERVA implemented tools, and guidelines shared at European level are supporting decision makers and experts of digitisation in the realisation of the digitisation initiatives, from the creation of digital libraries to the publication of digital cultural content on the Web.

MINERVA publications and tools had great success: from the "Technical guidelines for digital cultural content creation programmes" (under updating in the framework of ATHENA), the IPR guides, the good practices in digitisation collection that led to a couple of important publications, the "Good practice handbook" (available in 10 languages) and the "Cost reduction in digitisation" handbook; the activity on the quality of cultural Websites was also relevant: MINERVA produced a wide range of tools and guidelines for quality web communication, from the "Handbook for quality in cultural Websites", to the 10 quality principles with tests and handbook, to Museo&Web, the prototype for setting up quality cultural Websites of museums and its Content Management System.

It is important to stress that all the MINERVA outcomes were the object of a wide range of focused workshops held across Europe and beyond: South-Eastern Europe region (in cooperation with UNESCO Information for All Programme), Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan (MEDCULT project); this training activity largely contributed to the raise of the level of awareness on digitisation and to make MINERVA well known by the digitisation experts.


Another very relevant result that was born thanks to the MINERVA network has been the MICHAEL service. The projects MICAEL and MICHAELplus ran from 2004 through 2008; they provided, on the basis of the MINERVA outcomes, a platform to provide simple, quick, and multilingual access to the digital collections from Europe's museums, libraries, and archives. Through the multilingual search function, people are able to find and explore European digital cultural heritage using the Internet, apart from the language they use to make their search. The main focus of both projects was the integration of national inventories of digital cultural heritage to establish an international on-line service.

Thanks to MICHAEL it is now possible to search and browse the digital collections of 18 European countries from all the cultural heritage sectors (archives, libraries, museums, intangible



Examples of MINERVA project publications





heritage, built heritage, audiovisual, landscape etc.) and every kind of cultural institution: national, regional, local, large and small, public and private.

The MICHAEL service is based on the concept of a distributed platform made of open source software and consistent with OAI-PMH, while the digital collections are described according to the MICHAEL data model, which is closely related to the RSLP collection description schema and to work by the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative on collection description.

This service is still available and updated thanks to the work of the MICHAEL Culture AISBL, an association that includes the MICHAEL partners and is responsible for the proposal and implementations of new initiatives related to the MICHAEL service, as well as for the dissemination of the MINERVA results.

Finally, it is worth mentioning also DC-NET as one of the results of MINERVA. Although this project (whose acronym stands for Digital Cultural heritage NETwork) is funded under the e-Infrastructure - Capacities Programme of FP7 and seeks to strengthen co-ordination of the public research programmes among the European countries in the sector of the digital cultural heritage, it was born thanks to the initiative of many former MINERVA partners.

The DC-NET project will contribute to the coordination of the research priorities of Ministries of Culture, their Agencies and other cultural bodies (museums, libraries, archives, audiovisual, archaeological sites, etc.) across Europe in the area of the e-Infrastructures targeted to the digital cultural heritage.

#### How did you happen to decide to undertake a project with a focus on museums?

As I have already explained, the MINERVA consortium included people coming from the various cultural heritage sectors, including museums. The museum experts stressed the need of having specific agreed standards and tools for the description and aggregation of the digital information.

In fact, while libraries have a long tradition in the application of international standards, museums have a very fragmented approach: sometimes they use in-house standards and sometimes the library standards, and in a way that is not satisfactory at all to describe the complexity that each museum object has.

However, some very good practice in the field already existed, like SPECTRUM and museum.dat: ATHENA is working on their harmonisation and promotion by a wider public, taking into consideration the cross-domain perspective of Europeana and the national culture portals.

In a few words, the MINERVA consortium highlighted a wide gap and the following debate led to the composition of the ATHENA proposal.







**Digitising  
Content Together**

Ministerial Network for Valorising  
Activities in Digitisation



working document  
edited by  
the Minerva Working Group 5



identification of user needs,  
contents and quality criteria  
for cultural Web applications

# handbook for quality in cultural Web sites

improving quality for citizens





### Can you talk about the ATHENA goals?

ATHENA is a project whose purpose is to transfer to Europeana the digital content of the European museums through the creation of appropriate tools and guidelines.

Furthermore, ATHENA is working towards the identification of digital content present in the European museums, the integration of the different sectors of cultural heritage with the overall objective to merge all these different contributions into Europeana, the development of a technical infrastructure that will enable semantic interoperability with Europeana.

Another very important goal is to increase awareness of the importance of digitisation among museum stakeholders, aiming at facilitating museums' decisions to join and participate in Europeana.

### How about the achievements of the project?

We have already achieved some interesting results. From the management point of view the ATHENA consortium was able to involve new European and non-European countries and gather content from countries that were not fully represented in Europeana. Furthermore, we found many opportunities to cooperate with other projects - related or not to the European portal - and with the Europeana working groups.

On the technical side ATHENA developed an ingestion tool specific for museums but also flexible enough for the integration of digital objects that are structured according to metadata elaborated in other fields (libraries and archives).

This software is based on LIDO (Lightweight Information Describing Objects), the harvesting format that is now proposed to become a reference model for the integration of museum digital content in a cross-domain perspective. LIDO is a real European outcome since it was elaborated by a core group of experts in the field that includes people who developed the CIDOC CRM; this assures the harmonisation of both standards.

These results have the greatest visibility because of their immediate applications; however, I may mention many other closed and ongoing works, which are equally important: from the European aggregators survey held in cooperation with Europeana (a new edition is foreseen for the Autumn), to the current works on persistent identifiers and museum terminologies, as well as the "Step by step guide on IPR" that will support the ATHENA content providers, network members and other cultural heritage organisations on clearing the copyright on the material they would like to disseminate on-line, and, last but not least, the GIS guidelines to guide the museum people towards the best use of geographical information standards..





**minerva** Digitising  
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Ministerial Network for Valorising  
Activities in Digitisation



Ministero  
per i beni e le  
attività culturali

# Manuale per la qualità dei siti web pubblici culturali

seconda edizione italiana aggiornata



WP5  
Gruppo di lavoro italiano  
"Identificazione dei bisogni  
degli utenti e dei criteri di qualità  
per un accesso comune"



Which one of these do you find are the most important?

All these outcomes are the results of the cohesion of our network: this is the most important achievement.

The ATHENA network includes 37 partners and more than 200 content providers: is it easy to coordinate such a network of people and institutions from different countries? What are the challenges?

The ATHENA consortium is large indeed and has mainly museums but also universities, ministries, archives, cultural heritage agencies, libraries and archives. Everyone is called to contribute from a different perspective to the full success of the project.

It would be useless to say that keeping such a broad consortium under control is easy because you have to take into account all the partners' specific needs, and try to harmonise them. Furthermore all those institutions come from many different countries, including Russia and Israel, and have different working procedures and bureaucracies. For these reasons ATHENA has two work packages (WP1 Management and WP5 Coordination of content) for the coordination of the contribution of partners and content providers.

The challenges ATHENA is facing are both at technical and management levels. The ATHENA work packages are working to overcome the problems that such variety can bring (multilingualism, use of different standards and so on), and the results are encouraging: for instance, the ATHENA ingestion software can process information in every EU language and independently from the standards they are structured with. Moreover, museums are very complex structures: they often have a library and sometimes their own archives. Managing such complex and varied information is a big challenge for ATHENA, too.

From the management point of view, ATHENA counts on periodical plenary meetings (2-3 per year) very crowded! to foster the debate on the ongoing activities: this approach, which derives from the MINERVA experience, is reinforcing even more the consortium and promoted cooperation. Some ATHENA activities were not in the original Description of Work but emerged during these meetings. This helped the newcomers to feel they are part of a lively network; from this point of view it is not surprising that among the most enthusiastic ATHENA contributors there are institutions coming from countries (like Russia and Lithuania) that were not included in the original consortium.

Moreover, ATHENA organised many workshops on the ingestion tool, on multilingualism issues, etc. to improve the experts' skills in all partner countries.

Do you find the relationship with Europeana to which your project contributes easy or difficult?





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## Digitising Content Together

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# good practices handbook

version 1.3

edited by  
the Minerva Working Group 6  
Identification of good practices  
and competence centres



WP 6





The relationship with Europeana has always been satisfactory. This is due to various reasons: first of all, many ATHENA partners or content providers contribute to Europeana itself or other related projects funded by the Commission or national governments and they deeply know its mechanisms. Secondly, the exchange of information with the Europeana Foundation, which manages the portal, is fluid and facilitated by the presence of the foundation itself among the ATHENA partners. Some contributors were also forwarded to us thanks to the Europeana Content Strategy. Also, the technical standards Europeana builds on are fully compatible with those of ATHENA, although ATHENA focuses on museum content.

#### How about the sustainability of results achieved?

The ATHENA consortium hasn't yet planned anything for the future; it was only decided to discuss the matter during the next plenary in Budapest, at the end of November.

However, the project results will be maintained and promoted to the broadest audience in order to enable them to sustain themselves. For instance, LIDO will be officially introduced at the next CIDOC Conference in Shanghai and, together with the ATHENA ingester, is currently being tested by other European projects in order to verify its usability for their own purposes (e.g. Judaica Europeana, MIMO).

#### What are your plans for further work in the area of supporting digitisation of cultural heritage in Europe?

The partners of the ATHENA consortium are involved in the process of building a European Knowledge Space and promoting Europeana at the national level since they work both in important Europeana-related projects and national digitisation activities.

Many of them are also official representatives in the Member States' Expert Group and so they act as a bridge between the national governments and the Commission and can report the national positions up to the European level and vice-versa. In a few words, the plans of the consortium are currently to support the European Commission in the definition of future strategies and funding programmes.

Finally, the ATHENA consortium will contribute to Europeana with other data in the near future: we were recently informed that the Linked Heritage proposal was selected by the Commission for negotiation; this will allow us to work on new enriched data (not only from museums) to be transferred to the European portal.

Thank you for this valuable information, congratulations on your achievements, and good luck with all further plans.

*Monika Hagedorn-Saupe*

