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"E-Culture Net and a New European University of Culture**,**" *Historia en Informatica*, Amsterdam, Jaargang 11, no. 3, 2004.

The idea of a Network of Centres of Excellence for Culture was born in December 1995, when the European Commission launched the idea of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Multimedia Access to Europe's Cultural Heritage. As announced at the opening of the MEDICI Framework in Vienna (October 1998), the plan was that this network would be based at the Maastricht McLuhan Institute (MMI). The establishment of E-Culture Net as a thematic network within the 5th Framework Programme (2001-2002) was a next step. When a new administration at the University of Maastricht reversed its commitments, E-Culture Net began to look elsewhere.

A new home has now been found. A new European University of Culture is being launched and on 1 September 2005 it will provisionally begin with courses leading to new European doctorates in culture. The initial plan was to be based in the buildings of the European Parliament at Strasbourg. For practical reasons it was decided to begin with a distributed model with four universities each focussing on different topics: Freie Universität, Berlin (art and aesthetics); Universià di Bologna (humanities); Universidad di Alcala, Madrid (language and literature) and Université de Paris 8 (philosophy and internet). E-Culture Net will be based at Paris 8.

The European Commission is creating high-speed networks via TERENA and GEANT. E-Culture Net will build on this infrastructure to share a) high quality materials from memory institutions and b) research results (e.g. qua historical and archaeological reconstructions) in order to develop new critical methods. E-Culture Net will also promote the development of a new Distributed European Electronic Resource (DEER), which will have three components: distributed repositories; a virtual reference room and a virtual agora for collaborative research and creativity.

Why go to this trouble? There is a lack of integration. Historically Europe has developed local, regional, national and some international collections and most studies still reflect these limitations. Even internationally, Google Images has a wonderful databank of over 880 million images and exists in different languages but a search for *tree of life*, produces very different results than *arbre de vie*, *arbol de la vida, levensboom, Lebensbaum* although these are theoretically literal translations of the same term.

In the Near East, the tree of life became identified with the palm tree and linked with the lotus. Early examples are found in Egypt, at Susa and Persepolis. In the early 11th century, there is a story of a Muslim in the Near East and a Christian in Spain who had an identical dream about using a palm as a tree of life as the central pillar in a church as a symbol of the harmony between Islam and Christianity. The Muslim made his way to San Baudelio de Berlanga in the province of Soria, found the Christian and built the church.[1]

In the late 13th century the Dominicans built an even more imposing example in Les Jacobins in Toulouse.

The palm as tree of life is linked with the early crusader churches, including the Prior of Sion said to be the location of Christ's *Last Supper*. Through the Benedictines and then especially the Cistercians it becomes a central feature of chapter houses. This idea flourishes in England where the chapter house becomes an eight-sided appendage to their churches with a central palm like column in the centre: e.g. Lincoln, Lichfield, Westminster, Salisbury and finally Wells. Through Abbot Suger, the palm tree of life becomes part of the ambulatory at Saint Denis (1138-1142) and becomes a basic element of Gothic architecture. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the palm spreads to the cellarium, refectory, chapels, retrochoirs and finally the nave. In the early 16th century it emerges as a central motif in masterpieces such as the Chapel of Henry VII, Westminster and King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Those who call the latter the "noblest stone ceiling in existence" typically "forget" to mention that such fan vaulting is also Islamic as confirmed by a Topkapi manuscript.

Gothic architecture is an established field of study but these connections between the tree of life have not been made. Why? Many histories of the subject remain national: the Gothic in England is treated as a separate chapter from the Gothic in France, Germany or Spain. So we find a range of evocative technical terms: decorated gothic, umbrella style, perpendicular style, fan-vaulting. The advantage of these local and national studies has been a profound study of cultural objects as such. Needed is a much larger context, which reveals their connections with other trends across Europe and links them with other cultures. There is serious evidence that even the Gothic arch came via Islamic architecture. Indeed one could argue that a combination of Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions, especially in Spain and Sicily inspired some of the greatest masterpieces of European culture.

Even in its expanded form, Europe is only about 5% of the world population. Yet standard histories of art and culture such as Janson still devote 90% to European culture. If Europe is to achieve a new identity that is fruitful, it must begin by re-assessing not only its Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian roots but also its Near-Eastern roots, its Indian roots via Sanskrit, and the influences of the Far East which have come via the silk and spice roads. Closer to home we must begin by understanding the rich traditions of the new member states. These are deeper incentives for the DEER's distributed repositories, virtual reference rooms and agoras for collaborative research and creativity.

As a first step in this direction the author is working on roadmaps for a new Europe, a four series of seminars and a lecture series that will specifically address the challenge of a new approach to European and World Culture. The story of the lotus and the palm will be one of the 30 lectures in this new series. Such lectures can point the way to a new approach. But the vision of E-Culture Net goes far beyond the vision of an individual. It is about using inter-net-worked media, to enable scholars from all over Europe and beyond to share content and insights in order to arrive at a much bigger picture of culture, that recognizes universal themes we have in common, yet studies the expressions

whereby we rightly assert our uniqueness as countries, provinces, cities, towns and ultimately as individuals.