



The Cactus Project

Vincent Mom

DPP Foundation, The Netherlands

v.mom@wxs.nl

The Cactus project started about 3 years ago, in support of the historic archaeological research of San Juan, a large plantation on the Caribbean island of Curaçao (Dutch Antilles). The basis was a collection of about 800 digital images of 17th and 18th century documents concerning San Juan. These documents are a part of the archives of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) that operated from early 17th century until 1794 when it finally went broke. The Cactus computer system was envisaged as a handy tool to guide the user quickly through the available documents. However, the material appeared to be so interesting that the scope of the project was widened, and currently the database contains over 5000 digital documents (20000 pages). These have all been indexed (15000 names of persons, ships and places, over 120000 index entries). It is probably the largest digital database of WIC documents available.

The documents are letters from the governor and the council of the island Curaçao to their bosses in Holland. But apart from these, there are cash books, legal documents, inventories, reports, witness statements, military orders, official notifications, complaints, application letters, slave death lists, tax documents and much more. Slave trade is one important subject, but also the wars with France and Spain play an important role. Pirates and privateers populate the pages and violence and cruelty are everyday phenomena, clearly reflected in the material.

The extensive index data and query facilities enable users not only to retrieve relevant documents quickly, but also provide means to generate social networks, based on the fact that if two names appear in the same document, there somehow must be a link between them.

The first phase of the project (dates between 1700 and 1780) was recently concluded and the system was installed at the Dutch National Archives for a trial period, after which the data will be available through the Internet. In the next phase, the dataset will be enhanced with documents from the period 1675 -1700.

Keywords: digital documents, indexing, data mining, social networks, WIC

Presentation: A short introduction, followed by a live demonstration of the Cactus system.

References

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