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Latest Heritage Revival Projects of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina

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ABSTRACT

In view of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's long-term strategy for heritage revival and conservation, my presentation shall include selected samples of the latest achievements of the Manuscript Centre and Museum, which are two of the academic sections in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. These two academic institutions are an ambitious attempt at simulating the ancient Library of Alexandria .. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was the Library of the Mouseion, and it was dedicated to scientific research. Hence, my paper shall cover the following:

- 1. The second CD collection of the Manuscript Digital Library. It comprises 7 CDs holding 7 manuscripts selected from the manuscript collection of Abul-'Abbās al-Mursiy Mosque, over which the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has technical and scientific supervision.*
- 2. The Manuscript Museum Virtual Visit, where the user may browse the current exhibits of the Manuscript Museum, provided by brief captions of each exhibit, presented in six different languages.*
- 3. The first volume of Selected Rarities of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, which is a catalogue published two months ago. It describes selected works of the most precious holdings of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina: manuscripts, rare books, documents, statutes, etc; the second volume will be entitled: "Alexandrian Rarities of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina."*
- 4. Treatise on Gout by the prominent Arab scientist, Razis. It is the second series in our Multilingual Publishing project. It comprises the edited text of the manuscript, a translation into English, French, and German, along with a facsimile copy of the manuscript. The first book in this series is entitled: "Treatise on the Trace on the Moon's Face" by Hazen.*

5. *Escorial Catalogue, which contains a database of the manuscript collection of the Escorial Monastery, which Queen Sophia of Spain has kindly presented to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.*
6. *In addition to various publications and heritage multimedia productions that reflect my interest in heritage, which is further manifested in www.ziedan.com, being a website dedicated to Arabic Heritage.*

In the meantime, we are now working on the digitization and re-cataloguing of the British Library manuscript collection, in conformity with our special techniques. The coming period will witness further productions that reflect our keenness on drawing a continuum between Past and Present .. between Heritage and Technology .. between Egypt and the world. All these efforts pour into the advancement of human knowledge; which can never come of age without international collaboration.

Now, I shall throw light on the Manuscript Centre and the Manuscript Museum; the two academic centers for which I am responsible.

Manuscript Centre

The establishment of the Manuscript Administration came within the organizational restructuring carried out by Dr Ismail Serageldin as soon as he assumed his responsibilities as the Librarian of Alexandria. Thereby, the manuscript department has significantly evolved, since its realization in 1994, into an independent administration housing more activities and specializations, and comprising the following units and laboratories.

The Administration was the nucleus of the Manuscript Centre referred to by the Law No. 1 for the year 2001(Article 2) concerning the Library of Alexandria, which states:

“The Library of Alexandria comprises the Library, the Planetarium and the Conference Centre and it is to have the following cultural and scientific institutions established within it:

1. *International School for Information Studies (ISIS)*
2. *Centre for Documentation and Research*
3. *Science Museum*
4. *Calligraphy Institute*
5. *Manuscript Museum*
6. *Centre for Preserving Rare Books & Documents*

And other cultural or scientific institutions may be added or established by a decree of the President of the Republic, and the President of the Republic shall by decree define the legal status of the institutions mentioned in this article.”

On 12 September 2002 the presidential decree No. 268 concerning the establishment of the Manuscript Centre was issued:

Article 1. *A scientific and cultural centre designated as the ‘Manuscript Centre’ is to be established in the Library of Alexandria.*

Article 2. *The Manuscript Centre aims at the fulfilment of the following tasks:*

1. *To collect, catalogue and scientifically preserve original manuscripts.*

2. To acquire microfilmed and digital copies from the assorted manuscript collections worldwide.
3. *To provide scientific research resources in various fields of heritage.*
4. *To establish academic cooperation with parallel centres all over the world.*
5. *To publish scientific heritage especially the works pertaining to the history of science, and the contributions of Arab- Islamic civilization to the human intellectual experience.*
6. *To organize specialized training courses in the fields of heritage such as authentication, cataloguing and publishing of manuscripts.*
7. *To coordinate between specialized centres pertaining to heritage and manuscripts, as well as to organize colloquia on related issues.*

The Manuscript Centre comprises a number of integrated units pertaining to heritage, namely:

- Manuscript Cataloguing Unit
- Heritage Publishing Unit
- Specialized Translation Unit
- Donations Unit

Manuscript Cataloguing Unit

Dr Youssef Ziedan set the foundations of the Unit at the beginning of 1994. He has been ever since in charge of the manuscripts technical supervision. The work was initiated with the cataloguing of manuscripts of the Alexandria Municipal Library, as the BA undertook the administrative and technical supervision over them until Gen. Muhammad Abdel-Salam al-Mahgoub, Governor of Alexandria donated this valuable collection to the BA.

The work team consists of experienced specialists in the field of manuscript cataloguing and heritage. They are currently working on the cataloguing of the aforementioned manuscripts. With the publication of five parts of the BA's general catalogue behind, more are to follow.

Since the BA technically supervises also the manuscript collections at the libraries of Abūl-‘Abbās al-Mursiy Mosque and the Smūha Religious Institute, it has undertaken cataloguing of these two collections and published two parts from the comprehensive catalogue of Abūl-‘Abbās al-Mursiy and the first part of the catalogue of the Smūha Religious Institute, which is to be an exclusive compendium of its manuscript contents.

Heritage Publishing Unit

The main objective of this unit is the preservation of manuscripts and rare books from potential damage that may precipitate from direct contact or poor preservation conditions. Thereby, its members undertake the digitization of rare manuscripts and books, using a high-tech scanner or state-of-the-art digital cameras. These copies are then saved on CDs to be processed by graphics specialists. Hence, a digitized version of the manuscript is rendered accessible on a touch-screen virtual browser, through which the user can simulate the regular reading process. This way two goals are achieved: first, the original manuscript is kept from direct contact and preserved, which subsequently guarantees its survival for centuries to come; secondly, the promotion of rare possessions on a large scale, without bringing them into direct contact with the users.

The Heritage Publishing Unit operates in two parallel fields; the first is electronic publishing through multimedia in the form of compact disks. Chief among the projects which the unit has adopted is the Manuscript Digital Library; the first CD-set of which has been released and it comprises a collection of the rarest manuscripts in the BA, namely *Qasīdat al-Burda*- ‘The Garment Poem’ by al-Būsariy, *Dīwān Salāma bin-Jandal*- ‘The Divan of Salāma bin-Jandal’, *al-Zīj al-Jāmi* ‘The Comprehensive Ephemeris’ by Kūšiyār al-Jīliy, *Ghiyāth al-Umam fī al-Tiyāth al-Zulam*- ‘Nations’ Succor from the Madness of Darkness’ by al-Juwayniy, *al-Badī’ fī Naqd al-Ši’r*- ‘The Exquisite in Poetry Criticism’ by Usāma bin-Munqidh, *al-Luma’ fī al-Nahw*- ‘Highlights in Grammar’ by Ibn Jinniy, *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr*- ‘The Great History’ by al-Maqrīziy. The second set represents some of the rarities of the Islamic heritage collection in the mosque of al-‘Ārif bi-Allāh Abūl-‘Abbās al-Mursiy: *al-Islāh wa al-Idāh*- ‘Refinement and Clarification’ by Ibn Kamāl Pasha, *Dīwān al-Arīb fī Mukhtasar Mughnī al-Labīb*- ‘The Witty’s Divan of the Compendium of Mughnī al-Labīb’ by al-Sāmūliy, *Khulāsāt al-Hisāb*- ‘Compendium of Arithmetic’ by al-‘Āmiliy, *Talkhīs al-Bayān ‘an Majāzāt al-Qur’ān*- ‘Compendium of Rhetoric on the Metaphors of Qur’an’ by al-Šarīf al-Radiy, *Majmū‘at Rasā’il fī al-Isturlāb*- ‘Collection of Treatises on the Astrolabe’ by different authors, *Jāmi’ al-Masānīd wa al-Alqāb*- ‘The Comprehensive Book on Ascriptions and Epithets’ by Ibn al-Jawziy, and *Risāla fī ‘Ilm al-Hay’a*- ‘Treatise on Astronomy’ by Ibn al-Haytham. The unit is currently working on the preparation of the third set which comprises a remarkable manuscript collection of the Religious Institute of Smūha.

It has also published a sophisticated virtual browser for manuscripts; this program allows the user to perfectly turn the different pages of the original manuscript with a simple finger touch, given full control options such as magnifying and minimizing the image. In the same manner, the Heritage Publishing Unit has recently rendered the Vienna papyrus, which is the only surviving vestige from the ancient Library of Alexandria, accessible on a browser. Moreover, the unit is working on the preparation of a virtual visit of the various exhibits of the Manuscript Museum, so that it can be accessed from any place in the world.

The second field pertains to paper publishing. Within the framework of the Multilingual Publishing Project, the unit has issued Ibn al-Haytham’s treatise, *Māhiyat al-Athar alladhī Yabdū ‘alā Wajh al-Qamar*- ‘The Trace on the Moon’s Face,’ and al-Rāziy’s *Maqāla fī al-Naqras*- ‘Treatise on Gout.’ Both manuscripts were published in Arabic, English, French and German along with a facsimile of the manuscript. Work is going on to publish the third book in the series, *Muqaddima fī al-Tasawwuf*- ‘Introduction to Sufism’ by al-Sulamiy.

It has also published the Catalogue of *Selected Rarities of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, as the first part of a series of catalogues introducing the BA’s holdings of rare books, manuscripts and personal effects. Among the tasks of the Heritage Publishing Unit is the publishing of catalogues of the manuscripts being processed by the MCU, covering three main manuscript collections in Alexandria, namely: Alexandria Municipal Library, al-‘Ārif bi-Allāh Abūl-‘Abbās al-Mursiy Mosque, and the Smūha Religious Institute collections. On the other hand, the unit issues assorted microfilm catalogues such as the *Suez Canal Catalogue*, which comprises all the documents of the Suez Canal, and the Catalogue of the Spanish *Escorial Monastery*, which compiles over 14 thousand manuscripts, in addition to the illustrated pages inside the catalogs.

Specialized Translation Unit

The Specialized Translation Unit is considered as a ring in the chain of heritage preservation and publication. Translators carry out the translation of the descriptive data and assorted publications pertaining to manuscripts and rare books, into English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek.

It also takes part in the Multilingual Publishing Project aiming at introducing and promoting the rarities of manuscripts of the BA in several languages as well as producing facsimiles of them.

This unit operates with an elite team of specialized translators, supported by the Translation and Text Editing Committee; a consultant committee of eminent translators and linguists. Among the accomplishments of the Specialized Translation Unit are: Multilingual Publishing such as Ibn al-Haytham's treatise *Māhiyat al-Athar alladhī Yabdū 'alā Wajh al-Qamar-* 'The Trace on the Moon's Face,' and al-Rāziy's *Maqāla fī al-Naqras-* 'Treatise on Gout,' in addition to the Catalogue of *Selected Rarities of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina*.

Donations Unit

Through this unit the BA content is enriched through donations. This is achieved by means of certain steps; making necessary coordination, examining potential donations, receiving them directly from the donors (in case of acceptance), and registering them in the respective registry books by subject, each labeled with the name of its donor.

The staff of the Donations Unit, numbering eight, examine the donations and give an estimated price value for each book depending on its condition and year of publication, or age, rarity, and subject. Afterwards, the donations (whether books, manuscripts, audio-visuals, rare coins, stamps, antiquities, paintings or maps) are distributed over the different units according to their subjects. Finally, the Donations Unit sends a letter of thanks to the donor in acknowledgement of his/her contribution.

The total number of the donated books has amounted to 191,000 volumes. The BA holds periodic celebrations in honor of the donors, and issues a brochure on this special occasion. Further celebrations, for both individuals and institutions, are to be held on a regular basis.

Manuscript Museum

The Manuscript Museum is one of the academic institutions affiliated to the Library of Alexandria according to Law No. 1 for the year 2001(Article 2) concerning the Library of Alexandria, which states that:

"The Library of Alexandria comprises the Library, the Planetarium and the Conference Centre and it is to have the following cultural and scientific institutions established within it:

7. *International School for Information Studies (ISIS)*
8. *Centre for Documentation and Research*
9. *Science Museum*
10. *Calligraphy Institute*

11. *Manuscript Museum*
12. *Centre for the Preservation of Rare Books and Documents*

And other cultural or scientific institutions may be added or established by a decree of the President of the Republic, and the President of the Republic shall by decree define the legal status of the institutions mentioned in this article.”

On 12 September 2002 the presidential decree No. 269 concerning the establishment of the Manuscript Museum was issued:

“Article 1. A scientific and cultural centre designated as the ‘Manuscript Museum’ is to be established in the Library of Alexandria.

Article 2. The Manuscript Museum aims at introducing and preserving treasures of heritage as well as rare manuscripts, books, and papyruses. It is to undertake the following tasks:

1. *To develop museum display of manuscripts using cutting-edge techniques.*
2. *To establish scientific cooperation with museums and departments of parallel interest worldwide in the field of manuscripts.*
3. *To train staff on the preservation of manuscripts.”*

Soon after he assumed his responsibilities as the Librarian of Alexandria, **Dr Ismail Serageldin** started to set organizational plans for the Manuscript Museum within the arrangements of the Inauguration of the BA; prepare exhibits and show cases; select a collection of rare manuscripts, books and personal effects of great writers. Being the Director of Manuscripts and the person responsible for heritage departments in the BA, **Dr Youssef Ziedan** undertook the realization of the set plans. In the year preceding the Inauguration, Dr Ziedan worked on training the museum staff on guided tours to the visitors.

The Manuscript Museum is located in the heart of the Library, occupying the space of 344m². It comprises 12 display cases, donated by Italy within the framework of the cooperation agreements between the two countries, in addition to 20 Egyptian-made display cases. Around 100 manuscripts and rare books are displayed in these cases, in addition to the personal effects of some remarkable cultural figures such as **Kavafis**, **Durrel**, etc. Two pieces of the *kiswa* (decorative black brocade cover, embroidered in gold with Quranic verses) of the Holy Kaaba have been recently added to the Museum exhibits. The *Kiswa* pieces are a precious donation made by the grandchildren of the leading Egyptian economist, Talaat Harb. The two pieces of the *Kiswa* had been presented to Talaat Harb by HM King ‘Abdul-‘Aziz Al-Sa‘ud of Saudi Arabia in 1936, in recognition of the early economic projects which he had initiated in Saudi Arabia. The *Kiswa* pieces remained in the Talaat Harb family cemetery (near al-Muqattam hills in Cairo) until his grandchildren decided to present the BA with them before the Inauguration, which was Tuesday 10 September 2002. The two pieces were restored and are now draped over the wall of the Museum.

The displayed items are provided with brief descriptions in Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek. A team of 6 employees is assigned to make guided tours in the Museum with ample explanation of the displayed items in seven different languages.

On the other hand, visitors can review the electronic publications of the Manuscript Centre, which were prepared using state-of-the-art digital techniques, such as the Virtual Reality Browser that runs on touch-screen computers. This program enables the user to

thoroughly review a given manuscript, browse its different pages, magnify the desired part, and listen to related commentary and explanation. The first collection of the Digital Manuscript Library- a project adopted by the Manuscript Centre- is available for public display on four sets of the Virtual Reality Browser.

Moreover, the only surviving vestige from the ancient Library of Alexandria is currently displayed in the Manuscript Museum; a digital copy of the papyrus held at the National Austrian Library (Vienna) is available on a special browser, prepared by the Heritage Publishing Unit. It comprises texts written in old Greek, translated by a team of specialists from the Unit of Specialized Translation. Both units are part of the Manuscript Centre.

Rare Books and Possessions Unit

RBU is one of the latest established units in the administration. It holds a host of rare possessions; books, commemorative coins, maps, and personal effects. The content of the unit- books only- has amounted to 7.000 rare books, the oldest of which is dated back to 1536 AD, in addition to ample non-European collections.

When recruiting the personnel for RBU, it was taken into consideration the degree of sophistication of culture and mastering of different foreign languages. Furthermore, they are required to attend on regular basis cultural seminars held by the administration, and to carry out researches on selected topics pertaining to the nature of the RBU's collections.

Content development is realized through purchase, donations and acquiring digital copies from the rare publications in the world elite libraries.

The rarity of each book is determined according to certain criteria, namely, early prints, lithographs, illuminated and illustrative volumes, special editions, and significant world known publications (eg. Description de l'Egypte).

The BA has allocated a reading room for rare books where researchers and postgraduate studies candidates can review 7 thousands volumes, in addition to an abundant number of rare maps, eminent authors' papers, and momentous documents. It is one of three specialized rooms affiliated to the Museum to provide advanced information services in different fields and to offer guidance in carrying out researches and studies.

Manuscript Museum Tour Unit

Upon entering the Manuscript Museum, the BA's visitor is taken on a guided tour of the world of Arab heritage and the history of printing, through the careful selection of manuscripts and rare books exemplifying some of the rarest and most affluent holdings of the Library. Six specially trained tour guides provide a comprehensive and informative visit through the numerous showcases displaying the above-mentioned treasures. With extensive knowledge of the manuscripts and books at hand, as well as a wide general knowledge in the history of Arab and Western heritage, the guides help to provide insightful information into a world unknown by many, and cater for any specific interests. The guides are proficient in four major languages (Arabic, English, French and Italian) aiding in the aim of the interchange of cultures and knowledge, whilst descriptions on the museums contents are available in seven languages (Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek).

The experience begins with the tie between the past and the future, through the digitizing of the manuscripts of the BA. While preserving the manuscripts from further deterioration, the virtual browsers allow the visitors to fully appreciate the manuscripts, being able to turn the pages with their own hands through the use of touch screen technology, and enabling them to enlarge areas of particular interest. The BA's aim of capitalising on the digital age will ensure the digitalization of all manuscripts making them more accessible to a wider audience and ensuring the elimination of cultural boundaries. Visitors are then taken through the specially illuminated displays, provided with the history and uniqueness of the manuscripts and rare books. On completion of the tour, the visitors are enthusiastic to sign the museum register, adding their names and preserving their place in time and becoming a part of the museums experience.

Microfilm Laboratory Unit

It is one of the significant units at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Microfilm is a suitable medium for the conservation and protection of rare manuscripts and documents against potential loss or damage resulting from excessive circulation and age. Thus, the unit undertakes the preservation of such documents for the longest possible period, in addition to the increase of their accessibility and readability without direct contact with the originals.

With the establishment of the unit, a unique work plan was laid down focusing on: acquiring microfilms, authentication, documentation, cataloguing, as well as preparing a reading room equipped with the latest sets for researchers. Within the framework of the aforementioned plan, the BA obtained microfilms of rare manuscripts and documents, amongst which are the microfilms of the manuscript collections in the Escorial Library (Spain), Cordoba and Granada, and the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts in Cairo, in addition to the momentous Suez Canal documents. The unit also comprises comprehensive and exclusive collections of national and Arabic newspapers, serving as a historical register of important events, as well as rare documents.

The work team in charge consists of a number of specialists in the assorted fields of processing, cataloguing, classification, revision, translation, data entry, as well as other technical operations (photography, copying, development and conservation) according to set standards.

During the past months, the team has embarked on the copying, re-cataloguing, and documenting of the collections in consistency with scientific criteria and standards, the translation of the **Suez Canal documents** into French, and the publication of the 'Catalogue of the Escorial Manuscripts.'

Few days preceding the Inauguration, in particular in October 8, 2002, the BA received 46,165 microfiches, each contains one hundred pages donated by the United Kingdom. This collection comprises comprehensive copies of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts in the British Library numbering 14,000 items. It is considered the biggest collection in Europe, and the largest donation of manuscripts to the BA so far. The collection owes its weight to the fact that the British orientalist carefully collected it from different Islamic countries throughout the last three centuries. It was kept during the preceding century in the library of the British Museum and India Office in London. Eventually, both collections came into the possession of the British Library.

The assorted microfilms and microfiches will be available when the BA will open its doors to the public by the coming October 20, 2002, in the Microfilm Reading Room; one of the three rooms dedicated to provide researchers and scholars in different fields of heritage with integrated information services.

Restoration Laboratory

The laboratory operates with highly qualified experts undertaking the restoration of manuscripts, rare books, and maps, in addition to repairing and disinfecting used books. Manuscripts and rare books receive specialized treatment; dusting, disinfecting, unbinding, restoring their leaves, assembling, sewing, preparing the headband, fixing the restored cover and preserving them in special boxes made in the laboratory.

The Library is keen that all the materials employed in the restoration are natural acid free ones such as glue, paper, thread, and leather. The duration of the restoration process depends on the condition of the manuscript. As for maps and rare books, they need careful technical wet treatment according to their state. This is done after making sure that the ink is fixed. After removing the foxing spots, or dust, they are left to dry and then restored finally.

Since its establishment in 1996, the laboratory has carried out the restoration of around 154 rare manuscripts, 55 old maps, and 680 rare books.

The Manuscript Reading Room

The Manuscript Reading Room comprises original manuscripts and assorted published references pertaining to heritage that researchers would require in implementing their work. The staff in charge are highly qualified in the fields of heritage, and have been trained during the last years on the different tasks related to Arabic legacy. The room includes thousands of original manuscripts as well as a host of printed referential sources on heritage.

The Microfilm Reading Room

It is dedicated to microfilm and microfiche users, supported by a specialized laboratory of microfilm preparation. Whereat, researchers can view thousands of photographed manuscripts, old documents as well as exclusive issues of all Egyptian newspapers. The hall is equipped with an electronic catalogue to search the collections available in the microfilm department.