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The Rare Books and Possessions Unit and the Translation Unit at the Manuscript Museum /Centre at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a personal experience.

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Abstract:

The paper shall give a brief introduction about the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Manuscript Museum / Centre. It shall present the Rare Books and Possessions Unit, its content, the criteria of selecting rare books, main tasks of the unit, the reading room, the services it offers to the public and the way it develops. Also a presentation of the Translation Unit, its role in preserving heritage in the new digital world and its achievements shall be given, followed by a sum up and a final word.

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is located on a magnificent site in Alexandria facing the sea with the Alexandria University on its southern side. It is very close to the location of the old Library in the ancient royal quartier, which was the most famous among all ancient libraries and was frequented by scholars from all over the world.

The new project of the library was a symbol of international collaboration, where the UNESCO, France, Italy, Sweden, different Arab countries and others took part in helping Egypt to carry out this enormous project.

The new Library of Alexandria is an integrated cultural complex, with main and specialized libraries that can hold 8 million books and items, several specialized museums, display areas, educational centres, a Planetarium and a Conference Center. It comprises many cultural and scientific institutions like the Manuscript Centre, the Calligraphy Institute, an International School for Information Studies (ISIS) and the Documentation and Research Centre.

The Manuscript Museum

■ The Rare Books and Possessions Unit

It is one of the latest established units in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. It holds a host of rare possessions and books (approx. 10,000, the oldest of which dates back to 1536 AD), commemorative coins, maps, personal effects and non-European book collections.

The employees are chosen due to their degree of knowledge and mastering of different foreign languages. Furthermore they are required to attend cultural seminars held on regular basis by the administration. Their main tasks are cataloging and making classifications, carrying out researches on the rare books collections and providing library services in the rare books Reading Room.

The rarity of each book is determined according to certain criteria, namely, year of publishing, number of copies, the importance of the author and the significance of the events that took place at the date of publishing. Also early prints, lithographs, illuminated and illustrative volumes, special editions and significant world known publications (ex. Description de l’Egypte) are included.

A Reading Room is affiliated to this Unit; it serves researchers and postgraduate studies candidates, and is provided with specialized references, search tools and encyclopedias.

The development of the Unit’s content is realized through purchase, donations and acquisition of digital & facsimile copies of book rarities from libraries all over the globe.

The Manuscript Centre

■ Specialized Translation Unit

The specialized Translation Unit at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina 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 related to manuscripts and rare books, into English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek.

The Unit also takes part in the Multilingual Publishing Project, which aims at introducing and promoting rare manuscripts, which the BA holds, in several languages as well as reproducing facsimiles of them.

The working team consists of specialized translators, supported by the Translation and Text Editing Committee, which reviews the translated texts and makes necessary modifications.

Among the accomplishments of the Translation Unit is the Multilingual Publishing. So far, three books were published in this series namely, Ibn al-Haytham's treatise entitled *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). The fourth book: *Muqadima fī al-Tasawwuf* (Introduction to Sufism) is underway.

Moreover the Specialized Translation Unit has recently published the Catalog of Selected Rarities of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (which includes descriptive data of the rarest and most significant holdings of the BA), the descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscript Center and Museum (which introduces the different units of these two academic centers), and the digitized Virtual Visit of the Manuscript Museum, where all the content of the Manuscript Museum are provided with ample description in 6 languages

To sum up, I was lucky enough to experience work first in the Manuscript Museum (specially in the Rare Books Unit, which has given me the chance to get acquainted with all our Rare Book Units content, and to enlarge my knowledge by the researches I carried out and presented in constant seminars) and then in the Manuscript Centre (specially in the Translation Unit), which has helped me improve my language skills, and in the meantime review many of the BA's content of manuscripts.