Toward the mapping of the Arab-Muslim turâth

From a classic catalog to a mapping of the turâth

The Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, based in Cairo, was established in 1953 by the Dominican Order to promote dialogue and cultural encounters between Muslims and Christians.

An exceptional library has been built up to fulfill this mission, with more than 155,000 volumes and a large collection of journals in Arabic and western languages, which opens the outstanding heritage of Arab culture to Egyptian and foreign students and researchers.

The library catalog is undergoing a major development, integrating pioneering and innovative cataloging standards (FRBR and RDA). This step will create a new ability to explore the Arab-Muslim heritage, allowing us not only to catalog books, but to show the intellectual relations between them and their authors: schools of thought, related comments and rebuttals of major works of the turâth, etc.

Each book will be visually positioned in its historical context and in the history of its publication and editing. Through our database, each user of the library can then clearly see this historical contextualization.

The aim of the project is clear: to offer a real mapping of Arab-Muslim turâth, an invaluable tool for scholars and non-specialists.

Based on international standards, a second phase of development will allow the catalog to integrate data from other research institutes wishing to contribute to this mapping, allowing the sharing of this knowledge beyond the Arab-Muslim world to the intellectual environment of the Near and Middle East.

Ultimately, researchers worldwide will have a general mapping of the turâth through our linking up with other research institutes and libraries, sharing the resources of each.

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The Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo

The Institute (IDEO) is an academic center based in Cairo whose main mission is the study of the classical Arab-Muslim heritage and the promotion of interreligious dialogue.

The Institute was founded in 1953 by an Egyptian scholar, Georges Anawati, who is still considered a leading author on medieval Arabic philosophy. His name today still generates sympathy and respect among academic institutions of Islamic studies in Egypt and abroad.

The Institute organizes research seminars, lectures, meetings and study tours. Over the years it has developed a friendly and loyal network among academic researchers and universities in Egypt, foremost Al-Azhar University and the Manuscript Institute of the Arab League.

A member of the Institute, Michel Cuypers, received the Republic of Iran’s 2009 World Prize for the Book of the Year for his study of the rhetoric of the Qur’an.

The library of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies

The Institute gathers a team of researchers on Arab heritage. It has accumulated an outstanding library of over 155,000 books, including 20,000 classical texts from the first ten centuries of Islam, in all disciplines of Islamic studies: Arabic, Qur’an exegesis, theology, law and jurisprudence, philosophy, Sufism and science.

Situated in a large garden between Islamic Cairo and Madīnat al-Bu‘ūth where foreign students of al-Azhar are housed, the library is open to the public and serves students at the Master’s level and above.

In 2011, it served nearly 2,000 readers (including 500 new ones), of whom 64% were Egyptians and 58% were university students in Cairo.

The guesthouse for researchers, adjoining the library, accommodates students and teachers from abroad for long or medium term stays. Guests are usually invited to conduct a seminar during their period in residence.

The AlKindi project, version 4

We are about to launch a new version of AlKindi software.

This fourth version follows three previous software suites put in place since 2002, set up in collaboration with a team of specialists of the French National Library (BnF). AlKindi is already notable for having integrated complex Arabic onomastic and its capacity to distinguish between cataloging languages, interface languages, and languages of the cataloged works while maintaining compliance with ISBD and UNIMARC.

Version 4 implements new FRBR standards (as specified by RDA)—the first catalog in the world to have achieved this. These standards take into account the history of cultural works and their physical editions. Today, cataloging a book is not a mere exercise of compiling factual evidence of an actual book, but it requires the book’s placement in its cultural history and context. AlKindi version 4 is designed to meet these new requirements and give access to a real mapping of the texts of the classical Arabic heritage (the turāth). AlKindi version 4 records an account of the specific nuances of Arab culture and integrates it into a portal available worldwide.

The tool will be available in three languages: Arabic, French and English.
The 200 author Project

Following its call for proposals, a contract entitled “Historic contextualization of 200 authors of the Classical Islamic heritage” was signed on 19 December 2012 with the European Union under the European Instrument for Human Rights & Democracy (reference EIDHR/2012 / 308 681) for an amount of € 155,000.

This contract offers a qualitative leap for AlKindi version 4 since it opens an opportunity to enrich our catalog with greater historical contextualization and intertextuality, which will highlight all the resources of the new software.

200 authors of the classical Arabic cultural heritage will be given priority, including al-Ǧāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), al-Farābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Sinā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037), al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Ḥawzīya (d. 751/1350), Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), Ibn Ḥaḏr al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505).

The catalog will integrate the historical context of the relationships between authors and their works. This new contextual light will help avoid misinterpretation, identify the innovative accents of each work or author, and underline the central ideas of the schools of thought.

In Arabic, the term “critical thinking” (taḥfīr naqdī) is often understood as distrustful of the Arab or Islamic culture and is unbearable for many Arab researchers. They find it difficult therefore to adopt a historical perspective as researchers in the West do. They prefer to consider classical culture in its internal consistency and organic development, an ahistorical approach that brings out the specific beauty of Arab culture but tends to minimize the breaks and therefore becomes inadequate to help to meet new cultural challenges. The AlKindi catalog makes possible a more helpful historical reading of the turāth.

In addition, the sense of a particular work in the turāth is difficult to capture because many of its authors are compilers of the works of the ancients. Their genius has often been to summarize, rearrange, or to compile the works of their predecessors rather than to create an original or innovative work: the contextualization of theirs works is therefore essential to understanding them.

Enable a critical and respectful reading of the turāth

Our catalog’s integration of the historical context and intertextuality of works and authors allows a more nuanced and innovative approach to the Arab-Muslim cultural heritage, both critical and respectful.
The AlKindi software suite, developed at IDEO in recent years, is the only cataloging tool that takes into consideration the specificity of Arab culture (writing from right to left, onomastic, hegirian calendars). Developments under way will respectfully translate into Arab culture the new international cataloging standards. In this way, the Arab-Muslim cultural heritage will become available to all researchers along with its own genius and level of excellence.

More: the use of international standards will linked to other “regional” maps and other cultural heritages. Thus, we can gradually contribute to a universal mapping of human cultures, in accordance with the genius of each, according to a historical and contextual understanding.

To this end, IDEO will distribute its cataloging tool to all research institutes and specialized libraries wishing to participate in this general mapping by pooling their contextualized data according to the standards of FRBR and RDA.

Towards a universal mapping of human cultures according to a historical and contextual understanding.