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The Global Village of Heritage: the contribution of the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT)

by Fathi Saleh and Hala N. Barakat

Fathi Saleh is professor of computer engineering at Cairo University and Director of the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT), which is affiliated to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. He is also a member of the Supreme Council of Culture. He obtained his doctorate in engineering from the University of Paris, France. During his career, he has been cultural attaché to the Egyptian Embassy in Paris and Egypt's ambassador to UNESCO. His keen interest in cultural heritage led him to establish the centre of which he is now the director.

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Introduction

Recent developments in the field of information technology and telecommunications involving networks, the Internet, multimedia, etc. have played an important role in disseminating knowledge and facilitating the exchange of information. These developments have also changed our knowledge, appreciation and perception of heritage, our own as well as that of other nations worldwide. Telecommunications and information technology have not only provided tools for the documentation, preservation and management of this heritage, but have also created a sense of closeness between people from various backgrounds, and a feeling of living in a global village where easy access to

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one's own heritage and that of one's neighbours thousands of miles away is possible.

In Egypt, the establishment of the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT), affiliated to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and supported by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, marks a unique experience in applying the latest innovations in the world of telecommunications and information technology to heritage issues. CULTNAT's mandate is to document the various aspects of Egypt's tangible and intangible cultural heritage as well as its natural heritage. This heritage encompasses various aspects of human civilization, monitors the development of human livelihood, and represents a cultural and a natural heritage of national and international value. To achieve this goal, CULTNAT is making use of the latest information technology and is working in collaboration with national and international specialized organizations. The centre also aims to increase public awareness of Egypt's cultural and natural heritage through the dissemination of information using all available media, as well as developing the skills of professionals in the field of documentation and management of cultural and natural heritage.

Egypt's wealth in archaeological sites, architectural styles, the arts, folklore and natural beauty is reflected in CULTNAT's various programmes as follows.

The archaeological map of Egypt

The archaeological map of Egypt is the first comprehensive inventory of all archaeological sites in Egypt in a Geographic Information System (GIS) linked to a wide-ranging database of the archaeological sites, monuments and artefacts found throughout Egypt.

22. Interior of the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage.

The information is organized on three consecutive levels: The first is national, showing all sites on a large scale map and providing basic information about each site. At the second level, a detailed map shows the site and its components along with further information, while the third level provides the complete data of the monument with a plan of the structure and images. For a number of monuments, each wall is depicted with the relief or paintings along with the translation of the hieroglyphs, while for others, a 3-D model is available with the possibility of a virtual visit.

The amount of data collected so far and integrated in the programme could also be used for a wide variety of products, including archaeological atlases, guides, CD-ROMs, etc.

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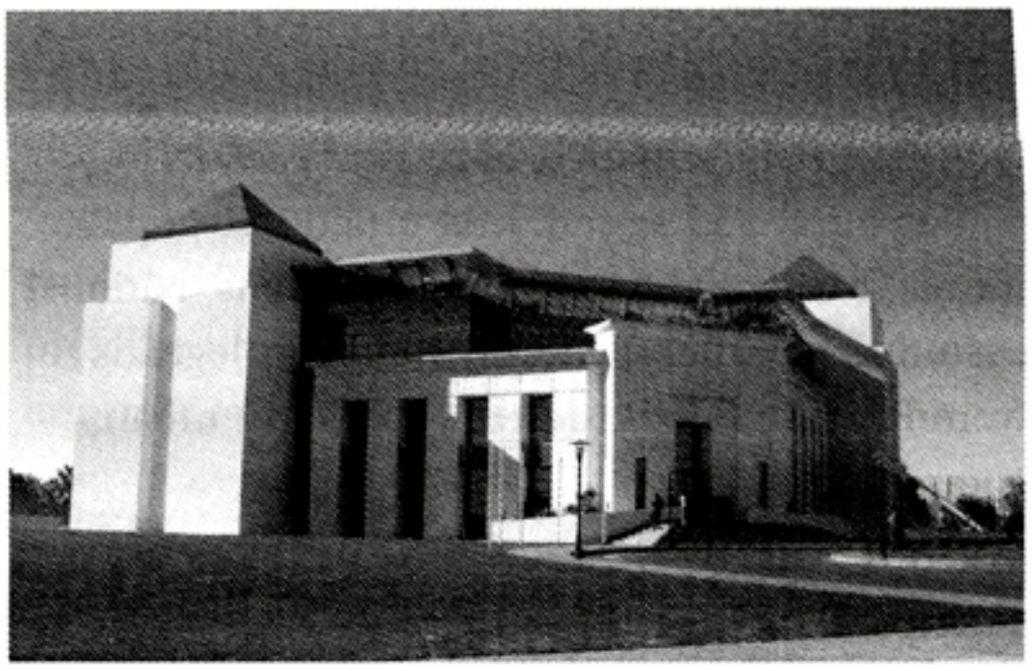
The architectural heritage of Egypt

The purpose of this programme is to document the nineteenth- and twentieth-century architectural heritage of Egypt, starting with the central area of Cairo as a pilot project and continuing with other parts of Cairo and other cities. This project constitutes a Geographic Information System (GIS) with an easy-to-browse database that includes extensive photographic documentation and all published material for each inventoried building, in addition to historical documents, maps and archival material.



23. The Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage building. Smart Village. Egypt.

This exhaustive database serves a variety of users ranging from decision-makers to architects and historians. In the wealth of studies on architecture in Egypt, this is an unprecedented systematic digital approach that crowns the limited attempts of the dispersed few who have documented one aspect or another of Egyptian architecture. A series of thematic CD-ROMs, books, guides and other publications are extracted from this database thereby serving as very effective cultural awareness tools.

The natural heritage of Egypt

The documentation of Egypt's natural heritage is a multidisciplinary programme aimed at disseminating information on the natural heritage of Egypt. The programme involves the collection of all data available on protected areas and their components including detailed information on the flora, fauna, geological formations and related cultural features. The data is further used to create a digital natural map of Egypt in the Geographic Information System (GIS). The system is designed to be used as a monitoring, assessment and management tool by various stakeholders in the field of nature conservation and environmental policy-making. It can also be useful for researchers in natural history and environmental studies, visitors to protected areas, and environmental NGOs. For the dissemination of information, a series of books, CD-ROMs and postcards have been produced on various subjects related to the natural heritage.

Egyptian folklore

Egypt's living traditions are embedded in a deep and colourful source stemming from various cultures that have enriched it over the millennia. CULTNAT is undertaking the task of documenting these traditions. A systematic approach is adopted in the compilation process and is aimed at building up the most comprehensive and inclusive library of scientific and audiovisual material.

The library is designed to include a rich array that covers ethnological activities, popular

themes, traditional feasts, celebrations, folk tales, proverbs and life cycles. It also includes legends, customs, daily activities, cults of the saints, architectural and agricultural traditions, popular music, arts, crafts, popular superstitions, national costumes, jewellery, and mythological legends from Egyptian lands, deserts, rural and urban communities.

The information is used to publish a thesaurus of Egyptian folklore (*Al-Meknaz*) as well as a series of books and online products on traditional crafts in Fatimid Cairo and traditions and practices during the holy month of Ramadan. Moreover, the programme has produced a national action plan for the documentation of Egyptian folklore.

The musical heritage of Egypt

CULTNAT seeks to ensure a better understanding of our musical heritage and the arts that have greatly developed during the earlier part of the twentieth century and which are in serious danger of being lost forever. This is achieved through documenting, classifying and analysing this heritage. The Arabic music information system comprises three levels: the first level focuses on documenting basic information related to composers, lyrics, singers, modes, forms, and rhythms. The second level compiles the complete works of artists with original lyrics, scores, and audio and video clips whenever possible. The third level is a multimedia upgrade that targets the production of documented audiovisual deliverable material based on collected data as well as a detailed musical analysis of pieces selected by professional critics.

Such a database will assist musical education in music institutes and will provide a tremendous source of edutainment for the general public.

The photographic memory of Egypt

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Middle East and Egypt in particular became a destination that attracted a large number of pioneer photographers. Their works documented such vivid topics as archaeological sites and excavations, local architecture and landscapes, in addition to the social life and daily activities of the local community. The programme aims to make such rare collections available for researchers, curators, and admirers of old photography through a number of publications, including books and CD-ROMs as well as online.

Collections of famous photographers, from local and international archives and from private collections, are digitally documented. Glass-plate negatives, vintage sepia-toned albumen prints and selenium-toned silver sheets from the early twentieth century are classified in Egypt's pioneering photographic heritage database, starting with the exclusive collection of Lehnert and Landrock housing over 1,200 black-and-white thematically assorted quality prints.

The Islamic scientific manuscript heritage

The manuscript documentation programme aims to document Islamic scientific manuscripts available in various institutions and private collections on the national and regional level, in order to build an electronic encyclopaedia of

manuscripts on the sciences and mathematics that were produced during the peak of the Islamic period. A pilot project was carried out at the National Library of Egypt, 'Dar al Kutub', and covered seven manuscripts in their entirety, illustrating the contribution of Islamic civilization to medical science. Currently, the documentation of manuscripts on astronomy and time reckoning housed in al-Azhar University Library is in progress. The programme is also exploring the potential of documenting microforms of manuscripts in special collections as well as creating a portal of Islamic scientific manuscripts on the web. Multilingual publications and CD-ROMs are some of the products that make such documented treasures available to scientists, researchers and the general public, both locally and internationally.

Eternal Egypt on the web

In collaboration with the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the IBM Corporation, 'Eternal Egypt' (www.eternalegypt.org) is a premier website to display a selection of Egypt's treasures and cultural heritage on the Internet to the global audience, using state-of-the-art technologies. The website covers the various eras of Egyptian civilization: Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic. It presents events, characters, museum objects, as well as historical sites, through attractive stories. The descriptive information is available in Arabic, English and French, and is supported by an innovative text-to-speech technology to generate the audio narrations, by 2-D high-resolution images, tours and panoramic views of many sites as well as 3-D models of various objects. The website is linked to webcams installed at the Giza Plateau, Karnak Temple, Qaitbey Fort, and in Islamic Cairo, providing virtual visits of these sites. The rich content of the website was further used to produce the digital guide available to visitors to the Egyptian Museum, providing them with visual, audio and textual information on part of the museum collection.

International joint projects

CULTNAT is a partner in several projects funded by the European Commission, namely: (a) *Euromed Héritage II 'Patrimoines partagés'*: A three-year joint project research programme, aimed at documenting and improving knowledge about the architectural and urban heritage of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Mediterranean basin; (b) *Traditional Water Techniques: Cultural Heritage for a Sustainable Future (Shaduf)*: This three-year research project aims to develop an information bank on traditional and indigenous technologies and to draw attention to the rich and versatile water and waste-water-related heritage in the Mediterranean region; (c) *Defence Systems in Mediterranean Coasts (SID-LIM)*: a two-year project, aimed at building a website on coastal defence systems and to restore and reuse an ancient defence-related building in each participating country; (d) *Strabon*: a three-year project, devised to offer the Mediterranean world a coherent group of online multilingual information systems dealing with cultural heritage and tourist activities and supported by multimedia. (e) *Unimed Cultural Heritage II*: this three-year project aims to improve co-operation in the field of cultural heritage preservation, restoration and management among the participating countries, by implementing extended cultural heritage

databases, a dedicated portal and training courses in relevant fields.

UNESCO has been and still is one of the main organizations funding several of CULTNAT's activities and projects.

UNESCO and UNDP funded a study of the present situation of Egypt's cultural heritage with a view to suggesting a strategic approach. The project entitled *Strategic Approach to Egypt's Cultural Heritage* includes the collecting of documentation and the creation of a National Register and databases, but also site management, conservation and restoration strategies and, thirdly, education, ecotourism and capacity-building.

A second project, *the Scientific Islamic Manuscript Heritage*, was initiated in September 2001. The project will document scientific Islamic manuscripts available in various institutions and private collections at national and regional level.

In the field of intangible cultural heritage and in collaboration with the Egyptian Society for Folk Traditions, CULTNAT is documenting *Al-Sirah-Al-Hilaliyya Epic*, recently declared by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.

Finally, CULTNAT's digital library is being developed with the support of UNESCO to be a model of an e-library.

Following the recent policy of the Egyptian government towards the integration of telecommunications and information technology in various aspects of life such as education, health, commerce and government, CULTNAT substantially contributes to global e-culture programming in Egypt. Since its establishment in the year 2000, CULTNAT's development objective has been to become a landmark on a regional and worldwide scale, in the implementation of a comprehensive approach towards the use of telecommunications and information technology for documentation of the various aspects of heritage.

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