

Arabic Collections in the British Library at 50

MELCOM International, London, 2024

Dr Debbie Cox debbie.cox@bl.uk



A schoolgirl views a manuscript at EAP1285, Great Omari Mosque collection

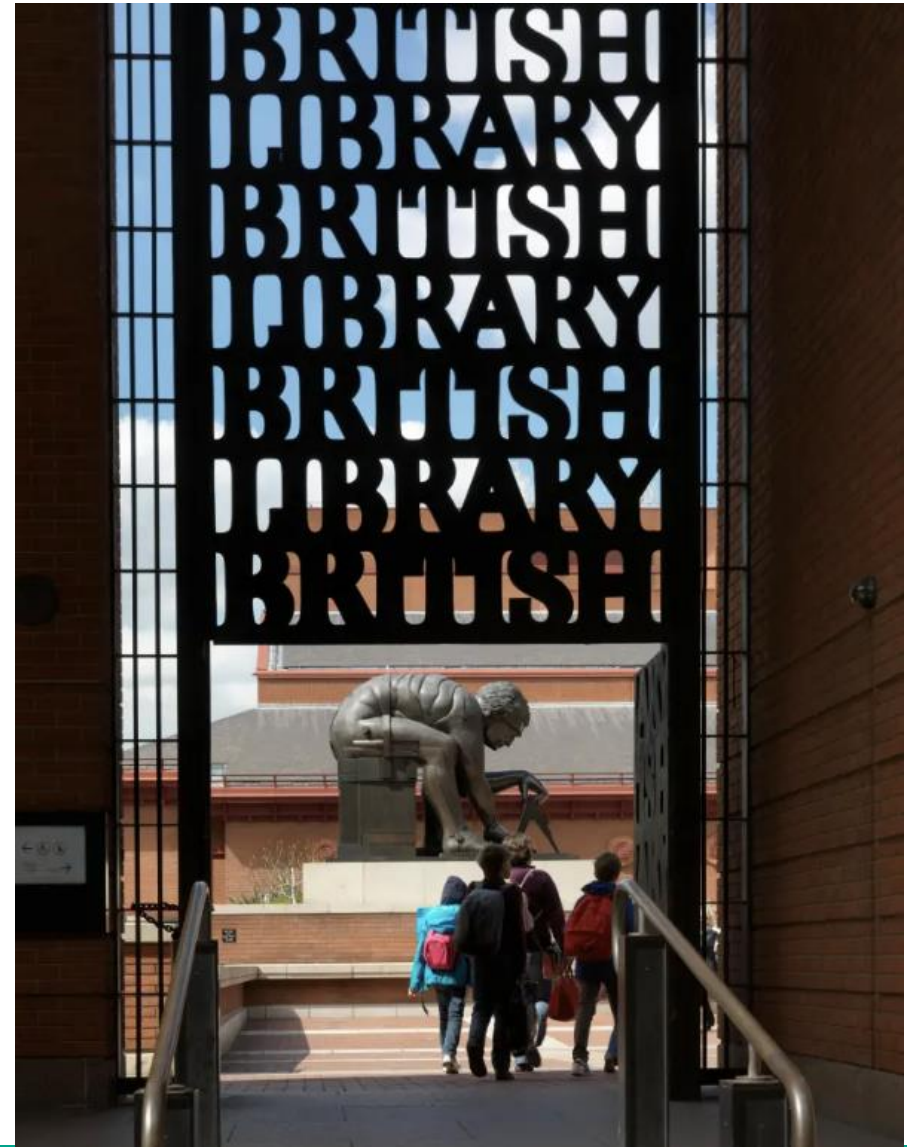
1973-2023: 50 years of the British Library

The UK's national library created by Act of Parliament (1972)

Combined **British Museum Library**, National Central Library, National Lending Library for Science and Technology, Social Policy Information Service, British National Bibliography, then **India Office Library** and **National Sound Archive** (also now Public Lending Right and Libraries On)

Different priorities, sites, cultures and ways of working

Arabic Collections originally located in Oriental Collections of the British Museum Library (dates from **1753**) and in the India Office Library



Looking back, looking forward

This talk aims to gain an overview of change over those 50 years (mainly the last 25 years)

Sets Arabic Collections in the context of creating a national Library

Notes key achievements (visible and behind-the-scenes) and new challenges

Looks out from the inside, and in from outside



Digitisation in progress with Senior Imaging Technician Elizabeth Hunter

My role

25+ years at the Library, joined as Arabic Curator in 1998.

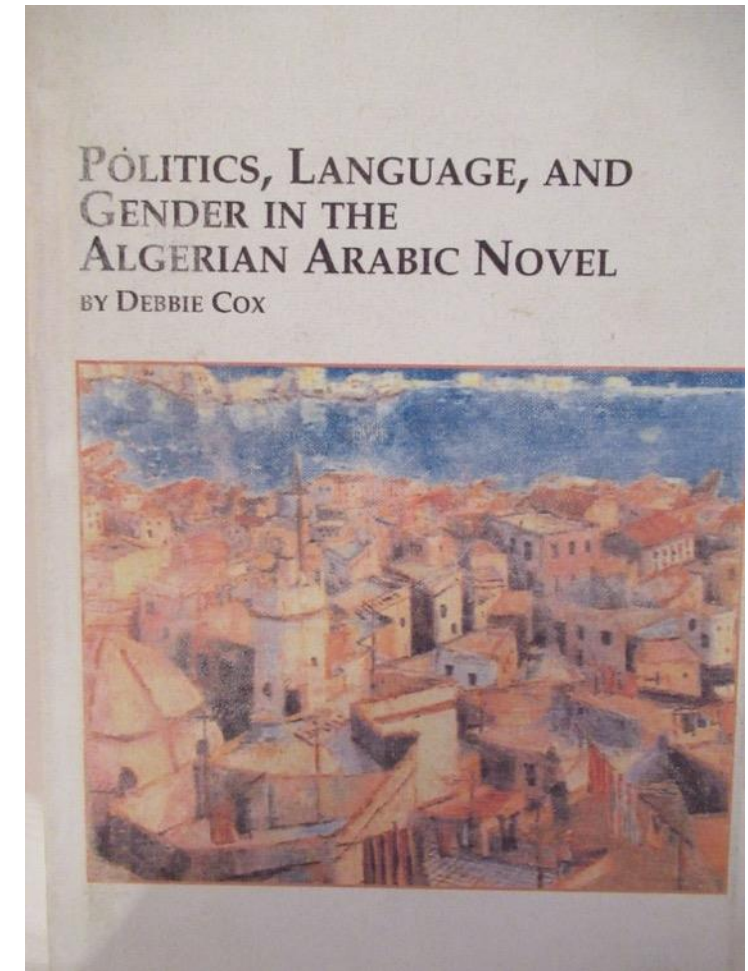
Worked on publications more than manuscripts, alongside Dr Colin Baker (Head of Arabic, then Head of Middle East Collections)

1998: Arabic Curator (c.16 years)

2014: Arts & Humanities Content Strategy Manager

2015: Lead Curator, Contemporary British & Irish Publications

Interest in how Arabic (and multi-lingual 'Arab') materials are situated within the Library (touching on inclusion and representation)



Creating a national library

Specific challenges...

Creating "**one library**" from separate institutions - different histories, aims, sites and systems

Moving from an academic research library or 'library of last resort' to a Library "**for everyone**"

Legal requirement to collect and preserve the national published archive, during rapid change in nature and scale of publishing: avoiding a "**digital black hole**" through **non-print legal deposit**

Meeting user needs for remote access to digital materials where possible; managing expectations where not possible



Changing demands

Challenges shared with other libraries

Digital revolution; different ways of accessing knowledge, changed expectations and relationships (demanding new skills)

Remaining relevant, and being *seen* to be worthy of funding against competing demands: need to 'do more with less'

Growing demand to address inequalities and hierarchies of knowledge, as well as colonial history and provenance of collections





Our mission

We make our intellectual heritage accessible to everyone, for research, inspiration and enjoyment



Access, engagement and inclusion

Ensuring that the services we offer, and the collection we hold, are truly 'for everyone'.

Modernising our library services

Investing in skills, processes, systems and capabilities to deliver the quality of library services our users deserve.

Deepening our partnerships

Collaborating with libraries and memory institutions of all kinds across the UK and around the world, to achieve more than we ever could by ourselves.

Sustainability and resilience

Reducing our carbon impact and collaborating with partners to create a more sustainable future.

New spaces, North and South

In Yorkshire and in London, delivering new, world-class physical spaces designed to welcome future generations of visitors and users.

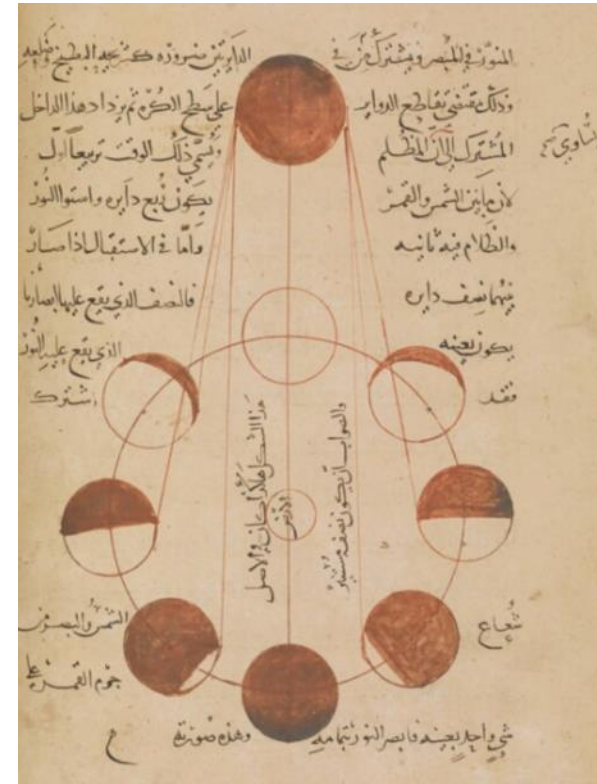
Arabic Collections: pre-digital (physical)

World renowned **manuscripts** collection, also on **microfiche** (complete set marketed to libraries) with Subject Guide

Extensive and wide-ranging collection of Arabic **books, journals and newspapers** (print and microfilm): still actively developed

Arabic publications from UK (hub for some newspapers, also book and journal publishing) - through Legal Deposit, donation and purchase

Arabic **music** and **oral histories** within the National Sound Archive (eg. Moroccan Oral History project), **postage stamps**, official publications and more.



From keepers to curators



Martin Lings, Abu
Bakr Siraj al-Din,
1909-2005
BM/BL 1959-1974



Yasin Safadi, 1934-2006
BM/BL 1969-1995



Hugh Goodacre BM/BL 1972-96



Roderic Vassie
Arabic Curator, then
Marketing Manager for
Middle East (Document
Supply Centre)
BL 1980s-early 90s



Katherine
Van der Vate

From Orbit House to St Pancras

The British Library
79,461 followers
2y

Congratulations to Daniel Lowe, our Curator of Arabic Collections, who has been awarded a share of £150,000 through [Art Fund's](#) New Collecting Awards.

Daniel will be using the award to build our collection of modern and contemporary Arab visual cultures by established and emerging artists in the Middle East, North Africa and diaspora communities. This will diversify and expand our existing Arabic collection, through a whole host of printed works from photo books to graphic novels.

Find out more about our Arabic collection: <https://lnkd.in/dMMNmbza>

#Collections #ArtFund #BritishLibraryCollections #ArabicCollections



Daniel Lowe,
Curator 2014-to present



David Jacobs, Senior Conservator

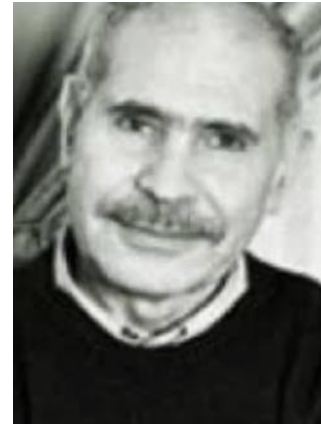
Colin Baker,
Curator
then Head
of Middle
East &
North Africa
1995-2022



Debbie Cox,
Curator
1998-2014



Invisible output: 'core' work – enabling access



Top:
Waseem Farooq
Joseph Smith
Alireza Sedighi
Ben Younes Majen
Bink Hallum

Below:
Hazem Jamjoum
Saba Syed

Some former and current staff behind the scenes:

Cataloguers (two former, one current),
Acquisitions Officer,
Arabic Scientific Manuscripts Curator,
Audio Curator
Head of Qatar Foundation Partnership

Also translators, conservators, and many more

Visible output: Exhibitions

1976: World of Islam Festival (Yasin Safadi and Martin Lings – with others) Display of 160 Qur'an manuscripts in British Museum

1979: Early Arabic Printing (Yasin Safadi) - 34 items, British Museum

1986: Manuscript collections of Claudius James Rich (Yasin Safadi)

1991: Arabic calligraphy and new acquisitions (*Aja'ib al-makhlūqat*, Or. 14140)

1998- : Arabic items on permanent display in Treasures Gallery including Qur'ans and other manuscripts

2007: Sacred (Colin Baker and others) - sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

2017: Comics and Cartoon Art from the Arabic World, Treasures cases, (Daniel Lowe)

Many loans to other institutions in UK and internationally;
Arabic items in Library exhibitions; events programme



World of Islam Festival, British Museum, 1976

Sacred, 2007



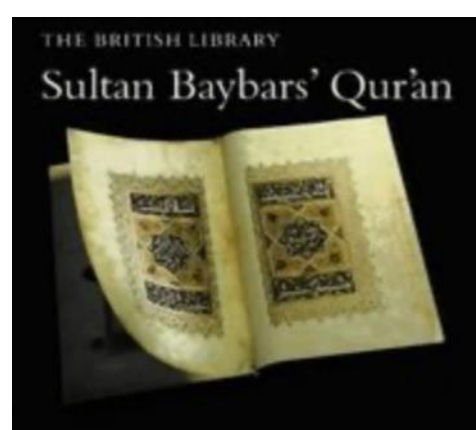
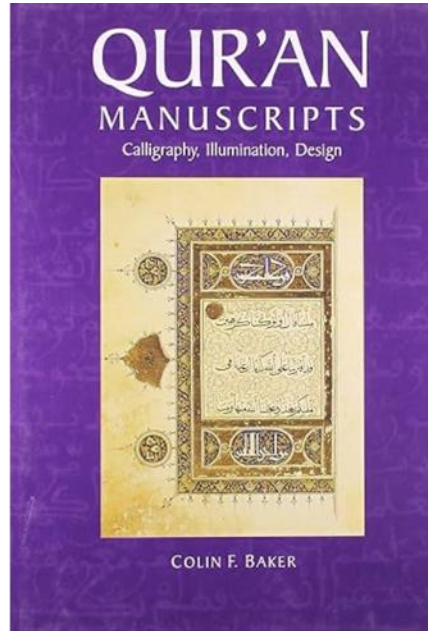
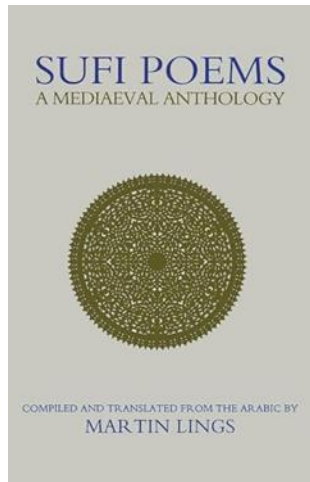
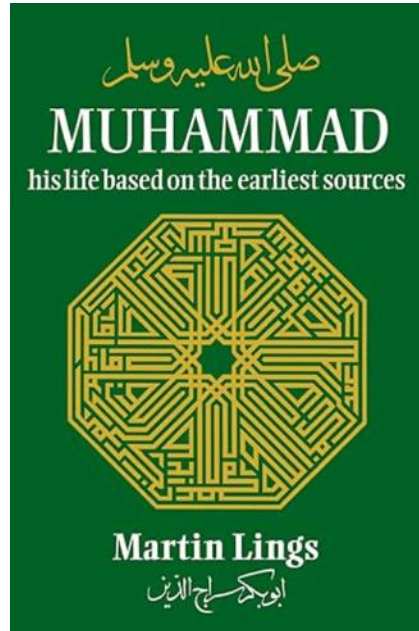
Visible output: Publishing



Yasin Safadi's work on calligraphy was widely translated

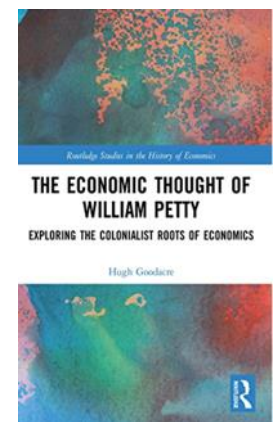
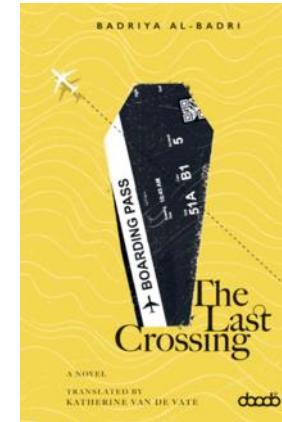
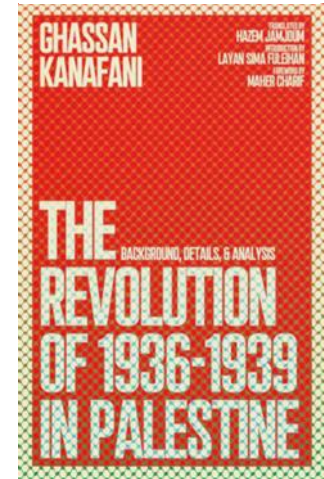
Martin Lings wrote widely after his retirement, although he is best known for his biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

Colin Baker's book draws on collections and benefits from full colour illustrations



Sultan Baybars' Qur'an (CD)

Beyond the Library



Poetry by Younes Ben Majen (former Acquisitions Officer). Translations from Arabic by Hazem Jamjoum (Audio Curator) and Katherine Van der Vate; colonial history by Hugh Goodacre (former Curators)

Continuity

Curation: collection development, study, supporting events

Cataloguing collection, enabling access

Exhibitions and loans

Publishing (books, articles, blogs)

Seeking partnerships and funds for projects

Expanding off-site access to the collections (from microfilm to digitisation)

Promoting use of collections (talks, visits)

Extending international links

Change

Enabling access without ownership -
Endangered Archives, UK Web Archive, Google Books

Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status –
supporting different types of scholarship

More open to **examining provenance and history**

Greater **integration** of African and Asian collections into wider Library: more awareness of British diaspora communities and collections as their heritage

Relinquishing control to allow for **community input** (community engagement, Leeds programme, Living Knowledge Network)

Changed tone: more open and **welcoming**

But much more to do



Moving into St Pancras

Moving into St Pancras = **book moves**

- Orbit House to St Pancras (Arabic manuscripts and books to 1980);
- Woolwich to Boston Spa (Arabic newspapers and post-1980 books),
- St Pancras to Boston Spa (post-1900 Arabic books); clearing unsorted backlogs

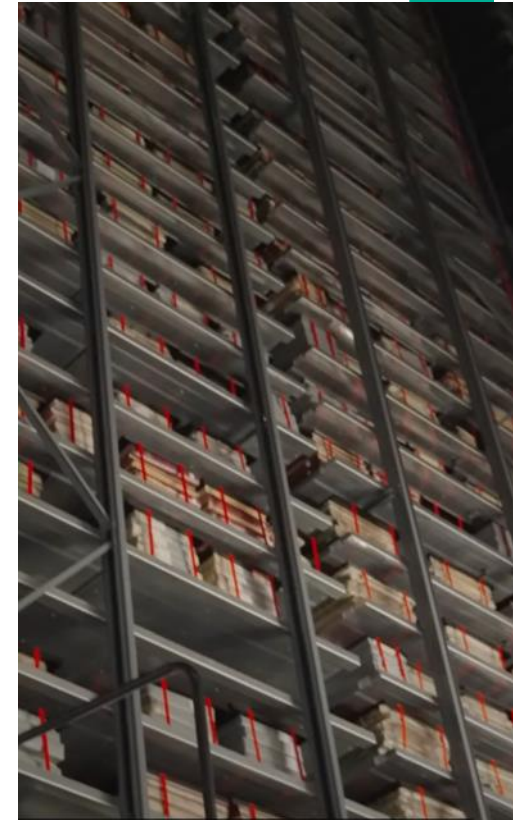
Other 'early years' challenges:

Lack of sensitivity to users of Arabic collections at St Pancras: took time and work to improve

Cuts to acquisitions budget: needed to restore active selection and new suppliers ; bespoke arrangements for hard-to-cover areas; gain extra funds to buy runs of newspapers

Legal Deposit coverage of Arabic-language material was weak; worked with Modern British Collections and Legal Deposit Office to improve intake

Catalogue did not perform well to enable access to Arabic collections: detailed work to improve

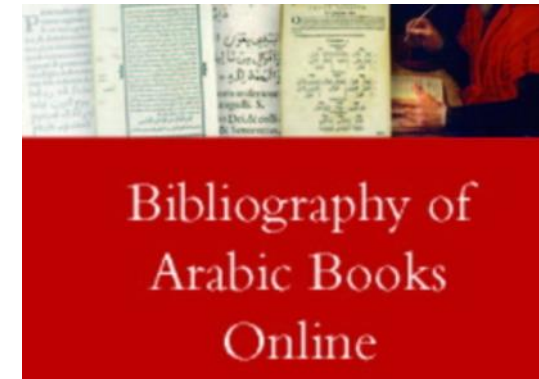
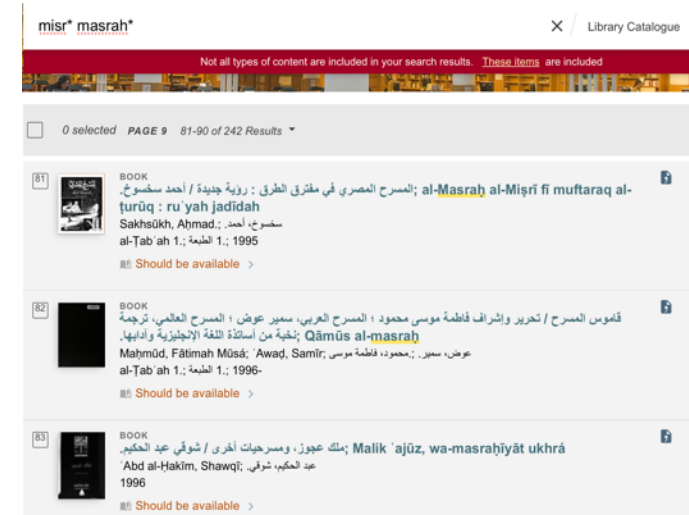
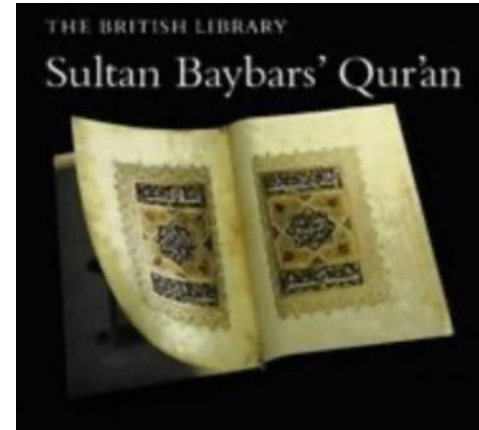


Additional storage building



Some personal achievements:-

- Helping to make the case for a Qur'an as one of first manuscripts digitised for 'Turning the Pages'
- All Arabic books discoverable in online catalogue - conversion, supplier records, backlog reduction / record matching
- Original script in records (80% of books, all digitised manuscripts)
- Persisting with the TEI business case despite setbacks
- Brill Bibliography of Arabic Books Online
- Gale Early Arabic Books Digitisation (free to view on expiry of licence) - digitised all Arabic books to 1900
- Supporting funding bids and preparation for Qatar Foundation Partnership
- Getting the Subject Guide to Arabic Manuscripts keyed for mapping to TEI or MARC



The first major text-searchable online archive of pre-twentieth-century Arabic printed books

Based on A.C. Edin's catalogue of the British Library's collection, Early Arabic Printed Books from the British Library supports comprehensive approaches to the study of the Middle East and the Muslim world and promotes original research on history, religion, history, language, literature, and science. It is an essential resource for every major library needing Arabic primary source material for research, teaching, and learning.

Scholars can search on the full text of items in Arabic, English, French, German, Latin, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish while also being able to discover content in Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Chinese, Turkish, Persian, Syriac, and seventeen other languages.

Full-text searching capabilities created with newly developed optical character recognition software (OCR) for early Arabic printed script ensures that scholars in Arabic speaking countries and those engaged in Arabic studies across the world can equally cross-search Arabic language materials and research this extensive range of texts.

Download the catalog to get all the details on newly released collections in Gale Primary Sources.

More achievements...

Web Steering Group – redevelopment of African and Asian pages on the website (later changed)

All publications (and archives) from and about Iraq digitised for Iraqi National Library (2004)

Building up extensive newspaper holdings (print, microfilm, digital)

Strengthening relationships across Library through Arts and Humanities Strategy and partnerships

Linking with Shubbak Festival of Arab Cultures – literary events in Library from 2015 onwards, further developed and led by Daniel Lowe

Including poet Suhaiymah Manzoor Khan in *Unfinished Business: the Fight for Women's Rights* – her podcast with the late Azeezat Johnson رَجَمَهَا اللَّهُ

Input into Anti-Racism Project (Cataloguing and Metadata, also Audiences sub-group) to inform current Race Equality Action Plan



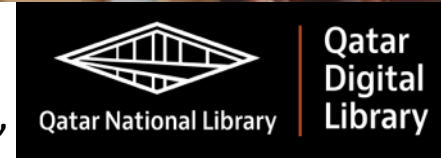
Azeezat Johnson (Image taken from Twitter account)

Arabic collections across the Library

Arabic Curator: more scope for outward-facing curation now collections discoverable in online catalogues



Qatar Foundation Partnership: Two Arabic Scientific Manuscripts Curators, Audio Curator (ethnomusicologist), Translation Specialist, two Arabic Translators, Arabic Language Content Specialists, Arabic & English Web Content Editor, plus conservation and digitisation team



Endangered Archives Programme: wide range of projects with local staff trained to preserve materials and to create digital surrogates and metadata (funded by Arcadia)



Potential for **Collaborative Doctoral Students** (PhD jointly supervised by the Library with a university), **Chevening Fellowships** (1 year)



PhD placement students: 3-month placements to focus on specific aspects of collection

UK Web Archive: annual crawl of UK web domain, manual collection building, external contributors

Arabic Curator works with Contemporary British & Irish Collections, Events, Research Development etc.

Arabic manuscripts now (2)



EAP projects in the Middle East & North Africa region



The EAP1499 Team

Project team of EAP1499, awarded funds in 2022 to digitise the 'Eyes on Heritage' collection, Gaza.

Description and documentation of manuscripts in Arabic benefits their users and enables wider access.

Arabic publications now (1)

Collection still actively developed: more focus on visual formats – comic art, artists books – suited to exhibition display and wider audiences

Searchable digital copies of pre-1901 Arabic books available (paid for) through **Gale's 'Early Arabic printed books from the British Library'** resource [digitised books will be free online when licence ends]

Music and speech previously held only in physical formats digitised through **Unlocking Our Sound Heritage**

Range of purchased or subscribed e-resources (mostly on site, some with remote access)

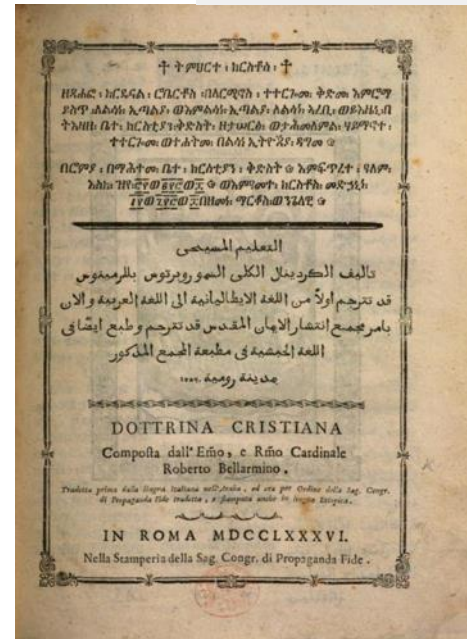
UK websites and social media (including newspapers) in the UK web archive (access mainly on site)

UK newspapers in print, also books and journals received through legal deposit

Some publications included in archives digitised by Endangered Archives Programme (free online).



Kotobarabia Modern Arab Renaissance Collection



Some early Arabic books are included in British Library X Google Books digitisation (free online)

Arabic publications now (2)

Daniel Lowe : interest in visual cultures of the Arab world

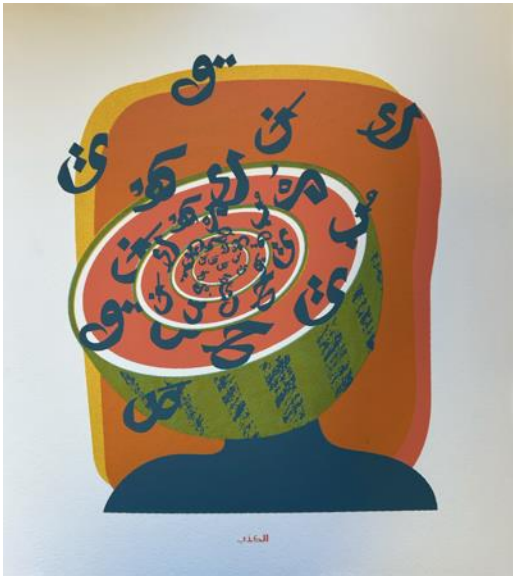
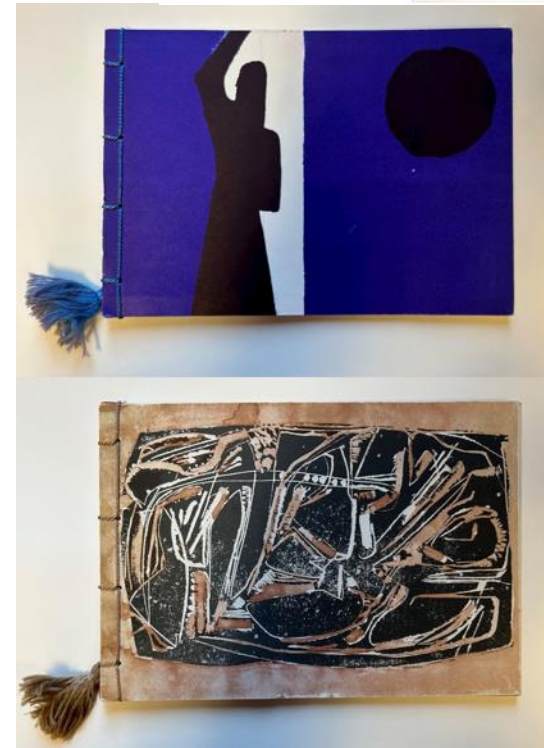
2015- Working with Shubbak Festival on events at the Library

2017: Comics and Cartoon Art from the Arabic World display in Treasures Gallery

2019: extended article showcasing work in Object Lessons Space

2021: Co-curated Histories & Archives of Arabic Publishing online lecture series with Murray Edwards College, Cambridge

2022 Art Fund award to acquire visual materials: artist's books, comics, graphic novels, zines



Arabic publications now (3)

Websites of UK-based Arabic newspapers archived daily; wide range of other UK-based Arabic (and related) websites, blogs and social media feeds archived at least annually (many more frequently) in **UK Web Archive**



Muslims, Trust and Cultural Dialogue

Muslims, Trust and Cultural Dialogue is an RCUK-funded in...

Contributing to the UK Web Archive

We need website creators and users to nominate websites for archiving so that the archive represents diverse communities, languages, concerns and expression



Home Topics and Themes [Save a UK website](#) About Us Contact Us



We archive websites:

1. That are on a .uk or other UK geographic top-level domain such as .scot or .cymru
2. That are published in the UK.

We do *not* archive:

1. Online Sound or Video platforms, in which audio-visual material is the predominant content
2. Private Intranets and Emails
3. Personal data in social networking sites or websites only available to restricted groups.

UK geographic domain websites are crawled annually

Other UK sites need to be identified manually (.com, .org, .space, .net, .art)

Small team: nominations via UKWA website are crucial

Not just websites: blogs and social media too (eg. X and Instagram). Not Facebook pages or podcasts.

Looking ahead

Race Equality Action Plan: includes Metadata Project to address offensive metadata, improve access to 'hidden' collections, provide details of provenance, also Community Heritage post to deepen engagement with local communities

New spaces: will increase scope for wider range of co-curated events and exhibitions (St Pancras, Boston Spa and Leeds)

Web Archiving – international partnerships to capture cross-border publishing on web (through IIPC), support and create body of experience shared with other web archives and libraries

Legal Deposit: focus on **inclusivity, regional representation, self-publishing** and small independent publishers

Opportunities for **new types of research**; different approaches to the materials

Much more to do: Newspapers, sharing records, wider partnerships with UK and international organisations

Changed thinking for the next 50 years

Letting go of 'ownership': it's not what we have that matters: it is what we help people gain access to, and the skills they develop through engagement with the Library

Letting go of 'control': we don't need to be the gatekeeper (if people use our material without us, that is good)

Falling numbers in reading rooms may not be bad: it can mean success in creation of free-to-view digital materials (requirement is to adapt, stay relevant, meet users' needs)

Library users are not just people interested in reading: people learn and access to knowledge in different ways – viewing, listening, interacting, meeting, participating (and growing vegetables in the Story Garden)

"For everyone" is a work-in-progress: it still needs unpacking - and further change.

**Thank
you**