

egypt

Cairo priory safeguards treasures of Islam's past

The Dominican Institute for Oriental studies has one of the leading libraries of the Middle East in the field of Arabic and Islamic culture, writes Abdalla F Hassan

In antiquity, Greek treatises were laboriously copied and recopied, translated into Syriac, a western dialect of Aramaic, and from Syriac into Arabic, in which form they spread through the Muslim societies of the Middle East and were eventually rendered into Latin.

Saint Thomas Aquinas and other prominent Dominican theologians were introduced to Aristotle through Latin translations of Arabic manuscripts. Their protégés – viewing Arabic culture as a bridge between Greek and Roman tradition – would later travel to the Middle East to research the writings of Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and other Islamic philosophers.

Several centuries later, within the grounds of the Dominican Fathers' Priory in the Cairo district of Abassiya, there is a quiet haven for scholarship. A unique collection of classic Arabic texts can be found at the 155,000-volume research library of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies.

The institute's collection of books evolved into one of the leading libraries of the Middle East in the field of Arabic and Islamic culture, drawing students from Al Azhar, the foremost seat of Sunni learning, and other institutions in Egypt and abroad.

A resource for researchers, academics and scholars, the library holds a plethora of books on Islamic history, theology and jurisprudence, Quranic commentary, Arabic literature, linguistics, philosophy, mysticism, the sciences, and Oriental and Coptic Christianity.

"The library is outstanding for two reasons: the books we have and the software we use," said Friar Jean Druel, director of the institute.

Its open source cataloguing software, AlKindi (named after two philosophers: one Muslim, the other Christian), is designed for the distinctive features of Arabic culture, for example the chain of names for medieval authors and the different calendars used in the dates of ancient texts. Cataloguing is arranged in a layered, pyramidal scheme.

"It allows us to separate the



Above: Friar Jacques Jomier, co-founder of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, greets Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, 1969. Right: Friar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, founder and director of the French Biblical and Archaeological School, whose idea it was to have a priory in Cairo with, behind, Friar Antonin J Jausse, 1932.

Photos Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies

work from its editorial history," said Friar Druel, explaining how a single work may have been written down by scribes, translated, edited, printed, reprinted, annotated, abridged and manifested in varied editions.

The institute organises seminars and its scholars participate in academic collaborations and conferences.

Ahmed Abdel Gawad, professor of veterinary medicine at Cairo University, frequents the institute's library for a book he is writing that delves into the question of why scientific production stalled in the Arab world.

In university and national libraries, he has found incomplete collections, missing books, outdated card catalogues and short working hours.

Several books are arranged on his workspace, including a bound volume of magazines published in 1952 on the history of science.

"We do not have a scientific model, we do not have theoretical thinking, our theoretical base is religious," Mr Abdel Gawad said, describing an aspect of his research.

"There are traditional, regressive tendencies and there are progressive and enlightened

tendencies. They are always in a tug of war. That is the problem of Arab science."

The 200 Project

In an office of the library, Friar Druel and several researchers work on the 200 Project, which is a European Union-funded initiative to chart the linkages of 200 authors in the medieval Islamic world.

Apart from cataloguing books, this allows an exploration of Arab-Muslim heritage by exhibiting relations between scholarly works and authors – the influence of masters on disciples, lost manuscripts mentioned in later scholarship, schools of thought, and commentary and rebuttals of major literary and political works through the ages.

The objective, said Friar Druel, is to begin visualising intellectual life – a first step in a worldwide collaborative endeavour of mapping human cultures.

Still, with 14,000 medieval authors from the Islamic world to choose from, 200 is a minuscule number.

"Lots of people believe when we say Islamic civilisation that



it is religion and religion and religion," said Ahmad Chleilat, an expert on ancient Islamic texts. It is more than that.

Mr Chleilat lives in Paris but stays in Cairo three to four months a year to advise on the 200 Project and the purchase of books for the library's collection.

Mr Chleilat developed a passion for the scholarly texts at an early age.

"My relationship with books is a relationship of madness, not only reading but I bind books at home."

He calls himself a codicologist, attached to everything to do with books, from the science of paper and ink to techniques in crafting books. He selected scholars for the 200 Project who were geographically and culturally representative of Arabic and Islamic civilisation. They include Christians, Jews and even a writer from Timbuktu.

He hopes to build on the 200 Project when it is concluded in a year's time to investigate the convergence of ideas between Europe and the Arab world.

Foundations

The idea to build a priory in Cairo came from Friar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, the founder and director of the French Biblical and Archaeological School based at the Dominican Priory of Saint Stephen in Jerusalem. It was conceived as a sanctuary for friars to research Egyptology related to the Bible.

In 1928, he sent to Cairo Friar Antonin J Jausse, a scholar in Semitic linguistics who had conducted one of the first detailed archaeological surveys of Jordan's ancient city of Petra.

On December 30, 1930, Egypt's King Fuad sold Jausse a plot of land a stone's throw away from

the walls of the old Fatimid city and the priory was built two years later. Once it was established, the Vatican asked the superiors of the Dominican Order whether they would consider creating an institute for the study of Islamic and Arabic culture, removed from any proselytising.

In 1953 Friars Georges Chehata Anawati, Jacques Jomier and Serge de Beareucueil founded the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies to study Islam, its doctrine and civilisation and to open a scholarly dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Born in Alexandria to a Greek Orthodox family, Friar Anawati served as the institute's director and later chairman until his death in 1994, researching and authoring books and articles on Islamic theology, philosophy, the history of medicine and Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Friar Jomier specialised in

Quranic exegesis and contemporary Egyptian culture, writing about the trilogy of the author Naguib Mahfouz in French and introducing the work of the Egyptian laureate to a wider audience.

Friar de Beareucueil studied mystic Sufi tradition, including the 11th-century Persian Sufi poet Abdullah Al Ansari, from Herat in western Afghanistan. In 1963, he gave a series of lectures in Afghanistan and was invited by the country's monarch to stay on and teach at the university in Kabul, where he remained for the following two decades.

Since 1954, the institute has published a journal called MIDEO (Melanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales). The annual budget for the institute is €150,000 (Dh612,000), of that total being €15,000 and €20,000 is spent on purchasing books.

Extensions were made to the institute library in 1975 and 1984, when it was housed inside the priory, but more space was needed to hold the burgeoning collection. Ground was broken in 2000 for a new edifice, which was inaugurated two years later with high-vaulted ceilings, sunny reading rooms and guest rooms to accommodate visiting scholars.

The friars

Devoted to a quest for truth and knowledge, St Dominique de Guzman, a Spanish priest, founded the Dominican Order eight centuries ago to go beyond the cloistered monastic life of abbeys by learning and teaching.

"Ten years after the foundation, we find already friars in Palestine, Cyprus and very soon in Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire," said Friar Jean Jacques Perennes, the incoming director of Jerusalem's French Biblical and Archaeological School.



Top: The Dominican fathers' priory in Cairo.

Above: Friar Georges Chehata Anawati, director and later chairman of the Dominican Institute for Oriental studies, authored 14 books and co-authored another 12 addressing subjects in Muslim theology, the history of medicine, and Christianity and Arabic.

Below: Friar Antonin J Jausse, who in the early 20th century lived among the Bedouin tribes of Jordan, with Thomas Edward Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), 1917.

Photos Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies



"To train them in Hebrew and Arabic, the Dominican Order established language schools in Spain and Tunisia between 1230 and 1245."

Sharing communal meals and praying together three times a day, eight friars, and a grey cat named Zadig, reside in the priory in Cairo.

Friar Druel, a French national, became a Dominican at the age of 22, the first to join religious life on both sides of his family as far back as he can remember.

At 44, he has earned four masters degrees, on top of his training in theology, including one in teaching Arabic as a second language. His doctoral study was on numerals in Arabic grammatical theory.

"We need more Dominican Brothers trained in Islamic heritage and Arabic to come and live here," he said.

Friar Mateus Domingues da Silva has studied Arabic in

Cairo for the past two years. He is returning to Brazil to begin a doctoral degree on the philosophy of the Persian Sufi sage Suhrawardi. Friar da Silva, 29, was drawn to Suhrawardi's writings through French translation and hopes to be the first to translate his formative work, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, into Portuguese.

"Arabic philosophy was an important period in the history of ideas," he said.

Friar da Silva joined the Dominican Order at the age of 21. "Study is very important to us," he said. "It is a way of preaching, of life, of prayer."

Friar Adrien Candiard, 32, majored in history and political science in France and contemplated a career in politics.

"I saw that I preferred to talk about God than anything else," he said and so at the age of 23 he became a Dominican instead.

"There is a very rich theological tradition in Islam, with the particular question of what is the meaning of truth."

Friar Candiard is embarking on his doctorate in September on the nature of truth in Ibn Taymiyyah's multi-volume treatise, *Avverting Conflict between Reason and Tradition*.

Ibn Taymiyyah was regularly at odds with the clerics of his time, accusing them of having an uncritical approach to Muslim science, which earned him several stays in prison.

Extremists often cite the 14th-century theologian. "So let's study, let's see what he is saying," said Friar Candiard. "I don't try to study people who look like me, but the contrary, people I do not understand."

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Abdalla F Hassan is the author of *Media, Revolution and Politics in Egypt: The Story of an Uprising*

Journalists face jail if reports do not match government's

New legislation brought in over death toll figures

CAIRO // Egypt may take legal action against journalists who report "false" military death tolls in extremist attacks that contradict official statements, if a new anti-terrorism law is approved, officials said yesterday.

President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, who called for tougher laws following the assassination of his top prosecutor last week, is expected to approve the law within days.

The cabinet has already approved the draft law.

Article 33 of the draft law, published in several Egyptian newspapers, stipulates a minimum two-year sentence for "reporting false information on terrorist

attacks that contradicts official statements".

The law also opens up the possibility of deportation and house arrest.

Two officials, including justice minister Ahmed Al Zind, confirmed the wording of the law.

Mr Zind said the law was prompted in part by coverage of ISIL attacks on Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai Peninsula on July 1.

The military spokesman said 21 soldiers and more than 100 militants were killed in the attacks and ensuing clashes, after security officials said dozens more soldiers had been killed.

The government has accused foreign media who reported the higher death toll of exaggerating troop casualties.

"The day of the attack in Sinai some sites published 17, then 25, then 40, then 100 dead," Mr Zind said.

Mr Zind said such reports affected the "morale" of the country.

"There was no choice but to impose some standards," he said. "The government has the duty to defend citizens from wrong information."

"I hope no one interprets this as a restriction on media freedoms. It's just about numbers [in death tolls]," he said.

"If the army says 10 died, don't report 20."

The country has been fighting a militant insurgency in Sinai since the army, then led by Mr El Sisi, overthrew former president Mohammed Morsi in 2013.

Hundreds of policemen and soldiers have been killed in the attacks, while more than 1,400 people, mostly Morsi supporters, have been killed in a crackdown on protests.

* Agence France-Presse

Army kills 25 militants in Sinai

CAIRO // Egypt's military killed 25 militants in airstrikes and ground operations in North Sinai yesterday, security sources said.

Security sources said troops killed the 25 militants in villages between the towns of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah.

The army found four militant hideouts and attacked them with Apache helicopters and ground troops.

The Egypt affiliate of ISIL, recently renamed Sinai Province, has killed hundreds of soldiers and police since the army removed former president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood from office in 2013.

Though the vast peninsula has

long been a security headache for Egypt and its neighbours, and the removal of Morsi brought new violence that has grown into an extremist insurgency that has spread out of the region.

On Monday, a car bomb in Cairo killed Egypt's top prosecutor, the highest-profile official to die since the insurgency began.

Egyptian government officials have accused Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood of links to the Sinai attacks. The Brotherhood says it is a peaceful movement that wants to reverse what it calls a military coup.

Egypt's interior ministry said yesterday it had arrested 12 Brotherhood members who had formed

three cells with the intention of carrying out attacks on policemen and soldiers.

Also yesterday, the prosecutors referred to trial 22 people charged with planting bombs near targets including the high court and cabinet buildings, the state news agency Mena reported.

President Abdel Fattah El Sisi has also expressed concern about militants based in neighbouring Libya, where groups including another affiliate of ISIL have taken advantage of a weak state structure following the toppling of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

* Reuters



The Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies has 155,000 books that has led it to become a leading resource for researchers, academics and scholars. David Degner / The National



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