British Library PhD Placement Scheme 2022/23 – Project Profile

# Linked open data for Arabic manuscripts within West African collections

Reference: **2022-EAP-WAF**

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| **Supervisor(s)** | Jody Butterworth (Endangered Archives Programme Curator), Mariam de Haan (Curator, African Collections) |
| **Team and department** | Endangered Archives Programme, London (St Pancras) |
| **Start date/timeframe** | Earliest start: June 2022<br>Latest end date: March 2023 |
| **Duration** | **3 months** (or part-time equivalent) |
| **Part time/Full time** | Full time or part time<br>Minimum days/week if undertaken part time: 2 days |
| **Location and working arrangements** | Can be offered as a hybrid placement (remote with regular visits to London, St Pancras) |

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| **Context and nature of placement project** |

This placement is hosted by the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), a grants-giving programme funded by Arcadia and administered by the British Library. The aim of the Programme is to preserve archival material from around the world that is in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration.

EAP has funded several manuscript projects in West Africa, notably in Djenné and Timbuktu (Mali), as well as digitising numerous private collections in Senegal. In addition to manuscripts in local languages and Ajami script, these projects have digitised Islamic manuscripts in Arabic. The focus of this placement would be on the latter material.

The placement student will use linked open data to improve the discoverability of the online collections of West African manuscripts in Arabic. Currently, these collections do not sufficiently reach communities in relevant geographical areas. For example, project EAP879 digitised over 2,400 manuscripts from Djenné and surrounding villages. During August – September 2021, 216 researchers accessed this material, of which 47 were from Nigeria, 27 from the USA, 20 from Ghana and 13 from Algeria. Unfortunately, no one from within Mali, where the physical material is held, accessed this online collection. Although our statistics show quite a global spread, the numbers are relatively low in comparison to the amount of material online. This placement would help highlight this rich research resource through the multilingual aspect of Wikidata, to make the materials on the EAP website more accessible and discoverable to researchers and interested communities from relevant countries.

This project will be supervised jointly by EAP Curator Jody Butterworth, who will manage the administration of the placement, and African Collections Curator Mariam de Haan, who will oversee work on the manuscript element. There will also be core input from the Library's Wikimedian-in-Residence and the Curator of Arabic Collections.

## Tasks and outcomes

The primary focus of this placement will be to create the foundations for increased access to the EAP website by highlighting manuscripts through Wikidata and Wikipedia.

The main tasks include:

- Becoming familiar with the digital collections and identifying the most relevant manuscripts for this project.
- Liaising with the curators of African and Arabic collections to discuss the suggested list of manuscripts to be included.
- Creating Wikidata entries for particularly important/unique manuscripts.
- Linking manuscripts to any related Wikidata items in relation to uniform titles, authors or scribes.
- Giving a progress update on a fortnightly basis, preferably in person.

Additional optional tasks may be agreed with the student depending on their interests. For example:

- Publicising and promoting the collection to relevant researchers and audiences, through a Wikithon, social media, the Endangered Archives blog, conference presentation.
- This placement could provide fascinating insight into the manuscripts that were transported (or re-copied) across Sub-Saharan Africa. The placement student may wish to capture this information in the form of data visualisations. The outcome from this work could be in the form of an event at the Library, such as a staff talk organised with the Digital Research team.

Expected outcomes:

- Creation and editing of a total of 30–50 Wikidata /Wikipedia entries.

## Training and development opportunities

PhD placement students are welcome to access a wide range of workshops, talks and training available at the Library. Supervisors will offer advice on which opportunities may be of particular relevance. Depending on availability, these wider training opportunities may include, for example, the Digital Scholarship Training Programme, Cultural Property Training, Research Roundtables, Business & IP Centre workshops and staff talks.

In addition, this particular PhD placement will provide:

- An excellent introduction into Wiki data and the editing processes involved, to include training from the Library's Wikimedian-in-Residence and allocation of a dashboard that will enable tracking the editing of Wikipedia article.
- Learning about cataloguing standards and specific tools used within EAP (such as OpenRefine) and about the processes involved in cataloguing manuscripts to international standards: ISAD(G) (used by EAP) and TEI (one of the cataloguing standards for Asia and Africa collections).
- An opportunity to learn from the Digital Research team about Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) being developed for Arabic.
- An opportunity to gain awareness of IIIF (International Image Interoperability Framework).
- A first-hand 'behind-the-scenes' insight into the activities of a major research library and cultural organisation, with a particular focus on digitisation programmes, cataloguing and international engagement.

| Required knowledge and skills |
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| All applicants will be expected to demonstrate the following:<br><br>• Ability to communicate effectively verbally and in writing, internally and externally.<br>• Working knowledge of Microsoft Office applications and online meeting tools.<br>• Ability to follow instructions and policies, in particular with regard to Health & Safety and the safe use of collections.<br>• Ability to work effectively with others while also completing tasks independently.<br>• Clear reasons for applying to a specific placement and good understanding of the project purpose.<br><br>In addition, this specific placement project requires the following:<br><br>• Excellent Arabic language skills as well as a good knowledge of Islamic manuscript culture (essential).<br>• Knowledge of French (desirable).<br>• An interest in Digital Humanities (desirable; experience of editing Wikipedia not expected). |

Application deadline: **Friday 25 February 2022 (5pm)**

Eligibility criteria, funding information and details of how to apply are available on the British Library website: https://www.bl.uk/research-collaboration/doctoral-research/british-library-phd-placement-scheme