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Transforming our understanding of Middle Eastern history: The British Library and Qatar Foundation unveil project to digitise half a million pages of archive material

- *Partnership to digitise maps, photographs, manuscripts and letters*
- *Project supports Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser's and Qatar Foundation's vision to place Qatar at the centre of Gulf history studies*
- *Revealing the forgotten history of British involvement in the Gulf region*
- *Context and interpretation in both English and Arabic*

LONDON 18 July -- The British Library and Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF) have unveiled an ambitious partnership to transform people's understanding of the history of the Middle East, and the region's relationship with Britain and the rest of the world.

The £8.7 million project was announced this morning at the British Library's flagship building in St Pancras, London. Its plans will digitise more than 500,000 pages from the archives of the East India Company and India Office, in addition to 25,000 pages of medieval Arabic manuscripts - all of which will be made freely available online for the first time.

The digitisation will take place over the next three years at the British Library, in close cooperation with the new Qatar National Library, and much information will be available in both Arabic and English. Once live, the site will also offer users the opportunity to add their own Gulf-related stories and memories, enabling them to contribute to the online resource, whether by sharing images of mementoes and old photographs, or by recounting the stories their grandparents once told them. In this way, historical items from living memory will be added to the archive of items dating back several centuries.

The project also encompasses the digitisation of thousands of pages of medieval manuscripts that demonstrate the significant influence of Islamic scholars in the fields of science, medicine, mathematics and geometry. Together, these resources will illuminate centuries of fascinating Arab history and culture and massively boost understanding of the rapidly-changing Gulf region and its place on the world stage.

"The India Office Records held by the British Library are an extraordinarily rich source of historical material relating to the Gulf," said the British Library's Chief Executive, Dame Lynne Brindley. "We are delighted to announce this very exciting partnership with Qatar Foundation, through which absolutely anyone with an online connection will be able to have access to this unique treasure trove of material, illuminating subjects as diverse as tribal and global politics, international commerce and family history."

Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries said: "The British Library and Qatar Foundation have embarked upon a tremendously exciting project that will undoubtedly prove hugely popular when the digitisation work is complete. It is tantalising to know that so much fascinating information that charts the UK's relationship with the Middle East will soon be freely available and I commend this important and ambitious partnership."

Qatar National Library, expected to open in 2014, will also offer an extensive collection of print and digital resources to residents across Qatar. Making material from cultures around the world available on the internet in multilingual format, the library is currently developing its capacity for the digital conversion of important documents.

Dr Claudia Lux, Qatar National Library Director, said: "There is no question that the India Office Records at the British Library holds one of the world's foremost archives of material related to the Gulf region. Qatar National Library is very proud to work alongside the British Library in the development of the region's first digitised local history archive."

Ambassador of Qatar, His Excellency Khalid Al-Mansouri said: "The British Library and Qatar Foundation partnership is priceless. It will increase the awareness and the knowledge of the people of the Gulf about their history. This huge quantity of historical material released online can only enrich the many studies, research papers and textbooks that inquire into the history of the Gulf, and the wider region. It will transform the perception of many in the wider world."

The India Office Records to be included in this online resource, dating from the mid-18th century to c1947, will include a wealth of information on the politics, people, places, trade, culture and customs of the Gulf region. Thousands of pages of research work about these records, already prepared at the heritage library of Qatar National Library - including transcription and translation into Arabic - will be incorporated to identify names and places, making it accessible to the Arab community. Personal names, place names and keywords will be fully searchable, transforming research possibilities for these collections. To date, this material could only be consulted by visiting the British Library's Reading Rooms in London. Once it is digitised and uploaded onto a dedicated online platform, it will be freely available to researchers across the UK, throughout the Gulf and around the world.

19th and 20th Century reports and gazetteers - originally secret documents intended only for the eyes of senior officials - will provide a treasure trove of first-hand information, testifying to the critical strategic and commercial importance of the Gulf to European powers including Britain, France and Germany, which were actively involved in the region at that time.

The work will lead to the creation of up to 43 new jobs, as well as involving a team of more than 30 from the Library's existing staff.

Dame Lynne Brindley concluded: "Thanks to the vision of Qatar Foundation, we look forward to unlocking the rich and fascinating content held in these collections, making more of our unique collections available online and giving researchers around the world the unprecedented opportunity to explore for themselves the raw material of centuries of Gulf history."

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest research libraries. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The Library's collection has developed over 250 years and exceeds 150 million separate items representing every age of written civilisation and includes books, journals, manuscripts, maps, stamps, music, patents, photographs, newspapers and sound recordings in all written and spoken languages. Up to 10 million people visit the British Library website - www.bl.uk - every year where they can view up to 4 million digitised collection items and over 40 million pages.

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Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development is a private, non-profit organization that is supporting Qatar on its journey from carbon economy to knowledge economy by unlocking human potential for the benefit of not only Qatar, but the world. Founded in 1995 by His Highness Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, Amir of Qatar, QF is chaired by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser.

QF carries out its mission through three strategic pillars: education, science and research, and community development. QF's education pillar brings world-class universities to Qatar to help create an education sector in which young people can develop the attitudes and skills required for a knowledge economy. Meanwhile, its science and research pillar builds Qatar's innovation and technology capacity by developing and commercializing solutions through key sciences. Finally, its community development pillar helps foster a progressive society while also enhancing cultural life, protecting Qatar's heritage and addressing immediate social needs in the community. www.qf.org.qa

Qatar National Library is a new project of Qatar Foundation and will serve everybody from world-class researchers looking for high specialized scientific articles to the general public enjoying listening to music or watching videos. The new building of Qatar National Library in Education City will open in 2014. A landscape of knowledge will be displayed to the visitors, a children's library, gaming section, heritage exhibition and a vast amount of books and journals in printed, and digital format. Music and film collections will be presented to the public and students and researchers as well as the general public will have unlimited possibilities to use the digital collection in the library. www.qatarnationallibrary.org

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