

## WELCOME ADDRESS

## **New Frontier for Digital Preservation of Heritage in the Middle East**

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Welcome to the First International Conference of our Network: Virtual Heritage Cairo, 2017

### **“SUSTAINING HERITAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: Towards Virtual Environments for Middle East’s Cultural Heritage”**

First, I would like to thank the Ministry of Antiquities and His Excellency, Professor Khaled El-Anany, for hosting our first Conference in Cairo at the Precious and impressive, The National Museums of Egyptian Civilization, the best place to host us. I wish also to thank, the National Research Institute for Astronomy and Geophysics and its President: Professor Hatem Odah and Project Lead: Professor Gad ElQady, the President of the National Institute of Oceanography and Fishery, for the great effort, organisation, management of the project activities in Egypt and the generous hosting of VHC Colloquium and training workshops in Egypt.

**VIRTUAL HERITAGE CAIRO** is the Digital and Online platform of the International Collaborative Network for Cultural-feed of Virtual Heritage (CfVH) platforms of medieval Cairo. The network aims to develop smart and interactive platforms for the documentation, preservation and engagement with Islamic Cairo’s cultural, social and built heritage that engages cultural content into the virtual environments of historic buildings and urban fabric.

Islamic and Medieval Cairo, a World Heritage Site, has always been a Site of exceptional historic significance and value on several aspects, social, cultural, architectural, religious and even political. Yet, and in a stark contrast with the Pharaonic Antiquity and archaeological sites, Medieval Cairo remains anonymous to those who have never visited Cairo. There are no traces of its contents in World Museums, nor there is much of documentation of its significance parts. It is a truly cohesive fabric; very difficult to neither decompose, separate into parts nor imitate

its construct out of its own contextual convenience. We look onto the potentials of reducing technical and logistical limitations to produce virtual and immersive reality platforms of the old city that enable cultural terrains to be integrated into the digital models of the buildings and streets.

We aim to generate and develop technological platforms that offer a degree of 'reality' and photorealism of culture through engaging with building and people in remote historic domains, not only through physical features of inherited buildings, but also through engaging with virtual modelling of objects, venues, social engagements in a realistic but remote environment. The benefits and potentials of these platforms are far-reaching that range from conventional tourism industry to online marketing, shopping in the past, educational display in national and regional museums, experimentation, and various virtual cloud industries.

The history and memory of a nation, is never accurately conceived or understood through physical buildings. They are rather inherited through habits, traditions, and virtues of everyday realities. But, to aim for such socially and culturally rich environments, considerable effort is essential, both through in-depth research in the past, looking beyond the buildings into people's history, stories and archival records. This must be paralleled with developing local expertise that credibly engage with modern systems of Virtual Heritage as well as creative abilities to develop historical environments virtually. While the support of the scholars, researchers and experts is clearly prerequisite to such endeavour, the effort, contribution and enthusiasm of the talented young Egyptian researchers and entrepreneurs are critical if we are to build a sustained effort to bring Islamic Cairo back to life.

Virtual Heritage Cairo Network, in this context, supports the growing digital heritage sector in Egypt and the Middle East and organises a series of engagement activities and databases that bring together projects, specialist research institutes and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to technically-able entrepreneurs and researchers. It will develop projects and activities that focus on undertaking creative and practice-led research on *imaging cultural heritage* in Virtual Heritage.

#### **PROJECT PROGRAMME**

The project is designed to enrich Inventive practice-led research

investigation in the new media of recording, interpreting and reproduction of cultural heritage through innovative digital and online platforms. It is

built around a Knowledge-transfer programme that focuses on increasing skill-base, building capacity amongst stakeholders and young professionals through three main pillars:

**Conceptual Investigations:** Undertaking Investigative research to enhance our understanding of the capability of new technology and digital platforms to allow cultural-feed into digital models of historic fabric.

**Practical Training:** Participants and fellows of the Network will be offered practical training and mentorship to develop their technical and research skills through actual fieldwork projects.

**ACTION: Creative Engagement Platforms:** This includes online database, research forums and online exhibitions. It also includes collaboration with the Gov. agencies, providing policy documents and help with technical training.

The Network is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC: Grant AH/N009347/1) as a collaborative effort between several British and Egyptian Research Institutions and specialist consultants that include: The Centre for Global Heritage at Nottingham Trent University, the Digital Heritage Unit at the University of Wolverhampton (UK) and the National Research Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics (NRIAG; EGYPT) and supported by Ministry of State for Antiquities, which hosted our public lectures and seminars and host us today. The Network is developed in association with Ironbridge International Research Institute of Cultural Heritage at the University of Birmingham, Queen's University Belfast, Soluis-Heritage-UK, and The International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE) at the University of California at Berkeley.

Over the next two days we will learn more on the possibilities, capabilities and knowledge that has been developing in this field, not only in Egypt and the Middle East, but also around the globe. Participants in this conference cover a wide range of approaches, regions, case studies and techniques. More importantly, we won't only be listening to scholars and researchers, but we were keen to bring people from governmental agencies, young entrepreneurs who would like to disseminate their experiences in this growing field and market in the region. We will have the opportunity to acknowledge, through the current experience of young people, what are the challenges that face our collective endeavour.

To give you a brief account on the VHC activities over the past year, we have conducted a series of research colloquiums, practical projects and training Workshops that aimed at bring the debate and practice of Virtual Heritage and associated technologies to the heart of the medieval city of Cairo. The first International Colloquium of the Virtual Heritage Cairo took place in Cairo between 27<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> July 2016, in the National Research Institute of Astronomy and Geophysics (NRIAG) in Helwan, the Historic Astronomic Observatory site, Whilst the second International Colloquium took place at the University of Wolverhampton on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2017. Overall, over 90 participants attended the two Colloquiums and Training activities. Our network has attracted over 40 Young researchers and entrepreneurs to take part in its activities, and interdisciplinary projects, some to a great success and others suffered certain difficulties. Typical to such new endeavour and new context, Success require persistent ambition and long-term strategies of collaboration and training.

This conference concludes the first Phase of the Virtual Heritage Cairo Network, which will build into a broader, more inclusive and practical application of Virtual Heritage in Phase 2 & Phase 3. We are hopeful that VHC, through all phases, will bring together research minds, creative practices and successful businesses of Digital Preservation of Heritage to enable the Egyptian Authorities to self-support its long-term strategies for cultural heritage preservation in Egypt.

I hope we all engage in very exciting panels and discussions over the coming two days and learn more about the latest state of the art not only on Virtual and digital application of Heritage but also on new modes of heritage preservation and public engagement in general.

*Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem*