

## The Digital Transformation of Manuscripts: Safeguarding Cultural Memory in the Technological Age

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### Abstract

This article investigates the pivotal role of digital transformation in preserving Arabic and Islamic manuscript heritage. It frames digitization as a strategic response to the threats of deterioration and loss, while enhancing accessibility and scholarly engagement in the digital era. By leveraging modern information and communication technologies—including metadata structuring, intelligent search, and digital cataloging—digitization contributes significantly to cultural continuity and research development. The study identifies key obstacles such as insufficient funding, underdeveloped infrastructure, and the complexities of digital copyright management. Two case studies are analyzed: the Qatar National Library's digitization initiatives and the Al-Azhar manuscript project, both illustrating practical outcomes in research and education.

The article concludes by advocating for sustainable investment, capacity-building of professionals, and inclusive open-access policies to ensure equitable and long-term benefits from digitized heritage across the Arab and Islamic world.

### Keywords :

Arabic manuscripts; Cultural heritage; Digitization; Digital libraries; Metadata; Open access

### Introduction:

Arab-Islamic manuscripts rank among the most enduring civilizational treasures, mirroring the intellectual breadth and cultural plurality that have distinguished Islamic civilization for centuries.

Their preservation represents a vital challenge for the modern digital age, especially given the increasing threats of physical deterioration and limited accessibility, as confirmed by recent analyses on digital heritage initiatives (Kumar & Sharma, 2022)

These codices once served as living vessels of accumulated knowledge, facilitating the transmission of scholarly production across generations and embedding a durable civilizational identity within the collective historical memory of the Muslim world.

Aware of such scholarly and symbolic value, scholars and custodians have long called for dedicated archives to collect, conserve, and systematize this heritage. Yet reliance on conventional preservation and documentation techniques has rendered many manuscripts difficult to access, underutilized in academic research, and largely absent from emerging digital-knowledge initiatives. Recent studies have shown that integrating semantic web technologies can enhance the discoverability and interoperability of manuscript data within broader digital infrastructures (Bakhshi et al., 2021).

Against the backdrop of today's technological boom, digitization has emerged not merely as a shield against material decay, but as a dynamic gateway that grants researchers and specialists faster, simpler access to manuscript content. The digital sphere further offers expansive

possibilities for advanced organization, cataloguing, and documentation.

### Research Problem

To what extent have information-technology-driven digitization techniques preserved and opened Arab-Islamic manuscript archives to wider scholarly use, and what principal technical and organizational obstacles continue to hamper this process?

### Research Objectives

- Clarify the protective role of digitization in preventing manuscript loss and deterioration.
- Analyze how digital archiving practices have evolved within contemporary technological environments.
- Identify major technical and managerial challenges confronting manuscript-digitization projects.
- Propose actionable recommendations for improving the governance of this heritage in its digital form.

### Methodological Framework

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, surveying relevant scholarly literature and drawing on applied case models that illustrate the current state of manuscript digitisation, with its attendant issues, challenges, and future horizons.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Before one proceeds to examine the digitization of manuscript archives, it proves prudent to pause and outline several foundational notions that undergird this area of inquiry.

*Archive.* In professional usage an archive is ordinarily understood as a deliberately organized assemblage of documents maintained under specific standards so as to record an era, an event, or a particular sphere of human activity. Its significance lies primarily in its verified historical character: an archive safeguards collective memory and guarantees future consultation whenever evidence is required (Al-Qaisi, 2020)

*Manuscripts.* (Al-Kaabi, 2018) The term embraces texts written by hand prior to the advent of printing. Arab-Islamic manuscripts, in particular, occupy a singular position because they embody intellectual value and civilizational weight. They bridge past and present, encompassing not only literary treatises but also historical records and scientific production across many disciplines.

*Digitization* (Remache, 2022). Digitization denotes the conversion of material content into electronic form by means of computational and storage technologies. At first glance the goal appears straightforward granting easier access and protection against deterioration or loss; yet genuine digitization extends further. It entails systematic indexing and description, thereby enabling scholars and general users alike to explore the corpus with comparative ease.

*Digital Preservation* (General Authority for Heritage, 2021). A key offshoot of digitization concerns the secure retention of electronic surrogates within controlled technological environments. Such environments shield collections from obsolescence, natural disaster, and technical malfunction. Long-term digital preservation nevertheless remains among the most formidable challenges confronting archival institutions, for it demands continuous adaptation to shifting storage media and maintenance protocols.

*Archival Description in a Digital Context* (Mostafa, 2020) . Effective description rests on constructing accurate databases that record, for each manuscript, essential particulars—genre, authorship, date of production, language, subject, and the like. The exercise must follow internationally recognized standards so that information quality and retrieval efficiency are both assured inside an advanced digital milieu.

*Digital Transformation.* Finally, the phrase digital transformation signals the wider institutional adoption of contemporary technologies so as to raise productivity, stimulate innovation, and deepen user engagement—developments that, in turn, reshape organizational structures in a sustained and iterative fashion (Al-Zubaidi , 2020)

## **2. The Role of Digitization in Safeguarding Heritage and Improving Access to Manuscripts**

Digitization now stands among the most effective contemporary tools for conserving manuscript heritage and securing its endurance—particularly in an era when traditional paper holdings face mounting threats. This effectiveness is further supported by studies showing digital repositories' resilience under diverse environmental pressures, with secure backup protocols safeguarding cultural collections over time (Lopez-Morales & van der Molen, 2020) . Although manuscripts possess substantial historical and cultural significance, they remain vulnerable to deterioration through natural ageing, anthropic catastrophes such as armed conflict, climatic volatility, and sub-optimal storage conditions. Digitization therefore emerges as a strategic safeguard: it prevents physical decay and preserves this legacy for future generations.

A further obstacle involves restricted access. Many manuscript collections still reside in poorly organized environments, rendering search and retrieval slow and often inequitable. Methodical digitization reshapes such archives by constructing metadata-rich databases that allow users to locate documents swiftly and accurately, thereby reducing the labor and time required for consultation.

Academic demand for manuscript content, moreover, continues to grow. Cultural institutions respond by adopting digitization as a vehicle for knowledge dissemination. Through web-based platforms, researchers and students worldwide can consult digital surrogates, thus, fostering scholarly exchange and interdisciplinary collaboration while enriching academic research across diverse fields (Mansour, 2021) A study by Conway and Proffitt (2020) emphasizes that digital access, when well-structured, significantly expands the visibility of rare materials while enabling new forms of scholarly inquiry through data-driven analysis and machine-readable corpora.

Crucially, electronic access from any location and at any time broadens the beneficiary base. Specialist scholars, interested lay readers, and educators alike gain exposure, which in turn heightens public awareness of this cultural patrimony.

Digitization also strengthens informational security. Creating redundant digital copies permits recovery if originals are damaged or lost. At the same time, institutions can enforce precise controls over reproduction and access, thereby upholding intellectual-property rights and guarding manuscripts against unauthorized use.

## **3. Objectives of Manuscript-Archive Digitization**

The prime purpose of converting manuscript collections to digital form is straightforward yet far-reaching: to safeguard cultural patrimony by creating a durable surrogate whenever the original sheet is at risk of decay. In so doing, a nation's historic memory—Arab and Islamic alike—remains intact even if the parchment itself fades. Digitization also promises near-

instant access. Scholars, students, and curious readers who once travelled great distances may now engage with high-resolution replicas in moments.

Beyond preservation, digitization seeks to democratize consultation. Open online platforms allow students and researchers worldwide to access documents at any time. Such openness broadens the circle of inquiry, stimulates interdisciplinary dialogue, and adds unexpected voices to debates on Islamic intellectual heritage (Nasr, 2020) ( Arab Society for Libraries and Information, 2019).

A further aim involves refining research itself. Well-structured databases—tagged by author, date, subject, or language—let users trace connections invisible in traditional catalogues. Search time shrinks and discovery multiplies.

Digitization also fortifies institutional infrastructure. Libraries and archives equipped with robust servers and interoperable metadata standards are better positioned to collaborate across borders, pursue joint conservation projects, and share expertise (al-Zahrani, 2022). This was underscored by Youssef and Al Hassan (2021), who highlighted how digitization initiatives in North African manuscript repositories improved cross-institutional coordination, standardized metadata application, and infrastructure resilience.

Finally, the availability of a dependable digital facsimile mitigates handling risks: no abrasion from repeated thumbing, no theft from display cases, no mishap in transit. In emergencies, curators may rely on the electronic copy, confident that essential information—and the cultural meaning it carries—endures.

#### **4. Challenges Confronting Manuscript Digitization (Al-‘Utaybi, 2021)**

Despite the numerous advantages digitization offers in the preservation of manuscripts, the field remains fraught with challenges that may hinder the realization of its full potential. Among the most pressing of these obstacles are:

*Technical hurdles.* High-fidelity scanning demands specialized optics and painstaking calibration, particularly when pages are brittle, ink has bled, or scripts employ unfamiliar glyphs. Indeed, research into scanning practices confirms that even slight misalignment during high-resolution scanning can distort fragile materials, increasing post-processing workload significantly (Singh, Patel,& Dasgupta, 2019) . Optical-character recognition, still largely trained on modern typefaces, often falters with ligatures and marginalia.

*Financial constraints.* Precision equipment, proprietary software, climate-controlled storage arrays, and ongoing staff training entail considerable expense—an outlay that can overwhelm the budgets of many heritage institutions.

*Intellectual-property concerns.* Once a folio is online, unauthorized copying and redistribution become alarmingly easy. Institutions must navigate a tangle of copyright statutes while defending the moral rights of authors long deceased and the reputational interests of today’s custodians.

*Long-term storage.* Magnetic tapes, hard drives, and solid-state arrays each age in their own way. File formats evolve; checksum protocols change. Guaranteeing bit-level integrity over decades calls for recurrent migration and rigorous monitoring.

*Human capital.* Successful projects rely on technicians who can operate scanners, metadata specialists who can apply international standards, and digital-curation experts who understand both paleography and data governance. Continuous professional development is therefore not a luxury but a necessity. (‘Ali, 2020)

#### **5. Best Practices for Digitizing Manuscript Archives (Al-‘Harbi, 2021)**

Adhering to sound practice is indispensable if digital surrogates are to remain both accurate

and durable. Among the measures that merit particular attention are the following:

- *Capture technologies.* Selecting the correct scanning equipment is the first line of defense. High-resolution devices preserve minute details—script strokes, marginalia, even faint illuminations. In circumstances where ordinary light falters, infra-red or ultraviolet imaging can reveal text obscured or damaged. Recent technical analyses underscore that achieving this level of precision often involves trade-offs between image accuracy and preservation safety, especially when dealing with fragile paper or ink (Singh, Patel, & Dasgupta, 2019).
- *Structured description.* Robust digital indexing is no less crucial. Each folio must be accompanied by rigorous metadata such as title, scribe or author, date of copying, thematic keywords. International schemas such as Dublin Core improve interoperability, ensuring that records align with external databases and remain discoverable well into the future.
- *Layered storage.* A multi-tier preservation strategy should distribute redundant copies across geographically distant servers. Such dispersion insulates collections from natural disaster, hardware failure, or local network compromise, thereby sustaining uninterrupted access.
- *Access architecture.* Open-access principles maximize scholarly reach, yet intellectual-property rights still require vigilant stewardship. Institutions may, therefore, combine unrestricted viewing with license-based controls for sensitive material, deterring illicit replication while promoting legitimate research.
- *Project sustainability.* Long-term viability demands systematic technology refresh, periodic staff training, and a maintenance schedule that anticipates software obsolescence rather than reacting to it. Partnerships—regional, academic, international—encourage knowledge exchange and raise overall standards, ultimately extending the life of the cultural record entrusted to these archives. (Al-Masri, 2021)

## 6. Challenges Associated with Employing Technology in Manuscript Archiving

Despite the sizeable gains afforded by modern technology, the Arab-Islamic manuscript-archiving sphere contends with a blend of technical, human, and managerial impediments that curtail full exploitation of digital tools.

*First.* Numerous archival institutions and libraries across the Arab world operate on fragile technical foundations. A regional Survey of North African libraries highlighted that more than 60% lacked reliable server infrastructure, which led to frequent data losses during digitization trials (Youssef & Al-Hassan, 2021).

Scarcity of high-resolution scanners, dedicated servers, and advanced digital-preservation software; compounded by unreliable internet connectivity; renders digitization intermittent and limits seamless access to online collections.

*Second.* A shortage of personnel trained in digital-archiving technologies poses a fundamental obstacle. Digitization responsibilities frequently rest with staff lacking appropriate expertise, leading to errors in indexing, description, and related technical tasks. With absent sustained training programs, the skills gap widens and the quality of digital projects declines (Muhammad, 2020).

*Third.* Existing technologies struggle with the linguistic and scriptural particularities of Arabic. Traditional calligraphic styles such as Maghribi or Diwani are intricate and fluid, thwarting optical-character-recognition software and compromising the accuracy of converting images into searchable, machine-readable text.

*Fourth.* Unified standards for metadata and description remain elusive. Many projects neglect international frameworks such as Dublin Core or MARC 21, producing uneven data quality, duplicated effort, and minimal national or regional coordination; thus, foreclosing

opportunities for inter-institutional collaboration and data exchange (Sousan, 2020).

*Fifth.* Funding constitutes a persistent barrier. Digitization endeavors demand substantial resources not only at launch but also for ongoing maintenance, upgrades, and secure data storage. Intense competition for limited cultural budgets often forces manuscript-archiving initiatives into suspension or deferral, jeopardizing the long-term preservation of this invaluable heritage.

## **7. Exemplary Implementation Models**

### **7-1. Qatar Digital Library (QDL) (Ahmad, 2021)**

Launched through a strategic partnership between Qatar National Library and the British Library, the Qatar Digital Library stands out as one of the most ambitious Arab-Islamic digitization ventures. Since 2014, the project has assembled more than 2.5 million digital pages, encompassing religious, scientific, and literary manuscripts, alongside maps, rare plans. Recent evaluations indicate that QDL's use of Unicode-compliant metadata and Unicode-aware OCR improved text search accuracy by over 30% in multilingual environments (Al-Thani et al., 2018), thus enhancing access to a wide array of materials, including official British documents pertaining to the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Image quality is uniformly high. Each item receives meticulous bibliographic description, rendering the platform indispensable for historians and scholars of Islamic studies. The initiative relies on state-of-the-art scanners and Arabic-script-specific OCR technology, enabling precise conversion of manuscript images into searchable text. A flexible content-management system supports intuitive browsing, keyword and subject filtering, and a multilingual interface that caters to a diverse user base.

Beyond technology, QDL cultivates an environment of scholarly exchange: analytic articles and research essays accompany many digital objects, adding contextual depth and stimulating fresh investigation (Al-Jabri, 2022). All materials are offered online at no cost, realizing the principle of Open Access in practice. Long-term sustainability is secured through enduring strategic partnerships that guarantee continuous expansion and technical renewal.

### **7-2. The Al-Azhar Library Manuscripts Digital Transformation Project: A Leading Effort to Preserve Islamic Heritage (Al-Qousi, 2020)**

The digital transformation project for the manuscripts of Al-Azhar Library stands as one of the most distinguished initiatives harnessing information technologies to serve Islamic heritage. Its primary objectives are to safeguard this invaluable cultural corpus and to facilitate access through modern digital media. The project was carried out with the support of Egyptian institutions in collaboration with international partners, foremost among them the Bait al-Khebra Foundation and IBM, both of which helped design an integrated digital system for cataloguing and preserving the Al-Azhar manuscripts.

#### **• Scholarly Value of the Collection**

Housing more than 42 000 manuscripts—the largest such corpus in the Islamic world—Al-Azhar Library spans religious law, linguistics, medicine, astronomy, and numerous other disciplines. The project seeks to convert this trove into high-resolution digital form while attaching precise metadata: author, copyist, subject, physical condition, and date of transcription (Muhammad J. , 2021).

#### **• Advanced Digitization and Cataloguing Techniques**

Specialized scanners designed for fragile substrates capture each folio without compromising its integrity. A dedicated content-management system then supports fluid navigation and advanced in-page search. Subsequently, OCR modules tailored to historical Arabic scripts convert images into searchable, editable text, thereby broadening research possibilities.

#### • Remote Access and Distance Education

An interactive online platform now allows users to consult thousands of manuscripts remotely and, in many cases, download licensed copies. A pedagogical interface guides researchers and students through the platform, supplemented with visual aids and instructional videos that introduce manuscript studies and digital-data methods (Hassan, 2022).

#### •Scholarly and Cultural Impact

By unlocking sources that were once nearly inaccessible, the project has invigorated Azhar-related scholarship, enabling new academic theses and peer-reviewed articles. The digitized manuscripts have already become a primary reference in numerous university dissertations, underscoring the transformative effect of this digital turn on knowledge production and cultural preservation.

### 8. Future Trajectories in Manuscript-Archive Digitization

Projections suggest that manuscript digitization will undergo marked evolution over the coming years, driven by rapid technological advances. Chief among the anticipated shifts is a deeper reliance on artificial-intelligence and machine-learning techniques—tools expected to accelerate text recognition and manuscript indexing with greater precision and efficiency. This trend has been documented by Kumar and Sharma (2022), who emphasized the transformative potential of AI in enabling automatic transcription, layout analysis, and multilingual metadata extraction in digitized heritage archives. By means of these techniques, scholars can analyze even those codices written in distorted or faint hands, recover obscured or damaged passages, and reduce the time and manual labor traditionally required.

Digitization is also gravitating toward immersive solutions. Virtual-reality and augmented-reality platforms now allow researchers and students to handle digital surrogates within three-dimensional environments, thereby enriching the learning experience while sparing fragile originals from repeated handling.

On a broader scale, digital libraries and transnational networks are likely to achieve higher levels of integration and coordination. Cultural and archival institutions in multiple jurisdictions are working to harmonize metadata standards and share manuscript corpora, a development that will facilitate access and stimulate international collaboration on projects devoted to safeguarding common heritage (Al-Ghanim, 2022).

Preservation technologies, too, are set to progress. Quantum storage and advanced cloud architectures promise secure, sustainable repositories, ensuring constant availability of digital manuscripts and mitigating the risk of data loss caused by technical failure or hardware obsolescence.

Lastly, sustainable funding and public-private partnerships constitute two pillars on which future digitization efforts will depend. With steady financial and technical backing from governments and international bodies, libraries and archival centers can implement comprehensive, long-term programs that protect cultural patrimony and maintain open access

to these invaluable resources.

## 8. Findings

- 1 – The digital transformation of manuscript archives is a decisive measure for safeguarding cultural heritage and shielding it from damage and extinction; it simplifies access to these scarce sources and augments the possibilities of scholarly research. Nevertheless, the path forward is impeded by technical and financial hurdles, together with a pressing need to secure the intellectual-property rights attached to digital content.
- 2 – Long-term quality and continuity demand sustained investment in technical infrastructure as well as the systematic cultivation of specialized human resources.

## 9. Proposals

1. Intensify financial and technical backing for the development of digitization tools, while instituting targeted training programs that raise the proficiency of professionals engaged in the field.
2. Strengthen international partnerships among libraries and research centers so as to exchange expertise and unify technical standards, thereby refining cataloguing and organizational procedures and elevating the overall caliber of digital archives.
3. Devise rigorous strategies to secure digital data against cyber-risks, thereby safeguarding intellectual-property rights and thwarting the illicit exploitation of digitized manuscripts.
4. Adopt open-access policies that enlarge the community of users, coupled with regulatory mechanisms that uphold the rights of authors and holding institutions.

## Conclusion

Manuscript archives constitute an essential strand of humanity's cultural heritage, reflecting the histories of peoples and the evolution of their civilizations. In an age of swift technological change, digitizing these collections has become a strategic imperative: it protects fragile originals from decay and loss, while guaranteeing their smooth and secure transmission to future generations. At the same time, digitization broadens access to this invaluable patrimony and unlocks new horizons for academic research through advanced methodological tools.

Recent studies have highlighted that successful digitization projects require not only technical expertise but also ethical frameworks for metadata curation, access regulation, and cultural sensitivity, particularly in heritage-rich contexts (Terras, 2015).

Ultimately, digital transformation is more than the adoption of modern machinery; it is an integrated intellectual and cultural venture. Scholars argue that only holistic digital strategies—combining technology, training, and community engagement—can yield sustainable heritage preservation (Moreno-Gil et al., 2022). This transformation calls for sustained planning, continuous funding, and firm institutional commitment. Anchored by these pillars, digitization functions as a vital bridge linking past and present, granting societies a deeper grasp of their identities and cultural roots.

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