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# Reflections on Two Decades of the Endangered Archives Programme

**Abstract:** The Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) enables the digitisation of archives around the world that are in danger of loss or deterioration. Established at the British Library in 2004, the Programme celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 2024. In this paper we look back on two decades of EAP starting with the initial agreement with the charitable foundation Arcadia, which funds EAP's work. The first part of the paper revisits several other key aspects of the early phase of EAP including the initial choice of microfilm for archive preservation which was soon replaced with the digital imaging practice that is still in place. Other early sources touched on here are the observations of the EAP Advisory Panel on the kinds of application EAP received and where they were from. The important role played by the British Library is discussed in terms of expertise provided in curation, conservation and digital preservation. The second part of the paper looks at EAP since 2018 when funding was renewed by Arcadia and a new agreement with the British Library was drawn up. This included new kinds of grants: the larger Area grants and the Rapid Response grant. This new era also saw the emergence of the Modern Endangered Archives Program funded by Arcadia and run from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which now works closely alongside EAP. Taking us to the present day, the paper turns to the sudden emergence of Covid-19 and how EAP responded to this emergency that affected projects and applicants across the world. Finally, we look to the future and how the breadth and depth of the digital archive produced by EAP projects has opened up new avenues for research.

## 1 Introduction

As more and more of the world embraces the industrial/technological revolution and as globalisation accelerates, the available evidence of pre-industrial societies, their history and culture, is fast disappearing – in Asia, Latin America, Africa and even parts of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The rationale for the Endangered Archives Programme as stated in the initial *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2004, 3.

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The Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) enables the digitisation of archives around the world that are in danger of loss or deterioration. In 2024 the Programme celebrates its twentieth anniversary. The Programme has been made possible due to generous support from Arcadia, a charitable foundation that works to protect nature, preserve cultural heritage and promote open access to knowledge. Since 2002 Arcadia has awarded more than one billion dollars to organisations around the world. EAP plays a part in the greater vision of Arcadia to preserve global cultural heritage in its many forms; the Programme is administered by a small team based at the British Library who oversee the grant cycle and make the project outputs available online.

After such a long time all the people involved in the early years of EAP at the British Library – when the Programme was set up, when the criteria was agreed and the procedures tried and tested – have either retired or moved on to other positions.<sup>2</sup> In writing a short history of EAP for this publication it has been a fascinating task for us to read the early paperwork and pour over the Advisory Panel meeting minutes to uncover various deliberations, observations and decisions. What this process revealed is that several topics have been repeatedly discussed throughout the past two decades while other suggestions or ideas have been tried but discontinued. In this article we will look at these recurring themes and how they have been addressed. We will discuss this in two sections, initially looking at the first phase of EAP which ran from 2004 to 2018 and then at the shorter period of the second phase from 2018 to the present.

## 2 Phase One of the Endangered Archives Programme (2004–2018)

### 2.1 The Initial Agreement

It makes sense to start at the very beginning and look at the agreement drawn up between Arcadia<sup>3</sup> and the British Library. The document provides a useful understanding of the reasoning behind the Programme and why the British Library was chosen as the administering institution. It provides a background for the funder's aims and gives a clear outline of the Programme, specifying the role of the Interna-

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<sup>2</sup> The early EAP team comprised Graham Shaw (Director), Cathy Collins (Grants Administrator) who were involved from the beginning, Lynda Barraclough (Curator) joined in 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Arcadia was originally known as 'The Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund' but will be referred to by its current appellation for consistency.

tional Advisory Panel<sup>4</sup> responsible for approving the grant awards. The agreement also defines the EAP team (a part-time director,<sup>5</sup> a curator and grants administrator) with 15.2% of the initial ten million pounds going towards staffing and non-staffing costs within the Library (plus a small contingency) and the remaining amount going towards the grants and training (in the form of a bursary scheme). The agreement also outlines the British Library's commitments towards the Programme.

Not everything continues to be true today, but the document provides insights that are still relevant and could usefully be consulted regularly to see how the Programme might reflect on the original aims and practices set out by Arcadia and the Library.

There were two initial objectives for the Programme. The primary was to

bring into the international research domain neglected, vulnerable or inaccessible archival materials relating to 'pre-industrial' societies world-wide by securing their transfer to a proper local archival home and by copying for wider dissemination. This will achieve the underlying governing principle of making a significant difference to scholarship and research in a wide variety of subject fields.<sup>6</sup>

The secondary objective was:

[...] to assist in the future safeguarding of such archival materials in their countries of origin by creating new opportunities for the professional training of young archivists from developing countries.<sup>7</sup>

To achieve the second objective, the suggestion was to have four bursaries each year of six months' duration offered to overseas archivists and librarians. The aim was that they would receive professional training by staff at the British Library and would then be able to return to their countries and provide further knowledge exchange. The Library was to explore the possibility of linking to higher education institutions that offer library/archival training with the aim of advertising these bursaries to their overseas students. The failure of the bursaries was mainly due to the difficulties in obtaining short-stay visas. This objective is only now being addressed through the creation of regional hubs, a joint undertaking between EAP

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4 The International Advisory Panel consists of seven to eight members from academic, library or archival backgrounds representing the regions where EAP funds projects. For information about the current membership of the Panel, see <<https://eap.bl.uk/whos-who>> (last accessed 22 April 2024).

5 The Head of the Asia and Africa section (APAC) was to spend 5% of their time working for EAP.

6 *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2004, 3.

7 *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2004, 3.

and the British Library's International Office, with collaborating institutions based in regions where EAP would like to see an increase of in-country applications.

Arcadia, having identified a critical need for preserving documentary heritage, developed the Programme into an annual grants competition to create facsimiles of endangered material. The surrogates would be kept locally and at the British Library – where its own worldwide collection meant it was a natural home for the copies. The physical material as well as the master copies would remain in the country of origin. These principals have not changed from the outset. Archival material from the inception of the Programme was to be defined in as wide a term as possible, including primary and secondary media used within the arts and humanities. Both printed and non-print material was to be considered for funding; listing rare books, periodicals and newspapers: national, regional or local government records, manuscripts and private papers, maps and charts, prints, drawings, photographs and sound records.

Five criteria were specified for evaluating each application: *Urgency* in safeguarding the material; *Vulnerability* and the condition of the collection and how much similar material had already been lost; the *Significance* of the archive and its relevance to a particular field of study, its uniqueness; *Feasibility* of the proposal; and the *Expertise and experience of the applicant(s)*, particularly their track-record of delivery. Although these criteria have been visible within the rather lengthy documentation for potential applicants, EAP has only recently made these core criteria more visible on its website, helping applicants understand what the Panel considers when assessing each application.

The initial agreement specified who could apply. It was expected that the majority would be academics from universities or similar institutions as this was deemed to guarantee the spending of the grant. It was agreed, however, that independent researchers could also apply to the Programme and the British Library would administer these grants. It was stipulated that any additional costs for providing this service could be negotiated between the Library and Arcadia. The maximum length of a project was to be a year but this was quickly seen to be unfeasible when the Programme started issuing grants as the maximum time limit increased to 24 months from its first round.

## 2.2 Surrogate Content and Its Availability to Researchers

Copying archival material has come a long way over the past 20 years. In the initial plans the British Library favoured microfilm as the preferred method of copying but applicants to EAP, presumably for ease while in the field, preferred digitisation. Once it became clear that EAP would be a digitisation programme the assumption was that relevant staff within the Library's imaging team would have the technical



expertise to assess the quality of the digitised images. For many years now, EAP staff have had this responsibility – ensuring the digitised outputs meet the standards of the British Library. The Panel was concerned that many project teams would not have the technical know-how to carry out digitisation of archival material and there was a suggestion of a two-day training course to be held at the Library each year. However, the practicalities of holding such a short course for project holders based around the world meant this did not happen – though it would have been a wonderfully collaborative training event and one we are only now addressing in the form of the regional hub workshops.

In the early years the camera of choice was often a compact camera, whereas now we are more prescriptive in the type of digital SLR to be used. Although the EAP team has some basic knowledge of the workings of a camera and the required image standards there is nothing quite like the expertise from having completed an EAP project. It was therefore decided to publish a how-to-do guide aimed at prospective EAP project holders and *Remote Capture: Digitising Documentary Heritage in Challenging Locations* was co-written by two project holders.<sup>8</sup> Along with the publication EAP provides a digital appendix listing appropriate camera models, therefore bringing more conformity between one project and another, increasing the likelihood of image standards being equivalent to the Library's norms.

As the Library had initially preferred microfilm the initial plan was to make the surrogate copies available to researchers only within the Reading Rooms at the Library's London site. However, this changed after the Five Year Review commissioned by Arcadia and carried out by an independent reviewer, Sarah Tyacke, a former chief executive of the Public Record Office who led it at the time of expansion into the National Archives. Her recommendation was to make the digitised collections available on a dedicated website.

The uploading of content was, however, initially slow. The website was created in 2010 and by 2013 there were 26 projects online consisting of a modest 220,000 images. This then jumped to 80 projects the following year (1.5 million images) and 138 projects amassing 4.8 million images the year after. By 2017 EAP had 195 projects with 6.1 million images (and 25,000 sound recordings) available online. It was clear at this point the website was at capacity and a new solution was needed.

The huge increase in figures between 2013 and 2014 was a simple result of increased staffing from one EAP cataloguer to two. Of course making the outputs from the first five years of the Programme available on the website was not nec-

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Pearson (project lead on EAP794 and EAP1013 and overseeing the training on several other projects) and Patrick Sutherland (project lead on EAP548, EAP749, EAP1016 and EAP1221); Butterworth et al. 2018.

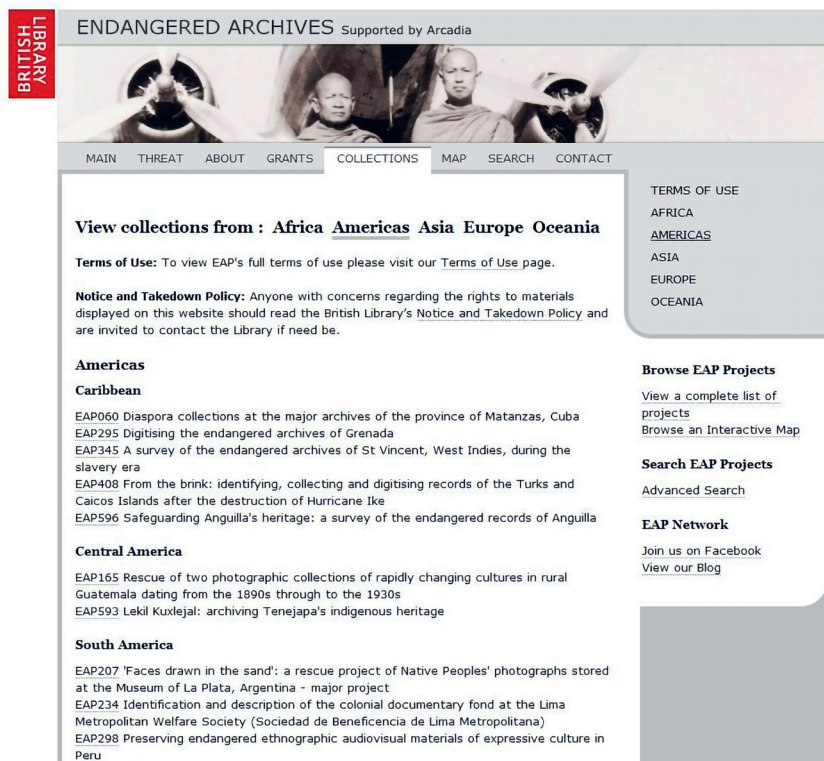


Fig. 1: Example of a page from the original EAP website. Image: EAP

essarily an easy task. Retrospective permissions had to be sought from the project holders. Some projects did produce microfilms and these then had to be outsourced to an external supplier for digitisation. The earlier projects had produced beautifully bound hardcopy catalogues that related to the digitised images; these, of course, had to be recreated electronically so that the information could be ingested into the Library's online catalogue. The earlier projects also submitted their material on CDs or DVDs which required the ISO images to be extracted; it was not just a simple task of saving the contents to a server. Even with the majority of the outputs from Phase One being available online, the permissions from the grant holders did not necessarily grant the downloading of the material, so the majority of these projects can still only be viewed from the website.<sup>9</sup> Towards the end of Phase One and

<sup>9</sup> EAP now requires the permission forms to be submitted at the detail application stage. This gives EAP a CC-BY-NC license for any outputs from a project.

as part of a review instigated by Arcadia, EAP commissioned the creation of a new website which will be discussed as part of the independent review process.

## 2.3 Application Process and Panel Observations

The original funding for EAP was 10 million pounds and the assumption was that this sum would enable ten annual rounds of grants. The initial amount actually went a lot further and supported 14 years of the Programme. The format was that EAP could draw down the needed amount each year to cover successful applications. There was no upper limit per round and this meant there were four types of outcomes: an award, a conditional offer, a decline and a deferred decision. The latter was when the applicant had six months to resubmit their application due to the International Advisory Panel being unable to make a decision because of missing information within the submitted form. With the renewal of EAP in 2018 the funding format changed slightly and there was an annual budget limit, making the uncertainty of deferred decisions too difficult to accommodate. Now applicants are encouraged to reapply the following year if the Panel is unable to support an application in its submitted state.

Various trends have been discussed by the Panel throughout the entire duration of EAP. The most repeated is that we have received fewer applications from the Middle East and only six have been funded (projects based in East Jerusalem, Iran, Israel and Lebanon). Although EAP has tried to be proactive in promoting the Programme within the region there has been little noticeable success. Hopefully the recent collaboration with the American University of Beirut as a regional hub will mean that the Programme receives more applications from this region in the future. In the first few rounds of applications for grants the majority were from academics based in Western institutions who due to their research were aware of archival material in poor conditions and at risk of further deterioration. By the fifth round of grants it was noted in the Panel meeting minutes that this was no longer the case and that the majority of applicants were from outside of Europe and North America.

When looking back over the years of Phase One we have been interested to see the conjecture, particularly during the first few years, that the majority of applications had come from outside of the country where the material resided. More recently, with the benefit of data visualisations, we are able to look at these assumptions in more depth. Of course, the truth is always slightly more nuanced, as on several occasions academics may move to western institutions from their country of origin and our statistics do not reflect these distinctions. Although as mentioned above, by the fifth round the Panel was noticing more applications from outside Europe and North America; even in the first year, the distinction was evenly split,

with 49.02% of applications being made by researchers from outside the source country and 50.98% made by local applicants. The second year showed similar figures but from the third round local applicants made up 60.94% of applications. This percentage remained consistent until the funding round of 2021, the first since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, when 77.94% of applications were submitted by local researchers, with a similar division in 2022 (77.03%). Perhaps one contributing factor for this relatively positive split between in-country and external applications is the high number of applications from South Asia, particularly from India.

It might, however, be more insightful to look at only the successful applications during Phase One, which gives a different picture. EAP awarded 367 projects, with 51.5% of these to applicants in the same country as the archival material. When broken down by some of the major geographical regions it was clear that there was a marked discrepancy in terms of how many were from local applicants: 61.6% of projects in Asia (98 out of 159 projects), 37.5% of projects in Africa (39 out of 104 projects), 44.3% of projects in the Americas (27 of 61 projects) and 60.5% of European projects (23 of 38).

In the very first Advisory Panel meeting held in 2005, it was flagged that the Programme ‘may well get an emergency call during the year to rescue an endangered archive and in these circumstances the Panel would be able to consider the possibility of providing funds without having to wait until the next round of applications. It was agreed that the Programme would consider funding such activities as conservation and freeze-drying, which would not normally be eligible for funding but which may well be required in an emergency situation’.<sup>10</sup> To our knowledge, the Panel was not asked to consider such cases but EAP during Phase Two of its funding did try to address this with limited success and more discussion regarding the Rapid Response grants will be given later in this chapter.

## 2.4 The British Library’s Relevance to the Programme

The fact that the Library has such a wealth of curatorial staff focussing on the regions and languages that form the basis of EAP projects was factored in at the very start of the Programme:

The success of this Programme will critically depend upon ready access to a wide variety of linguist, cultural, archival, photographic and preservation expertise. The BL is uniquely placed to provide that combination.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *EAP Round 1 Panel Meeting Minutes* 2005, point 5.1.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2004, 5.

During the Phase Two discussions this became more concrete as curators within the Asia and Africa Studies section had their job descriptions amended to include 5% of their time helping the Programme (whether by assessing applications, promoting the Programme to relevant audiences or helping with cataloguing queries). The other reasons the Library was chosen to administer the Programme was due to:

- The wealth of professionalism and experience in all aspects of the collection management of manuscripts and archives
- Conservators being world-leaders in the development of treatment for paper and non-paper items
- The Library's experience of storing original material as well as microfilm
- The Library's digitisation facilities
- The Library's experience of administering academic research projects
- As a public body, the Library was known for setting rigorous standards of accounting and financial monitoring

On reflection, perhaps one of the obvious omissions to this list but an understandable one in light of the initial plan to focus on microfilm is the Library's expertise in digital preservation. The team of specialists have guided the EAP team throughout its history in professional standards and tools in order to care for the digitised material, ensuring its stability into the future.

Perhaps one slightly disappointing realisation from the initial agreement and during Phase Two discussions was the wish by Arcadia for the Library to undertake further fundraising 'in order to maximise the research exposure of the archival material and stimulate new project initiatives based upon it'.<sup>12</sup> Within the initial agreement, the Library was to secure additional external funding to sustain the Programme as well as seek shorter-term funding opportunities for hosting academic or archival workshops, seminars or conferences on themes arising out of the material received and to apply for funds for research projects in partnership with the UK higher education sector. It is rather unfortunate the Programme has not yet been successful in securing external funding for these purposes. Now, after 20 years and with over 12 million images online, there is clearly a wealth of digitised material and undoubtedly academics who would want the opportunity to share their research results with others. Below (in section 3.4) we discuss some ways in which these opportunities could be explored further in the future. The Programme has similarly been unsuccessful in exploring consortia partnerships with the USA, which is also highlighted within this chapter.

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<sup>12</sup> *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2004, 13.

## 2.5 Independent Five-Year Reviews

Arcadia has commissioned two reviews to assess the success of the Endangered Archives Programme. The first, carried out in 2009, was to find out the measurable outcomes of EAP during its first five years and see how far those outcomes met the original expectations held by Arcadia and the British Library. It was to assess any policy changes as well as any recommendations to the process by which the British Library administered the grant. The timing of the review coincided with the Library's creation of a new cataloguing system – Integrated Archives and Manuscript System (known as IAMS) – and the review was to evaluate the impact of this new catalogue on EAP.

The first review acknowledged the timely move of the Endangered Archives Programme from within the Asia and Africa section of the Library to the newly formed Digital Scholarship department as this would ensure the long-term preservation of the material. The main criticism from the review was that although the cataloguing of the material was of high quality, there was a considerable backlog and it was growing with little material available to researchers. The recommendation was that the backlog had to be resolved within two years. A solution for making the material quickly available was to use the website's collection management system. However, this in fact meant doubling the cataloguing as the processes were different for the EAP website and the Library's bespoke catalogue IAMS.

The second review, carried out by Elizabeth Beaudin, former director of Digital Initiatives at the Yale University Library, focussed on the metadata and cataloguing into IAMS and made one fundamental recommendation: the material had to be more discoverable. This was broken down into three main areas:

1. Metadata expansion via a realignment of metadata in use along with additional mandatory elements
2. Training by way of a uniform curriculum for project teams using training materials, in-country user groups and/or a tested training model to advance metadata and cataloguing literacy
3. Upgrades in technology to improve discovery within a new web portal for access to the EAP archives

These recommendations required a policy change for cataloguing within the Library as a whole. Prior to this manuscript titles within IAMS were allowed to be in English or transliterated using the Library of Congress guidelines for non-Roman scripts. Understandably, many of the EAP teams did not have English as a second language nor were they familiar with the Library of Congress guidelines, so the metadata received was not consistent or particularly helpful to researchers. The recommendation from the review was to allow for titles in original script. This was

a game changer, making the digitised material more accessible to the communities most connected with the content.

To address the second recommendation from the review, the listing spreadsheet that captures the metadata and is sent to all projects was improved. The current version of the spreadsheet includes macros to ensure only certain terms (based on the Library of Congress FAST terms)<sup>13</sup> can be used, ensuring consistency across all projects. The same approach was taken towards the uniformity of Titles of Works rather than, for example, the terms ‘Koran’, ‘Quran’, ‘Qu’ran’, ‘al-quran’ and ‘al-Quran’ all bringing up different search results, which allowed much more discoverability across the collection.

The final recommendation and a requirement ahead of Phase Two funding with Arcadia was to create a new website.<sup>14</sup> The fact that EAP at this point had moved into Digital Scholarship was a significant decision that ensured the Programme was one of the first within the Library to adopt the latest in digital image standards. The website moved from displaying static low-resolution JPEG images to following the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) standard which provided zoomable JPEG2000 images. Most importantly, IIIF allowed the accompanying manifests to be shared within the scholarly community and allowed researchers to annotate content for their own research, share the images and metadata, embed images on other websites and compare different versions of manuscripts on bespoke platforms without the need to receive any copies of the image from the EAP team.

## 3 Phase Two of the Endangered Archives Programme (2018–2025)

### 3.1 New Kinds of Grants

The second phase of the Endangered Archives Programme began in October 2018 with funding from Arcadia for five further annual grants rounds. Financially, there was a major difference from the first phase in that the amount of funding available for new projects would be set in advance every year instead of being drawn down as needed (see section 1.1 above). This meant that there would be a limit on the

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<sup>13</sup> See the Library of Congress FAST (Faceted Application of Subject Terminology) terms: <<https://www.oclc.org/research/areas/data-science/fast.html>> (last accessed 17 March 2023).

<sup>14</sup> See <<https://eap.bl.uk/>> (last accessed 22 April 2024).





**Fig. 2:** Example of static JPEGs available on the first EAP website. Image: EAP



**Fig. 3:** Example of IIIF image from EAP collection seen through the Universal Viewer. Image: EAP



number of grants given out, however, in practice, EAP continued to fund about the same number of new projects (around 30) every year.

The signed agreement between the British Library and Arcadia recognised a number of challenges facing an international grants-giving programme on the scale of EAP. Of these, the first and most important was ‘reaching potential applicants and enabling them to make good quality applications’. The proposal suggested several ways to address this:

We will increase outreach efforts; provide additional training including videos and materials in several languages; and increase connections between applicants and members of the extended EAP community. The outreach efforts will take advantage of the Library’s international network and curatorial travel on behalf of the British Library to, for example, area studies conferences and regions with endangered materials.<sup>15</sup>

The plan for the second phase of EAP included two new types of grants alongside the Pilot and Major project grants which continued from the previous phase:

#### Area grants

These are the largest projects with budgets initially up to £150,000 lasting up to 24 months. Area grants are similar to a major grant, but larger in scale and ambition. They may cover a larger geographical area, digitise a larger collection, or deal with materials in more challenging conditions. These would allow several related projects from a region or area to be grouped together to give greater impact, efficiencies in training and equipment, as well as economies of scale in project management and coordination. The grouping could be recommended by the Programme, or separate archives could elect to put in a joint or collaborative bid. This model can stimulate collaboration and creative thinking within archival communities, especially where smaller organisations may not have sufficient capacity on their own.

#### Rapid response grants

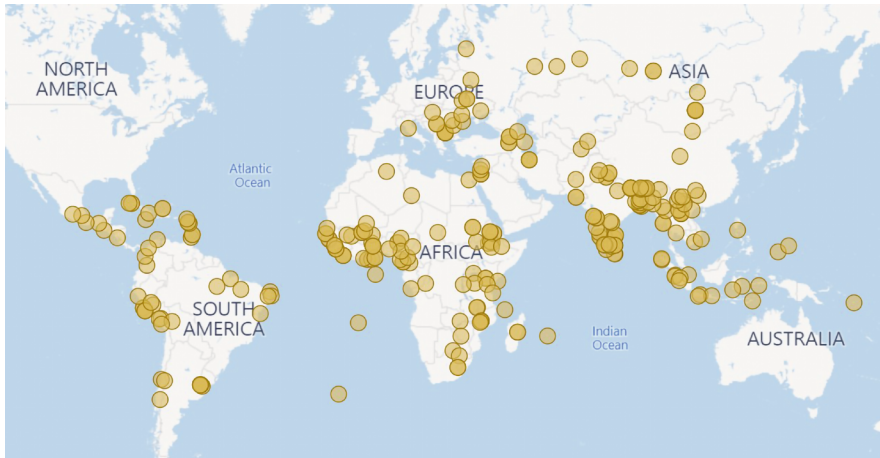
These are smaller projects with budgets initially up to £15,000 lasting up to 12 months. These are designed to provide a faster response and may be submitted at any time during the year with a decision made within four months of application. These are targeted at more urgent situations where the delay inherent in the annual cycle could result in extensive damage to the material. These grants would not duplicate initiatives that aim to save or protect collections in an immediate emergency situation, such as environmental disaster, war or civil emergency. They could apply in the aftermath of such events, where collections may remain at continued risk of loss through consequential physical damage or rapid deterioration such as mould after a flood.<sup>16</sup>

At the time of writing, EAP has awarded three Area project grants. The first of these, awarded in 2021, was ‘Hidden and endangered manuscript collections connected

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<sup>15</sup> *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2018, 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2018, 4.



**Fig. 4:** Locations of EAP projects through to 2021. Image: EAP

to the Supreme Patriarch and the Royal Family of Laos' (EAP1398). This project is working across a monastic complex containing several different manuscript collections in the city of Luang Prabang in Laos. The project lead Khamvone Boulyaphonh had been involved with previous EAP projects and put together a project team comprising people who had been trained in these projects. Also on the project is Volker Grabowsky of Hamburg University who has led EAP projects in the past and is on the Advisory Board of DREAMSEA (see below). This combined experience and expertise makes this ambitious project a realistic one as well.

The results of the ambition to set up a Rapid Response grant have been more mixed. Thanks to its dedicated experts in the fields of conservation and digital preservation, the British Library has been able to give advice and training to those working in emergency situations. However the time, equipment and training needed to set up a digitisation project as well as the institutional support needed to sign agreements and receive grant payments has meant that EAP has not been able to move swiftly enough to accomplish a truly rapid response digitisation project at the time of writing. Ways in which to expedite this process are still being explored, including closer ties with organisations such as Cultural Emergency Response (CER) and the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Cultural Areas (ALIPH), which can move quickly to help stabilise an emergency situation, laying the groundwork for cataloguing and digitising archives.

### 3.2 Working with Other Programmes

Another big change was the start of a new programme funded by Arcadia, the Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP). This programme is based at the UCLA Library and developed from an earlier cultural preservation programme run by UCLA, the International Digital Ephemera Project (IDEP). The Modern Endangered Archives Program joined a growing fellowship of cultural preservation programmes funded by Arcadia which also includes the Endangered Language Documentation Programme (ELDP), the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) and the Endangered Wooden Architecture Programme (EWAP).<sup>17</sup> From 2018 onwards MEAP has operated on the same principles as EAP and other Arcadia-funded programmes, with an annual funding round, an independent panel assessing applications and funding being given to a combination of survey and digitisation projects. MEAP also covers the same broad range of material under the heading of ‘archives’ including photography and sound recordings as well as documents, journals and books.

The main difference between the two programmes, as suggested by the name, is chronological, with MEAP concentrating on more recent endangered material. This meant that while in the past EAP had not put any chronological limits on the material that was in scope we now needed to do so and make clear when applicants should apply to MEAP rather than EAP. In conversations between the two programmes and with Arcadia we decided on the middle of the twentieth century as the dividing line. We now say that applications where the majority of the material dates to before the mid-twentieth century should be sent to EAP, while those where the majority of the material is later should go to MEAP.

This led to another issue: what to do when applicants wanted to work on material that covered both periods and developed applications to EAP and MEAP in the same funding round. We discovered that it was impossible to consider such applications because it was too difficult for applicants to plan and for the panels to assess when it was uncertain whether both applications or only one would be successful. Therefore, along with Arcadia, we decided on a policy of allowing applications to one of the two programmes but not both in the same funding round. In the end we agreed on the following wording:

Applicants with collections including substantial material from before and after the mid-twentieth century can apply to both EAP and MEAP for projects to work on the same collection, but

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<sup>17</sup> In recent years, Arcadia has also set up three ‘environmental regranteeing programmes’: Endangered Landscapes Programme (Cambridge Conservation Initiative); Open Rivers Programme (Stichting Open Rivers); and Earth Investigations Programme (Journalismfund.eu).

not in the same application year. Applicants may therefore choose to create related project plans for their applications to each programme. Funding from one programme must have started before an application to the other programme will be considered.<sup>18</sup>

As always, we also suggest that applicants get in touch with us to discuss more complex plans like this and anything else they feel unsure about.

One other digitisation programme with similar goals to EAP is DREAMSEA, another Arcadia-funded programme though not a regranting programme, which has a remit close to that of EAP. DREAMSEA is run by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society) of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta and the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) of the University of Hamburg. The programme seeks to discover and digitally preserve endangered manuscripts in South East Asia. This proactive nature distinguishes DREAMSEA from EAP, which relies on others to identify endangered collections and apply for funding to preserve them.

### 3.3 Responses to the Pandemic

When the Covid-19 pandemic brought the world to a halt in early 2020, EAP was one of many organisations that had to interrupt something that had been a continuous practice for years. Our sixteenth application round had just concluded and we were preparing for the annual meeting of the EAP Advisory Panel in London. Once it became clear that this was not going to happen we made the decision to postpone the panel meeting (and therefore the funding decisions) to the following year in April 2021. On 23 March 2020 EAP wrote to all applicants now at the stage of detailed application to inform them of this.

In September we wrote again to all current applicants to anticipate whether they still wanted their applications considered in the postponed round, with a survey to assess the amount of changes in project plans and budgets. In October, we came back to all applicants who had responded positively with a link to a Google form to ask whether changes were needed, what they were and for a risk assessment taking into account factors such as travel restrictions and quarantines. As some applicants did not feel able to pursue their original plans and withdrew their application we opened another call for applications to join those that were carried over. In the end there were plenty of viable projects, adjusted or developed in the

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<sup>18</sup> Endangered Archives Programme Guide for Applicants, Round 18 (2022). <<https://eap.bl.uk/applicants>> (last accessed 22 April 2024).

light of the pandemic, for the EAP Panel to consider in April 2021. In another first, this was the first time the meeting was held virtually rather than at the British Library in London.

An equally urgent consideration were the 77 EAP projects currently in progress across the world. Institutions closed their doors, staff were furloughed and some of those working on projects fell seriously ill with Covid-19, or had to look after family members who were ill. In London the EAP team was also affected, with the British Library closing and a sudden shift to working from home. Some of us were affected by the virus and could not work for weeks. Trying to understand all of this and develop a response that we could communicate to our projects, we were guided in the first instance by compassion and pragmatism. If EAP-funded projects could not function we wanted to let them know they would have a no-cost extension, initially for three months.

By September of the same year we knew that the pandemic was not going to be over in a matter of months and that brief extensions to projects may not be enough to keep them going. We wrote again to the ongoing projects, now 65 after several that were in the last stages had been able to finish despite the pandemic. This time we were engaged in a fact-finding exercise and asked all project teams to fill in a form with a few questions which would help us understand the changes that were being made or needed to be made so that these projects could continue and hopefully come to a successful conclusion despite the disruption of the pandemic.

1. What stage are you at with your project (e. g. setup, survey, digitisation, finalising metadata)?

Around a third of projects that answered considered themselves to be at the final stage. As long as these project teams had access to a computer and the images they were able to work on metadata and complete all other aspects of their project.

2. Do you expect to need more time than originally planned for? If so, how much?

Ten projects reported they would not need more than the three-month extension already provided by EAP. Others needed longer than they had originally planned, in some cases as much as a year.

3. Do you expect you will need to make other changes to the project plan and material to be digitised?

Around two-thirds of respondents did not anticipate any other changes to the project plan and material to be digitised. Of the others, there were reductions in the ambitions with respect to the number of collections to be digitised or surveyed because of uncertainties around travel.

4. If so, do these changes require adjustments to the project team?

Only four project leads reported that they need to adjust their team. However, a project based in India reported that the team was likely to be dispersed because they had to look for other jobs.

5. What are the financial implications of this (for example: has it been necessary to pay staff salaries/fees from the project funds during a lockdown? Have you had to cancel travel and accommodation bookings?)?

Perhaps surprisingly, around half of the respondents reported no financial implications arising from the pandemic. In some cases the cancellation of travel plans meant that funds could be spent on other aspects of the project. Where projects did incur additional costs it was often in paying the salaries of teams who were unable to work due to illness and lockdowns.<sup>19</sup>

As EAP compiled the answers to these questions, local differences in the pandemic were evident, with some projects able to continue to work safely in countries where the pandemic had not yet had a major impact, such as Mongolia. In other countries including India, major lockdowns resulted in staff being furloughed and unable to continue to do digitisation work yet still needing to be paid. Project teams responded to these challenges in varied and creative ways and thus far none had to give up due to the pandemic – a testament to their commitment to the work they were doing. With changes in working plans, communicating via Zoom or similar software and reworking budgets, EAP projects continued to do this vital work.

While the impacts of the pandemic on new projects are currently minimal, some of the processes that EAP introduced in the first year of the pandemic have stayed. We now ask all new projects at the point of receiving their funding offer to review their risk assessment and look at whether any issues have arisen in-between the original application and the point at which the project will actually start. In this way we hope to give project leads the opportunity to let us know whether they will be facing challenges that they did not originally foresee and for EAP to keep better track of changes in places where projects are operating.

### 3.4 New Opportunities for Research

The increasing depth and breadth of the digital collections created by years of EAP projects has created an incredible resource for researchers. An aspiration expressed in the 2018 proposal for funding to Arcadia was that this would lead to more than new information; it would start to change the way researchers work with the past:

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<sup>19</sup> The summaries of the responses are drawn from the report ‘Survey of live EAP projects, September 2020’ by EAP Programme Manager Ruth Hansford.

Furthermore, by taking the EAP approach, we enable researchers to challenge existing narratives and understanding, providing a new lens through which to view the past – one that is uniquely responsive to the needs of communities, researchers, and collection holders.<sup>20</sup>

While this may seem ambitious, the growing scale of the digital collections funded by EAP (or at least many of them) has started to offer opportunities for a different kind of research in recent years. To take one of many possible examples, we can look at the EAP projects run by Professor Shanker Thapa in Nepal between 2013 and the present. Nepal and the Kathmandu valley in particular has an incredibly rich religious cultural heritage coming from a place where Buddhist and Hindu religious practice coexisted and influenced each other.<sup>21</sup> Buddhist ritual practices have been handed down through families from one generation to the next over centuries, and many of these practices are recorded in ancient manuscripts. These manuscripts, in the loose-leaf pothi format, are written in Sanskrit and the local Newari language and are mainly kept in the homes of ritual practitioners known as Vajracharyas.

Partly due to its climate, Nepal has some of the very earliest surviving manuscripts in Sanskrit, important for understanding the history of both Buddhism and Hinduism. The richness of Nepal's manuscript tradition was recognised by British colonial residents in the nineteenth century and their acquisitions built the collections that are now held in institutions like the British Library. These collectors selected manuscripts that suited their own interests or were particularly beautiful, early or rare. As a result, the collections held in Western institutions are selective and represent a particular set of nineteenth and early twentieth century European interests. By contrast with this, the EAP funded projects carried out by Shanker Thapa have focused on the collections of those who own and use the manuscripts, who are usually practitioners or ritual specialists.<sup>22</sup>

The first project proposed by Thapa and funded by EAP was the survey of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts in the possession of Vajrayana Viharas and Newar Buddhist families in Lalitpur in the Kathmandu valley, Nepal (EAP676). As indicated by the title, this was a pilot project surveying personal and monastic manuscript collections kept in the Kathmandu valley. The project digitised and catalogued whole collections of manuscripts and arranged the digital collections in terms of their owners and custodians rather than by other kinds of categorisation. Thus a seventeenth-century illustrated manuscript of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* sutra (Figure 6) is catalogued as part of the Dipak Vajracharya collection (the inherited collection of a family of ritual specialists) along with 30 other manuscripts in that collection.

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<sup>20</sup> *Agreement between Arcadia and the British Library* 2018, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Gellner 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Thapa 2015.

Two further projects following up EAP676, and one currently in progress, have generated a truly significant documentation of the manuscript collections of ritual specialists. These collections are very different from, for example, the Hodgson Collection of manuscripts from Nepal at the British Library, taken from various sources and named after its nineteenth century British collector.

Digital collections like those generated by Thapa's projects – and there are many others – mean that researchers can understand the practical content of the manuscripts rather than as individual pieces in a collection stripped of their original lived context. Through this we can begin to see how the ambitions for EAP projects to have a significant impact on research could be realised. Rather than simply adding to the pool of resources available to researchers, EAP digital collections can open gateways to new ways of carrying out research.

This is currently being explored by a recent major research project headed by Mulaika Hijjas and funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The Naskah Sumatra project 'investigates three kinds of manuscript collections – the royal library of Palembang; libraries of private individuals in Aceh; and mosque libraries in Minangkabau – to rediscover the intellectual and literary culture of Sumatra in the 18th and 19th centuries'.<sup>23</sup> The project challenges the dominance of collections created through colonial activities in Southeast Asia – the same dynamic seen in Nepal in the same period:

Most of the manuscripts from the diverse writing traditions of island Southeast Asia that are now held in institutional collections are there as a result of colonial intervention, whether driven by philological or antiquarian scholarship or as the byproduct of conflict between local polities and European agents. Public discourse in Southeast Asia and in Europe increasingly asserts that the displacement of these manuscripts, whether commissioned or looted, was theft, and a deliberate act of violence against indigenous epistemologies.<sup>24</sup>

This expresses the challenge now present in the availability of new (digital) collections created through the agency and logic of their own custodians rather than selected, removed and categorised through colonial agency and logic. As the recognition of this grows there are surely many other parts of the world where projects like this can be carried out.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quote from the Naskah Sumatra project's website, see <<https://naskahsumatra.org/>> (last accessed 10 March 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Quote from the Naskah Sumatra project's website, see <<https://naskahsumatra.org/call-for-papers/colonialism-and-manuscript-libraries-in-island-southeast-asia/>> (last accessed 10 March 2023).

<sup>25</sup> See also the discussion of these issues in interviews recorded in this video <<https://blogs.bl.uk/endangeredarchives/2022/09/eap-video.html>> (last accessed 14 March 2023).





**Fig. 5:** Detail from a manuscript of the Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtra, from the personal collection of Dipak Vajracharya, Lalitpur, Nepal (EAP676/16/1). Image: EAP

## 4 Conclusion

At the time of writing the Endangered Archives Programme has supported over 500 projects in 96 different countries. We have surpassed 13 million images available on [eap.bl.uk](http://eap.bl.uk) and have over 35,000 sound recordings available via the British Library Sounds website. Reviewing the two decades that have led us to this point, it is striking that it has been a time of great change, especially in terms of technology, global politics and the unexpected crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2004 and 2024, the Programme has moved from envisaging preservation as the creation and storing of microfilms to digital photography and providing images and sounds of digitised archives to all via the internet. Some issues have been perennial, includ-

ing the tension between funding archival quality digital preservation projects and swiftly responding to emergency situations where cultural heritage is at risk. Yet the basic principles set out in the early documents we have reviewed remain the same and there is no question that the issues that inspired the founding of the Programme in 2004 are even more present now, with environment and political dangers ever more present to the world's heritage.

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