

Case Study 5.4: The ‘Ābdīn Palace Archive in Cairo: Merging Monarchy and Nation

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Archival spaces were profoundly reconfigured with the gradual development of the Egyptian nation-state under increasing colonial hegemony in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Daftarkhāne was founded in Cairo in the 1820s as the archive of state administration, but other archival sites, such as the courts, continued to store documents that they produced in their day-to-day work. In addition, pre-nineteenth-century documents were not transferred to the Daftarkhāne, but instead remained distributed across the urban topography. The Daftarkhāne started to develop into an archive with national ambitions after the abolition of provincial archives in 1865. This development reached a new milestone in the 1920s when the royal ‘Ābdīn Palace, built in 1873, officially became the central Egyptian national archive to which documents were gradually transferred from all across Cairo and Egypt. The neo-classical ‘Ābdīn Palace housed the royal government from the palace’s inauguration in 1873, up to the revolution in 1952. Planned by the French architect Léon Rousseau, it was meant to materialise an Egypt that was modernising and reforming.

The creation of the ‘Ābdīn archive was far from linear: it was initiated in the 1920s as a royal library and only slowly transformed into a distinct archive. The creation of this national archive was closely linked to the state-sponsored project of writing an Egyptian national history, as the ‘Ābdīn Palace also hosted a workshop of royal historians who wrote a massive history of ‘modern’ Egypt that narrated the story of a reforming Egypt under benevolent European guidance with the Ottoman Empire acting as a hostile alien entity. The archive’s collection criteria, thus, both reflected this developing national narrative and shaped it profoundly. Most importantly, Ottoman language documents were marginalised and those in Arabic and European languages prioritised, thereby, ‘de-Ottomanising’ the Egyptian past.

Situating the national archive in this palace, at the very heart of state authority, made a clear statement as to its envisioned role. Yet, at the same time, the existence of this royal archive, located in one of the palace’s wings, was not evident to the uninitiated observer. In a sense, this architectural design collapsed the monarchy and the Egyptian history into one indistinguishable entity. The new Nasserist archive (*Dār al-wathā’iq*) on Cairo’s Nile corniche replaced ‘Ābdīn in the 1960s. Housed in a typical Eastern European modernist building, it created the first distinct archival space within Cairo’s urban topography and, thus, made the state’s claim to the documents visible.



Fig. 1: ‘Abdīn Palace, Cairo, 1944; photo: John Phillips; © Time Inc. / Shutterstock.

