

## **Jewels of the Nile**

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A museum that covers a country's entire history? Heather McLean thinks she may have found it

Imagine a museum without walls. One that encapsulates an entire country, as it is today as well as its thousands of years of history. A museum made of Egypt, bringing everything together, from the last of the ancient wonders of the world, the pyramids, to how invaders brought new religions and skills to the society that lives in the country today.

Eternal Egypt is the name of a project that has made the country into that museum without walls, created in a partnership between the Egyptian government and IBM. Alongside the government and the Egyptian Centre For Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CultNat), IBM has over the past two years developed a centralised digital database of historical and cultural resources taken from nine archaeological sites and museums.

The highlight of this investment is [www.eternegypt.org](http://www.eternegypt.org) The site is a rich network of links, so with every click of a mouse the user becomes the author of a historical story in which they are entirely in control.

Katherine Charnock, head of history at Mandeville School in Aylesbury, Bucks, says of the site: "It's educational, but it's engaging for children.

It puts everything about Egyptian history into context, so rather than having students look at textbooks, they can see what everything looks like and where it fits."

The site contains images of some 30 artefacts that appear to be 3-D, but that are actually constructed of a series of pictures taken from the high resolution 3-D images for academic research. There are also five webcam views of sites of historical importance in Egypt that are updated once an hour, 24 hours a day. Additionally, the site contains about 2,000 two-dimensional images of artefacts with accompanying text plus text to speech technology, both available in English, French and, for the first time, Arabic (to create Arabic speech to text, IBM had to develop tools to identify Arabic vowels, as vowels are not written down in modern Arabic, so that artificial intelligence in the database can translate text and read it out loud).

Also on the website are nearly 1,500 pictures that can be zoomed in on for more visual detail, eight 360-degree panoramic views of different archaeological sites of interest in Egypt as they are today, 12 animations to help explain aspects of Egyptian history, and four virtual environments showing computer-reconstructed lost or damaged sites throughout the different eras of Egyptian history. The site also lists bibliographies of recommended further reading and students can email questions to be answered by CultNat.

Professor Mohamed Saleh, the previous director of the Museum of Egyptology in Cairo (one of the sites involved in the project) and now director of the Egyptology unit of the Grand Museum of Egypt, says this is only the beginning and the site will be continually added to. In the near future a set of subject programmes for

teachers to use in class will be introduced, which will lay a trail to make navigation of the site easier and prevent students from scooting off on enthusiastic tangents.

[www.eternaegypt.org](http://www.eternaegypt.org)

#### MANDEVILLE SCHOOL PUPILS TRY OUT THE SITE

As part of the GCSE history curriculum at Mandeville School in Aylesbury, Bucks, students have to study medicine in the ancient world. Katherine Charnock, head of history at Mandeville, explains what happened when her students tested the site.

"The class began by putting 'medicine' in the search engine. It came up as an actual medicine section with lots of artefact resources and also primary sources. These primary sources were manuscripts shown as they actually are now, in the original languages, which is really important in history and was good for our GCSE pupils to see. Putting an event or fact into its personal time frame is vital in creating understanding and interest for students.

"It is exciting to see a student propelling themselves through the website.

They see an image of an actual manuscript, read a short explanation of its contents, then click onto a timeline to see when that manuscript was written and what else was happening at that time, then click on 'connections' to see associated artefacts, or follow entirely new trails provided by associated artefact images.

"Although the class was supposed to be looking at ancient Egyptian medicine, they quickly began clicking on the numerous links to related information given on each web page. They ended up off on a tangent looking at Egyptian toilets, but toilets are about public health so it still fitted in with what they were supposed to be following.

"Ultimately, as long as they get an overall picture of what it was like at that time in ancient Egypt and can fit medicine into that context, it's good. Children learn a lot better by doing it by themselves and this website really does make them do that."