

Rachel Mairs on Dragomans
Egypt in Reading: Stories from the Liverpool Collections exhibition

Part 1: Defining dragomans

The name comes from the Arabic word *targoman*, which means translator. But the role of a dragoman is so much more than simply managing the linguistic divide between Arabic in Egypt and the many different languages that tourists used in Egypt in the late 19th Century. A dragoman was a guide, was a go-between, was a fixer, who would do things like give tours of tourist sites – a lot of them had very good knowledge of Egyptian history and monuments – they would make arrangements for hiring boats, making hotel reservations, they would basically take all of the everyday difficulties of travel for people.

Of course you find a lot of people who resent the position of dragoman as well, a number of tourists write about how they felt they were somewhat isolated from everyday life in Egypt, because the dragoman was in some ways doing his job too well, he was making everything too easy, he was isolating them from everyday interaction with people.

Part 2: A dragoman's skills

The most basic qualification for a dragoman was some knowledge of English or another foreign language – and we find a really wide range of expertise within this: from dragomans who had been educated in multiple languages to dragomans who had worked their way up through the system, who had started out as boys who hired out donkeys to visiting Europeans in Cairo, and they would learn a certain amount of foreign languages on the job through everyday interactions.

Of course alongside linguistic knowledge you needed to have some sort of knowledge of how to manage a foreigner's travel within Egypt, often dragomans had close relationships with certain hotels and travel companies that they worked with. And dragomans were also expected to have some knowledge of the historical sites of Egypt, which a bit like language capability could range from a quite basic knowledge to dragomans who even knew how to read the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script. We have evidence of a number of dragomans who in fact would have passed for reasonably well-qualified Egyptologists, if they'd been born into a position where that was something they could have achieved.

Part 3: Discovering dragomans

Most of the sources we have surviving from the late 19th century are travel accounts written by foreigners. There are some ways we can attempt to get at a more dragoman-centred approach to this. We don't have any surviving accounts written by dragomans themselves, however we do have things like the business cards which dragomans gave to their clients, which tell us something about how they saw their professional role; what kinds of qualifications they claimed. We also have recommendation letters that tourists wrote for their dragomans.

This is a slightly trickier situation – I recently worked on an album, a collection of reference letters, which was owned by a dragoman named Solomon Negima, who mostly worked in Palestine. And although we don't have his own voice necessarily speaking through this, what we do have is a collection of recommendation letters curated by him, that tells us something about how he wished to depict himself to his future clients, and to posterity, to a certain extent as well.