

46th Seminar for Arabian Studies Conference

British Museum, London (UK) 28th - 30th July 2011

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Our contribution presents the web application of a virtual museum in Zafar in the Highlands of the Yemen. This we installed in 2002. The site's inaccessibility and the political unrest prohibit visits by foreign tourists and scholars. The project of the Zafar Virtual Museum communicates knowledge on important and little-known Himyarite artefacts exhibited.

The Zafar Virtual Museum application comprises an interdisciplinary effort realised with limited resources. The 3D model was not conceived from the beginning as a project in the prime sense, but rather was assembled from images and texts created for other purposes. Great accuracy in the representation was neither possible, nor was it not our goal. The Zafar Virtual Museum represents a synthetic model in which the information contained is more important than the structure of the building itself.



The web application is based on the software, ISEE, the basic idea of which is to enable information retrieval by simply viewing inside a 3D environment, since moving and looking in the real world are basic modes which all viewers use.

ISEE ranks the relevant information by means of its position/orientation in 3D space as a viewer would. This technology enables interaction and is suitable for different other applications. The ranking algorithm that we developed matches the intuitive expectation of users as verified by means of formal usability tests. Both image and textual data are integrated into the ISEE system: Targeting a particular exhibit elicits a brief textual description.

The Seminar for the Languages and Cultures of the Near East of Heidelberg University has committed itself to the Yemen since the late 1980s. It is hoped that the Zafar Virtual Museum will serve as a model in order to strengthen the touristic infrastructure in this Near Eastern land using inexpensive, reliable and user-friendly means. A further such virtual museum is planned for the Sultanate of Oman.

