

Digital Library of the Middle East

By [Charles Henry](#) posted 21 hours ago

Last October at the Digital Library Federation's (DLF) annual [Forum](#) in Vancouver, Canada, I served on the final plenary panel, asked to speak about themes and topics of that Forum that struck me as especially compelling. I reported that the emphasis throughout the conference on the correlation of the social implications and potential societal benefits (as well as potential disruption) of the technologies associated with building and evolving digital libraries was invigorating. The Forum had become far more than a technology venue focused on sharing insights into code, platforms, and apps, and while continuing to focus on those critical issues the speakers were thoughtfully and rigorously exploring ways that digital libraries can improve our capacity for better understanding the world and our roles in it. We should, in brief, always acknowledge that our digital libraries can virtually encompass our aspirations, biases, and yearnings, and can thus have enormous influence on our cultures, educational programs, politics, and behavior. I concluded by noting a project under development within CLIR and DLF called the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME), which had several strategic goals, including the construction of inventories and digital surrogates of endangered cultural artifacts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), methods to share that information to help mitigate smuggling, and over time engage students and scholars with its open and accessible aggregation of thousands of years of human expression. The DLME seemed to me exemplary of the responsibilities and constructive social value of these technologies promoted by the Forum's participants.

This week we gratefully acknowledge funding of the planning phase for the Digital Library of the Middle East by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The expected outcomes of this initial stage of activity include: a rigorous assessment of the technical specifications to build out the DLME; a more sophisticated understanding of the costs of the DLME; a registry of existing domestic and international related digital resources, assets, and projects relevant to a digital library of aggregated resources; identifying partnering institutions and individuals, with an emphasis on universities, museums, and archeological expeditions within the Middle East; as well as a more sophisticated knowledge of the cultural, political, and technical challenges of working in the region as foundational to a successful, sustained cross-cultural collaboration. In developing the proposal for this project, it has been most gratifying to see the swift and generous level of engagement of many R1 universities and libraries and liberal arts colleges; museums both domestic and in Europe and the Middle East; the interest of prominent scholars of and in the MENA region; and support from the Middle East diplomatic corps. The Antiquities Coalition is a full partner in this venture, with contributions from the Digital Public Library of America, National Digital Stewardship Alliance, and other sophisticated technical enterprises eagerly anticipated.

It is important to be explicit about the origin of this project: unlike other ventures CLIR and DLF have supported, the impetus for the DLME is the unimaginable human suffering, loss of life and home, and destruction that has riven the Middle East and continues to exact a horrific toll in lives destroyed and displaced. The Digital Library of the Middle East was conceived as a project because building digital libraries is what we do very well. As I noted in a [previous blog](#), our academic constituencies do not wear blue helmets, we do not bear arms, and we have no recourse to judiciary remediation, so in effect we try to contribute within our range of expertise, informed by our compassion and purpose.

This project is also conceived not as a Western implantation, but as a means to better connect with, understand, and be guided by those who are immediately affected by this carnage. The DLME will be a project of the Middle East—its scholars, curators, librarians, political leaders, and students will set priorities and direct the execution of the digitization and the knowledge organization that will make this experiment coherent. Local training for job creation and the long-term conduct of the DLME is integral to the project; we also envision an international curriculum for other regions of the world similarly afflicted or threatened.

