

Introducing the Digital Library of the Middle East

By: Peter Herdrich

In the winter of 2015, ISIL brought its campaign of terror to the Mosul Museum, launching their devastating attack with sledgehammers and power drills. For readers of the Ancient Near East Today, that paroxysm of violence is indelibly burned in our memories, made even more devastating by the searing video evidence. What many of us remember less well is another spasm of destruction in Mosul. Along with the attack on the Museum, militants looted and destroyed the libraries of Mosul, burning books, manuscripts, and other bibliographical material. As in Mali and Bosnia before, the difference between the collections in a library and museum didn't make much difference to terrorists with a destructive agenda.

The desire to more thoroughly secure collections of all kinds is one of the primary motivations behind a new project developed by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and the Antiquities Coalition, the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME). The DLME proposes a large-scale digital library that would encompass online collections of material relating to the cultures of the Middle East.

The library will provide an internationally shared inventory of cultural artifacts including detailed descriptions and image documentation on a single website with coherent metadata and search facilities. Images and descriptions could be made publicly available to encourage greater understanding of and respect for the region's cultural patrimony. Object-specific data would confirm ownership and legal status and would help determine whether an item of cultural or historical significance being offered for sale or transferred was acquired illegally. And the study will address bringing uncatalogued, undescribed, and undocumented collections online by providing funding, capacity building, and expertise – a possible extension of the Hidden Collections program for which CLIR is justly renowned. For both bibliographical and museum collections, the DLME seeks to improve security, provide access, aid in combatting the illicit trade, and encourage modern inventory and documentation standards for at risk collections.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has generously provided funding to support exploratory research, community building, and technical prototyping for the DLME. Dr. Charles Henry of CLIR and I will serve as co-Principal Investigators on the project. Media and digital arts producer Neil Sieling is lead research analyst, and Elizabeth Waraksa, program director for research and strategic initiatives at the Association of Research Libraries, will serve as consultant to the project. We will also benefit from significant contributions from the Digital Library Federation, the Digital Public Library of America, and the National Digital Stewardship Alliance.

These goals are firmly mission-based for both the Antiquities Coalition and CLIR. Dr. Henry joined [ASOR as one of the earliest supporters](#) of the Antiquities Coalition, and as a leader in the world of digital libraries, sees the great potential benefit in the DLME. "All technologies, including the construction of digital inventories of the cultural artifacts of the Middle East region that will form the core of the Digital Library of the Middle East, are means to express and foster core human values," Dr. Henry explains. "The DLME is envisioned as both a technical marvel but also a virtual place that facilitates social justice and provides a sustained, evolving platform for worldwide access as a public good. The crisis in the Middle East is urgent and heartbreaking; our immediate goals are to construct a digital library that will inhibit looting, track material objects of cultural significance and help to safeguard one of the world's greatest cultural repositories. Over time, we hope for peace, when the DLME can engage a new generation of scholars and readers who can gaze anew on such stunning evidence of our collective human achievement."

For many with backgrounds in archaeology and cultural heritage preservation, the chance to safeguard objects is critical and in the DLME, inventories are a principal means to security. The importance of inventories is enshrined in the 1999 Second Protocol of Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Article 5 - Safeguarding of cultural property states, "Preparatory measures taken in time of peace for the safeguarding of cultural property against the foreseeable effects of an armed conflict pursuant to Article 3 of the Convention shall include, as

appropriate, the preparation of inventories.” Unfortunately, uninventoried and undocumented collections are common across the Middle East and this creates a serious issue of risk management. To protect what you have, you first must know what you have.

With the Antiquities Coalition’s focus on implementing on-the-ground solutions, the promotion of databases and documentation fits our organizational mission – as a basic step toward the protection of so much cultural heritage material. This Antiquities Coalition infographic illustrates how inventories and databases contribute to safeguarding cultural material.

Over the course of our study grant, we will assess initiatives that will increase the value of the Digital Library of the Middle East. We will form Advisory and Steering Committees, dedicated in our commitment to partnership with local experts, academic colleagues, government and diplomatic officials, and librarians. We will study peer-to-peer cooperation between library and archaeological professionals, between Research 1 universities and libraries and their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa, and possible crowdsourcing of cataloguing and description of collections.

A Technology Advisory Committee will be created, and documentation best practices will be considered for bibliographical and material culture, along with next generation documentation efforts based on photogrammetry, 3D scanning, and immersive virtual reality. And we will consider the critical issue of financial sustainability and administrative organization. A digital library must consider its business plan and how it will carry its mission responsibly into the future.

Finally, we believe that paramount to our success is partnership. We seek to know about collections that would like to be part of the library, especially in the Middle East; about people willing to lend expertise in order to build capacity and improve online collections; and about overseas colleagues who would provide leadership from the discipline area. Please reach out to us if you’d like to help.

A successful Digital Library of the Middle East will present the stories of a diverse group of people whose culture is often misunderstood. We need to look no further than the Cradle of Civilization to understand how important these stories are. The origins of agriculture, towns, and writing provide testimony to our interconnectedness and to the value that our shared heritage has to people the world over. We believe that presenting the sweep of the history and culture of the Middle East stands to reaffirm our shared humanity. And that understanding is at the heart of any library or museum.

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