

# The Antiquities Coalition Joins CLIR on Planning for Digital Library of the Middle East

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From our partners at The Antiquities Coalition:

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has awarded the Council on Library and Information Resources \$149,500 to support exploratory research, community building, and technical prototyping for the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME).

Along with the horrific loss of life and human suffering in the region, the cultural heritage of many nations in the Middle East and North Africa is presently under severe threat from a combination of destruction, looting, illegal black market trafficking, and terrorism. Digital technology, specifically those technologies associated with the architecture, management, and sustainability of large-scale digital libraries, can help remediate this crisis.

The DLME would create a digitally based, internationally shared inventory of cultural artifacts that includes detailed descriptions and images, and confirms objects' ownership and legal status. This information would help determine whether an item of cultural or historical significance offered for sale or being transferred was acquired illegally. Images and brief descriptions from the DLME could be made publicly available to encourage greater understanding of the region's cultural legacy and respect for the importance of the cultural commonwealth, while helping to safeguard a fundamentally important expression of our humanity.

"The proposal has attracted the engagement and attention of a very fine array of scholars, IT specialists, diplomats, and administrators, which augurs well for its longer-term prospects," said CLIR President Charles Henry. "The opportunity to collaborate with and learn from our colleagues in the region is compelling. They will establish the priorities of activity and guide these efforts."

Henry will serve with Peter Herdrich, co-founder of The Antiquities Coalition, CLIR's principal organizational partner, as principal investigator. Media and digital arts producer Neil Sieling will serve as 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.

"Our focus is on finding practical solutions in the effort to fight the scourge of looting, the illicit trade, and terrorist financing," Herdrich said. "We all believe there's tremendous potential for the DLME to develop an implementable program that will significantly protect our shared cultural heritage. And that's what we'll be assessing."

Over the next eight months, the team will conduct a series of focused research projects; meetings, webinars, and other methods of education and outreach; identify and convene an advisory council; and travel to the Middle East and North Africa to explore potential partners and projects that may fall within the purview of the DLME. Information and insight gathered through these means will frame a final report that will either corroborate the efficacy and cost effectiveness of creating a DLME, or articulate why the concept is not currently feasible.

Throughout the project, the team will have opportunities to draw on the energy and expertise of CLIR's Digital Library Federation community. "We can bring the considerable technical expertise of the international digital library community to bear on this crisis," said DLF director Bethany Nowviskie, "but we must also apply our increasingly mature social and ethical consciousness to work in partnership."

If feasible, development of the DLME would likely proceed in stages that include converting free standing analog/paperbased existing inventories to searchable, digital databases; new digitization of objects in the Middle East

and the creation of linked metadata for them; and the aggregation of existing digital assets relevant to the regional legacy held in U.S. and European institutions.

More information about the project is available at: <https://www.clir.org/initiativespartnerships/DLME>.

The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) is an independent, nonprofit organization that forges strategies to enhance research, teaching, and learning environments in collaboration with libraries, cultural institutions, and communities of higher learning. Learn more at <http://www.clir.org>.

The Digital Library Federation, founded in 1995, is a robust and diverse community of practice, advancing research, learning, and the public good through digital library technologies. DLF connects its parent organization, CLIR, to an active practitioner network, consisting of 151 member institutions, including colleges, universities, public libraries, museums, labs, agencies, and consortia. DLF is the institutional home to the National Digital Stewardship Alliance, which works to establish, maintain, and advance the capacity to preserve our nation's digital resources for the benefit of present and future generations. Learn more at <https://www.diglib.org>.

The Antiquities Coalition is leading the global fight against cultural racketeering: the illicit trade in antiquities by organized criminals and terrorist organizations. This plunder for profit funds crime and conflict around the world—erasing our past and threatening our future. The Coalition's innovative and practical solutions tackle crimes against heritage head on, empowering communities and countries in crisis. Learn more at [www.theantiquitiescoalition.org](http://www.theantiquitiescoalition.org)