Envisioning a Digital Library of the Middle East

Peter Herdrich, The Antiquities Coalition
Elizabeth A. Waraksa, Association of Research Libraries

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Imagine an online resource that not only offers robust, professionally curated metadata and images for the collective cultural heritage of the Middle East, but also tracks ownership status for scholars and governmental entities alike, and allows for experiencing artifacts and cultural heritage sites in new media formats like holograms and immersive 3D. Thanks to a planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Antiquities Coalition and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) are simultaneously exploring the feasibility and technical prototyping of just such a resource – which we are calling the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME) – while building support and gathering input for this crucial endeavor among our many anticipated allies and partners around the world.

The goals of the DLME are ambitious, but we believe that together, it can be a reality. A digitally based, internationally shared inventory of cultural artifacts from library and museum collections that includes detailed descriptions and images, and confirms objects' ownership and legal status, would not only encourage greater understanding of the region's cultural legacy and respect for the importance of the cultural commonwealth, but also help safeguard a fundamentally important expression of our humanity. As readers of *Issues in Middle East Studies* are well aware, the advantages of digital technology are manifold: digital libraries can be searched using multiple terms in multiple languages; they never close; many people can use the digital library simultaneously; they are safe because of redundant locations of the data; they are easy to update; and, in the worst case scenario of an artifact's disappearance or destruction, the digital library serves as a digital surrogate of an artifact that would otherwise be irretrievably lost.

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 map libraries, museums, archives, and other collections of cultural material in the Middle East and around the world as possible partners in the DLME.
- We will form Advisory and Steering Committees, knowing that this is a worldwide undertaking and 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 R1 universities and libraries and their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa, and possible crowdsourcing of cataloguing and description of collections.
- We plan to create a Technology Advisory Committee. Current best practices for the documentation of material culture will be collated, along with next generation efforts based on photogrammetry, 3D scanning, immersive virtual reality, and holography.
- We 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.
- 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.
All of these efforts are in support of our goals for both library and museum collections by seeking ways to improve security, provide access, aid in combatting the illicit trade, and encourage modern inventory and documentation standards for at-risk collections.

We believe that paramount to our success is partnership. In the weeks since the start of the grant period, we have been heartened by the outpouring of support and encouragement from our international colleagues, which we believe bodes well for the future of the DLME. We have received key input from collaborators and organizations around the world, from the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) in Jordan to the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome. At the Antiquities Coalition's recent #CultureUnderThreat conference in Amman, we introduced the DLME to the seventeen ministerial level delegations from the Arab League that attended, (click here for a full account of Amman #CultureUnderThreat conference.)

Recent #CultureUnderThreat conference in Amman when DLME was introduced to seventeen ministerial level delegations from the Arab League courtesy photo

We believe that coordination with governments, international and national organizations, and cultural heritage collections offers us great perspective into how to achieve successful partnerships for the Digital Library of the Middle East. We also know that our academic and library colleagues will provide us with invaluable insight for our study. How can the DLME best serve the needs of scholars? What similar initiatives have been tried and what are the lessons we can learn from those? And what collections in the U.S., Europe, and around the world would be valuable to include as part of the comprehensive collection that the DLME aspires to be? In order to seek comprehensive answers to these questions, we have turned to the Middle East Studies Association and the Middle East Librarians Association for assistance. We will attend the annual meetings of both groups in Boston with the purpose of seeking your guidance on the DLME. Look for our announcement in the annual meeting program and please seek us out with your comments and insight.

Ultimately, we hope that the DLME provides direct benefit to the humanistic understanding of the Middle East. Dr. Charles Henry, the President of CLIR, is the Co-Principal Investigator on the Mellon Foundation study grant and an international leader in the world of digital libraries, and we believe he puts our goal very well: "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 world wide 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."

As we proceed through our initial phase of the project, dedicated in our commitment to partnership with local experts, academic colleagues, government and diplomatic officials, and librarians, we invite you to follow our progress at our website and on Twitter @DigiLibraryME, and to sign up for occasional updates by email. We look forward to seeing you in Boston in November!

Peter Herdrich is the Co-Principal Investigator of the Digital Library of the Middle East study, Co-Founder of the Antiquities Coalition, and former CEO of the Archaeological Institute of America.

Elizabeth Waraksa is Program Director for Research and Strategic Initiatives at the Association of Research Libraries. She was previously a CLIR Postdoctoral Fellow and Librarian for Middle Eastern Studies at UCLA, and a Lecturer in Egyptology at UCLA and Loyola Marymount University.

ANTIQUITIES COALITION

How Databases
#CombatLooting

Stages of Antiquities Trafficking	Database Solutions	Examples
THEFT	Inventories, registries, and other databases can help collections to immediately identify what's missing and put the authorities *and* market on the lookout.	In May 2015, while raiding an ISIS compound in Syria, U.S. Special Forces found a stash of Iraqi artifacts (with their registration numbers intact) that had been stolen from the Mosul Museum, and returned them to Iraq.
TRANSPORT	Registration numbers and other identifying marks on artifacts can alert customs officials that objects have been stolen.	In 1988, U.S. Customs officials seized and repatriated a shipment of 60 pre-Columbian artifacts, whose stamps indicated that they were registered by the Peruvian government.
LAUNDERING	Illicit antiquities enter the market and become legitimized through sale. Inventories ensure that illegal artifacts can be identified through registration numbers and databases.	In 2014, the U.S. stopped the auction of a 17th century Flemish tapestry, after it was revealed to be on INTERPOL's "Most Wanted Works of Art" list. Instead of entering the "legitimate" market, the piece was returning to its rightful owner in 2015.
PURCHASE	Even if an object has already been sold on the art market, a database can identify the object as having been stolen, and aid in its repatriation.	In September 2015, France repatriated a stolen wooden statuette from the Pharaonic VI Dynasty (2345 BCE-2181 BCE), after Egypt provided proof that the object has been inventoried.

SOURCES:
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