

DIGITAL LIBRARY OF THE MIDDLE EAST  
A USER'S PERSPECTIVE  
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The following is written from the perspective of an older scholar with few technical skills, but who appreciates and happily uses web based digital resources. It is no exaggeration to say that in the last ten years such resources have radically changed the way I work and teach. I will briefly describe the categories of digital resources that a Digital Library of the Middle East would contain and the potential users of such a library, and then introduce you to the Library's most important already existing components in my own field of study, ancient Iraq and neighboring regions.

A Digital Library of the Middle East will contain three categories of resources: 1) Images of primary materials, including manuscripts, artifacts and monuments; 2) traditional library materials such as books and journals; and 3) resources created digitally in the first place. Two kinds of scholars and students will use the Library: the fortunate ones, who work at research institutions with adequate libraries and travel budgets, and the less fortunate, whose colleges and universities do not have research collections in Middle Eastern Studies, and for whom travel funds are scarce or non-existent.

Primary materials are often published as photos or drawings that are incomplete, misleading, or not adequate for careful, detailed study. Scholars and students must travel to collections and museums to study such materials first-hand, putting burdens on the institution being visited (and especially on its personnel), endangering the materials through repeated handling, and creating a financial burden for the researcher who must travel thousands of miles to study the materials. Digitization and web-based dissemination is a triple win: Museums and collections need not devote valuable personnel hours to baby-sitting visiting scholars, fragile materials are spared repeated handling, and large travel budgets will no longer be essential for those who want to study the materials.

For unpublished primary materials, the advantages to digitization are the same, but bringing these materials into the public domain will require a change in the culture of institutions and scholarship. The days of individual scholars holding publication rights to certain materials, and preventing others from seeing them for decades and sometimes generations (as rights get passed down from teacher to student), are, or should be, over. While it is reasonable for a scholar to hold publication rights for five or even ten years, it is unreasonable not to share data with others working on the same type of material. Digitization will facilitate this sharing. For unpublished material that has never been studied, web access will enable institutions to make public their hidden treasures for the benefit of scholars, students and the broader public. Some major museums and collections in America, Europe and the Middle East

have adopted a policy of openness and permit digitization of their materials, but others, even some associated with American universities, are reluctant to lift restrictions on access to unpublished materials.

For those of us privileged to work in well-endowed research institutions, on-line access to scholarly books and periodicals saves us trips to the library. But for everyone else, on-line access to scholarly literature makes research possible. This is especially true for scholars and students in the Middle East itself, but in many other parts of the world, even in parts of Europe and America, the inaccessibility of scholarly books and journals is a major obstacle to serious study of the Middle East. Copyright issues get in the way of digitizing print materials, but it seems as if they are being resolved. A start could be made by digitizing all significant books and journals that are out of copyright.

The web currently has two kinds of Middle Eastern Studies resources: Electronic books and journals, either published only on the web or made available simultaneously with hard-copy editions, and digital tools and resources made possible only by the advent of electronic technologies. One foresees enlargement of both types; the replacement of hard-cover publication by electronic publication, despite significant esthetic drawbacks, would result in enormous savings of money and paper. Problems in the storage, archiving and distribution of large quantities of data, and especially images, remain daunting, but these are the kinds of problems that seem to get solved as technology continues to advance.

In my own work, I have benefited hugely by the access to primary materials--cuneiform tablets in this instance--provided through the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI; [cdli.ucla.edu](http://cdli.ucla.edu)). Of course, as Bob Englund will tell you, CDLI is more than just an ever-growing searchable archive of scanned tablets. At Johns Hopkins, our Digital Hammurabi project ([www.jhu.edu/digitalhammurabi](http://www.jhu.edu/digitalhammurabi)) has developed a process for creating three-dimensional scans of tablets and is currently seeking funding to produce portable scanners to deploy to museums and collections. New searchable editions of cuneiform lexical texts are being prepared by Berkeley's Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (DCCLT; [cuneiform.ucla.edu/dcclt](http://cuneiform.ucla.edu/dcclt)). In Birmingham, colleagues are compiling a digital cuneiform paleography that enable the comparison of sign shapes over the three-thousand year history of the use of cuneiform writing, using digital images of the signs taken from the clay tablets.

As a Sumerologist, I make intensive use of the Electronic Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary (EPSD; [psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd](http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd)), a project which is pioneering the reconceptualization of dictionary making in the digital age. Lexemes searched in the EPSD are linked to Oxford's Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL; [www-etcs.orient.ox.ac.uk](http://www-etcs.orient.ox.ac.uk)), a searchable corpus of all Sumerian literary texts in transliteration and translation. For many of these works of the world's earliest literature, this is their first and only place of

publication. Important early scholarly publications are increasingly available online from Electronic Tools and Ancient Near Eastern Archives (ETANA; [www.etana.org](http://www.etana.org)), and a comprehensive guide to all electronic resources for the study of the ancient Middle East is provided by the related Abzu website ([www.etana.org/abzu](http://www.etana.org/abzu)).

These electronic tools and resources are all a constant presence in my work life, and have transformed the way I do research and teach. There is much more to be done however: The projects just mentioned must be completed and expanded, and new tools and projects must be developed if scholars of ancient Iraq, like myself, are to be fully enfranchised researchers in the digital age. But that is one reason we are meeting in Alexandria.