

Seeking Collaboration: A Summit for Projects Collecting Cultural Heritage Data in Syria and Conflict Zones

Conference Report

Overview

On December 10-11, 2015, representatives from 19 international groups involved in protecting the cultural heritage of Syria and other zones of conflict met in Washington, DC to identify ways in which they could collaborate to maximize their efforts. This meeting, titled *Seeking Collaboration: A Summit for Projects Collecting Cultural Heritage Data in Syria and Conflict Zones* was co-organized by the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), (Dr. Andrew Vaughn, Executive Director), and the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), (Dr. Ann Benbow, Executive Director). The Summit was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), (Dr. Sarah Lepinski, Program Officer) which provided grant monies, meeting space, and logistical support; the Rust Family Foundation (Dr. Michele Miller, Program Officer) which provided travel grants; the National Geographic Society (NGS), (Dr. Christopher Thornton, Senior Director, NGS Cultural Heritage Initiatives) which provided meeting space and logistical support; and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC), (Dr. Christopher Tuttle, Executive Director) which sponsored the event's group dinner.

Rationale

Protection of cultural heritage in Syria and other zones of conflict is, and will continue to be, an urgent matter. Every day, sites and buildings in Syria and other conflict areas are being damaged or destroyed by conflict, looting, and terrorism. Dozens of non-profit organizations and non-governmental organizations have responded to this crisis, and some of them have received significant funding from European countries, Canada, UNESCO, and the United States. Just in the latter half of 2015, cultural heritage conferences held at the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Asia Society have called for all working on this problem to find ways to achieve both greater collaboration and a division of labor. The goal of this Summit was to move projects closer to achieving these aims.

Participating Organizations

Organizations sending representatives to the Summit included: AIA; the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); The Antiquities Coalition; ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives; Computational Research of the Ancient Near East (CRANE) at the University of Toronto; CyArk; Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East & North Africa (EAMENA) at Oxford University; The Getty Conservation Institute (GCI); International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS); Manar al-Athar; National Science Foundation (NSF); The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago; Penn Cultural Heritage Center; Shirin; the Smithsonian Institution; The Syrian Heritage Archive Project (a joint project of the German Archaeological Institute and the Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin); The Day After Project; The Past For Sale Initiative at The University of Chicago; UNESCO; UNOSAT; United Nations Security Council; U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield; the World Monuments Fund (WMF); and Yale University.

Summit Format

The first day of the Summit was a closed session hosted by NEH at their offices. Participants, who were welcomed by Dr. Peggy Plympton, NEH Deputy Chairwoman, met in both large group and breakout sessions to describe their projects, discuss principles of collaboration, and identify specific ways in which they could work together. Thomas Barritt of Ketchum Communications moderated the whole group sessions. Breakout groups were moderated by Dr. Susan Ackerman, Dr. Andrew Moore, Dr. Laetitia La Follette, Dr. Ann Benbow, and Mr. Colin Mably. The second day of the meeting was hosted by NGS at their facility in downtown Washington. Participants met to finalize discussions from the day before, agree on the principles of collaboration, and discuss next steps for the initiative. This session was followed by a panel of representatives from grant-making organizations, each of whom described the type of support available for cultural heritage protection initiatives. Panelists included Dr. Sarah Lepinski (NEH); Dr. John Yellen (NSF); Dr. John Francis (NGS); Dr. Ben Jeffs (WMF); and Dr. Paul Rissman (private philanthropist).

This closed morning session was followed by a public event in the Grosvenor Auditorium at NGS. Dr. Christopher Thornton, Senior Director, Cultural Heritage Initiative, NGS, served as master of ceremonies. The event, which attracted approximately 150 attendees, began at 12:30 PM with a welcome by Dr. Susan Ackerman, President of ASOR. This was followed by a second welcome from Mr. Gary Knell, Chief Executive Officer of NGS, who introduced Mr. Phillipp Ackermann, Minister and Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany. Mr. Ackermann announced a new memorandum of understanding (MoU) between ASOR and the cultural heritage projects led by the German Archaeological Institute and the Museum for Islamic Art, Berlin. The announcement was followed by remarks from Mr. Mark Taplin, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and finally from Dr. William Adams, Chairman of NEH.

After Chairman Adams spoke, Dr. Thornton hosted a lightning round for representatives of the 19 groups. Each group had three minutes to describe its project and point out possible areas of collaboration. The lightning round was followed by reflections and observations from three Syrian archaeologists attending the Summit: Dr. Samir Abdulac, ICOMOS; Dr. Salam Al Kuntar, Penn Cultural Heritage Center; and Dr. Amr Al-Azm, Shawnee State University and The Day After Project. Dr. Andrew Moore, President of the AIA, thanked the participants and all who attended the open session. Dr. Adams then offered his thoughts on the conference, and the open session adjourned. The session was video-recorded and will be available on the web sites of ASOR and the AIA.

Summit Outcomes

A. Principles of Collaboration for Syrian Cultural Heritage Projects

Representatives of the organizations attending the conference unanimously agreed to abide by this set of principles:

1. We have undertaken our respective projects because we care deeply for the people of Syria. We work with Syrians to protect and preserve their cultural heritage, which is the shared heritage of all humankind. For the purposes of this set of principles, we are concerned with tangible and intangible cultural heritage defined in broad terms—including, but not limited to, museums, sites, urban heritage, landscapes, artifacts, music, art, language, religious practices, collections, libraries, archives, ethnographic materials, and historic structures and monuments.
2. We are committed to active dialogue that will lead to a series of collaborative initiatives, as appropriate within the mission of each organization, so that all of our projects can better achieve their common goals in order to maximize our collective effort.
3. We agree to share explanations of our projects (e.g., goals, objectives, descriptions of metadata or datasets, experts, advice, timelines, action priorities, and other information as appropriate), with the aim of fostering better coordination of efforts and better division of labor, as appropriate to the goals and mission of each project and organization.
4. We agree to be vigilant and proactive in our work by exploring practical activities that will facilitate sharing and maximizing impact. To facilitate sharing and discussion, we agree to explore a variety of practical approaches. These may include (but are not limited to) the following: memoranda of understanding (MoUs); secure websites to share ideas and updates; shared digital platforms and the use of common data standards; a secure list-serve covering topics of importance to our experts; calendars of events and symposia on related topics, and fundraising for collaborative projects.
5. To facilitate the above, we will meet for regular communication updates. Such meetings may be by periodic conference calls, virtual meetings online, or (as funding allows) in-person meetings. Because this is truly a crisis, we will agree upon target dates for furthering the objectives articulated above and for sharing our progress publicly, as appropriate to the mission and goals of each project and organization.

Both the AIA and ASOR will work with the groups to facilitate their collaborative efforts.

B. Breakout Group Discussion Summary

1. As a practical step toward collaboration, groups suggested the establishment of a secure web site with:
 - Contact information for participants
 - Project grid (includes project descriptions; type – geospatial, capacity-building, etc.; goals; base of operations). The grid will help to identify areas where projects overlap.
 - Database of all projects working in this area (not just those represented at the Summit)
 - Database of rules and regulations controlling data sharing
 - Forum for exchange of ideas
 - Calendar of opportunities to meet and promote projects

The conference co-organizers will seek support for this secure, web-based interface, which will launch early in 2016.

2. Participants also agreed to look actively for such collaborative opportunities as:
 - Sharing data, as safe and appropriate
 - Viewing and vetting others' data
 - Using the same data management platform and the same standards for data collection
 - Sharing best practices
 - Sharing experts
 - Providing training in data standards
 - Helping the people of Syria and other conflict zones who work on the ground
 - Developing models that protect cultural heritage in any conflict zones.
3. Groups recognized the need to prioritize. These were some key questions that arose:
 - How can project data help law enforcement to stop trafficking in illicit antiquities?
 - How can our projects help the people in Syria and other conflict zones who are working on the ground?
 - What areas are most at risk for attack and destruction? How can our projects help to protect these areas?

The web interface described in 1 above, and the Cooperation Mini-grants described in C below will help to facilitate such collaborative efforts.

4. Finally, groups agreed that it was important to let others in the world know about their work. Some ideas for this included:
 - Conference presentations and workshops
 - Articles
 - Promote on web sites and social media
 - *Dispatches* section in *Archaeology Magazine (AIA)*

C. Cooperation Grants

There is a pool of \$40,000 available for mini-grants to enable collaborating groups to meet and plan (\$25,000 from an anonymous donor and \$15,000 from NGS). The Summit organizers have developed a request for proposals for these grants, which will be released early in 2016. The organizers will also seek additional funds for Cooperation Grants.

Summit Attendees

Name	Organization
Abdulac, Samir	ICOMOS
Ackerman, Susan	ASOR
al-Azm, Amr	Shawnee State University; The Day After Project
Al Kuntar, Salam	Penn Cultural Heritage Center
Alrez, Wassim	Syrian Heritage Archive Project
Anderson, Kaitlynn	ASOR
Aroaz, Gustavo	ICOMOS
Assis, Phillip	U.S. Department of State
Avramides, Ioannis	World Monuments Fund
Barritt, Thomas	Ketchum Communications
Benbow, Ann	AIA
Bewley, Robert	EAMENA (Oxford)
Bloch, Franziska	Syrian Heritage Archive Project
Branting, Scott	ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives
Cohen, Andrew	U.S. Department of State
Daniels, Brian	Penn Cultural Heritage Center
Danti, Michael	ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives
Davis, Tess	Antiquities Coalition
Fiol, Manuel	UNOSAT
Gerstenblith, Patty	U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield
Greene, Joseph	Manar al-Athar
Greenland, Fiona	Oriental Institute, University of Chicago
Harrison, Timothy	CRANE (University of Toronto)
Jeffer, Ben	World Monuments Fund
Kühne, Hartmut	Shirin
Kurin, Richard	Smithsonian Institution
LaFollete, Laetitia	AIA
Lee, Elizabeth	CyArk
Lepinski, Sarah	NEH
Leventhal, Richard	Penn Cultural Heritage Center
Mably, Colin	AIA
Macdonald, Susan	Getty Conservation Institute
McCarthy, Blythe	U.S. Department of State
Menegazzi, Cristina	UNESCO
Miller, Brandt	National Geographic Society
Moore, Andrew	AIA
Myers, David	Getty Conservation Institute

Philip, Graham	Shirin
Rothfield, Lawrence	Past for Sale Initiative at Univ. of Chicago
Rowan, Yorke	Oriental Institute, University of Chicago
Schindler, Hans-Jakob	United Nations Security Council
Simon, Stefan	Yale University
Teutonico, Jeanne Marie	Getty Conservation Institute
Thornton, Christopher	National Geographic Society
Tuttle, Chris	CAORC
Valtchanova, Lily	UNESCO
Vaughn, Andrew	ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives
Wegener, Cori	Smithsonian Institution
Wilkie, Nancy	U.S. Committee of the Blue Shield
Wolfenbarger, Susan	AAAS

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