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**THE GETTY CONSERVATION INSTITUTE, THE WORLD MONUMENTS FUND, AND  
JORDANIAN AND IRAQI HERITAGE AUTHORITIES PARTNER TO CREATE  
MIDDLE EASTERN GEODATABASES FOR ANTIQUITIES**

**Bilingual, Web-Based Geographic Information Systems Will Aid in Protecting and Managing  
Important Archaeological Sites in the Middle East**



Looted temple facade at the ancient site of Umma in Iraq. Photo credit Joanne Farchakh-Baiaily

LOS ANGELES— The looting and destruction of archaeological sites in the wake of the Iraq war shows that protecting a country's cultural heritage during a time of conflict is no easy task, especially when that heritage involves historically important sites that can't be moved out of harm's way.

But even in times of peace, the preservation of a country's archaeological heritage depends upon a comprehensive understanding of historic site locations, dimensions, and their key characteristics. And while the boundaries of ancient

Mesopotamian cities such as the mud-brick of Babylon in Iraq or the distinctive rock cut architecture of Petra in

Jordan are more difficult to miss, they, along with smaller, less well-known sites are increasingly at risk from a range of threats including tourism and urban encroachment.

Now, partnerships between the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) in Los Angeles, the World Monuments Fund (WMF), and separately with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities (DoA) and the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) aim to aid in the complicated task of inventorying, monitoring, and managing archaeological sites and monuments in the Middle East to help protect them for future generations.

Dubbed the Middle Eastern Geodatabase for Antiquities, Jordan—or MEGA-J—a newly designed Arabic-English, web-based geographic information system in development first for Jordan will standardize and centralize information on archaeological sites throughout the country into a single system, maintaining information on exact locations and boundaries, site characteristics, and condition. Developed by the GCI in collaboration with consultant Farallon

Geographics, Inc., MEGA-J will play an important role in preserving Jordan's archaeological treasures, and will serve as the prototype model for a similar system to be undertaken after the war ends in Iraq.

"The archaeological record found in Jordan and Iraq is one of the most important in the world, and the Getty Conservation Institute is pleased to be able to partner with the World Monuments Fund and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities on a project that aids in saving this rich cultural heritage for future generations," said Tim Whalen, Director of the Getty Conservation Institute.

Adds Gaetano Palumbo, the World Monuments Fund's area representative for Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, "The World Monuments Fund is committed to this collaborative effort to increase the capacity to protect and manage the archaeological heritage of Jordan and Iraq. If ever there was a time to undertake this important effort, it is now."

As a planning and decision-making tool, MEGA will allow officials to address issues such as site protection and management, infrastructure and development control, and compliance with World Heritage site requirements, and will be used in the development of national and regional research strategies. Importantly, MEGA will enable the DoA to coordinate heritage site data with other national authorities, such as ministries dealing with infrastructure development, agriculture, and tourism, as well as provincial and municipal governments.

"Jordan pioneered a database for the management of archaeological sites in the early 1990s, originally called JADIS," said Dr. Fawwaz Al-Khraysheh, director general of the DoA. "That database needed to be replaced and the DoA, in looking for a partner, turned to the GCI and WMF for the development of MEGA-Jordan." Dr. Al-Khraysheh also noted that "Jordan will now continue its pioneering role in implementing and fully integrating the use of MEGA-J into the DoA's daily activities, and in training our colleagues from the region on such programs."

The system will be especially important in terms of infrastructure and development planning. When the exact location and boundaries of a cultural site are not known, it becomes difficult to manage the site. The MEGA-J system will allow the DoA to effectively address the potential impact of projects like construction of buildings, roadways, and pipelines on or near archaeological sites. This particular risk is especially relevant in Jordan today due to the recent influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, regional investment in the country, and the resulting boom in development.

This tool also will be important at the completion of the war in Iraq, as new development

often can mean unwitting encroachment. MEGA-I will be launched in Iraq in partnership with the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, or SBAH, at a future date.

"As we look toward the return of stability in Iraq, we want to make sure new development does not happen at the expense of important cultural heritage sites. The Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage looks forward to having a new tool that will help us with our long-term strategic efforts in this area," said Director Amira Edan.

The web-based system is being developed by Farrallon Geographics using open source software—one of the first such systems, in fact, to be entirely crafted using open source. Because the code is not exclusively owned, it will be easily accessible and updates can be made at no or little cost—unlike proprietary systems that in local terms can cost the equivalent of several annual salaries to upgrade. This also means the system can easily be modified and is flexible enough to meet future needs.

The development of MEGA-J evolved from related work in the GCI-WMF's ongoing Iraq Cultural Heritage Conservation Initiative, intended to help the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) in the stewardship of Iraq's archaeological and architectural sites. Jordanian officials aiding in the Iraq effort also possessed a similar need for an updated electronic inventory in their country. When war made the deployment of the system in Iraq temporarily impossible, the GCI and Jordanian DoA decided to move forward with a system for Jordan that will be later adapted for Iraq.

Data collection for MEGA-J began in February 2008 and will continue parallel with development of the new system. A prototype of the system will be installed in the DoA offices in Amman and Irbid, Jordan, in spring 2009. Once the system is fully deployed in Jordan, developers will provide ongoing technical support for an additional two years to ensure that DoA staff can maintain the system. Work on the Iraq version of MEGA will begin immediately after the Jordanian system is fully deployed in fall 2009.

In the meantime, select Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage personnel have been preparing by participating in specialized training programs held in Jordan by the GCI-WMF Iraq Initiative, with support from UNESCO, the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, and the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman.

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