

Humanity's earliest written works go online

April 21 2009, By ANGELA CHARLTON , Associated Press Writer



People attend the launch of the World Digital Library in Paris, Tuesday April 21, 2009. National libraries and UNESCO have put some of humanity's earliest written works, from Chinese oracle bones to Latin America's first novel, online in the World Digital Library. (AP Photo/Jacques Brinon)

(AP) -- National libraries and the U.N. education agency put some of humanity's earliest written works online Tuesday, from ancient Chinese oracle bones to the first European map of the New World.

U.S. Librarian of Congress James Billington said the idea behind the World [Digital Library](#) is not to compete with [Google](#) or [Wikipedia](#) but to pique young readers' interest - and get them reading books.

"You have to go back to books," Billington said in an interview in Paris, where the project was launched at UNESCO's headquarters. "These are primary documents of a culture."

A Web site in seven languages - English, Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian - leads readers through a trove of rare finds from more than a dozen countries.

Among them: a 1562 map of the New World; the only known copy of the first book published in the Philippines, in Spanish and Tagalog; an 11th-century Serbian manuscript; and the oracle bones - pieces of bone or tortoise shell heated and cracked and inscribed that are among the earliest known signs of Chinese writings.

It also has early photographs, films and audio tracks.

For now, searches on the site produce no more than a few hundred items in any category. But Billington says the project is ready to expand as other national libraries join in with the 32 libraries and research institutions already involved.

He insists the idea is quality, not quantity.

"It's not an online bibliography," he said. "These pieces are one of a kind, or available in just a very few places. ... You don't get that elsewhere."

The site provides page-by-page viewing of the original works, scanned in by the national libraries that took part in the project, often with multilingual narration by curators.

It unites items about one subject but held in different countries, in a kind of online retrospective. "It brings together cultural heritage that's scattered around the world," Billington said.

The site is aimed at researchers, teachers and schoolchildren worldwide.

While its offerings are fairly narrow, Billington sees it as a starting point, "an entryway to learning for those who are living in an audiovisual world."

The concept is modeled on the Library of Congress' American Memory project, which debuted in the 1990s and now has 11 million history-related items online.

The partners in the World Digital Library project, including national libraries of countries from Iraq to Uganda and Russia, argued over how to finance it - the funding comes from private and public sources - and how best to translate it. But they all agreed on the need for such a global repository, Billington said.

He hopes it gets readers interested in a topic or historical period and then nudges them toward real libraries to read more about it.

"Books have to be read so you can appreciate these treasures," he said.

On the net:

World Digital Library - <http://www.wdl.org>

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