

## Press release

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

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## Mainz egyptologist receives approval for long-term project to study ancient Egyptian cursive scripts

**Inventory of hieratic and cursive hieroglyphic characters will be systematically and digitally recorded for the first time to be jointly funded by the federal and state governments**

The Joint Science Conference (GWK) of the federal and state governments has ratified the 2015 Academies' Program, coordinated by the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities and worth an approximate total of EUR 62 million, and approved two new long-term projects of the Academy of Sciences and Literature Mainz, including the project "Ancient Egyptian Cursive Scripts: Digital Paleography and Systematic Analysis of Hieratic and Cursive Hieroglyphs" that will be supervised by Egyptology Professor Ursula Verhoeven-van Elsbergen of the Department of Ancient Studies of Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU). The purpose of the Academies' Program is to study, preserve, and present cultural heritage. It is one of the most extensive humanities research programs in Germany and is jointly funded by the federal and state governments.

Unlike the mostly carved hieroglyphs, cursive scripts were used for day-to-day writing purposes in ancient Egypt. They were written using rush stems and black or red ink on materials such as papyrus, linen, leather, wood, ceramics, plaster, and even stone. Hieratic script was used for every stage of the ancient Egyptian language during 3,000 years and was only displaced in some contexts by demotic cursive script in the middle of the first millennium BC. So-called cursive hieroglyphs represent modifications of the detailed hieroglyphs adapted to the needs of handwriting. The analysis of both types of scripts and their relationship to hieroglyphs and to demotic script is still an on-going task of Egyptology and manuscript studies. The over 100-year-old standard work by Georg Möller entitled *Hieratische Paläographie* (Hieratic Paleography) lists examples for all periods but was derived from a total of only 32 sources. It has only partially been supplemented by recent research. The purpose of the approved project will be for the first time to compile a systematic and digital inventory of hieratic and cursive hieroglyphic characters from selected and significant sources, whereby different eras, regions, textual genres, and writing mediums for the documentation period from around 2700 BC to 300 AD will be taken into account.

The source materials will be processed in various forms for access. The primary aim is to create a digital paleography database which preserves and presents online the repertory of characters. The database will provide various search options and will facilitate cooperation among international experts while at the same time extensive metadata on all relevant sources will be provided. Partial or special paleographies will also be successively made available as download files or book publications. In addition, the project will systematically study the cursive scripts focusing on their emergence and development, the contexts in which they were used, their regional use, and datability. Other aspects to be considered are the economy and material nature of writing, the layout of manuscripts, and the identification of individual scribes' hands. While the information technology modules mean the project is firmly anchored in the field of the Digital Humanities, other modules take the form of practical training in the writing and facsimiling of hieratic script and provide teaching methods being part of the Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in Egyptology.

The project will be spread over 23 years and will be funded to the tune of some EUR 265,000 annually. Under the supervision of Professor Ursula Verhoeven-van Elsbergen, working places will be set up in the Egyptology section at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and in the Computer Philology section at the Technical University of Darmstadt.

Further information:

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URL for press release: <http://www.akademienunion.de/index.php?id=147> – The Academies' Program, coordinated by the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities