Universität Basel

Research Project

Crossing Boundaries: Understanding Complex Scribal Practices in Ancient Egypt

Third-party funded project

Project title Crossing Boundaries: Understanding Complex Scribal Practices in Ancient Egypt
Principal Investigator(s) Loprieno, Antonio ;
Project Members Müller Krähenbühl, Matthias ; Gabler, Kathrin ; Unter, Stephan ; Stanic, Klaudija ;
Marty, Evelyne ;
Organisation / Research unit
Departement Altertumswissenschaften / Ägyptologie (Loprieno)
Department
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Many aspects of ancient Egyptian scribal culture are still poorly understood. Within the project, we adopt a transdisciplinary approach in order to *cross* the *boundaries* between archaeological and philological scholarship and better understand the so-called *'heterogeneous'* papyri which bear several texts and drawings belonging to various genres, e.g., maps, plans, accounts, poems, hymns and letters and have never been studied as a coherent whole. They are, however, of primary importance for the study of the wide *competence and the performance of ancient scribes* at work, both synchronically and diachronically.

The papyri stem from the *village of Deir el-Medina*, a literate community which housed the families of the workmen who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the surrounding necropolis during the New Kingdom (c.ă1350–1000 BCE). The project partners are the University of Basel (Switzerland), the Université de Liège (Belgium) and the Museo Egizio (Turin, Italy), where the most important collection of papyri from this site is kept. The project aims to identify the fragments of heterogeneous papyri from this collection, to piece the fragments together and provide a digital reconstruction of the original documents, to study the variety of texts attested on each papyrus, to assess the numbers of scribal hands and reconstruct the history of these documents, to enrich the results with data coming from other ancient Egyptian archives of heterogeneous papyri, and to broaden the perspective by comparing the data from Deir el-Medina with complex scribal practices from other periods and places.

We expect our project to exert a major impact on three main levels: from a *cultural heritage* point of view, it will lead to the reconstruction of number of ancient Egyptian papyri, now in fragmentary state; (2) from a *Digital Humanities* point of view, new learning algorithms and a dedicated interface will be developed to piece together hundreds of fragments of papyri; (3) from a *cultural history* point of view, we aim at significant new insights about Egyptian scribal culture, demonstrating that many textual categories (administrative, legal, historical, religious, or literary) could appear on a single document and mastered by individual scribes.

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