

High-tech imaging reveals hidden past in ancient texts

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(PhysOrg.com) -- It might simply look like a smudge, but even the slightest stain on the ancient writing surface of papyrus could obscure a revelation of a past civilization. Now, with the advent of high-tech imaging, some of those secrets could reveal fascinating insights into everyday life of early Egyptian, Greek and Roman societies.

For the last four weeks, a team of national researchers and scholars examined dozens of papyri among the thousands of papyrological pieces in the University of Michigan collection. Using multi-spectral imaging, the Ancient Textual Imaging Group—led by acclaimed papyrology expert Stephen Bay of Brigham Young University—examined ancient text written on papyrus that had become illegible because they are stained, discolored and faded. Recording through a range of filters, the technology captures high-resolution color images, making clear the layers of text hidden beneath words and letters written on levels of papyrus.

The Ancient Textual Imaging Group, based at Brigham Young, is conducting a two-year venture to record illegible papyrus documents from historically significant U.S.-based collections. The project is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Throughout July, scholars and students at the Papyrological Institute, hosted by U-M, will examine the newly recorded images, aiming to piece together a picture of a world that until now has been hidden. Findings from the newly enhanced images of the papyri will be released as early

as August.

"These new images give us insight into the writing and life of generations existing two, maybe three generations before the readable text was written," said Arthur Verhoogt, U-M associate professor of papyrology and Greek studies.

The Papyrological Institute, which alternates university locations annually, is sponsored by the American Society of Papyrologists. Since 2003, the institute has been held at Yale University, University of California-Berkeley, University of Cincinnati, Columbia University and Stanford University.

Along with lectures and working first-hand with ancient texts, the scholars and students at the institute further their proficiency in Coptic and papyrological conservation. A form of Coptic is a common, colloquial Egyptian. Coptic flourished as a literary language from the second to thirteenth centuries.

Papyrus was used before the invention of paper around 1000 A.D. Everything from literary texts, police reports and legal decrees to letters from soldiers and shopping lists were recorded on the sort of papier-mache material. Many papyri were reused with text on the back side, or users would wash away text and write atop deleted words and phrases.

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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