

Papyrus, parchment and paper trails

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In a pioneering project funded by the Mellon Foundation, scholars at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich are compiling a database of Arabic documents, many dating from the early years of Islam. The online resource affords unique insights into everyday life in Arab lands.

The Arabic Papyrology Database (APD) is a unique resource which makes a wealth of historical documents written in Arabic freely

available online. The collection includes letters, marriage contracts and rental agreements dating from the seventh century, accounts of tax revenues received and wages paid out, and texts inscribed on amulets. "The documents give us unparalleled insights into [daily life](#), particularly in Egypt, from the time of the Arab conquest up until the 16th century," says Professor Andreas Kaplony, who holds the Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies at LMU, and is supervising the compilation of the database.

The work of Kaplony and his colleagues is being made possible by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which has just approved a grant of over 450,000 dollars for the coming two years. The database is expected to be complete by the end of 2015, and will bring together all 2500 documents previously published in the literature. In addition, the researchers at LMU are constructing a second database which consists of metadata on texts that have not previously been published elsewhere. When complete, this will provide information on a further 15,000 documents.

Largely untapped sources

The APD is a unique database that catalogs historical documents from Arab lands which are directly concerned with the minutiae of [everyday life](#). "These informal sources provide insights into aspects of daily life that literary sources pass over. For instance, they give us glimpses of the lives of women, children and peasants. The database reveals a rich variety of sources, which are not widely known," says Kaplony.

The database is freely accessible on the internet, and offers a range of research tools for scholars in many fields, not just papyrologists but also historians and linguists. In addition to a transcript of each original text, the database incorporates metadata pertaining to each document, including its date, the material it is written on and translations with unusually detailed commentaries. "We document the various steps in the

editorial process, and include variant readings, which is a feature not found in other databases," says Kaplony. In addition, each lexical term in the Arabic texts is directly linked to an online glossary.

The team at LMU and universities of Zürich and Vienna has been working on the APD since 2006, and the [database](#) currently comprises 1575 texts. "The APD provides valuable information about Arabic language usage, both in its colloquial and literary forms. It also facilitates the study of particular classes of documents such as legal or administrative texts, but also personal correspondence. This material tells us how a sales contract was set out, or how letters were formulated. How did one address one's 'favorite (female) slave'? How did one inform a son, politely but firmly, that he should return home immediately? That sort of question can only be answered if one has access to a large corpus of texts," as Kaplony explains.

The texts were written on papyrus, parchment or paper. The originals are held in archives and manuscript collections dispersed all over the globe. Some 130,000 historical documents relating to everyday life in Arab societies are currently known, the majority of which are not yet available in scholarly editions. The Mellon Foundation has a long-standing association with the Arabic Papyrology Database, and provided funding for the project over the three years up to 2013.

At LMU's Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies, work on the APD goes hand-in-hand with two internet-based teaching projects – the Arabic Papyrology School and the Arabic Papyrology Webclass. Both of these ventures make use of digital communications technology to bring junior researchers and established investigators in all parts of the world, including scholars based in Arab countries, together in a virtual classroom.

More information: www.ori.uzh.ch/apd

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

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