Building a rich digital corpus of Egyptian inscriptions of the 3D millennium BCE

A database of texts in private funerary chapels of the Old Kingdom

In the project “Monumental Discourse in 3D millennium BCE Egypt,” we have been developing a database “Old Kingdom texts in non-royal contexts.” In a classic format, this makes accessible information about the texts such as: type of text, position (in space and on the monument), epigraphic aspects, contents, tomb owner (identity, titles, dating,) and bibliographical references.

Extant digital corpuses of Egyptian texts are limited to the transcriptions of words, in some cases related to a digital thesaurus, and rarely with grammatical markup. Various questions arise in devising a digital corpus meant to represent Egyptian inscriptions as complex multi-layered text artifacts.

Dimensions to be represented in a rich digital corpus

Inscriptions are complex objects well beyond what their words say. A rich digital corpus ought to include not only an image of the inscription, its transcription, its translation, and the relevant meta-data (derived from the above textual database), but also represent:

- non-trivial dimensions of grammatical analysis;
- intertextual relations with other texts of the same genre (to begin with these) and beyond;
- composition and poetic structure (metricalization);
- layout on the material support (including the metricalization of the text as a lapidary inscription).

The first two dimensions can be realized through extensive markup; the second also implies building an ad hoc thesaurus of formulaic expressions and recurrent clusters of language. The third and fourth dimensions must be represented visually, with added commentary. A “workspace” would (classically) include an image of the inscription, its transcription, and its translation (all scrollable, zoomable, and resizable). Mouse-overs and clicks would permit a multi-dimensional consultation of the objects, as well as navigation to other, similar or intertextually allied, objects. Toggles should permit to switch to the images with analyses of composition and layout.

Rights for the images

Rights for the images can be with the museums of the Egyptian authorities (in situ inscriptions) and/or with the authors of the publications. The situations are diverse and often complex for the layman (the academic researcher), as discussed in the above. Consultation of the legal problem shows, however, that it is best for specialized legal counsel.