

Towards a Database of e-books in Egyptology?*

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Abstract

This paper presents the first results of a discussion on setting up a *database of ancient Egypt digitized books*, very useful for the whole Egyptological community. Different possibilities existing today are analyzed, and a list of criteria for choosing one of the presented organizations is detailed.

1 Introduction

It is very common for Egyptologists and amateur Egyptologists to consult many references during their daily work. As you don't have in your office or at home all the necessary books, your sole resource is to pay a visit to your nearby library, which is a time-consuming way. And sometimes, your library hasn't got the right book! That's particularly the case with old books – from, let's say, 1700 to 1930 – so what to do then? Lend the book through your library from another library...even more time-consuming, and sometimes without result because that library just doesn't want to lend a precious book.

2 The EEF background

Happily we have a wonderful tool called Internet, and another wonderful tool called a scanner. Egyptologists have a specialized dedicated forum, of which the acronym is "EEF", for "Egyptologists' Electronic Forum" – no, nothing to do with the old Egypt Exploration Fund! Objective of this forum, as indicated on its website², is: "a membership-wide e-mail list for conferencing on the culture and civilization of ancient Egypt". Every week, and this since 1998, each member of the forum (there are now more than 2300 members) receives free of charge an EEF Newsletter, besides daily messages sent by the members of the forum. One of the sections of this newsletter is a dedicated "Book Corner" comprising a "New (Paper) book release" section and also a "Digitized books and online dissertations" section. It is important to note that the 2300 EEF members are working in a specific business model, very common for internet: all information is communicated to the Forum, without any COMMERCIAL interest and the forum itself is open to all Egyptologists and amateurs on a totally free basis. EEF is the result of a community of interests, each bringing its own part of the knowledge. This will have a serious consequence on the discussion to follow.

As an example of recently digitized books, the last EEF Newsletter, numbered 621, and dated July 1st, 2010, mentions FOUR new entries:

* I would like to thank Aayko Eyma, EEF Moderator (ayma@tip.nl), and Michael Tilgner, Egyptologist (michael.tilgner@kabelmail.de) to have accepted to share numerous discussions on this topic, and to have reviewed this paper.

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² <http://www.egyptologyforum.org/>

- W. Pleyte – Chapitres supplémentaires du Livre des Morts – 3 Volumes – Leide (1881)
- Gaston Maspero – Les enseignements d’Amenemhaît Ier à son fils Sanouasrît Ier – Le Caire (1914)
- Henri Sottas, Etienne Drioton – Introduction à l’étude des hiéroglyphes – Paris (1922)
- Hans Abel – Zur Tonverschmelzung im Altägyptischen – Leipzig 1910.

Aren’t these books very interesting? And some not very well known? Now, thanks to Internet and the digitalization of these books, you can read them at home or anywhere in the world! ... Really very easy and practical!

It is clear that since a few years, the number of digitized books has greatly expanded. Again, a recent example: nearly the whole collection of books published by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago has lately been made available online. This amounts to about 150 volumes... Last year, some members of EEF thought it was perhaps time to collect all these references, published in and perhaps outside the Forum, into a single database (DB), available at least to EEF members, if not to the whole Egyptologists Community – and perhaps more widely to all!

One of the EEF very active members, Michael Tilgner of Germany, is already keeping a list, as complete as possible, of e-journals and digitized paper periodicals, which can be found at:

<http://www.egyptologyforum.org/EEFDigjournals.html>

as well as a list of egyptological book series online:

<http://www.egyptologyforum.org/EEFSeries.html>.

The proposal to assemble in one place all the references on digitized books that have been communicated to the EE Forum is therefore not very innovative, but very practical and pure common sense.

The forum moderator is M. Aayko Eyma, located in the Netherlands: ayma@tip.nl. Together with Aayko and Michael Tilgner, during the second half of 2009, we have brainstormed about the different possibilities that could exist to set up such a database.

I would like, in the name of us three, to share our latest thoughts: we proposed, when we learned of the existence of this conference, to open the discussion to all participants and to collect new proposals that could be made available about this focused topic. So let’s make this presentation a true exchange of ideas, for the benefit of all.

3 Present size of the database

It is difficult to assess the exact number of digitized Egyptology books existing today. Let’s make a guess. One very important source of digitized books is the “Internet Archive”:

<http://www.archive.org/>

It contains today 2.400.000 books in its “Texts” section, of which about 5.000 are coming out when you search with the keyword “egypt*” only. Of course not all are

Ancient Egypt, but Michael thinks that the total number of AE digitized books could be between 5000 and 10.000 references.

4 Present similar initiatives

There are already some initiatives that go into more or less the same direction. Let's mention the most important ones:

4.1 OEB – Online Egyptological Bibliography

<http://oeb.griffith.ox.ac.uk/>

As everybody knows, and when you look at their website – and we have present at this conference M. Willem Hovestreydt of OEB which will give you tomorrow a status report on this initiative - the ancient AEB – Annual Egyptological Bibliography - has moved at the beginning of January 2009 from Leiden to Oxford within the Griffith Institute. It contains articles, publications and BOOKS (being paper or online) in Egyptology starting at year 1822 onwards.

The search is available by yearly subscription, starting at 50 £ + VAT or about 75 €. So, the business model of OEB differs considerably from that of EEF. Not many private people, and certainly not students or our Egyptian colleagues are able to support such a yearly cost. It is also important to note that you get a LIST of references; you must begin the search for the book and there is no link to online material.

4.2 ETANA/ABZU – Electronic Tools and Ancient Near eastern Archives

<http://www.etana.org/abzu/>

Depending of the University of Chicago, and a cooperative project with a dozen other institutions and universities, as its title mentions it, it is centered more broadly on Ancient Near East, and contains 2090 electronic book references. When searched on “Egypt” you find nearly 500 references. Free access.

4.3 University of Heidelberg

<http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Englisch/helios/fachinfo/fachref/aegypt/welcome.htm>

This resource is well known for its growing list of digitized books, called “Digital Literature in Egyptology – worldwide”; it has a list of about 400 Egyptian entries. Digitized books are to be selected in the library catalogue search tool. Free access.

4.4 Agyptos

<http://www.agyptos.uni-muenchen.de/indexe.htm>

This is a database for egyptological literature, based at the University of Munich, maintained in co-operation with the University of Heidelberg (see point 3.3). The database mentions if the full text of the book is available in full online. One responsible person is Martina Ullmann.

Free access.

4.5 The Open Library

<http://openlibrary.org/>

“Open library is a project of the non-profit Internet Archive... This is an Open Project – the software is open, the data is open, the documentation is open, and the site is open.”

There are some records which are on AE. Free access.

4.6 Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog (KVK)

<http://base.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/en/index.php?>

A section on “Electronic Full Texts” has been recently added (called BASE). It is looking at 1700 worldwide document sources for digitized references.

4.7 – A European initiative: “EUROPEANA”

<http://www.europeana.eu/portal/aboutus.html>

Description of the project: think culture. “It links you to 10 million digital items:

- Images – paintings, drawings, maps, etc
- Texts – books, newspapers...
- Sounds, Videos...

On April 21, 2010, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso has announced that the European Commission will entrust three persons – Maurice Levy (CEO of Publicis – France), Elisabeth Niggemann (head of the German National Library) and Jacques De Decker (writer, Académie royale de Langue et Littérature françaises de Belgique, Brussels) – with the task to *come up with recommendations on how best to speed up the digitization, online accessibility and preservation of cultural works across Europe*. For the time being, there are 10 million digitized objects of all sorts available through libraries, museums and archives through Europe. Presently, it has no structure that is able to host a filled DB (we have questioned the The Hague central office).

Reference: Information Society Newsroom Update Weekly – 26/04/2010.

<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/10/166&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

4.8 Wikipedia

Wikipedia, the open encyclopedia, could be one solution with advantages and drawbacks:

- advantage: it is not ONE person who has the full charge of maintaining the database, but a whole set of persons that will freely collaborate...this removes any FINANCIAL problem linked to the project...
- drawback: the quality of the list would probably not be optimal; some question – with reason – the quality of the texts of Wikipedia – this question can certainly be raised. Another drawback is probably the fact that we will not be able to enter a “full” DB into Wikipedia.

As an exercise, we have build up a single “frame” in Wikipedia, consisting of an alphabetical list; you can have a look at:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouvrages_num%C3%A9ris%C3%A9s_sur_1%27%C3%89gypte_antique_class%C3%A9s_par_auteur

4.9 Google Books Library Project

<http://books.google.com/googlebooks/library.html>

Google Books is a service from [Google](#) that searches the full text of books that Google has scanned, converted to text using [optical character recognition](#), and stored in its digital database.

Books in the public domain are available in "full view" and free for download. A few references are in the AE domain. Free access.

4.10 Other sources

There are of course hundreds of other organizations that are digitizing books: e.g. universities, institutions or museums that are presenting fully digitized AE books.

5 Criteria that should be followed for the DB

During our brainstorming, a list of criteria that the chosen organization should follow has been defined:

- Egyptology needs a centralized catalog of all digitized Egyptological books (and more generally publications) *and only ONE*.
- The DB should be *perennial*: EEF having now 12 years of existence, the wish is to have a DB still “living” in 10 years from now. This means the solution found should rely possibly on a permanent staff. This makes universities less prone to be a preferred candidate, due to more frequent changes in jobs.
- The DB must be maintained by a *professional* institution, as “amateurism” in this sector is not recommended. This is – for universities – a positive point if the staff is “library oriented”...
- This catalogue should be accessible *at least* to all members of EEF, and – to be discussed – probably more largely to all (Egyptologists included), *without any cost!* (Philosophy of EEF!)
- The catalogue should technically be a DATABASE searchable through the main basic (mandatory) fields such as Last NAME, TITLE of the book, YEAR of publication. Other fields could be first name of the author, location of the publisher, number of pages...but these fields would not be mandatory. The query being done, it

should list all available entries with the mandatory fields accompanied by an URL, directly linking to the relevant website (hyperlink).

- The DB remains a co-operation of EEF and the host organization, with some sort of labor division between the parties (e.g., delivering material vs. processing such submissions) and with proper acknowledgements.

6 Contacts already established and today's situation

Preliminary conversations with one university, late last year, revealed that a serious problem for universities is a "lack of manpower" to handle the data, plus (and no doubt not only with this institute) there was no real progress in going into a database structure, instead of a simple (automatic) list.

In May 2010, following some announcements about the digitalization of all out-of-print publications of the Mariemont Museum in Belgium, this organization was contacted. The Museum showed, at the General Director level, an interest to host the DB. The museum has a permanent "Digitization Service", which is in charge of scanning some of the most precious books of what is called the "Réserve précieuse" containing several thousands of rare books (including incunabula and books from the 16th and 17th century). The library catalogue of the museum is searchable online as a DB and contains more than 100.000 paper book references:

http://www.musee-mariemont.be/home_en/library/online_catalogue/

A discussion with the scientific Director in charge has shown that this museum is able to guarantee a long time maintenance of the DB and has the necessary experience in Egyptology for a quality treatment. There is also no financial counterpart requested.

No contact has been taken yet with OEB, except a discussion with M. Hovestreydt, present in this room. We will contact M. John Baines who is the responsible person for OEB.

We have given you the details of our recent private exchanges, and hope, via these thoughts, to open a public discussion at this conference. So we welcome your reactions about the different possibilities already mentioned, and are open to new ideas and venues.

Note: At the time of finalizing this paper (November 2010), the Director of OEB has shown a strong interest in collaborating with us. However, due to organizational reasons, the terms of collaboration can only be fixed in spring next year. In the meantime, a first list of digitized books with their URLs will be set up for further treatment.