

Letter of Support

From:

Dr Federico Rocchi
Via Gran Sasso d'Italia 48
42100 Reggio Emilia (RE)
Italy
federico.rocchi@mail.ing.unibo.it
rocfed@tin.it
Tel. +39-0522-556087

To:

Lisa Moore
Chair, Unicode Technical Committee
The Unicode Consortium
P.O. Box 391476
Mountain View, CA 94039-1476
U.S.A.

Subject: Letter of Support for the inclusion of s.c. Gardiner's Set into UNICODE System

Reggio Emilia, August 13th, 2002

Dear Sirs,

long time has passed since the old pioneering age of Egyptology when only three typographical printing sets were available all over the world for preparing hieroglyphic texts for publication. These sets, the one exclusively owned by the IFAO Press, the one exclusively owned by the Istituto Biblico Pontificio and the one created by Sir Alan Gardiner with his own funds and later on given to the Oxford University Press, were subsequently flanked by only another one, that for J. J. Augustin's, Printers in Gluckstadt. This sparseness of Gutenberg-like matrices for hieroglyphs is certainly due to the high costs that the creation and the maintenance of such a typographical set have. A consequence to this situation is that only fundamental texts published by the above-mentioned institutions were printed with standardized fonts. The vast majority of egyptological books, even most important ones such as dictionaries and textual corpora, had to be created by lithography or other similar procedures with the autographed hieroglyphic handwritings of the respective authors. This obviously limited the printing costs but also the readability of the hieroglyphic texts. Not all the handwritings are equal and not all are good ones. This is a phenomenon that in its magnitude stimulated the scientific research devoted to the analytic comparison of the different handwritings of famous egyptologists of the past.

Too many text collections and corpora have been written in handwriting (to quote only the most famous and important ones: Urkunden des aegyptischen Altertums, a series of more than 10 volumes, the Ramesside Inscriptions, a series of more than 10 volumes, the Coffin Texts, 4 volumes, the Pyramid Texts, 2 volumes, not to speak of the 7 volumes of the fundamental Woerterbuch der aegyptische Sprache, etc.) and it is a horrible fact that these reference texts have not been prepared with standardized fonts. In fact a distinction between text epigraphical studies and text diffusion must be made. While in the first case a very good handwriting is not only necessary but also sought, in the second case a clear, standardized and universal font is the unique way to distribute a text.

Nowadays the long time that has elapsed since Gardiner's years has given us the possibility of using computers to prepare texts and, I think, it is wholly absurd that a good, standardized and useful hieroglyphic font is not yet available to end-users in UNICODE.

I've been informed in these weeks that the UNICODE Consortium is analyzing the possibility of including in the UNICODE system also a hieroglyphic font. This would be a major advancement whose benefits will be improving for years not only the field of egyptology but also many other areas of scientific research. In fact a good hieroglyphic font which will lower the book publication costs will be of enormous importance also for all those disciplines which have to do with the influence that hieroglyphs had, both from the points of view of style, art, semiotics and linguistics, on many cultures and cultural phenomena. It is as easy as thinking to them, to quote the interest in the Hermetic Tradition in Italian Renaissance, the Baroque use of glyphs in decoration as well as the same in the Liberty Style of early 20th century, not to quote all those sciences which study the evolution of alphabets from Phoenician to Proto-Sinaitic, from Minoan A & B to ancient Greek etc. All these fields may need a good set of hieroglyphic characters in their publications. Indeed not only ancient Egypt specialists will benefit from the inclusion into UNICODE of a hieroglyphic set. But also an entire multitude of different kind of scholars who need to use hieroglyphic fonts in their work.

A further improvement is still in order. The widespreading of Internet all over the world justifies completely the existence of an unified font with which to exchange Egyptian hieroglyphic texts. Many current projects for the preparation of online dictionaries of ancient Egyptian and of online text corpora will be crowned with complete success if only a standardized font would be quickly available.

Having stressed upon the many untouchable reasons that support and justify the inclusion into UNICODE of a hieroglyphic set, I think a few words should be spent about which set to include.

Since many years egyptologists have tried to subdivide the very many characters of the Egyptian writing into two main classes: a kind of basic set and a kind of extended set. While the inclusion of the more complete extended set would require a lot of time (more than 8000 characters), the inclusion of the basic set (about 800 characters) should be extremely easy. In fact we have at our disposal what is considered to be the most organic, the most studied and the most improved basic set of hieroglyphs, i.e. the s.c. Gardiner's set. As far as Middle Egyptian texts (the most important literary works are among them) are concerned Gardiner's set is fully complete and operational; also many other texts from other periods (maybe excluding Ptolemaic ones) can be covered without many problems by the Gardiner's set. Including this set into UNICODE will also be a tribute both to the science and to the scientist. Without this set and all the hundred year work behind it egyptology nowadays would be a poor thing; while not completely adequate for every Egyptian texts, this set is surely the best starting point for the future extension of the UNICODE library to the complete spectrum of hieroglyphic characters when egyptology will reach an agreement about all the remaining symbols. As Silvio Curto wrote, in his work about the history of egyptology [1], Gardiner's Egyptian Grammar was and is useful "perchè corredata... di una lista di geroglifici che non è eccessivo definire perfetta" [2].

In conclusion and summing up I express my sincere support to the project of inclusion of a hieroglyphic font into UNICODE because:

- it will lower the production costs of books with hieroglyphic texts
- it will enhance the quality and readability of these texts
- it will help not only egyptologists
- it will be useful for online publications
- it will be useful for the production of e-books

I also suggest to start with the inclusion of the s.c. Gardiner's set because:

- it is ready
- it is the most studied
- it is the most adopted
- it is the most known
- it is complete as far as Middle Egyptian texts are concerned

- it is the base for the study of Egyptian language in universities
- it is, by global judgement, the best we can have in a definitive form

With all my best regards I remain,

Yours faithfully,

Federico Rocchi

Notes :

[1] S. Donadoni, S. Curto, A. M. Donadoni Roveri, L'Egitto dal Mito all'Egittologia, Milano 1990, 192.

[2] "because it is completed with... a list of hieroglyphs that is not excessive to define as perfect".