

UCLA to Announce Vast Online Encyclopedia of Egyptology

By [JENNIFER HOWARD](#)

The University of California at Los Angeles will unveil plans on Friday for what appears to be the world's first online, peer-reviewed encyclopedia devoted to ancient Egypt. The UCLA Encyclopedia of Egypt, which won a \$325,000 grant this month from the National Endowment for the Humanities, will include material in Arabic as well as English.

The encyclopedia will be the only "clearly bilingual" comprehensive reference work in the field, according to Willeke Wendrich, the project's editor in chief, "and it's high time." Ms. Wendrich is an associate professor of Egyptian archaeology in UCLA's department of Near Eastern languages and cultures. Jacco Dieleman, an assistant professor of Egyptology in the department, and John Baines, a professor of Egyptology at the University of Oxford, will serve as co-editors. The NEH grant will cover fees for authors as well as researchers, programmers, copy editors, and other support staffers.

Users can preview the site at <http://www.uee.ucla.edu>. During the project's first phase, which will take about two years, the editorial team plans to commission and publish some 650 entries. The first commissions will go out this summer, and some contributions may be up on the site as early as this fall, depending on how long they take to navigate the writing and peer-review process.

The project seeks to satisfy what scholars in the field describe as a pressing need for reliable, current, Internet-accessible scholarship. The standard reference work in Egyptology, *Der Lexikon der Aegyptologie*, has several drawbacks. Completed almost 20 years ago and written entirely in German, it has no online edition. Egyptologists still consult it frequently, but it "is really in need of updating," according to Christopher Eyre, president of the International Association of Egyptologists and senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool's School of Archaeology, Classics, and Egyptology.

Mr. Eyre notes in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle* that with "the speed that Egyptological research has moved forward in my lifetime, things that I used as an undergraduate are now not satisfactory for teaching the current cohort."

Moreover, he says, the Internet is awash in dubious information about mummies and temples, pharaohs and gods. As Mr. Eyre puts it, "There is a lot of highly personal amateur stuff that causes quite a lot of problems" when one is "dealing with students and public perceptions." Ms. Wendrich got the idea for the project about four years ago, when she realized how often her

undergraduates were mining the Internet for research materials. "I was faced with a group of students who couldn't discern what quality of information they were dealing with," she says.

Rather than adopt an A-to-Z approach, Mr. Dieleman says, the editors identified 10 major categories, including geography, history, and religion. Those areas that are well documented elsewhere will first be treated by the encyclopedia in a handful of overarching essays. In other categories, like language and writing, religion, society, art, and material culture, "we will ask scholars to write very detailed articles."

In time, the encyclopedia will contain as many as 4,000 entries alongside a wealth of visual materials: terms in hieroglyphs, maps, photographs. Anyone with a Web browser will be able to use the English-language "open version," which will include abstracts in Arabic. A fuller version will provide, for a fee, complete Arabic translations along with such frills as three-dimensional "virtual reality" models of temples and other historical sites.

"We have to be self-sustaining," Ms. Wendrich says, explaining the split-level system. "We have to create some kind of income." She points out that anyone with an Egyptian e-mail address will be able to browse the enhanced version gratis. "It's very important that Egypt has access to its culture and heritage," she says.

Existing technology, in the form of UCLA's [eScholarship publishing program](#), has given the encyclopedia a head start. "It's a beautiful system," Ms. Wendrich says. "We can just jump in and use it." She is particularly delighted with a built-in mechanism that notifies editors when contributors and peer reviewers upload material.

The eScholarship platform will also make it possible for the editors to update regularly and to preserve each successive version of an entry, a feature that ought to enhance the project's research appeal. "You can quote an article in 2007, and that article will still be available in 2050," Ms. Wendrich points out. "What we create, as a beautiful side effect, is a history of the discipline ... the changing thoughts that people have on the subject, the changing angles."

She and Mr. Dieleman will present details of the project at the annual meeting of the American Research Center in Egypt, on Friday in Jersey City.