

This project began in 2007 in Cairo, where I was staying to finalize the design of a new Coptic font for the publishing department of the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO), based on the old lead Coptic font of the French National Printing Office (Imprimerie Nationale) and the IFAO.

During these few months of work on forms of classical Coptic uncials, I also had the opportunity to study numerous cursive documents, usually on papyrus, and I became interested in this livelier, more personal and generally unknown form, far from the heavy uncials which are specific to this kind of writing. Talking to Coptic researchers, I learned that no cursive Coptic font existed. Not only were some of them interested in the possibility of having one created in order to publish their texts, but I learned that this absence was mostly due to many researchers and publishers thinking that such an enterprise was not possible, and considered cursiveness and typography as well as spontaneity and stabilisation of shapes as incompatible.

This experimental aspect appealed to me and the remarkable cursive documents that I had the chance to study there convinced me to launch a project when I returned to France. I thought about Laurent straight away to help me on the project. He had written his dissertation on Coptic typography towards receiving his diploma in arts and crafts in 2006. We had been thinking about working together when the opportunity came and this project was the perfect meeting point, the opportunity to combine both our experiences. Laurent had just won a scholarship to continue working on his diploma project, in which he had already thought about creating a cursive font. Our collaboration began quickly, almost naturally, on a project and a script which was dear to our hearts.

When we talk about Coptic today, we don't immediately think about the script, and if the word evokes anything it would be the Coptic religion. Coptic is a dead language, the language of the Christians from Egypt, where it was used approximately between the first century BC and the ninth century AD. Its definitive version appeared in the third century. It is still used today during religious ceremonies of the Coptic church; it is roughly the equivalent of our Latin, but its use has moved from religion to research, in which the study of Coptic has become more and more important in the last few centuries.

Coptic writing is the conjunction between two scripts and two cultures: Egyptian and Greek. It borrows 24 characters from Greek writing and the other 7 come from Demotic, which was the script used in Egypt previously. These 7 characters transcribe sounds only used in the Egyptian language.

Demotic comes from Hieratic, which itself derives from the hieroglyphic system: the glyphs derived from Demotic and present in the Coptic script are the last trace of these three successive scripts. But beyond the change of glyphs, the true revolution came in structural changes. Thanks to the Greeks, Egypt discovered the alphabetical system, whose ingenuity and simplicity in comparison to pre-existing systems thrilled scribes at the time.

There are two reasons why the Coptic language is so closely linked with religion. The first being the historical one because it was conceived to spread Christian writings to Egypt. The second reason, almost editorial and literary, is the consequence of the first one: the published Coptic writings we have essentially deal with religious matters. What is at stake in our project is to show that whereas Coptic is a sacred script at the service of religion, it was also the people's script, a script for everyday life which was taken over by the Egyptians, even more so than hieroglyphics which were reserved for a social elite. The idea of this project is also to show another side of this script and its culture.

It seems that our project has occurred at a significant scientific and editorial moment, when a great number of cursive Coptic texts discovered during the past decades in Egypt are going to be printed in the years to come. Many documents relating to everyday life have been found, and some of them are now being translated.

Alpha	Beta / Vita	Gamma	Delta	Epsilon	Zeta / Ita	Eta / Ita	Theta / Thita	Iota	Kappa	Lambda / Laoula	Mu / Mi / Mèj	Nu / Ni	Xi / Èksi	Omicron	Pi / Bej
Ⲁ	Ⲃ	Ⲅ	Ⲇ	Ⲉ	Ⲋ	Ⲍ	Ⲏ	Ⲑ	Ⲓ	Ⲕ	Ⲗ	Ⲙ	Ⲛ	Ⲝ	Ⲟ
P	C	T	Y	Φ	X	Ψ	Ω		ϰ	λ	†	Ⲟ	Ⲟ	ϣ	ϛ
Rho / Ro	Sigma / Sima	Tau / Daù	Upsilon / Ypsilon	Phi / Fij	Khi / Chi	Psi / Èbsi	Omega		Sai / Schai	Hore / Hori	Ti	Djandja / Djendja	Kyima / Tschima	Fai	Khai

A lot of people are surprised that excavations are still carried out in Egypt after so many years, and not only do we carry out excavations but we also find things. What makes Egypt a great place for scientific research is its climate. The arid climate preserves fragile papyrus documents in an amazing condition, while in Europe papyri were destroyed quickly by water infiltration and humidity. The Egyptian ground preserved these documents in sand like a museum, and we have found documents almost fifteen centuries old on sites of cities built on the border of the desert which were well-preserved and readable and have become the precious witnesses of that time. The will of the Egyptians since hieroglyphics to always transmit and leave a trace, has found a happy continuity in the exceptional climate of this country. It has allowed some of these documents to travel down through the ages, from religious writings engraved in stone to private correspondence on papyrus.

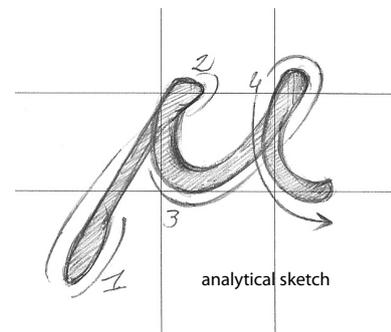
Coptic fonts are quite numerous for a dead language, proof of the success of this research field, even if on the whole they are not aesthetically and technically satisfying because few publishers and researchers call for type designers. They are all more or less based on the uncial form of religious writings. The Coptic font I created for the IFAO printing office, a worldwide resource important in terms of scientific publishing, and the Coptic font drawn by Laurent for his diploma, are no exception to the rule. What researchers have come to realize is that it may be paradoxical to only refer to an uncial image of Coptic writing, intimately linked with religion and reproducing religious documents, when using this form to reproduce documents related to everyday life. We wanted to offer an alternate typographic choice to the uncial, so as to leave the researchers and the publishers free to choose the form which would suit them better according to the documents published and to establish a closer relationship between the social context of the text and its typographical image.

Laurent, within the scope of his diploma thesis, and I, within the framework of my work for the IFAO, had opted for two very distinct typographical solutions based on the uncial. My aim in making a revival of the character for the French National Printing Office and IFAO was to reach the most representative stage of uncial writing characteristic of Coptic. We also wanted to build out the existing lead font with numerous characters while always keeping in mind my idea of attaining the best of classical uncial writing. Laurent's reasoning for his diploma, even if he based his work on the analysis of the classical historical shapes, offers a more current aesthetic approach to Coptic typography.

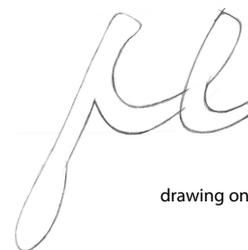
After working on a classical historical option and a resolutely more contemporary approach, we thought of this project as a third approach in working on ancient scripts, an option in which cursive writing and the human being are at the core of the typographic work.



Mu extracted from a papyrus



analytical sketch



drawing on tracing paper



vectorization of the glyph

The first step of the project was the close examination of the script. Without mastering the purely linguistic aspect, we were both familiar with the Coptic script since we had already worked on it and studied it. The cursive form is nevertheless very different from the classical Coptic script, which is more stable, and the preparatory phase of analysis was particularly long and important. We were lucky to have numerous documents at our disposal, and to be able to observe various cursive models. I had the opportunity to visit the Coptic Museum in Cairo, where numerous papyri and ostraca (pieces of pottery on which Egyptians sometimes wrote) were exhibited, and the Coptic researchers we were in touch with were able to provide us with advice and valuable documentation throughout the project.

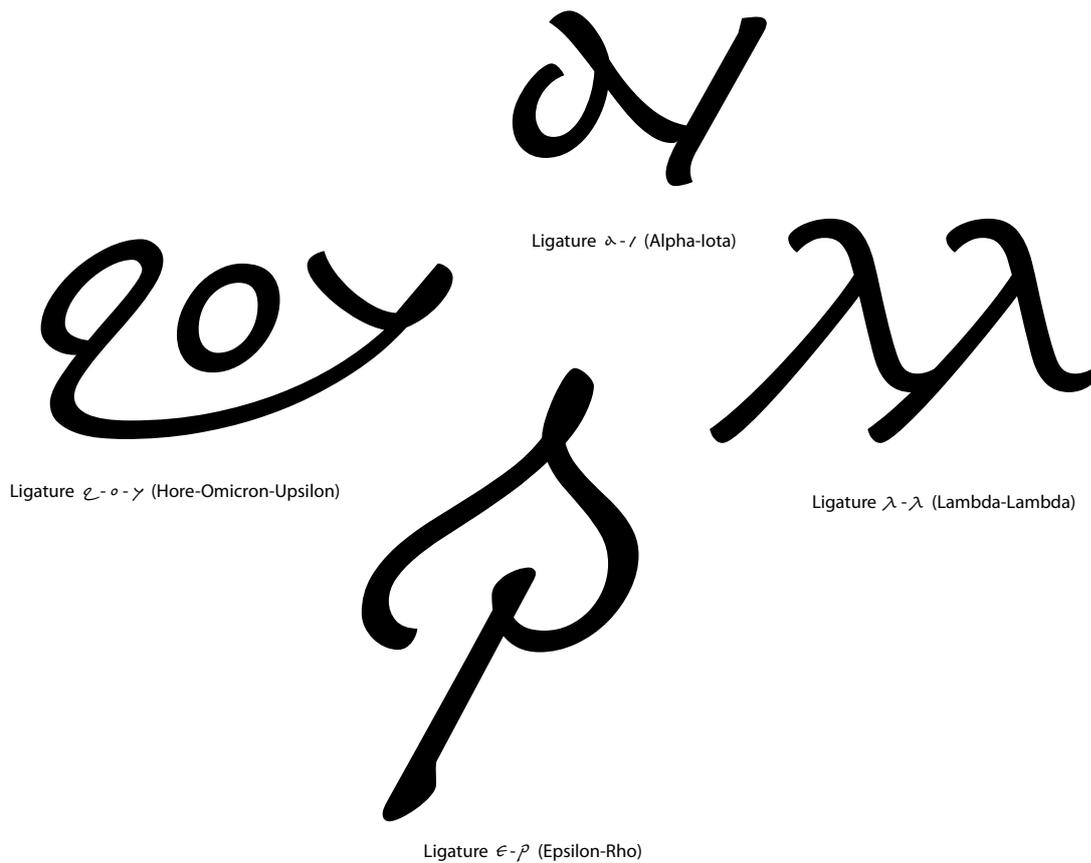
We concluded the observation phase, during which we had become familiar with the ductus* of characters, with a short phase of calligraphy in cursive Coptic script, trying to find tools and media close to those used in most of the documents, kalamos and papyri. On the whole the handwritten line played an important role throughout the project, from the calligraphy to the correction of the first vectorized signs.

After the analytical phase, we set to developing a process for working, not only because we had never worked on a foreign cursive but also because we had never collaborated on a type design project. The process we agreed upon can be roughly summed up as follows: a first phase of analytical sketches for a few days; a second phase of selection of glyphs which we found the most interesting (legibility, aesthetic, representativeness) in the working documents; a third phase of tracing and drawing those enlarged characters for about two weeks and a final phase, lasting several weeks, of vectorizing, touching up and harmonizing the characters.

*Ductus ([Latin] *noun*): the number of strokes that make up a written letter, and the direction, sequence and speed in which they are written.

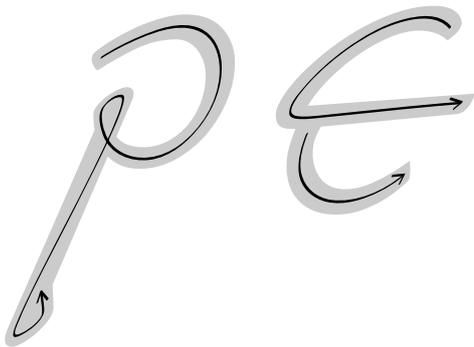


Ligature μ - α (Mu-Alpha)

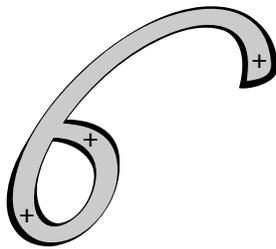


We have distinguished two great problems, or let us say typographical issues in this project, which we are going to examine closely. The first and most obvious one was to find a balance between cursiveness and stabilization, between faithfulness and distance to the model. From the beginning, we were at work on a Coptic papyrus from the seventh century which is exceptional as a model in many ways (but we cannot reproduce it here due to complicated copyright issues). First of all, it is amazing for its design, its good state of conservation and the quantity of characters it contains, and we were thus able to observe signs drawn by one and the same hand. It is also interesting because it has solved the issue “too cursive” or “too stable” because it offers a very legible model of cursive writing, in which letters are formed to offer a possible model for typography. That century was the time when Coptic was sufficiently assimilated and when the people had appropriated the script, and there was neither the tendency to copy the Greek model nor the “mannerism” of the last centuries. While the project is also the result of studies of numerous models to be able to find more representative shapes and to understand structures, we have tried to capture the spirit of this key document and the rhythm in the writing of its creator. To avoid the trap of an excessive stabilization as well as of a “rough” cursiveness, we have tried to remain true to that document, and to come back to it as often as we could so that our work could ensue from it and to manage to find in the result something of those cursive letters written fourteen centuries ago.

We could not allow ourselves to fall into a logic of facsimile which would not anyway do justice to the rhythm of the document, if it were applied to a typographical drawing in which a character has an unvarying shape. In a papyrus, the letters, the lines and the words balance one another to give a final impression of regularity, but with a vibration specific to cursive writing. That is what we have tried to produce in this project: creating shapes, which are specific enough to give a typographical document an impression close to that of a manuscript, while being general enough to accommodate the setting of Coptic from any historical period.



Ductus



Pressure



Outline and middle line.

What was also at stake in this project was to show the cursiveness without using ligatures all the time. In Latin writing, cursiveness and ligatures are almost synonymous, and the more cursive you are, the more tied up you are. The Coptic writing system has a very different logic, and cursive writing has in common with the uncial form the fact that each letter is independent and should “live” on its own. Occasionally, there are ligatures in small groups of letters but we could not rely on a system of ligatures to suggest cursiveness, and the choice of making slanting typography could also not capture what we were looking for.

We thus decided to consider the letters as having a downstroke and an upstroke, but that this upstroke and this downstroke were not made by the tool itself – the kalamos of cursive script was probably sharpened into a point and not bevelled – but that the contrast only came from the pressure applied to the tool. The vibration created is more subtle, and only based on our analysis of the gesture in the ductus of the glyph. It also gave this project a different dimension which was almost that of an investigation, of an analysis exercise on a cursive Coptic script, of a “hand.” We had to re-examine the knowledge we had of the different ducti in comparison with Latin lines because in the Coptic cursive the design of characters is sometimes very unique, and one of the objectives of this project was also to discover an appropriate manner to deal with ductus.

Finally, none of us wanted to use the principle of a classical base line for our characters or use a suspended line, so we decided to structure our writing around a middle line which allowed us to energize the writing and to apply a logic closer to cursive scripts on papyrus, with an emphasis on the outline of the words to preserve the vibration of calligraphic writing. Working on the positioning of the characters in keeping with a middle line was not easy to do. Whatever the glyph, the eye has to perceive that the line and the positioning ensue from the previous glyph and announce the following one. One has to understand that the positioning results from the logic of the handwritten line. Moreover the positioning should not be detrimental to the shape which would be harmful to the flowing movement and the rhythm of the whole thing. As with a Latin font, the outline of the words also participates in the distinction between glyphs and in better legibility.

Recto

+ ΝΤΕΡΕΤΩΜΝΤΕΛΑΧ, ΣΙ
 ΝΕΣΡΩΪ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ ΝΤΕΚΜΝΤ
 ΜΑΪΝΟΥΤΕ ΔΪΜΟΥΕ ΝΡΩΥΕ ΕΜΑ
 ΤΕ΄ ΜΝΟΥΤΕ ΣΟΥΝ ΣΕ ΔΪΡΧΟΛΗ
 5 ΤΟΝΟΥ ΣΕ ΜΠΙΔΜΑΝΤΑ ΕΡΟΚ
 ΝΣΑΥ ΔΥΩ ΝΑΜΕ ΔΑΡΗ ΡΩ
 ΤΗ ΤΟΝΟΥ ΜΠΑΤΡΕΪ ΜΑ ΝΕ
 ΜΙΦΑΝΙΟΣ ΕΒΟΛ ΣΕ ΕΝ
 ΤΑΪΤΩΡΪ ΡΩΤΗΥ ΜΠΙ
 10 ΒΝ ΘΕ ΝΤΡΕΙ ΕΤΣΗΣ
 ΔΡΙ ΜΝΟΒ ΝΝΑ ΝΓ
 ΚΩΒ ΝΚΕΧΑΡΤ[ΗΣ]
 ΕΤΡΩΕΤΗΚ ΝΩ
 ΡΙΤΟΥΕ Ν
 15 ΡΩΣΤΕ

+ Lorsque mon humilité a reçu la sainte lettre de ta piété, j'ai été emplí d'une grande joie. Dieu sait que j'ai été très chagriné de ne pas t'avoir rencontré hier. C'est qu'en vérité le soleil était tout à fait couché avant que j'arrive chez Épiphane. Comme je me suis senti enthousiaste auprès de lui, je n'ai pas trouvé le moyen d'aller à Tsès. Fais-moi la grande faveur de plier pour moi les autres papyrus qui sont chez toi pour demain matin tôt

Verso

ΧΕ ΔΤΕΧΡ[ΙΔ ΥΩ]ΝΕ ΕΒΟΛ
 ΧΕ ΕΝΤΩΝ ... ΟΥΑΡΗΒ Μ
 ΜΟΥ ΕΣΜ ΝΣΤΙΧΕΡΩ
 ΔΥΩ ΡΩΜΑ ΜΗΜΕΛΑ
 20 ΨΝΑΔΜΟΛΟΓΙΖΕ ΝΑΧ
 ΝΡΟΜΝΤ ΡΩΡΟΥ ΕΡΩΔ[Ν]
 ΝΣΟΪΣ ΨΘΕ ΝΑΪ ΨΝΑΕΪ
 ΕΝΕΜΤ ΡΙΤΟΥΕ ΝΤΑ
 ΣΙΝΕΥΣΑΥΕ ΡΩΤΗΚ
 25 ΝΚΕΦΑΛΑΝΟΝ ΥΛΗΛ
 ΕΣΩΪ ΝΑΜΕΡΙΤ Ν
 ΣΟΝ ΜΜΑΪΝΟΥΤΕ
 ΝΣΑΥ ΜΩΪΣΗΣ
 ΜΑΡΚΟΣ ΝΕΚΣΟΝ
 30 ΝΕΛΑΧ,

car j'en ai besoin : c'est que j'ai reçu un acompte aujourd'hui pour le Sticheron. Quant à l'encre noire, je te la rembourserai en espèces. Si le Seigneur m'en donne le moyen, j'irai au nord le matin et je les mettrai en ordre chez toi. Surtout, prie pour moi, mon cher frère pieux ! (À) maître Moïse, Marc, ton humble frère.

On a strictly technical level, the font is compatible with both PCs and Macs and is as much as possible based on `UNICODE`. Since `UNICODE` grids only contain a few of the characters necessary for scientific publishing, it only represents a small portion of the characters. The font is also compatible with the Coptic font from the IFAO Publishing Office. A virtual keyboard to allow keying in Coptic texts via our `AZERTY` keyboard has already been created for Macs with a logical positioning of letters according to the keys and shortcuts like `^+e= ê` (in French) to allow easier typing of all the accented characters. We are going to work on a PC version as soon as possible.

This project was a personal initiative without any financial backing; the distribution and the sale are done in both our names. We hope this tool, quite experimental in the field of scientific publishing, will help in the publishing of numerous cursive documents and will be convincing to publishers and researchers, and also make them aware of the typographical problems of reproducing ancient documents, while maybe opening new aesthetic perspectives, which have been hardly explored for Coptic and other ancient scripts.

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Thanks for their advice to: [Émilie Decombes](#), [Geneviève Favrelle](#) & [Jean-Louis Fort](#).

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Translation: [Sophie Wallois](#), [Mark Jamra](#) & [Jonathan Perez](#).

Copte Scripte © Laurent Bourcellier & Jonathan Perez. 2008.

The Copte Scripte font received in 2009 the *Type Directors Club Certificate of Excellence in Type Design* of New York.

