About the project

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The *Old Writing* project has been realised by the National Archives in Krakow since 2013, when the website **www.dawnepismo.ank.gov.pl.local** [1] was created. In 2016, more features have been added (language versions and a newsletter) and a new graphic design of the website has been presented. The construction and development of the website has been conducted with the financial support of the Supervisory Director of State Archives.

1. WHY WAS THE PAGE CREATED?

The idea for the project was born a few years ago. The impulse for our efforts in this direction was provided by the desire to increase the popularity of palaeography, a science that helps us learn about history, which is today generally present exclusively in the lecture halls of higher education institutions. We are also observing the daily needs of modern archival users. More and more people without any experience of work with archival materials are visiting us, faced with the challenge of finding information from manuscripts from various eras. That's why we decided to create a place in which it is possible to obtain or develop skills connected with deciphering old writing. At the same time, we decided to present the ideas of palaeography and neography in a wider context, moving outside the borders of science. Our reality is changing so quickly that the skills of deciphering hand-writing (not only from centuries ago) may soon become a rarity. That's why we are targeting our project towards the widest possible group of recipients, not just for people who deal with professional research into writing.

2. WHY US?

Why do we believe that archival workers have something more interesting to present in the areas of palaeography and neography than scientists who deal with these fields? The answer is simple – as archival workers, we have to deal on a daily basis with huge amounts of archival materials and it is the easiest for us to select and prepare various materials that illustrate the topics covered. We don't want, however, our website to be another textbook, and we prefer to stimulate interest rather than teach it, so we refer those who are particularly interested in the topics to the scientific literature.

3. WHAT CAN YOU FIND ON THE WEBSITE?

Above all, Practical exercises, and Word games and fun. They all have the same function – in slightly different forms, you can practise deciphering old writing. You can choose the level of difficulty suitable for you, the historical period that interests you and the document language. A slightly different type of fun

from the others is the Virtual scriptorium – here you can write you own sentence which will be shown as text written by the hand of a historical scribe. To prepare the letters, we have used three original documents from various eras. Thanks to this, your text will look as though it was written with a quill in the past. The letters from original documents are complemented by specially-prepared letters which we have called Forger's help.

4. MATERIALS ON THE WEBSITE

All the archival materials on the website are stored in the National Archives in Krakow.
The photographic presentation of documents (all arranged photographs) was conducted by Anna Seweryn.

5. WHAT MATERIALS CAN YOU FIND HERE?

The website includes materials for Latin palaeography and Polish and Gothic neography. In this way, our project does not cover the issues of Russian palaeography or neography (although we do show literature concerning these topics). The decision to exclude them was made mainly due to technical reasons – the keyboards of our computers are not adapted for use with the Cyrillic alphabet. In addition, for obvious reasons, there are significantly fewer such materials in our Archives.

6. HOW DO WE PREPARE MATERIALS?

Generally, we choose them in such a way so that they are of different types, come from various eras and represent various types of writing. The next condition is the state of the originals and their format. Both these factors affect the ability to obtain a good quality scan, which is necessary for the suitable presentation of materials.
We have placed only fragments of documents in the exercises, which is necessary for the website to be easy to use. Meeting this assumption was very important for us while creating the website. If we had placed scans of whole documents, it would have definitely hindered usage of the deciphering tool. The documents presented by us are often tens of centimetres wide in their original form!
The scans of the texts designated for deciphering have been subjected to basic graphical changes, in other words, framing, removal of dirt and stains, or improvement of sharpness. In the Word games and fun section, the presented graphics were sometimes altered a little more.

7. WHAT CREATED CHALLENGES FOR US?

The greatest challenge for us was to set the rules of transcription. We basically followed the existing publishing instructions, however, the use of some of the rules in full turned out to be impossible. The instructions were prepared to create a printable version of historical texts. In such situations, the most important aspect is the content of the document. We, however, are interested in the way in which it was written. That's why our rules include one that we do not correct the obvious mistakes of the writer. In addition, our website presents documents in various languages and from different ages – from medieval to almost contemporary. In the course of such a long period, writing habits changed, new rules were established, there were new appearances, while other aspects disappeared. It would, therefore, be very difficult to set the rules which reflect these changes, without creating a wide user handbook. That's why, as much as possible, we have simplified the rules of transcription and we recall the most important ones in each exercise.

8. WHY ARE WE PLAYING WITH SUCH A SERIOUS TOPIC?

History is not only about processes and events that have changed the destiny of the world. It's also about the daily lives of people just like us, who smile to us even after a few centuries. That's why we have prepared Word games and fun, in which, among others, we have revived former scribes (yes – their representatives also come from the resources of our Archives), and we have created jigsaw puzzles and crosswords. Confirmation of the fact that this relation to reality is not our own idea is the picture of the XVII-century town scribe from Lwow, which comes from a book written by him:

ANK, Varia – collection of archival remnants, ref. no. 29/32/17/28 (picture graphically altered)

9. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

We would like to develop the website and add new exercises and games. We are counting on being able to persuade you to take a look on a regular basis, because there are not many placers on the Internet (especially the Polish Internet), where you can learn how to decipher old writing. The resources of our Archives can boldly be compared with a treasure chest without any bottom, so we hope that will we surprise you on many occasions!

We wish you lots of joy with old writing and a little discipline while exercising your eyes! We also encourage you to contact us in any matter concerning our mutual interests.

Anna Sokół and Aldona Warzecha, project authors

Source URL: https://dawnepismo.ank.gov.pl/en/about-project

LINKS

[1] HTTP://THE OLD WRITING PROJECT HAS BEEN REALISED BY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES IN KRAKOW SINCE 2013, WHEN THE WEBSITE WWW.DAWNEPISMO.ANK.GOV.PL. WAS CREATED. IN 2016, MORE FEATURES HAVE BEEN ADDED (LANGUAGE VERSIONS AND A NEWSLETTER) AND A NEW GRAPHIC DESIGN OF THE WEBSITE HAS BEEN PRESENTED. THE CONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEBSITE HAS BEEN CONDUCTED WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE SUPERVISORY DIRECTOR OF STATE ARCHIVES.