Two of the most profound technological advances in human intellectual history were the twin inventions of ink and papyrus by the Egyptians about 5,000 years ago. The advent of writing allowed information to be expanded beyond the mental capacity of any single individual and to be shared across time and space. The two inventions spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean to Greece, Rome and beyond, and they remain a central medium for communication in the modern world.

X-ray synchrotron sources provide exciting new perspectives of fundamental importance within the Human Sciences. The CoNeXT project Ancient Ink as Technology focusses on ancient manuscripts. It addresses both a decisive chapter in the history of science and also one of the central challenges facing the historian: the fact that the majority of ancient manuscripts lack a recorded archaeological context. Information about the socio-historical context is naturally curial, whether dealing with ancient literature, diplomatic correspondences, administrative documents, or family archives. X-ray analysis delivers chemical and structural signatures, which reflect the physical properties of manuscripts. It is our expectation that these “fingerprints” will enable a mapping of characteristic traits of ink and papyrus along both a chronological and geographical axis. The focal point of the analysis is the extensive Papyrus Carlsberg Collection which includes manuscripts from a variety of geographical and social contexts spanning some four millennia. If our expectations are fulfilled and it proves possible to map various physical properties onto the archaeological maps, the same procedure can be applied to various other forms of manuscripts across different periods and cultures and the scientific impact will be far-reaching.