

Universität Heidelberg and University of Manchester Cultural Exchange 2024

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For the month of June, myself and fellow students from the University of Manchester engaged in a cultural exchange program with the HCCH, during which we attended a range of seminars and workshops and visited many culturally significant sites. It has been an indescribably enriching experience, and I feel that I have greatly benefited not only from the opportunity to make international connections, but interdisciplinary connections too.

Whilst the course for which I am studying is an MA in Library and Archive Studies, it has been wonderful to hear perspectives from specialists in museum curation, object conservation, digitisation and archaeology, too, and to consider the ways in which these interact with libraries and archives, forming a greater ecosystem of cultural heritage with shared aims. The experience has provided an excellent opportunity to think about what we as librarians and archivists of the future might learn from these other fields, developing areas such as accessibility and outreach and challenging the limits of what an excellent library or archive can be. Certainly, the interdisciplinary attitude exemplified by the community of the HCCH is one which I hope to embody within my own practice going forward.

In the following report, I will describe some of my personal highlights from the exchange, and discuss some of the ways in which these experiences have prompted me to think about my field in new ways.

Excursion to Lake Konstanz

On our first weekend in Germany we were lucky enough to take an excursion to Lake Konstanz with a small group of staff and students.

Our first stop was the Pfahlbauten Museum, which consists of recreations of prehistoric pile dwellings and is the oldest open-air museum in Germany. My personal research interests concern the seventeenth century, so this was a much earlier period than I am used to, which made it very exciting! I particularly liked the way in which the museum encompassed its own history as a heritage site into the narrative which it presented in the space; its critical reflections of its origins in the 1920s felt interesting and necessary. This palimpsestic curatorial approach is useful in its ability to invite the visitor to consider the power dynamics at play within the exhibition and others like it now, encouraging curatorial accountability in a thoughtful and interesting way. This technique is one which I feel would benefit many historic library collections too.

On the second day, we visited several medieval churches on Reichenau Island. This was particularly rewarding because we were accompanied by Dr Roland Prien and Steffen Bauer, both of whom have worked on digitisation projects concerning these sites, and





consequently were able to offer some fascinating perspectives. This experience really illustrated the power of digitisation as a way of adding depth to our understanding of heritage sites, and I felt that, through these techniques, I gained a greater grasp of the rich story of this area as it evolved through time.

Later in the day, we were able to see some of Dr Prien & Bauer's digitisation projects in action in an exhibition at the Baden-Württemberg State Archaeological Museum. It was a very special experience to enjoy these aspects of the exhibition with people who worked on them, and it illuminated for me the network of experts with different skillsets who are involved in the production of a great exhibition.

As a student of library studies, the exhibition was of course also very exciting because there were lots of gorgeous medieval books, and it offered a great overview of the scribal culture of the area at this time. I especially enjoyed the use of audio in the portion of the exhibition which concerned musical texts, and felt that

this was a great way of highlighting the idea that books are objects which are used in particular ways – an idea which can at times be a challenge to represent in the sort of text-based exhibitions one might encounter in the library sector.

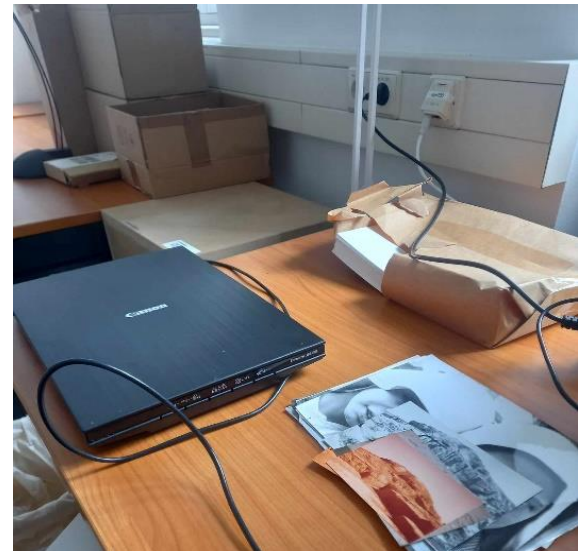
Photo Project

We were privileged to have the opportunity to help to digitise, catalogue and improve the storage conditions of a photographic archive which primarily centred on an archaeological excavation in Iraq in the 1960s.

Working on this project was quite a special experience for me because it was my first experience of this sort of work on this scale, and it was very exciting to have the opportunity to put into practice some of the theory which I had previously encountered on my course. Determining what information we wanted to record about each item, and the ways in which we would structure and present this information, was a very interesting process, and has helped to clarify and challenge the archival framework within which I work.

Archaeology is not an area in which I am especially well-versed, and so it was a rewarding experience to consider what information we can determine and record about photographs concerning a subject about which we have little prior knowledge. I in fact found myself pleasantly surprised about the amount of information we could obtain from simply reading them as objects.

Furthermore, it was useful to have the opportunity to consider the role that we can play as archivists in recording this information in such a way that it will be useful for those who are better versed in a subject, and to ensure that these materials are



made available to researchers in a logical, efficient and secure manner. In turn, this allowed me to think about archival practice as a link within a greater chain, and the dynamic, mutually beneficial role of archivist and researcher.

Lauresham & Lorsch

It was fascinating to hear about and see some of the exciting work being done at The Lauresham Laboratory for Experimental Archaeology, which not only seeks to determine the ways in which agriculture might have been undertaken in the early medieval period, but also considers the ways in which these discoveries might help us adapt our current agricultural practices in the face of the climate crisis.

Claus Kropp, who kindly offered us a fantastic tour of the centre, told us about a number of projects which have contributed to the research undertaken at the facility and which involved a wide variety of different groups; for example engineering students experimenting with traditional building techniques for the first time, undergraduates from Oxford on an intensive archaeological course, and reenactment societies who occasionally stay in the dwellings, lending the space more of an authentic, lived-in atmosphere. This multi-perspective approach makes it an incredibly interesting project, and it serves as an excellent model for running a research-based heritage space which benefits from the contributions of the wider community, whilst also investing their interest and providing enriching learning opportunities.

Kropp told us that he had asked a group of school children who had participated in a project at the site what they had most gained out of the experience, and they told him that it had changed the way that they think about the food they eat; a powerful demonstration of the transformative potential which research with a strong emphasis on community outreach has, not just in terms of its impact on the development of historical understanding, but also in the perspectives it brings to our lives today.

During this excursion, we also visited the site of Lorsch Abbey. Whilst portions of the

structure remain, including the abbey's striking Carolingian arches, the former boundaries of structures which are no longer present are designated with depressions in the ground. I felt that this was a rather novel way of prompting imaginative responses to the site, although I must confess that without the helpful insights of Dr Prien, who showed me around, I would have struggled to get a good idea of its story from this use of the space. This allowed me the opportunity to have a think about the ways in which we construct narratives within a heritage site, and we had a very interesting discussion about the challenges of achieving this effectively.



Leichenpredigten

My personal research interests concern early modern printed funeral sermons, the trends in their visual features, such as marginal notes and use of punctuation, and their presence within historic collections. As such, I was very excited to visit the manuscript reading room to take a look at some of the rich collection of German funeral sermons at Universität Heidelberg and compare them with the English texts which I have studied in my home institution's collection.

This was a really great reading room experience, and it was particularly interesting to see how the use of font was employed as a visual sign to generate meaning and shape the reading experience in these sermons; for example many texts used blackletter in the marginal notes to indicate commentary, whilst italic indicated reference to biblical passages. It was also very exciting to see how past readers had added their own marginal notes in manuscript form, developing their own visual codes of readership.

The opportunity to make these observations has greatly enhanced my understanding of the printed funeral sermon as a genre on a wider scale and has raised some fruitful questions which will help me to develop my future research. I hope that I am able to pursue this international line of enquiry further in future projects, and in doing so continue to collaborate with Universität Heidelberg.

General Reflections

The experience as a whole has been absolutely wonderful, and I'm so grateful to have had these myriad opportunities to discuss with and learn from staff and students here in the HCCH, all of whom have been so welcoming, supportive and insightful – I could fill several pages more and still have experiences I'd love to share, so rich and varied has my time here been.

The wealth of expertise that has been so willingly and enthusiastically shared with myself and my fellow exchange students, and the openness with which we were received, was moving and inspiring. It has really highlighted for me the value of transnational collaboration, and I look forward to maintaining the connections I have made this month, as well as cultivating further connections with the skills which I have learnt during my stay.

