

The Living Bookshelf: The Ancient Library in Text Conference Summary Report

We would like to thank you for your generous support of our conference, and offer a report in summary of our activities.

The Living Bookshelf: The Ancient Library in Text conference took place between the 12th-14th September at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. The conference theme was “The Ancient Library in Text”, and we encouraged participants to deploy “library” as a conceptual tool that could be used to engage with literature. As such, many papers did not address specific ancient libraries (though some did), but instead considered the ways a text might resemble a library, or how literature might display the “fingerprints” of a library in its composition. We were delighted to host papers on Greek literature from the Hellenistic Period to the end of Antiquity, on Latin literature across a similarly wide period, on the Qumran scrolls, on the Herculaneum papyri, and the keynote paper helped us reconsider the importance (or even existence) of the Library of Alexandria, perhaps the most famous library of the ancient world.

The conference featured 12 papers (8 of which were by graduate students), each followed by a 5-minute response from a graduate in attendance. The respondent system was particularly successful, and fulfilled one of our training goals, encouraging graduate students to feel more confident in participating in academic discourse. This was confirmed by the results of our surveys before and after the conference, where self-reported confidence in ‘actively participating’ grew from an average of 2.9 to 4.0 (on a 5 point scale), and views on the utility of a response format increased from an average of 3.8 to 4.3.

In addition, we had two graduate training workshops. The first was a workshop with the Corpus Christi College Librarian Joanna Snelling, who was joined by Conservator Nikki Tomkins and Cataloguer Sophie Floate. In this workshop the Corpus Christi Library collection was introduced, and participants were able to handle material texts and learn about how the material realities of books, and the physical context of literature, affects the more abstract ‘text’ we are perhaps more familiar with.

The second was a workshop led by our keynote speaker Alexandra Schultz (Dartmouth College), and was entitled “Communicating Your Research.” In this session, Alexandra helped the attendees communicate why their research was important, and how to frame academic projects for a non-specialist audience. This workshop was particularly helpful for those applying for academic jobs in the near future.

We were extremely grateful for the support we received from the AHRC OOC DTP, Corpus Christi College, Oxford and The Hellenic Society. These contributions helped the event to run smoothly, and allowed us to invite 4 established academic speakers with complementary expertise within the field, something extremely beneficial for the graduate participants. We would like to thank the housekeeping, catering and conference staff at Corpus Christi; they assisted us in controlling the AV, printing handouts and nametags, they provided catering throughout as well as the conference dinner, and made available accommodation for participants from outside Oxford. Without this help, the conference could not have run successfully.

We are particularly grateful to the Corpus Christi Centre for the Study of the Ancient World (directed at the time by Marion Durand) and Greg Waiting, for their logistical help.

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