

Transforming the Postgraduate Experience: UWICAH's First Annual Meeting of Postgraduates

This autumn, the Universities in Wales Institute of Classics and Ancient History embarked on a new venture. Swansea University recently hosted UWICAH's First Annual Meeting of Postgraduates. The conference was the first of an annual series of meetings organised by, and principally aimed at, postgraduate students researching any aspect of the ancient world. The inaugural event took place on November 9th and was organised by a committee of PhD candidates from Swansea University, who represent the disciplines of ancient history, classics and Egyptology, working under the guidance of academics with the University's department of History and Classics. Candidates were invited to speak on the topic of 'Transformations' in the ancient world, a broad and wide-reaching theme, which was chosen specifically to allow for a number of different interpretations and methodological approaches, and therefore, a diverse range of papers. The conference provided research students from the three constituent institutions of UWICAH (Cardiff University, Swansea University and University of Wales Trinity Saint David), and also students from the University of Birmingham, an opportunity to present papers relevant to their research projects and enabled postgraduates from across the U.K. to experience, at first hand, the varied scope of research currently being undertaken in Wales and beyond.

The impetus behind this new initiative is the desire to foster a sense of community amongst postgraduate students in Wales, and establish firm links between the research community in Wales and those in other institutions throughout the U.K., in order to develop a dynamic research environment in the study of the ancient world. First, and foremost, the conference provided postgraduates with a forum in which to present their research in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. It is widely recognised that a successful research experience requires networking and communication skills, and this conference aims to encourage continuing working relationships and an appreciation of the variety of approaches and interests of postgraduate researchers. When studying for a doctorate it soon becomes clear that, while individual research is at the core of the experience, there is also the need for learning how to present ideas, and how to react to feedback, and this initiative provided the perfect environment in which to do so. It was a relatively intimate event which did not intimidate researchers with limited experience of presenting, but there was also sufficient combined knowledge to encourage lively debate and questions which served to develop the themes being examined, and potentially yielded new areas of enquiry. The audience was not limited to postgraduates from Welsh universities and we were also able to accept speakers from beyond Wales, namely from Birmingham, and this interest from outside the country has the potential for the conference series to develop into an occasion which, although centred in Wales, need not limit itself exclusively to the three

constituent institutions. This suggests that, while the focus is on the research community in Wales, there is the potential for wider impact and communication, which can only be good for everyone concerned.

Whilst officially UWICAH represents departments of classics and ancient history within Welsh universities, it recognises the strong research environment for Egyptology in the country, and has long included the discipline in its academic programme. The inclusion of Egyptology in this new conference series served to foster further cohesion and a sense of community amongst postgraduates in Wales. It is our hope that postgraduate students from all three disciplines recognized common themes and approaches, common difficulties and innovative new methodologies that they will be able to apply to their own field of research. Through integrating these disciplines, this conference allowed for a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas, methodologies and approaches, thus ensuring that the research community remains diverse, dynamic and open to new ideas.

In order to ensure the development of a thriving and cohesive postgraduate community in Wales the conference staged a number of skills-based workshops alongside its programme of academic papers. These workshops were aimed at providing and enhancing a set of practical skills that research students will need to become successful academics. In 2013 these seminars were hosted by teaching and research staff from Swansea University and included three workshops on the following topics: a teaching skills workshop which sought to provide postgraduate tutors with inspiration and innovative techniques to actively involve undergraduates in the classroom, advice on careers within the heritage sector and information on the formation of research groups, on the model of University of Wales Trinity Saint David and Swansea's own KYKNOS Centre for Research on the Narrative Literatures of the Ancient World. Each workshop was devoted to highlighting skills that postgraduate students will need in their future careers, but for which they may not have received any formal training. Comments from the delegates at this year's conference include the following:

- "I thought the conference was a significant step forwards for graduate Classics in Wales, and in fact for the whole of the UK. A friendly forum like this, where research students can present their research to an audience of their peers and share ideas, both provides invaluable experience and is immensely fertile. I thought the workshops presented by university staff on things of general interest to graduates were a very useful and interesting innovation. The organisation of the event was flawless: pleasant surroundings, luxury cakes, samosas, and generally a great atmosphere. A credit to you and to Swansea, and good to see UWICAH back on the road" (Professor John Morgan, Professor of Greek, Swansea University).
- "The First UWICAH Annual Meeting of Postgraduates held at Swansea University on 9 November 2013 was a huge success. It attracted research students from Cardiff

University, the University of Wales/Trinity Saint David, Birmingham, and Swansea University to present their research and to participate in short workshops on teaching, research groups, and heritage. The meeting provided new insights into the transformations in the ancient world, drawing on historical, textual, and visual sources, thus including several disciplines with diverging traditions, foci, and methodologies. Ancient Egyptian texts of the underworld as well as Christian saints were discussed, demonstrating the need for interdisciplinary approaches. The conference also emphasised the fact that modern occurrences can be better understood by analysing ancient sources, such as genocides or the attitude to or of rulers, demonstrated for example by Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, which refers to Cyrus the Great. Written in the fourth century BCE it became a model for a genre to discuss princes, reflected in Machiavelli's work almost two millennia later. Hopefully, a similar conference will be held next year since it gives the graduate students a great opportunity to engage in lively discussions" (Dr Martina Minas-Nerpel, Reader in Egyptology, Swansea University).

- "Having recently re-joined academia from the workplace, it was fantastic to have the chance to immediately engage with my academic peers from across the region and beyond and I commend the hard work of the organisers for making this happen. The day was well organised and the beautiful setting of Swansea University's Singleton Abbey served to accentuate the good will and thankfulness evident in those who attended" (David Colwill, Ph.D. candidate in Ancient History, Cardiff University).
- "My experience at the UWICAH conference in Swansea was very good. I saw a wide variety of topics being discussed throughout antiquity and provided me with the opportunity to see what materials and methods other researchers are engaging in. Furthermore, I had the opportunity to network with other post-graduates and faculty on an international level" (Philip Myers, Ph.D. candidate in Archaeology, Birmingham University).

The conference series has the potential to instil a sense of belonging to postgraduate researchers in Wales. By giving participants this opportunity, we, as organisers of the inaugural event, hope that the initiative will allow existing research strengths in the participating universities concerned to grow and develop. Swansea provided the base for the start of this process, but our collective research strengths guarantee that this is only the beginning. It is our intention to establish an annual event which will become an integral part of the academic calendar in Wales, building upon the successes of the annual meeting of UWICAH at Gregynog Hall. Our ambition, to start a new conference series to develop research talent amongst postgraduate students, draws comparison to similar initiatives in the U.K., such as AMPAH. However, we aim to distinguish ourselves by adopting a more focused approach. Our narrower geographical

focus, coupled with our desire to foster a sense of community, will ensure that the UWICAH Annual Meeting of Postgraduates not only acts as a showcase of new research and ideas in Wales, but also provides an opportunity for postgraduate students from Welsh universities to meet their peers (both in Wales and from further afield), gain valuable skills, network, form lasting friendships and understand how their individual project fits into the wider research environment. UWICAH's Annual Meeting of Postgraduates will be hosted at each of the three universities in turn, ensuring the long term success of the venture by allowing students and academics from each institution to add their focus and personality to the event. It is our firm belief that this new conference series will be a success not only on a regional level, but will also have the potential to serve as a model to develop postgraduate communities in a number of localities throughout the U.K.

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