**Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund – Research Project in Rome into the Contribution to Urban Topography made by a Fourth Century Pope**

The Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund helped to fund an eight-week trip to Rome, Italy to complete a piece of research facilitated by the British School at Rome (BSR). The BSR is a research institution founded in 1901 to promote the art, history, and culture of Italy. Many eminent classicists, such as the archaeologist Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, are affiliated with the school. I applied for a short-term residency at the school in October 2022, providing an outline of my research project. In November 2023, I was informed that I had been awarded a short residency with access to the BSR archives. With the green light from the school, my research could now begin in earnest.

This report aims to give its reader an insight into the process of my research, how my time at the BSR impacted the project, and how I developed academically, professionally, and personally in the ancient city that Byron called ‘the lone mother of dead empires’.

Map

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***Map of Rome showing sites where inscriptions by Damasus could be found. Size of square indicates density. (Drawing: James Huemoeller after Guyon, “Damase et l’illustration des martyrs”).***

My research was focused on the figure of Pope Damasus I, Bishop of Rome from 366-384. Today, his relics can be found in San Lorenzo in Damaso, near the Theatre of Pompey in Rome. During his time, the fourth century AD, Damasus was famous for installing dozens of highly elaborate inscriptions around the city of Rome, linked to the cult of the martyrs. These inscriptions were written in verse and served as poems that eulogized Christian martyrs and special Christian religious sites. These inscriptions have been treated as important historical documents for reconstructing what early Christianity was like, how early Christians worshipped, and the origins of martyr cult. My research wanted to take a different approach and ask: what happens when we treat the poems as poems? Instead of thinking about these texts only as material objects for the study of history, I set about to have an intimate literary encounter with this collection of poems.

My preliminary research involved creating a dossier of Christian inscriptions that were still visible in the fourth century, using principally the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) and the *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* (CLE), to which I began to apply textual analysis, practical criticism, and comparison to the Damasus poems which are recorded in Dennis Trout’s commentary *Damasus of Rome*. My motivation for undertaking such a project was that I felt a new critical engagement with the inner workings of these poems stood to make an important contribution to how we understand the formation and reception of early Christian poetic discourses.

My research in Rome started by exploring the city in order to understand the topography of the ancient urban space. The archaeologists at the BSR were able to obtain special permits for me to visit sites that are closed to the public and non-researchers. The BSR archives were also rich and exciting. I had plenty of lovely sketches and squeezes of Damasian inscriptions to work with I set about transcribing upon my arrival.



***Permit only: Me in the Columbarium of Pomponius Hylas. (ancient tomb)***



**A picture containing wall, building, stone, indoor

Description automatically generated**The most challenging aspect of my project was getting a sense of how the Damasus inscriptions compared to other inscriptions in Rome. All churches are full of inscriptions which are very difficult to date. I kept notes of the different inscriptions I encountered in different places. A highlight of my discoveries in churches is the beautiful mosaic in *Santa Sabina* (pictured below) and seeing the fourth century mosaics at *Santa Pudenziana.* The oldest to remain in their original contexts from antiquity. The church apse is mostly original and gave me a good sense of what Damasus’ Rome would have looked like.

Every day, I got up early to explore the city, with a particular focus on Christian archaeological sites such as catacombs. I arranged to be shown around places where Damasus inscriptions had been found. Not very many remain, and most that survive (there are 60) are now in the Vatican museums, which I visited in my fourth week in Rome.

***Permit only: Three niches containing frescoes at a shrine to the nymphs, House of Maecenas.***

**A picture containing wall, symmetry, building, indoor

Description automatically generated**It is difficult to describe how much of a crucial role the BSR played in my research. Exploring Rome in the mornings and then going back to the vast and stunning library at the BSR each day allowed me to focus on my research as I have never done before. I will use an anecdote to try to describe what kinds of wonderful revelations arose on a daily basis. This is an extract from the journal that I kept while I was in Rome. I wrote at the end of every day to consolidate my thoughts and findings:

**18/04/2023**

*I had a rather revelatory moment as I was flicking through pictures of St Peters, eyes bleary with fatigue before dinner. A caption under an anonymous sketch of the Vatican Hill that read:* A picture containing handwriting, limestone, art, ground

Description automatically generated*namque supercilio saxa liquor ortus excitavit | fontem perennem chrismatis feracem.* Pausanias, Peristephanon, XII*. That sounds familiar, I thought, so I ran to find the Loeb [*commentary*], and behold! A footnote: refers to the baptistry of Damasus I. The poem goes on to describe the stream and the font in great detail. It’s strange because the archaeological sources don’t bother to cite the poem, so it's the first time I’ve come across it.*

***The mosaic inscription above the doorway at Santa Sabina.***

***Fragment of a Damasus Inscription, San Lucina. The name THEODORUS can be read.***

A picture containing floor, building, wall, indoor

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Finally, I began to put my pen to paper in week five of my trip. I decided to explore three key case studies, all of which are Damasus inscriptions that can still be seen at or very near their original contexts today. These were a poem memorialising the canalisation of a spring to a baptistry near St Peter’s; an elogium to the saints at the catacombs of S. Callisto; and finally, an elogium of the martyr Eutychius at his tomb near the cemetery of S. Sebastiano.

***Damasus Inscription, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City***

A picture containing indoor, window, floor

Description automatically generatedDamasus’ inscriptions are very distinct because they use wide, red letters in a special epigraphic script called Philocacean. You can see this pictured in the Damasian inscriptions I have included in this report. He had this commissioned especially for official papal use. Notice how the letters are very clear to read. This indicates that Damasus wanted us to have a thorough reading engagement with his installations. Further, Damasus knew his Classics. Many of his verses contain allusions to Virgil, Ovid, Homer, and many other prominent writers of antiquity.

***Reproduction of a Damasus Inscription, S. Lorenzo in Damaso***

In antiquity, Damasus’ poems were displayed opulently, using expensive materials such as marble, and no small expenditure in resources. I argued in my work that he is a pivotal starting point for current scholarship on the beginnings of Christian civic identity, and he ought to be at least as discernible in this scholarship as he was in Rome’s fourth century urban landscape.

By the end of the project, I had produced an 8000-word thesis on my discoveries over the two months. Here is an excerpt which I feel sums up my central idea:

*The historical treatment of inscriptions in sylloges has led to the denial of inscribed poetry’s innovative, interesting, and problematic elements beyond their intertextual relations with Classical predecessors. A phenomenological approach to the Damasian corpus contributes to the important move to towards productive reception of late antique poetry. It is my hope that renewed engagement with the external worlds of the poems in tandem with their poetic form will give new life and possibilities to this fascinating genre. Damasus refused to cohere opposition, figuring contrasts and focalizing interpretation in order to perform the negotiation of meanings made possible by the presence of an existed subject reading in the space.*

I intend to submit my research for publication with *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* and I hope that it will contribute to the field’s wider understanding of Christian poetry, a fundamental genre in the emergence and transmission of Western literature. As a Classics student studying for my MA at the University of Manchester, it was a privilege to be conducting my research at the BSR where so many prestigious Classical scholars have lived and worked. The generous award from the Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund meant that I could leave my job in the UK to commit to a rigorous programme of study. I am hoping this research will lead me to a PhD on Christian inscriptional poetry in the future, but it also represents a unique time in my life where I independently committed to a project and could be fully immersed in my passions without distraction from financial pressure and other commitments in my daily life. I will always be grateful to all those who supported me and allowed this project to come together.

**Expenditure**

Flights £358.00

BSR Residency Fee £1680.44

Travel insurance £27.56

Other (Subsistence) £347.71

Total £2413.71

**Funding**

Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund £940

SALC Travel Award £300

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**Word count**

1,493