Roman Society Museum and Heritage Summer Placement Report
British Museum
Department of Greece and Rome

First of all, I would like to express my immense gratitude to the Roman Society in generously funding and organizing my placement in the British Museum’s Department of Greece and Rome. I completed the internship after finishing an MPhil at Oxford in Greek and/or Roman History and before beginning a Ph.D. in Classics at Princeton. As an aspiring ancient historian whose interests in Archaic Greek society and religion lie on the border between ancient history and archaeology, I was excited for the opportunity to work closely with the collections of the British Museum. Moreover, having interned in both the Conservation and Ancient Art Departments of the Yale University Art Gallery during the course of my undergraduate degree, I knew that I liked working with material culture in a museum context, and I was keen to learn more about collections management and the role of a curator at an institution as large and as prominent as the British Museum.

During the three-week internship, I worked closely with Dr. Ross Iain Thomas, the Roman Curator in the Department of Greece and Rome. Ross allocated me a miniature research project for the duration of my internship that focused on digitizing the museum’s collection of Roman glass and gems. This project is part of a larger British Museum initiative to digitize its entire collection and to make object records available online, thereby increasing collection accessibility for students and scholars all over the world. The first aspect of my project was to create a concordance between the museum number of each object and the numbers by which it had been listed in various catalogue publications; this concordance will eventually be added to each object’s digital record so that scholars searching the collection online will be directed to a more complete bibliography. The second aspect of my project was to digitize and edit the original catalogue drawings of Roman glass and gems in preparation for their being attached to object records and made available online. To complete these tasks, I gained some familiarity with Merlin, the online collections management system of the British Museum, and with Adobe Photoshop.

Perhaps my favorite part of the internship was not the Roman glass digitization project itself—although I recognize how important a project this is and thoroughly enjoyed my role in it!—but my frequent conversations with Ross and his colleagues. Throughout my time at the British Museum, Ross was a wonderful mentor who generously shared his own time and expertise and who made sure that I came away from the internship with a new understanding of Roman glass as an archaeological material. I appreciated how, whenever possible, Ross took me into the galleries, storerooms, and basements to let me handle the objects that I had spent the morning scanning drawings of and reading about in either archaeological reports or publication catalogues. He was constantly challenging me to think like a field archaeologist, even in the case of museum objects whose original excavation context may have been lost to time.

Ross was also an excellent source of information about the role of a curator in an institution like the British Museum. Whether it was discussing with me his research on objects in the collection, such as his Actium Prow project, or showing me an archaeological report detailing the British Museum’s involvement in the ongoing excavations at Naukratis, or even letting me sit in on a
meeting with curators from a local museum who were seeking to obtain some British Museum objects on loan, Ross gave me a real sense of both the challenges and the privileges that one faces as a museum curator, and of the ways in which a curatorial job differs from, for example, a university lectureship. At the same time, Ross was also incredibly encouraging and supportive of my own academic interests and research, and he was quick to point out all of ways in which the collections of the British Museum and its resources are open and accessible to scholars everywhere.

I was also able to learn a bit more about how the British Museum functioned as an institution when, by happy accident, my internship overlapped with the annual visit of the British Museum’s Trustees to the Department of Greece and Rome. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the trustees’ visit, as part of which I heard presentations from several of the department curators, including Ross, about their ongoing research, ranging in scope from the planning and design of a new exhibit on Troy to the meticulous rejoining of sculptural fragments from Ephesus. As part of this visit, I also had the opportunity to see the objects that had been acquired by the British Museum over the course of the year 2017-2018. It was fascinating to be able to hear these talks and to see the newly-acquired objects as a reminder that places like the British Museum are living, breathing institutions and that, although much of their collection may have been acquired centuries ago, they are still actively involved both in innovative research and in the expansion of their collection.

I would like to thank Dr. Ross Iain Thomas and all of his colleagues in the Department of Greece and Rome once again for being so kind and welcoming to me over the course of my internship. I am also incredibly grateful to the Roman Society for its generosity in supporting the Museum and Heritage Summer Placement program, and in particular to its secretary, Dr. Fiona Haarer, for her role in coordinating the internship placements. I had a wonderful time during my internship and I learned so much—not only about Roman glass, but also about the experience of working in a museum and about the role of museum collections in the 21st century.

Sarah M. Norvell
September 2018