# Reimagining Roman Bath: Past, Present, and Future

## Supervisory team

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Professor Holleran is Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient History and Director of the Centre for Motion and Connectivity in the Ancient World at the University of Exeter; Professor Eckardt is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading; Ms Hart is Curator of the Roman Baths Museum in Bath.

The supervisory team bring complementary strengths in ancient history, archaeology, epigraphy, artefact studies, and museology and are ideally placed to advise the student on the research practices and methodology that are central to this project.

## Subject

The PhD project will play a central role in the ambitious transformation of the [Roman Baths Museum](https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/), working alongside the new curator, Amanda Hart. It will form part of a broader plan to transform and reimagine the museum, offering an exciting opportunity to challenge and disrupt established notions and preconceived ideas about Roman Britain and Aquae Sulis (Bath). The student will explore the history of the museum within its Victorian imperial context and undertake original work on the site of Roman Bath and its associated archaeological finds. This research will feed directly into the redevelopment of the museum displays, suggesting fresh interpretative themes, new stories, and different ways in which these could be presented to visitors. It will raise the profile of the Roman Baths Museum and engage the public in new research.

## Research context

The Roman baths were first discovered in 1755, but it was only with the discovery of the Great Bath by Major Charles Davis in the late nineteenth century that large-scale excavations took place (1878 - 1880). Subsequently, a new museum was built to house the early collections and baths, designed in the neoclassical architectural style. It was a Victorian interpretation of the baths based on the grand bathhouses of Ancient Rome, with a Tuscan colonnade, Diocletian windows, and a terrace topped with statues of the emperors and military men associated with Roman Britain.

Many of the themes drawn out by the antiquarians involved in the early excavations include military conquest, imperialism, and ‘civilisation’, reflecting the British colonial context of the era. These ideas fed directly into the development of the early museum displays and, despite further excavations on the site, the narrative remains centred on military conquest and the desire of the local population to be ‘Romanised’. Moreover, the audio-visual displays are dominated by healthy, able-bodied, white, adult, high-status males.

## Research questions and methods

The museum at Bath offers an excellent case study of the issues raised in much of the recent scholarship around museums and decolonisation because of its setting in a Georgian Spa Town that benefitted directly from the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. Other museums and heritage organisations in Bath are beginning to address this issue (see [The Bath and Colonialism Archive Project](https://bathandcolonialism.org/)). The student will research the archives held at Bath Record Office to see how the early antiquarians and architects viewed the Roman remains and how their own socio-political status influenced the development of the early museum. They will consider the ways in which the museum displays still reveal the historical context in which they were initially conceived.

Since the last museum development in 2005, much new work has been done on the Bath collections, the archaeological site, and the town. However, more still needs to be done to reveal a fuller picture of Roman Bath and its people, and enable the museum displays to be properly updated. The student will, therefore, explore the site of Roman Bath and its associated archaeological finds, reassessing, for example, objects found in the temple precinct and the spring to discover new stories about individuals and identity. The epigraphy will also be re-examined in the light of recent trends to shift the focus away from elite men and to consider the voices of women, children, the enslaved, and migrants. The student will undertake an analysis of the evidence from excavation sites in Bath through both published and unpublished (grey) literature to explore the role of the baths and sanctuary site within both Roman Bath and its rural hinterland.

Lastly, the student will explore the museological challenges around creating a contemporary Roman display that takes into the account the (pre)conceptions and expectations of visitors, shaped at least in part by the influence of the modern political environment, the English education system, and the media.

Research questions include:

* How have perceptions of Roman Britain from the Victorian discovery of the Great Bath and (re)construction of the Roman Baths Museum to the present-day influenced the existing display and interpretation of the site? What is the historical, political, and cultural context in which these perceptions developed*?* How does Bath Museum compare to other museums with major Roman collections in Britain and the north-western provinces?
* What can we learn from the epigraphy and artefacts about those who visited the baths and the sanctuary? What about those who lived and worked in the associated settlement? What was the place of Aquae Sulis in the wider landscape of Southwest Britain?
* How can the current museum displays be redeveloped to convey to visitors cutting-edge academic ideas about Roman Britain, its society, and the Roman bathing complex?The student should have a background in Roman history and/or archaeology, and a keen interest in museums, museology, and heritage, as well as in interrogating the political, social, and cultural context of museum displays. Within these parameters, there is scope for the successful student to shape the PhD project to reflect their own research interests.

## Skills developed by the student and employability enhancement

The doctoral student will be based between the University of Exeter, the Roman Baths Museum, and the University of Reading, and will receive their PhD from the University of Exeter.

They will be provided with a range of valuable training as part of the PhD. This will include bespoke training in museum practices, such as using the Roman Baths Museum’s documentation catalogue (Axiell Micromusee), researching archaeological archives, object-handling, care of collections (environmental monitoring, packaging, pest control, lighting), photography, display, interpretation, and creating exhibitions. Alongside specific training in discipline-specific skills such as epigraphy and approaching artefact assemblages, the student will also have access to the full range of postgraduate researcher training offered at the Universities of Exeter and Reading, including guidance on all aspects of completing a research degree, as well as on career development, research sharing, data analysis and management, and targeted writing support.

As part of their work with the Roman Baths Museum, the student will be expected to contribute to public engagement and participation, using their research to connect with communities and with formal and informal learning groups, through special events, social media, and the website, both on- and off-site. They will also be expected to present their ongoing research at academic conferences and seminars.

The collaboration between the Roman Baths Museum, the University of Exeter, and the University of Reading will significantly enhance the student’s employability prospects in both academia and the museum and heritage industry, providing multiple transferable skills.