

# International Training Programme (ITP)

Research Grant 2025

## REPORT



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Supported by the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust

**Project:** *Exploring Community Perspectives on the Display of Cypriot Cultural Heritage at the British Museum*

**Location:** British Museum, London

**Dates:** December 2025 (research) & February 2026 (conference presentation)

On 27 February 2026, together with Dr Ersin Hussein, we presented our paper, *From Cyprus to the British Museum: Community-Led Reflections on Cultural Identity and Display*, as part of the session “Identity and the Eastern Mediterranean” at the conference *The Ancient Mediterranean and the British Museum: Pasts and Futures*. This three-day conference, organised by the Department of Greece and Rome at the British Museum and the Institute of Classical Studies (University of London School of Advanced Study), took place at Senate House from Wednesday 25 to Friday 27 February 2026. It explored both the historical impact and future potential of the Museum’s ancient Mediterranean collections, bringing together scholars and practitioners to reflect on how they have shaped modern understandings of Mediterranean antiquity across artistic, literary, and intellectual contexts.



Presenting, together with Dr Ersin Hussein our paper at the *Ancient Mediterranean at the Past and Futures* conference

Participation in this conference was an invaluable learning experience and a significant opportunity for knowledge exchange, the kind of knowledge that is rarely encountered in publications or online, but is instead generously shared in such settings through direct interaction with museum professionals and scholars and insightful glimpses to each one’s projects and achievements.

Our paper “*From Cyprus to the British Museum: Community-Led Reflections on Cultural Identity and Display*” presented community responses to the display of Cypriot antiquities at the British Museum, foregrounding the perspectives of the Cypriot diaspora and Cypriot nationals residing in the UK. The current presentation of the collection was critically examined and reimagined through a collective experience of the space of the gallery that took place during two site visits to the British Museum in December 2025 with members of the Cypriot diaspora community. These facilitated visits were carried out in consultation with, and with the generous support of, the Department of Greece and Rome, particularly Thomas Kiely, A.G. Leventis Curator of Ancient Cyprus.

Organising and implementing this site-specific research was made possible through the support of the ITP Research Grant. I am sincerely grateful to the ITP team for their continued commitment to supporting research and conference mobility for fellows. I also extend my thanks to the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust for its generous sponsorship towards the programme and its fellows, and for supporting our research, vision and professional endeavours.



Panel discussion of the session Identity and the Eastern Mediterranean of the Ancient Mediterranean at the Past and Futures conference. From left to right: Gabriella Micale (chair), Diana Jeha, Ersin Hussein, Demetra Ignatiou, Elena Isayev (respondent).

In the following pages I shortly present the scope, methodology and outcomes of this research project that focusses on community engagement in the shaping of museum narratives and heritage display taking as a case study the Cypriot collection of antiquities at the British Museum.

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I met Dr Ersin Hussein in early 2025 at a conference held at Trinity College Dublin, titled *“Cypro-centric Approaches to Teaching Ancient Cyprus: Practical, Creative, and Experiential Pedagogies for Engaging with Landscapes and Material Culture.”* She was among the organisers, and I presented a paper. Following this first encounter, we developed an ongoing conversation around the representation of Cypriot heritage in museums both on the island and internationally.

We perceived the conference *“The Ancient Mediterranean and the British Museum: Pasts and Futures”* as an ideal opportunity to initiate a collaborative research project. Our shared research interests focus

on how Cypriot heritage is displayed and how such displays can be reconsidered in order to become more inclusive and embrace polyvocality shifting away from (post)colonial schemes of material culture classification and identity representation. Building on these exchanges, we developed a proposal for a focused study of the Cypriot collection which is displayed in Room 72 of the British Museum, focusing on community perspectives and responses.

The conference would take place in February 2026, during the early phases of the British Museum's Masterplan, described by the organisers as a "once-in-a-century opportunity to redisplay and reinterpret the collections from the ancient Mediterranean, Egypt, Assyria, and the Middle East for twenty-first-century publics." In this context, our research seeks to contribute meaningfully to these developments and to inform the future redisplay of the Ancient Cyprus collection.



Second Focus Group - Participants with Thomas Kiely, A.G. Leventis Curator of Ancient Cyprus

My participation in the ITP annual programme at the British Museum during the summer of 2025 allowed sustained engagement with the Department of Greece and Rome. Curator Thomas Kiely has been extremely supportive and always willing to provide access to the collections and to offer critical insights.

The project we developed is grounded in a participatory research-led approach, placing the focus on community voices in relation to interpretive inquiry. We share the belief that museum displays should not be contextualised based on fixed or authoritative narratives and that instead honesty and multiperspectivity should be prioritised in order to provide a meaningful and inclusive museum experience. Our research focus is to understand how displays are experienced, questioned, and reinterpreted by individuals with cultural and personal connections to the material, when these individuals or members of their community/ies had no or little involvement in the curatorial process

and interpretative methods. For this we opted to explore community perspectives on the display of Cypriot antiquities at the British Museum, engaging members of the Cypriot diaspora in dialogue around heritage and identity and exploring participatory approaches to exhibition and meaning making.

The qualitative methodology of focus groups was adopted to record not just individual responses but also the dynamics of collective discussion and exchange. The core research activity consisted of two workshops—focus group sessions held at the British Museum on 12 and 13 December 2025. We invited participants through targeted outreach to members of the Cypriot diaspora and Cypriot nationals living in London. We did an effort to include a diverse range of ages, ethnic and professional backgrounds and levels of engagement with museums. The written invitation we sent emphasised the value of the participants’ personal perspectives and lived experiences, regardless of their prior familiarity with the museum or its collections.



Participant of the first focus group

Participants of both workshops experienced both object-based engagement and facilitated discussion. They were given time to explore the current display of the Cyprus collection and they were also given the opportunity to access objects that are not currently exhibited, through a guided visit to the department’s storage areas, which offered an insight into how material culture is organised beyond the exhibition space. We designed the sessions as immersive experiences, incorporating introductory activities, gallery exploration and moderated group discussions over coffee and tea. We also prepared questionnaires to be filled in by the participants to collect data in different formats and provide the opportunity for different ways of expressing views and thoughts.

We encouraged participants to critically reflect on the current display and to share their own preferred narratives for the representation of Cypriot heritage. The workshops concluded with a focus group discussion facilitated by Dr Hussein and myself. These discussions and the exchange of viewpoints and thoughts between them have been extremely meaningful to the research process as most people

where very eager to share their feelings, ideas and thoughts. Discussions were recorded with consent and anonymised for analysis.



Participants of the second focus group visiting the Cyprus Gallery at the British Museum

The focus group discussions revealed varying perspectives shaped by personal histories, collective and individual identities and diversified approaches to the museum as an institution and the collection as an exhibit. Although on some occasions participants expressed differing or even contradictory views, the discussion remained respectful and constructive. Some participants highlighted aspects of the display they found engaging, while also identifying areas they felt could be reconsidered or improved.

A common denominator of the discussion was the desire for more inclusive and multi-vocal interpretations of Cypriot heritage, alongside an urge for contextualisation of objects beyond conventional archaeological frameworks. Another popular response was the expression of the participants' gratitude for inviting them to join and for giving them space to negotiate and voice their views.

The findings of this research were developed into a co-authored paper presented on 27 February 2026 as part of the conference at the British Museum. Our presentation focused on both the methodology and the insights generated through the workshops and questionnaires, situating the project within broader discussions around participatory museology, community engagement, and the interpretation of archaeological collections.

The project generated qualitative data on community perceptions of museum displays, contributed to ongoing discussions around participatory museology and heritage representation and established a model for future community-engaged research initiatives. Among the most highly valued outcomes of

the project was that it enabled meaningful connections with members of the Cypriot diaspora, that may support our future research but also the Museum's public programmes.

This project significantly contributed to my ongoing work around Cypro-centric approaches in exhibition making and critical museology with regards to the decolonisation of museum practices. It has provided practical insights for integrating community voices into curatorial processes and it has also enhanced my capacity to design and implement participatory, research-driven projects.

This is just the initial step for the project that we envision. The two focus groups conducted provided the yeast for what we aspire to become a long-term research program which will allow us to continue our research organising additional meetings and site visits to broaden the participant base and deepen the analysis.

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### **Researchers' short bios**

#### **Ersin Hussein**

Ersin Hussein is a Senior Lecturer in Ancient History (Swansea University), specializing in the history and material culture of Cyprus. Her monograph *Revaluating Roman Cyprus: Local Identity on an Island in Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2021) examines the unique historical narratives of the island within the Roman world. She also investigates the display of, and responses to, Cypriot artefacts in museums, employing object-based learning techniques to engage diverse audiences. Her public engagement includes interactive displays, community-led talks, workshops, and collaborations with the Cypriot diaspora. Through her work, she fosters meaningful discussions on heritage, identity, and historical reception.

#### **Demetra Ignatiou**

Demetra Ignatiou is a curator, museologist and researcher working at the intersection of contemporary art, archaeology and archives. Demetra collaborates with museums, art institutions and local communities, in Cyprus and abroad, for exhibitions, public programs and publications. Through her practice she explores alternative ways of engaging and interacting with art and critical approaches to cultural production and interpretation. Her research evolves around cypro-centric approaches and the decolonization of exhibition practices and museum narratives. Recent curatorial projects include: "Cyprus Insula" (2024) at the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, "WE MET- LOVE, DEATH AND META" (2024) and "FIVE" (2023) at the Cyprus Museum, and "We can only begin to notice" (2023) at NiMAC.