

Europaeum bursary report: Oxford-Helsinki exchange 2019

The Europaeum programme enabled me to spend three wonderful weeks in Helsinki between 27.05 – 20. 06. 2019. In 2018, the classical languages department there started a five-year ERC-funded project building up a new digital grammar based on the language of primary documents written in Ancient Greek. These documents, found mainly in Egypt, date from between 300 BC and 800 A.D. My PhD is on a related area (using corpus linguistics to study the spelling of these texts), and I'd often wished I could meet and learn from the specialists there.

While in the department, I was looked after by Dr Sonja Dahlgren and Prof Marja Vierros. Both Sonja and Marja went out of their way to welcome me. I was lent a bike, given space in a shared office, and invited to approach them with questions at any time. They also regularly made time to have lunch with me to talk informally. I was there to work on my own research rather than contribute to the project, and I sometimes wondered whether the work I was doing could repay their kindness. Three weeks is not a long time, and in retrospect I wish I had more measurable goals for what wanted to achieve during the visit (e.g. a finished piece of writing), not least so that I could show my hosts hard evidence of how helpful the stay had been to me.

Nevertheless, I found my visit very productive in terms of how I think about my work. Throughout the period covered by the project, Greek in Egypt was in contact with spoken and written Egyptian, with some interruptions to how and how much Egyptian was written. Sonja specialises in the linguistics of this contact. She gave me helpful pointers on parallels between spelling patterns in Greek and Coptic, the last, alphabetic stage of written Egyptian. Seeing the relevance of Coptic, which I do not know, made me realise I was in danger of falling into an at best Eurocentric trap I am aware of and keen to avoid: of thinking of Greek as a European language even though large amounts of primary material come from North Africa and Asia, where there was more or less visible contact with local languages. In plainer words, I was guilty of ignoring the context of my material because it is complicated and traditionally covered by other fields. I have resolved to spend time asking to discuss my work with Egyptologists, and not expecting an easy ride.

Sonja's guidance was particularly interesting because her main thesis (that some spelling patterns in Egyptian Greek testify to phonological transfer from Egyptian) apparently contradicts mine (that the spelling of documents I look at suggest that writers' Greek literacy was high even in documents where it has been traditionally considered poor). In fact I think these positions are much less in tension than they look; explaining that (to do with what norms applied to writing, and what the language of surviving writing is evidence of) has now got more prominence in my thesis plan. Marja had helpful comments on linking spelling habits to scribal hands (something I find difficult to get my head round, so always good to be reminded of) and showed me round the digital platform the project has developed for annotating papyri. She also helped me arrange a meeting with the developer, Erik. This was a big boost to my own workflow, and I have continued using the tools since.

The friendliness extended beyond the department. Another reason I had wanted to visit Helsinki is that the English department strong tradition of historical corpus linguistics research. I met Dr Samuli Kailaniemi and had an interesting discussion about parallels in the difficulty of having a definition of "error" in papyri and deciding what a spelling mistake is in Early Modern English manuscripts, which editions more or less explicitly "correct". I also met Juha Aunesluoma of the Europaeum office in Helsinki. He mentioned that June is a good time to visit because scholars are still largely around, but teaching and exams are (largely) done.

I'd chosen June by chance, but I'd definitely agree it's a good time to come. As well as host scholars having more time, the length of the days means you can pack a lot in. If you do come in June and aren't used to it essentially not ever getting properly dark, be prepared to find it weird. It affects people differently: it didn't affect my ability to sleep, but I did mean I often simply forgot to go to bed because the cue wasn't there. I'd recommend setting a timer to remind yourself. Bring an eye mask if light disturbs your sleep.

As I understand the exchange to Helsinki is relatively new, I've put some practical info below. I'll wrap up the report by saying how positive an experience the trip was. The exchange helped me think about my work in new ways, and find connections with scholars in other disciplines. I was able to spend time learning from specialists whose work was very relevant to me, and who I would otherwise never have had a realistic prospect of getting to know. I also got to see how a different academic system operates, and see a social model whose assumptions of the public good were very different from discourse in the UK. Seeing the country you live in from the outside is always a useful thing, and it did not come off better from the comparison. I had a productive and deeply enjoyable time, and I'd warmly recommend an Europaeum exchange with Helsinki to anyone.

Practical info:

Accommodation: I stayed in university halls run by Unihome. The quality of the accommodation was excellent, far above anything I've ever seen offered to students in the UK, and better than a lot of non-student accommodation too. I'd say it's a good option – it's hard to find short-term accommodation elsewhere, and it was a good deal cheaper than say a room on AirBnB. YRent includes most things (including laundry and a sauna), but not, weirdly, linens. You will be able to rent these, but linens are often left behind by previous users and / or can be found in second-hand shop for less, so wait till you get there and see whether you need to before renting a pack. Unihome's communication can be a bit haphazard. Essentially, when you arrive, you have to arrange to pick up your keys from the main office, Töölö Towers, wherever you're staying. Other than that, keep your key on you at all times (self-closing doors, hefty lockout fee), take photos of any damage when you arrive, be prepared to do a thorough clean before you leave, and all will be fine.

Finland is not cheap, but as long as you don't go near any alcohol (if you want some, buy it in Estonia) the bursary should cover a budgeted 3-week stay. A month might be a push. In the summer, Helsinki's transport company, HSL, offers hire bikes (€30 for a season; free half-hour rides, modest charges past that). These are excellent value compared to bus / tram fares. Public transport was excellent. Fares are stacked against occasional users, so if you're going to use the bus, get a pass; app is cheapest. If you can borrow a bike, there's a bike repair point just by the Helsinki Central Library. Coach trips (e.g. OnniBus) and the ferry to Tallinn (advice on <https://herfinland.com/helsinki-tallinn-ferry>) are really affordable ways of sightseeing. As I learned, a day cruise to Tallinn leaves you with about 5 hours there: a bit too much time not to be bored in the old town (fascinating but absolutely tiny) and not quite enough to go and see a few things properly. I'd definitely recommend a hostel for the night to get more done.

I travelled overland from the UK. If you're interested in doing the same, there's a route through Sweden or up through Germany (<https://www.seat61.com/Finland.htm>). I took the Germany option (Finnlines ferry from Travemuende). Finnlines treat you well, but info can be lacking in advance: foot passengers clearly aren't their core business. Tips:

- The ferry terminal does not connect to Travemuende train station. You could walk, but it'd be on the verge on a port road with lots of goods traffic. You're better off taking a bus from Luebeck train station, where you'd have to change anyway. Cash ticket from the driver.
- The terminal at Travemuende has plenty of space to sit downstairs. There's a café (very meat-based, plate of good chips for a very reasonable price) and a wholesale alcohol shop. Check-in for foot-passengers won't start until about 11pm, so if chips can fit into your evening it's a good use of time.
- If you book a cabin, you book a *berth* in it rather than the whole thing. I think you can technically book a whole cabin, but that is... not a budget option. You don't technically have to book a berth – there are recliner seats and lockers much cheaper if you don't, and shared loos. The seats are comfortable. As it's a 30-hour crossing, I'm not sure the saving is worth it, particularly as you'd have to bring your own sleeping bag. There's a free sauna onboard. Deck space is limited.
- There's catering available on board. A coffee's not too expensive, but you're much better off bringing your own food. There's a bakery and small supermarket at Luebeck station. The info brochure says the tap water is drinkable, but most people I saw had brought their own too.
- If you can, download the HSL app and buy a ticket for your arrival in Helsinki before you set off from Travemuende. Disembarkation in Helsinki is relatively quick; if you set the ticket to start 15 minutes after scheduled arrival, you should have plenty of time left on the time slot to catch the bus. The ferry docks a bus-ride away from the first metro station. Internet at sea is available but truly extortionate. A paper single from the driver in Helsinki is possible, but again not much cheaper than a day ticket.