

Researcher:

**Dr. Thibaut Deviese –
Postdoctoral Researcher
in Archaeology**

Business:

Boots

Other partners:

**The Royal
Pharmaceutical Society
and the Petrie Museum**

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The project idea

Since his research was at the intersection between chemistry and archaeology, Thibaut had always felt attracted by the idea of working on multidisciplinary research projects. Therefore, when the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) opened a call for attending a 2-day workshop with the objective of helping early career researchers from different universities to create joint multidisciplinary research projects, he did not hesitate to apply for this opportunity. He got accepted and during the workshop he met with a pharmacist – Dr. Szu Wong – and a classicist – Dr. Jane Draycott –, who were both interested, like him, in studying the chemical composition, packaging and marketing of cosmetics from the past. Since the AHRC was offering grants for researchers attending the workshop who would have been able to develop a research proposal involving at least three different disciplines, Thibaut, Jane and Szu decided to initiate a collaboration and apply for this funding opportunity.

Based on their own specialism and interests, they identified Ancient Egypt, Ancient Rome and the Victorian Era as three interesting periods for their project. Ancient Egyptians are among the oldest known producers of cosmetics. Ancient Romans were famous for their cosmetic and medicinal products. The Victorian Era was also interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it was far enough from the other two periods in order to investigate continuity for the ingredients used in cosmetics. Secondly, Victorian drug manufacturers notoriously drew many insights and inspiration from Antiquity in the packaging and marketing of cosmetic/medicinal products.

One of the requirements for this AHRC scheme was to incorporate a component of impact and collaboration with non-academic organisations in the research proposal. Thibaut and his co-investigators reached out to different institutions that curate collections relevant to this project. They approached the Petrie Museum in London, hosting a collection of objects from Ancient Egypt and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS), hosting a collection that covers all aspects of British pharmacy history, from the 1400s up to the present day. The Roman objects came instead from the site of Naintré (France) that Thibaut had investigated during his PhD. They also reached out to the company Boots, to access its archive that traces the history of the company ▶

over almost 170 years, from when John Boot opened a small herbalist store in Nottingham in 1849 to the present day. This allowed them to study the classic influence in the products of the company. All the organisations that they contacted accepted to join and to support the project. They were excited about the opportunity to generate interest in and visibility for their collections and to leverage these for research purposes, given their respective organisational remits.

The support of these partners was crucial for the development of the project and their in-kind contributions (i.e. staff time to facilitate the access to the collections) and involvement gave a significant boost to the grant application. Thibaut and the other co-investigators had the opportunity to meet with the non-academic partners during the preparation of the grant application and look at the material they could study during the project. This allowed them to insert more details and more specific plans in the application. All three organisations also showed their interest and commitment to contribute to the project by providing support letters for the grant application.

Ultimately, this project on ancient cosmetics was one of those retained for funding by the AHRC. The £80,000 (the maximum that could be applied for) covered a full year of part time work for all three co-investigators and additional funds for all the activities related to the project (meetings, public engagement events, conference, etc.). After they got the grant, Thibaut, Szu and Jane met several times to establish the division of work and the overall plan for the project and then they reached out to each of their non-academic partners to select the objects to analyse and organise access to these. Several field trips and paperwork were needed to obtain the sampling authorisations for the RPS and Petrie collections. According to the original plan, Thibaut, Jane and Szu, analysed the composition of cosmetic products, studied their packaging and marketing materials and even recreated some of these ancient skin care products for the public engagement workshops. They developed interesting insights for their own disciplines as well as opening up new streams of knowledge and enquiry thanks to the multidisciplinary nature of their approach. Additionally, together with the project partners, they realised three family oriented workshops, a toolkit to reproduce similar workshops in the future, a multidisciplinary academic conference and an exhibition around the objects investigated.

During the project, Thibaut also developed a collaboration with Kew Botanic Gardens. This collaboration provided the

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opportunity

to compare the chemical compositions of ancient cosmetics with those of modern plants analysed in their laboratories.

More opportunities for collaborations emerged after the project thanks to meetings at the academic conference they organised and the social media coverage of their activities.

For example, a researcher from the University of Nottingham, Hannah O'Regan, saw tweets posted by the team about a bear-grease cosmetic container preserved in the RPS collection that they had analysed. Since her research includes the study of human-bear interactions from the Late glacial onward, she reached out to Thibaut. They are now collaborating on a radiocarbon dating project to study the disappearance of bears in the UK.

The collaboration officially ended in February 2018 but Thibaut is still in contact with the two co-investigators and with the non-academic partners. Several publications are upcoming thanks to this project and Thibaut, Szu and Jane also received invitations to speak at academic conferences. While the main focus right now is on publishing the findings of the completed project, Thibaut reckons that there is a keen interest from multiple sides to continue the collaboration and to apply for funds for further research activities.

Key benefits & challenges

Thibaut commented that this project not only satisfied his own passion and intellectual curiosity while applying his research skills on a topic of interest but also allowed him to develop new skills, particularly for project management as principal investigator. Additionally, he could exercise valuable communication and management skills that will help him deliver more impact work in the future, such as organizing creative interactive workshops for families, academic conferences and/or promoting findings through social media.

Thibaut found working with non-academic organisations very exciting because they have different priorities and methods of work. For example, Boots set up an archive in the company in order to preserve documents and objects related to its history. A researcher, however, often sees an archive as an opportunity to gather data about a research question that is not restricted to a single company and that can benefit the broader community. Moreover, Thibaut commented that academics can benefit from the invaluable knowledge of the curators and archivists in charge of preserving collections. In their case, working with the curators and archivists made data collection more efficient because they knew straight away where to find relevant objects to analyse and why they were a good sample for the study.

Another advantage of collaborating with a business as well as with other non-academic institutions was the development of new networks, which resulted in further collaborations and ideas for future research projects, and the exposure to different ways of thinking and approaching problems both in an academic and in a non-academic environment.

Gaining these benefits from the collaboration and completing the project successfully required the overcoming of some challenges. For example, Thibaut

had to divide his time between his postdoctoral research (for which he was technically employed full time) and this new part time research project on ancient cosmetics started thanks to the AHRC grant. It was challenging for him to reduce his involvement in his postdoctoral project without hampering its progress and at the same time have the flexibility needed to collaborate with collaborators from different institutions and facing similar issues. The challenges in terms of time management were also instrumental in making Thibaut realise that they probably had written a very ambitious application. In particular, he had underestimated the time and effort needed to carry out all the administrative duties connected to the project, which were necessary for the academic research to progress but were also taking time away from it.

Being the principal investigator of a multidisciplinary project also required Thibaut to understand the work habits, approaches and expectations of scholars from different fields and to reconcile them as best as possible. While this sometimes proved tricky, Thibaut felt that by leaving as much freedom as possible to each co-investigator and ensuring them the opportunity of publishing and presenting separately as well as together, in the end made the project work for all.

Finally, collaborating with non-academic organisations required Thibaut, Jane and Szu to learn how to present their project and progress in a way that was interesting and relevant for each partner and to understand and deal with their constraints. Being well aware of the different restrictions for each partner made it feasible to conduct rigorous research while respecting each collaborator's desires and constraints.

Advice for other researchers

Thibaut learnt many things from collaborating with other researchers and non-academic partners and was happy to share some insights with those interested in following a similar path. His main advice would be to put as much effort as necessary to understand the way of working and the approach to the project of each collaborator and to share expectations and constraints of each party with the rest of the team. This will be key in preventing or overcoming possible bottlenecks and issues. For example, Thibaut, Jane and Szu made sure that non-academic partners were immediately aware that they could only work on the project part time and that therefore progress might have been slow. At the same time, they paid a lot of attention in ensuring that they were creating benefits for each partner involved in the project. This reciprocal support and attention was instrumental in avoiding disappointment and frustration afterwards.

Another advice would be to be wise with time management

and planning because “no matter what the project is, you will work many more hours than you had planned, even to do fewer things than what you had in mind”. In particular, Thibaut signalled that it is important to keep in mind that planning and organising public engagement activities (e.g. conferences, workshops and exhibitions) requires a lot of time that should be accounted for in any proposal framework. Moreover, it might be helpful to set up mechanisms or tools, such as a WhatsApp group, to be able to communicate frequently with project partners or collaborators in an efficient way.

A final word of advice from Thibaut was that you need to be prepared that the project will not develop exactly as it did in your mind when you planned it and applied for the funding. You will need to grab the opportunities when they come and go beyond what you planned, putting in also extra work whenever necessary to get the job done. After all, the best surprises and opportunities generally come from unexpected turns.