



Tag: Hunterian Museum

Volunteering with EMOTIVE EU



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McKaila's Musings

Antonine Wall, Art, Artefacts, culture, Ebutius, Emotive, EU, Explorathon, Hunterian Museum, Museum, museum studies, Primary School, Roman, Verecunda, Volunteering

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On 30 September, 2017, I had the opportunity to volunteer with EMOTIVE EU as part of Explorathon 2017. EMOTIVE is an EU-funded research project (2016-2019) that uses emotional digital storytelling to improve how we experience cultural heritage (<http://emotiveproject.eu>). One of the two cultural sites of the project is the Antonine Wall exhibition at the Hunterian Museum (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/>) at the University of Glasgow. The Antonine Wall is a World Heritage site (<http://www.antoninewall.org>). It was built by the Romans ca. 142 CE and ran coast-to-coast across Scotland (from the Clyde to the Firth of Forth); it was the most northern frontier of the Roman Empire and was abandoned in the late 150s.

I worked with two groups of students from Castlemilk John Paul II Primary School. We discussed what life would have been like for a young girl named Verecunda, who was a Caledonian slave. This blog post is a summation of my notes throughout the day.

I had a great day — thank you to all facilitators, organizers, and volunteers for creating such a lovely atmosphere to work in! It was also great to meet Sara Perry, a fellow Canadian!

My first group with Verecunda was extremely lively and involved. I had two girls, named Lucy and Mercedes, and one boy, named Michael. They were attentive while Ann was giving an overview of Verecunda's story, and they were also eager to get started. I think that seeing all of the supplies and large papers got them excited. I asked them their thoughts on what activities Verecunda would be doing during her day. Both Lucy and Mercedes mentioned chores — cleaning, washing, etc. Michael suggested that she might be taking care of the farm animals. All three of them focussed more on writing than drawing on the paper, which I thought was interesting. We had a lively discussion and asked each other questions back and forth. Their questions to me started out as fairly simple: "How and with what did she clean? Did she have to take care of pigs? What was the Roman general like? What did their money look like?" Luckily, some of my background is in Classics/Roman history, so I was able to direct them towards some likely answers. As we got deeper into our conversation, more probing and complex questions were being asked as they became more invested in Verecunda's story: "Why is there slavery?" And my favourite question of the whole day was from Lucy: "Is Roman vs Caledonian identity similar here to how it is in Shakespeare's 'Boudicca'?" Luckily, I know my Shakespeare! I filled in the others as to the plot of 'Boudicca' so that we could discuss issues of identity.

Here is a link to the image on my personal Instagram account of this trio: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZoa7LyDxUU/?hl=en&taken-by=mckailaferguson>. I tagged the University of Glasgow, The Hunterian, and Emotive EU. I also used the hashtags that we discussed in our meeting.

My second group with Verecunda was also involved, but they had a different energy about them. It was made up of four boys, named Reese, Andrew, Cody, and William. They were quite chatty and appeared to be good pals. This group was interested in my Canadian accent, so we had a good chat about some Canadian and Glaswegian slang. Surprisingly, this group was very interested in Verecunda. They even mentioned that they liked this exercise more than the one with Ebutius that they just came from. These four drew pictures of everything that they talked about, as opposed to my first group that wrote everything down. They wondered if Verecunda and Ebutius were pals. They had many questions about animals and had a discussion about whether or not Verecunda would be in-charge of cleaning all of the weapons and armour, since she lived with the Roman general. Reese was particularly interested in what her house would have looked like. He spent the entire time drawing a very beautiful and detailed house, while still making sure he was contributing to the conversation. This group was keen on knowing more about Roman military history: "What were their weapons like? Who were they fighting?" Again, the questions quickly became more probing and complex: "Why did the Romans conquer other people? If Verecunda was a slave, why didn't she just escape?" This last question sparked quite the debate. Two of them thought that running away would have been her best bet because being a slave would be rubbish. The other two were trying to convince the group that she didn't have it that bad, and that staying with her new family would provide her with food and shelter. They thought that she would die very quickly after she escaped. All four of the boys travel quite often, so they wondered if Verecunda and her Roman family would travel up and down the wall.

Both groups really enjoyed this exercise. I tried not to answer their questions directly, but rather asked them questions about what they thought the answer might be. They seemed to enjoy this because they had freedom to be imaginative, creatively problem solve, and work together with their pals as a team. Interestingly, they didn't favour Ebutius' activity which involved technology. That made me wonder how much technology they have access to and use in their classrooms. Perhaps they enjoyed Verecunda because they could control every aspect of the conversation and use their own creativity to create a narrative? Both groups wanted a bit more time with Verecunda since we just started to scratch the surface.

Some suggestions based on comments that I received:

- It would be a good idea to have many more colours of pen/marker to choose from. Some of my kids got really caught up with the accuracy of the colours to what they were drawing.
- Having a bit more time to get into Verecunda's story some more. They were too eager to want to stop! Maybe having a performative element at the end would have been a nice wrap-up.
- The kids wanted some more details about her life. They also really loved how enthusiastic and entertaining Ann was, so having Ann say some more details about her life at the beginning would have helped.
- Near the end, the kids were interested in the Hunterian Museum. Perhaps having some time before or after the activity for them to roam around and see everything would be a good idea.

I got to work with Ebutius and the public during the afternoon, which was great! Before I followed the public around, I did the task myself. It was quite different from what I was anticipating. I had more control over the story than I thought I would. However, I found myself reading the screen the whole time and not looking at the objects as much as I should have. After I was done, I walked around again so I could see everything. The voice of Ebutius and the other characters were so great!

The people that I was following were university students or older. It was interesting to see if people decided to share a tablet with their partner/friend, or if they wanted their own. As soon as people put on the headphones and started the story, you could tell what their relationship to each other was instantly. I tried not to be super obvious that I was following them as I didn't want my presence to impact their experience.

Some comments that I received:

- A few groups wanted to be able to see their progress visually, perhaps in a small sidebar on the app. They wanted to know what they had decided, and how much they had left to do in a map form.
- The app was very user friendly and intuitive, but some older visitors wanted it to be a bit louder.
- They liked the varied lengths of the excerpts, with some being longer interspersed with a few shorter ones.
- As the person following everyone, it would be very helpful to have where the objects are located on the map. A simple highlight would do just fine!
- Some groups wanted to have a go around the exhibition before they started with the tablets, so that they could familiarize themselves with the space and objects. They didn't know about the Antonine Wall at all, and felt like they were thrown into this story with no context. One of the groups attended a MUSE tour of the exhibition a few weeks ago and thought that this exercise was a great compliment to the tour, since they had some context and information on which to build Ebutius' story.

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