New Archaeological Research Network for Integrating Approaches to Ancient Material Studies - NARNIA

NARNIA is the acronym of the project entitled New Archaeological Research Network for Integrating Approaches to Ancient Material Studies which is an Initial Training Network that falls under the Marie Sklodowska Curie Actions and is funded by the 7th Framework Program. NARNIA is an interdisciplinary project which combines archaeology with the natural sciences and takes advantage of the possibilities offered by a great variety of analytical techniques in order to study archaeological material from the Eastern Mediterranean.

The scope of the project is to offer the twenty fellows that receive a full and generous scholarship through European funding, the best possible training in archaeological sciences and analytical techniques applied to the study of ancient materials and thus improve their prospects of employment and career development in the future. At the same time we sincerely believe that our fellows, through their research, will make significant contributions to the history and archaeology of the Eastern Mediterranean basin, a region of great historical, cultural and geopolitical significance. Thanks to this Marie Sklodowska Curie Action we have been able to offer sixteen, three-year doctoral fellowships and four two-year post-doctoral fellowships at a time that many European countries are coming face to face with high unemployment levels.

The results of the research that is being carried out by the fellows and the members of the scientific board of the project have already started to appear in prestigious scientific journals and some have been widely disseminated through the media.

The project begun to take form in 2009 when a former student of mine, Dr Maria Dikomitou, who had just finished her doctoral research participated in a workshop organized by the University of Cyprus to inform the academic community about European funded projects. We worked together to put down the initial framework of the program and then we contacted colleagues with whom we had collaborated in the past in order to finalize the proposal. Eventually we formed the consortium of the NARNIA project which consists of nine partners from six different countries. They are the University of Cyprus who also acts as the coordinator, University College London, the University of Sheffield, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the Université Paris-Ouest, the Hashemite University, the National Centre for Scientific Research “Demokritos”, and two private enterprises G.M EUROCY INNOVATIONS LTD and Thetis Authentics LTD. With the input of all the partners we submitted our proposal which focuses on the interdisciplinary study of ancient ceramics, glass, metals, architecture and building decoration (mainly mosaics and wall paintings), as well as on techniques of dating and chemical analysis of ancient materials.

The competition for these programs is fierce. Our proposal was one of 862 that were submitted in 2009. Out of the 862 only 63 were approved for funding and ours received both the highest rating and the largest budget, which comes to 4.6 million euros, with 100% financing from the Research Executive Agency (REA). Thus NARNIA was and perhaps still is the largest funded project ever to be granted by the REA to Cyprus. The University of Cyprus is not only a small university but also a very young
university but this does not mean that it cannot compete and achieve to get funding from European programs. A number of members of the faculty of UCY have won different types of Marie Curie programs but also ERC programs which are even more competitive and therefore very prestigious. Through European funding the University of Cyprus has been able to build and enhance its infrastructure in laboratories and equipment. Also we have been able to build research teams with new scholars who finally have the opportunity to continue their research in Cyprus. With the current dire economic crisis the budget of UCY which is a state university has had to be reduced greatly. Thus it is now even more important and crucial that we try and get European funding to continue our research but also to open new positions for young scholars.

Without the funding we received it would have been impossible to undertake such a large scale research project. The funding covers the monthly salaries of the fellows but also the expenses needed to do their research (university fees, use of laboratory facilities, consumables etc). More importantly the budget includes generous funding for travel so that our students can move around the institutions of the network and thus have access to the laboratory facilities and expertise not only of the University where they are enrolled but also those of the other partners. There is also funding for them to participate in international conferences where they present their work but also have the opportunity to meet scholars from all over their world and thus built their own network of collaborations.

Part of the budget is also used by the partners to organize training courses for the fellows. In the first three years of its life the NARNIA project has organized 22 training courses. Many of the training courses were carried out in the different laboratories of the partnership and introduced our fellows to all the necessary analytical techniques for the mineralogical, chemical, micro-structural and physical characterization of archaeological materials. Other training courses took place outside in the field or in museum storerooms. They included fieldtrips and site visits in Cyprus, Greece and Jordan from where the bulk of the ancient artifacts under study derive. Most of the courses were open to graduate students and professionals (archaeologists, geologists, tourists guides etc) outside the consortium and thus they were able to benefit as well from the training opportunities that we offered our students.

The NARNIA project will come to an end in November 2014 but we sincerely hope that its legacy will have a long lasting effect. The twenty fellows of the project will certainly continue to do cutting edge research and investigate further the archaeology and history of the Eastern Mediterranean through a multidisciplinary approach as they have been so well trained to do.

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