



DR MATTHEW NICHOLLS - BIOGRAPHY

Dr Matthew Nicholls was in conversation with the University of Reading's Open Online Course Team

It's difficult to pin-point when I first became fascinated in the Romans. When I started learning Latin at the age of eight, my first lessons consisted of colouring in these magnificent pictures of Roman soldiers, and of course, ancient Rome is a rich source material for so many films, plays and

books. I particularly liked the Asterix comics and although the Romans were technically the baddies, I was captivated by them. They had better organisation, better buildings, better costumes – an all-round better deal than Asterix and the Gauls. As you'll see in the course, Roman buildings and technology is still very much something I enjoy researching and talking about.

When I first visited Rome as a teenager, I remember being swept up in the layer-on-layer of history of this beguiling city. We'll be looking at the classical period but there's also the late antique, medieval, renaissance, baroque, 19th century, fascist 20th century....all birds of passage flying across this huge historical landscape. It was impossible not to be transfixed by this vast city of grand monuments - buildings which held thousands of Romans cheering gladiatorial combats, where celebrated and feared emperors plotted the expansion of their empire, and where their subjects worshipped the gods. It's been a great pleasure to dedicate my life's career – first at the University of Oxford and then the University of Reading – to exploring such spectacular architecture.

Students often ask me to choose my favourite building in ancient Rome - an impossible task. There's now video evidence of me (in this very course!), stating the Pantheon is my favourite edifice, and it's certainly one the Romans greatest architectural achievements – the perfect half dome, the vast columns created from single blocks of Egyptian granite and the riot of coloured marble inside. But there's plenty of unusual sites not on the tourist trail – the Roman apartment blocks under the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul come to mind, where you can walk into a surviving Roman courtyard. And if I was to go back in time to see a building in all its spectacular glory, I would choose the library in Forum of Trajan, ancient Rome's libraries being a particular research interest of mine and the subject of my PhD.

I recall being on a research trip and wondering how to convey appearance and function of these remarkable structures. I found the 3D modelling

programme SketchUp and the rest is history. What I love about the 3D model is you can place yourself in the centre of this vast, ancient city and explore this unfamiliar world from any angle. A digital model is editable, flexible, navigable, transmissible, sharable and therefore potentially more powerful. I now teach my students at Reading how to make these models as part of their degree studies. I should add here, that I have a natural affinity and interest in digital tools and I'm also the Director of our open online courses project at the University of Reading (which is why it was high time I created my own course on FutureLearn!).

Rome wasn't built in a day and neither was my model. Drawings thousands of buildings took a long time and although improved software has made this process more manageable, every stone, slab and structure has been backed up by historical evidence. Ancient Rome was a complex, multi-layered place and that's why there is lots of emphasis in this course on how we know what we know. You'll see the evidence such as coins, inscriptions and marble map that I used as I tried to get a full sense of the city and to make my model historically accurate.

I've built this model here at Reading over the last ten years, and am delighted to bring it to a public audience for the first time to illuminate Rome in this course.