

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION / PROJECT / CONFERENCE

**Expedition/Project/
Conference Title:** 'BioMalPar XVIII: biology and pathology of the malaria parasite'
conference

Travel Dates: 22nd-26th May 2022
Heidelberg, Germany

Location: Alíz Owolabi

Group member(s):

Aims: 1) to give an oral presentation about my PhD work
2) to network with the malaria research community
3) to identify career opportunities

Photography consent form attached: Yes
(please refer to your award letter) No

OUTCOME (a minimum of 500 words):

The 'BioMalPar XVIII: biology and pathology of the malaria parasite' (BioMalPar) conference took place in the renowned European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) Heidelberg, Germany on 22nd-26th May 2022. This is an annual international conference for malaria researchers, with 3-500 attendees each year. I attended with my supervisor Sarah Reece and my labmate and fellow PhD student Catherine Oke.

The conference was of immensely high quality – presenters included respected academics from my own field (malaria disease ecology), such as Silvia Portugal, Ana Rivero and Nicole Mideo. As much of malaria research is focussed on molecular biology, it was incredibly useful for me to hear the latest unpublished research findings of the aforementioned leaders in my own subfield. All scientific talks were presented in one session (no parallel sessions), which I appreciated, as this allowed all attendees to experience the same material and we were able to discuss all of the talks afterwards. Moreover, the organisation of the conference was seamlessly done by EMBL. Both lunch and dinner were provided every day, the food being freshly cooked by chefs on site. One night we had a barbeque and a live band came to play as we danced under the open air May evening. Another evening we had a Science pub quiz, where we formed groups with our newly made friends. The poster sessions were very friendly and engaging. This was a very light-hearted and joyful conference overall.

I have previously attended BioMalPar in 2020 and 2021, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both of these were held online. This edition of BioMalPar was special for several reasons.

Firstly, being able to attend on site gave me networking opportunities that simply were not present in the online context. In the breaks between talks, during the meals, during the poster sessions and at the organised social events I mentioned, I was able to meet new junior researchers (postdocs and fellow PhD students) from Sweden, Germany, Denmark, United Kingdom, United States, Portugal and Italy, to name a few. Through knowing these new friends, I was able to approach them when they were together with their supervisors, thus having a more informal way of meeting senior academics (e.g. by having dinner together). I made one connection with a PhD student from Denmark (Kasper Bjornsson), who I was already able to meet again at another conference I attended in August. I also

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

spent time with a former colleague of mine from Edinburgh (Eleanor Silvester), who now works in Cambridge. Through Eleanor, I got to know her whole lab, who all attended the conference, and her supervisor Julian Rayner. We all got along very well and have aligned research interests, therefore I am considering joining the Rayner group for my postdoc. This development in my career outlook would not have been possible without attending the conference, in person!

Secondly, at BioMalPar 2022 my abstract was selected for a 10-minute talk + 5 minutes of Q&A. This was a huge opportunity, seeing as previously I had only given online poster presentations at BioMalPar, which had very low attendance (1-3 people came to talk on the online platform). In contrast, this time my talk was heard by hundreds of people who attended the conference and I even got 3-4 questions after the talk, which I was happy to have answered skilfully. What's more, one of the senior academics I mentioned (Ana Rivero) came over to talk to me about my research after the talk and suggested an experiment idea, which I am now considering as future directions of my PhD. Importantly, I had never presented this specific piece of work to anybody outside my lab and thesis committee. Hearing my colleagues' questions and reactions will be indispensable for my writing of the publication about this research.

I am incredibly grateful to the James Rennie Bequest for sponsoring my travel to this conference. It was truly a milestone in my scientific career through the network of academics I got to know and the exposure my research received, both of which will serve me for many years to come.