

Excavations at Vagnari 2013

By excavating and exploring the buildings and manufacturing provisions in this central settlement (*vicus*) of a Roman imperial estate near the Via Appia in Apulia in south-east Italy, we are gaining rare insight into both the economic role of a settlement servicing imperial landholdings in the surrounding countryside and the range of specialist crafts and industries practiced by the resident manpower from the 1st to the 4th centuries A.D. (Fig. 1).

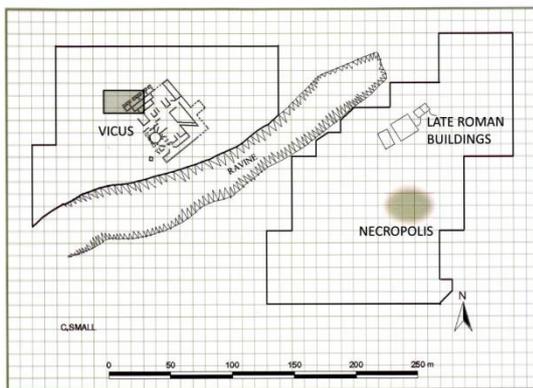


Fig. 1 Plan of the Roman *vicus* at Vagnari, based partially on resistivity and magnetometry surveys. The Sheffield excavations are in the area highlighted by a grey rectangle; south of the ravine is the Roman necropolis. Plan by C. Small.

Sheffield's fieldwork at Vagnari in 2013 concentrated on the northern edge of the *vicus* in and around the North Building, a long tile-roofed structure consisting of a series of rooms and corridors with plastered and painted walls of daub and with both beaten earth and mortar floors (Fig. 2). A resistivity survey conducted in 2006/2007 suggested the outlines of this structure, but only excavation has clarified essential questions of building design, layout, appointment and chronology. The eastern end of the building remains to be explored.

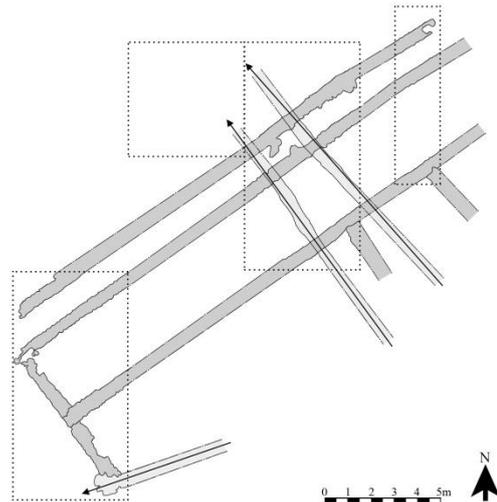


Fig. 2 Vagnari, 2013. Plan of the trenches in and around the North Building on the northern edge of the *vicus*. The linear features with arrows in them indicate stone-built drains. Plan by F. Taccogna and J. Boffey.

A current total of three stone drains ran beneath the North Building carrying quantities of waste and/or water from an unknown structure up-slope to the south that may represent industrial or residential habitation (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 Vagnari, 2013. The Sheffield team excavating walls and stone drains in and around the North Building.

Evidence for the production of building ceramics, for metal working, lead processing, and possible glass manufacturing in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. has been retrieved. The different types of floors and paving

suggest that different industrial or commercial activities, including storage of goods, may have taken place in the various rooms of the building. Particularly interesting finds from 2013 are the pieces of ceramic tiles with a vitrified surface (Fig. 4). These tiles might either have been misfired in a tile kiln at temperatures that were too high, or they could have been used in constructing a glass kiln and became vitrified when temperatures reached the intensity required to produce glass (materials analysis Caroline Jackson). In the coming months, scientific analysis of these materials will enable an informed assessment of the sourcing of raw materials for the estate and the economic implications of industry in Roman Italy.



Fig. 4 Piece of ceramic tile with a vitrified, bubbly surface.

Understanding the consumption of imported commodities is an important aspect of the project, the pottery vessels thus far assembled pointing to trade contacts with North Africa, Albania, and other regions in Italy (pottery analysis by David Griffiths). The pottery and coins found on site suggest that the excavated building dates at least to the 2nd century A.D. and that it was dismantled or abandoned in the latter part of the 4th century (coin analysis by David Wigg-Wolf). Residual pottery of the 2nd and

1st centuries B.C. and a coin (*victoriatu*s) of the late 3rd century B.C. suggest that the imperial *vicus* was not the first settlement on the site, but no actual structures of an earlier age have been identified as yet.

Important evidence for agricultural activities also has been uncovered, with charred and desiccated botanical remains surviving in a hearth, in floors, pit and drain fills, and other deposits. Chaff and grains from cereal species were identified, including free-threshing bread wheat and durum wheat, oat, einkorn, and barley (archaeobotanical analysis by Matthew Stirn; for a brief report on the archaeobotany, see http://www.romansociety.org/fileadmin/documents/pdf/M_Carroll_2013.pdf).

It was clear also that wheat chaff was mixed with clay to create a malleable and stable material from which to make daub walls; the collapsed, burnt daub spread over the floor of a room in the North Building had the negative impressions of this and other vegetal remains preserved in it. The combination of cereal grains and chaff within the building imply that a range of agricultural activities took place here, and the combination of the attested crops suggests that the occupants made a variety of products.

All these strands of evidence contribute to an understanding of elite involvement in the exploitation of the environment and control over labour, as well as the impact of the estate on the Apulian landscape.

Parallel excavations in the cemetery of the village are being conducted by Tracy Prowse (McMaster University), and at a contemporary villa at San Felice by Hans

vanderLeest (Mt. Allison University) and Myles McCallum (St. Mary's University). The cemetery, in particular, offers the rare chance to study the population engaged in industry, both slave and free, especially important, given the current evidence from the *vicus*. In 2014/2015, for example, the Roman lead artefacts and manufacturing debris will be studied in preparation for a collaborative project investigating the effects of childhood lead exposure by comparing the lead in artefacts from the settlement with the lead in the teeth of skeletons in the cemetery.

This interdisciplinary research in and around Vagnari is well on its way to making a significant and innovative contribution to an historical, social, and scientific understanding of life and death in a region that once was well connected to the capital of the Roman empire.



Fig. 5 Vagnari, 2013. The *vicus* excavation team. From left: Sharnvir Dhillon, Lindsay Mitchell, James Platt, Mark Mason, Maureen Carroll, Franco Taccogna, Florence Douglas, Courtenay Crichton-Turley, Sam Bromage, Jonathan Boffey, Jak Martin, Otis Gilbert, Catherine Kendall (Jonathan Moulton, not shown).

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