Excavations at Vagnari 2018
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Our excavations at the Roman Imperial estate at Vagnari in Puglia since 2012 (Carroll 2014) have concentrated on the north-western edge of the central settlement (vicus) of a vast Roman agricultural estate (Fig. 1).

Various structures for the processing and storage of produce from the estate lands have been excavated, and these include a winery or cella vinaria with large dolia inserted into the winery floor. The vicus buildings were in use primarily in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. (Fig. 2), but more recent exploration has shown that the Imperial vicus is likely to have been installed in the early 1st century A.D. as a successor to a settlement established in the 2nd century B.C. This Republican settlement at Vagnari may be the result of the seizure of land by powerful senatorial families from Rome who, as Appian (Civil Wars 1.7–8) tells us, grew rich in the 2nd century by colonising areas following the Roman conquest of southern Italy. The primary focus of fieldwork in summer 2018 was to clarify the chronology and nature of this predecessor settlement and to investigate its transformation into a property owned by the Roman emperor. The following is a brief preliminary report on that work.

THE REPUBLICAN SETTLEMENT – 2ND TO LATE 1ST CENTURY B.C.

Rome’s aggressive campaigns in Italy—against independent Italic groups and against Rome’s rival, Carthage—culminated in the 3rd century in the annexation of the territories of southern Italy reaching to the Adriatic Sea. The indigenous Iron Age inhabitants of Apulia whose territory bordered on the Adriatic, the Peuceti, had been an independent and wealthy population, but their primary settlement at Botromagno was sacked by the Romans in 306 B.C., and from the 3rd century life ceased here, at least temporarily, as archaeological evidence indicates (Small 2011: 16). Disruption and abandonment appear to have been the case at other smaller Peucetian settlements in the vicinity as well, as recent fieldwork at Jazzo Fornasiello and on the San Felice plateau indicates (Lambrugo and Pace 2017: 36–37; Depalo 2017). Field survey by Alastair and Carola Small in 2000 had suggested that occupation had also ceased on the Vagnari plateau in the 3rd century, and this is supported by our excavations (Small 2011: 16).

The attested resuscitation of occupation at Vagnari in the 2nd century B.C. is particularly important, as it reveals something about post-conquest recovery and the changing dynamics of land use in this part of Apulia. In the region, the picture of renewed occupation in some areas is suggested also by the building of a new Roman villa on the ruins of Botromagno in the second half of that century, as well as by the contemporaneous establishment of a Roman villa built over earlier remains of structures at Monte Irsi in western Apulia (Small 2011: 19–20). On the San Felice plateau above Vagnari, a terrace
villa was established by the mid-1st century B.C. (McCallum et al. 2011: 36). The people driving this new ‘wave’ of occupation were the Romans.

The Republican settlement at Vagnari is indicated by the presence of circular storage pits cut into the natural clay and chalk which had been used secondarily to dispose of animal bones, loom weights, iron objects, and pottery, including perfume flasks and grey gloss plates and cups, the latter dating from the 2nd to the mid-1st century B.C. (Prowse and Carroll 2017: 330–331). Loom weights appear in some quantities also in other deposits that stratigraphically belong to this period (Fig. 3). A ceramic vessel (dolium) was inserted into one of these pits, and it had been back-filled with pottery, including grey gloss plate fragments, charcoal, and iron objects (Fig. 4). Furthermore, grey gloss pottery of the second half of the 2nd and the 1st centuries B.C. was retrieved immediately above the natural soil. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to assign any surviving structural remains to this phase of occupation.

The Early Imperial Vicus

Possibly after a hiatus of a few decades, the settlement experienced extensive building activity and was enlarged, as attested by the stone-built walls uncovered on the site. The earliest walls were well constructed of rectangular limestone blocks of varying sizes, with the interior of these walls skimmed with plaster (Fig. 5). Where present, the ceramics in the construction trenches of these walls point to a date in the early first century A.D. All walls had a SW-NE orientation; this was adhered to in all later phases and enlargements of the buildings. Several stone-built drains were associated with the early Roman structures. Throughout the 1st century A.D., alterations were made to the buildings, with new walls cutting through drains and some of the earliest walls robbed out for material to be used in the construction of other buildings or additions to them.

Twelve circular or ovoid storage pits dug into the natural soil are attested in this period, the earliest of them probably dating to the beginning of the 1st century A.D., although they continued to be dug throughout the century. Most of them were laid out in alignment along the walls of the buildings.
In general, the ceramic evidence gives us a good indication that the period in which new buildings with stone foundations were erected in the *vicus* is the period of the reign of Augustus in the early part of the 1st century A.D. It is likely that it is in this phase that the emperor acquired the land, expanded it, and began to profit from the revenues from the estate. Roof tile fragments stamped with the name of an Imperial slave (Grati Caesaris) responsible for tile production make it clear that the estate at Vagnari was owned by the emperor; another tile stamp, probably of Augustan date, at Botromagno names the emperor (CAESARAUG) (Small et al. 2003). Thus, the emperor appears to have been amassing properties in the region at this time.

**THE IMPERIAL VICUS IN THE 2ND AND 3RD CENTURIES A.D.**

In the late 1st or, more likely, the early 2nd century A.D., the *vicus* underwent substantial alteration that reflects an intensified period of agricultural and industrial productivity.

An important addition to the *vicus* now was the *cella vinaria*, indicating indirectly that vineyards were part of the Imperial exploitation of the landscape and that the production of wine was a staple of the estate economy (Carroll 2016; Carroll and Prowse 2016: 333). In 2018, the *dolia* in the *cella vinaria* were the subject of a study (Università di Palermo) on the place of manufacture of these enormous storage vessels and another (Bradford University) on the residues preserved in them (Fig. 6) (as yet unpublished).

These *dolia*, with a capacity of several hundred litres of wine, rather excitingly, were not locally produced, but were manufactured in the area around Rome (including southern Latium), according to the analysis of the volcanic clay of which they were made. They must have been transported from kilns in Latium to Vagnari on the orders of the emperor, possibly by sea (for greater ease of transport) around the southern part of the Italian peninsula, to set up his new winery. The pine pitch with which the *dolia* were lined, for the preservation and purity of the wine, unfortunately did such a good job that the wine did not penetrate into the fabric of the vessels, so there was no chemical signature in the clay to indicate the presence of wine in them. The pitch lining, however, according to Roman agricultural writers, is absolutely typical of wine storage; there is, therefore, no doubt that this commodity was stored in the *dolia*.

![Fig. 6 One of the wine *dolia* in the *cella vinaria* (Photo M. Carroll).](image)

As in past years, evidence for considerable lead processing and iron working was retrieved in 2018. Lead smelting debris, lead scrap (Fig. 7), and manufactured items such as lead weights were found in the deposits of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. (see also Prowse and Carroll 2015: 324–325).

Various alterations and enlargements to the *vicus* buildings were carried out in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the walls of this period being constructed with big, unhewn chunks of the natural conglomerate rock and bonded together with clay and sometimes white mortar (Fig. 8). All these walls retained the SW-NE orientation of the earlier buildings, and several of them abutted older walls or were partly built on the lower courses of earlier walls.

Whilst excavation and survey data retrieved in the early 2000s provided no evidence for any form of
luxury in the *vicus* in this phase, the last three years of the Sheffield excavations have seen the repeated retrieval of sometimes quite large pieces of grey-veined and white marble floor or wall panels (*opus sectile*) as well as pieces of large window panes.

This evidence, as well as a very few pieces of ceramic segmental tiles used to construct columns, suggests that the *vicus* buildings in the north-west part of the site were not as mean or of such low status as we might have imagined at one time.

**THE LATE ROMAN VICUS AND THE END OF THE SETTLEMENT**

By the middle of the 3rd century, the winery appears to have gone out of use, and the *dolia* were either removed completely or smashed into pieces. Some of the *dolia* may, of course, have been reused elsewhere, for which we have no evidence in this part of the site. The southern and eastern walls limiting the *cella vinaria* were at least partially dismantled, perhaps around this time, leaving ‘ghost’ trenches behind (Fig. 9).

The roofed room to the east of the winery suffered severely in a catastrophic event, the entire roof collapsing on the floors and deposits below. Whether this event was, perhaps, a fire, we cannot say for certain, but there were dense pockets of ash and burning in places under the tile collapse. The ceramics and the coins suggest that the collapse and subsequent robbing out of walls took place in the late 3rd or early 4th century A.D. Interestingly, in several places running roughly parallel to dismantled walls were individual post-holes cut into the underlying chalk, which we interpret as the remains of scaffolding erected by a demolition crew.
to remove stone from the walls from top to bottom (Fig. 10).

Perhaps parts of the buildings remained in place, if ruinous, until the late 4th and 5th centuries, since some of the pottery from late disturbance deposits dates to this period. Presumably the Imperial vicus served as a stone quarry for the new village or hamlet now established on the other side of the ravine and inhabited into the 7th century A.D. (Small 2011: 29–34).

THE SITE: CHRONOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The excavated evidence confirms renewed settlement activity after the devastations of the expansionist campaigns of Rome in southern Italy and after the war between Rome and Carthage in the 3rd century B.C. In the 2nd century, not only

Fig. 10 Post-hole probably from scaffolding erected to dismantle the wall in the late 3rd or early 4th c. (Photo M. Carroll).

Fig. 11 Plan of the excavated remains at Vagnari vicus 2012-2018 (Plan F. Taccogna).
Vagnari, but also other sites show revival, possibly as a result of the (not always lawful) acquisition and exploitation of Roman public land (ager publicus) by powerful elites and senatorial families from Rome.

By the late 1st century B.C., some of these landowners and supporters of Augustus may have bequeathed their property to the emperor, as there is hardly any evidence that emperors acquired properties through purchase (Chelotti 2007: 171–172; Small 2011: 20; Maiuro 2012). Vagnari could well have been one of the properties that entered Imperial hands through inheritance.

The evidence indicates that in the early 1st century A.D., new buildings with well-built walls were erected and the settlement was substantially enlarged. It is likely the vicus became the administrative and distributive centre of an Imperial estate in this period.

By the early 2nd century, at the latest, the winery was added to the vicus, the basins for the dolia having cut through two stone drains of the 1st century A.D. and making them obsolete. The winery was probably in operation until the middle of the 3rd century. Although this particular cella vinaria was demolished, it is not impossible that another similar room was laid out somewhere else on the site, with production of wine continuing.

Much building activity took place in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, largely for what appears to be functional structures for processing crops, working metals, and possibly storage, but the end of the 3rd century or the beginning of the 4th, at least the north-west corner of the vicus had fallen into disrepair and was dismantled. The process of salvaging useful building stone from the vicus carried on in the late 4th and 5th centuries A.D.

Our work in 2018, therefore, has shed light not only on the Republican and Imperial phases of occupation at Vagnari, but also on the end of the settlement and the robbing and final destruction of it. The excavation, in conjunction with earlier survey work, give us a more complete picture of phases of occupation, changes in landscape use, and historical connections.

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PROJECT WEBSITE:
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/archaeology/research/vagnari