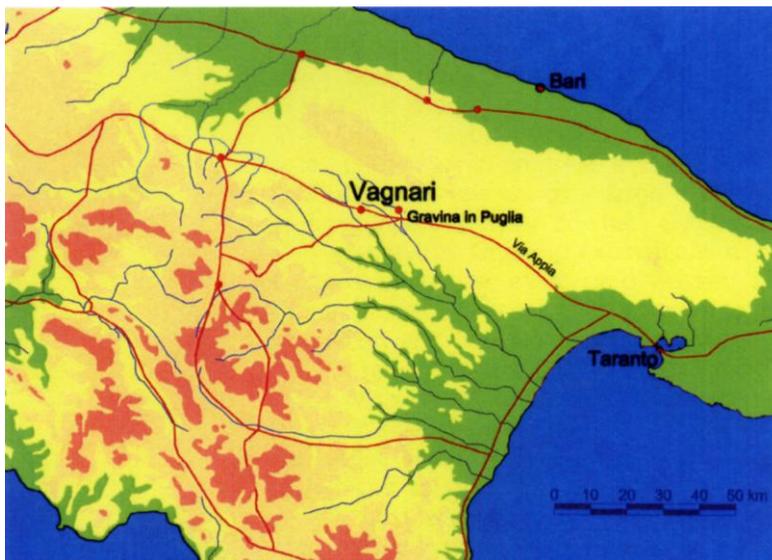


INVESTIGATING THE ROMAN IMPERIAL ESTATE AT VAGNARI (PUGLIA)

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The countryside around Vagnari in ancient Apulia was acquired as an imperial estate by the Roman emperor in the early 1st c. A.D., as the surveys and analysis of collected material by Alastair and Carola Small suggest. Since the Roman conquest of south-east Italy in the 2nd c. B.C., this territory had been linked to Rome by one of the main ancient roads, the *Via Appia*. The core of the estate at Vagnari consisted of a village (*vicus*), an associated cemetery, and a nearby residential complex (of the estate manager?). Although both the cemetery and the estate manager's site have been and still are the object of excavations by Canadian colleagues, very little of the imperial *vicus* had been excavated. A geophysical survey of the *vicus* indicated, however, that this site was large and complex and certainly of great potential for long-term archaeological research. A first season of fieldwork in the settlement, therefore, was conducted in July 2012 by the University of Sheffield under the direction of Maureen Carroll.



Map of south-east Italy, indicating the location of the settlement at Vagnari on the *Via Appia*. The territory of the imperial estate may have been vast.

Because so few imperial properties in Italy have been investigated, especially with this intensity, a new detailed and systematic programme of archaeological excavation and analysis in the main settlement (*vicus*) was initiated to understand:

- the role of this imperial estate in the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the region;
- the nature, origins and social complexity of the population of the *vicus* and vicinity;
- the contribution of a nucleated imperial property and its inhabitants to cultural change in Apulia.



Excavation of the walls of a building on the northern edge of the *vicus*. They appear just below the plough-soil.

The Sheffield excavations concentrated on a building on the northern edge of the *vicus* where geophysics had revealed what appeared to be a row of small cells, in order to clarify whether the rooms were used as slave quarters, storage rooms, or even stables. Surface-collected stamped tiles indicate that slaves were involved in running the estate, although it is likely that also freedmen and free-born tenants lived and worked here. Contrary to the impression gained by the resistivity survey of this area, however, the excavations have shown that the building did not consist of small cell-like rooms. Some of the 'walls' showing up in the resistivity survey were revealed as steeply-inclined stone drains running beneath our building, thereby altering our understanding of its internal structure. These drains must have carried considerable quantities of waste and/or water from an unknown structure up-slope, and they give tantalising glimpses of possible industrial or residential habitation nearby. The pottery and coins found on site suggest that the excavated building dates to the 1st or 2nd century A.D. and that it was dismantled or abandoned in the latter part of the 4th century.



The excavations revealed that some 'walls' detected in the resistivity survey were, in fact, stone-built drains (left and right) running beneath the building on the northern edge of the *vicus*.

Substantial evidence was retrieved in and around this building for metal-working, especially with lead, but also iron and bronze. Numerous roughly torn and cut pieces of metals taken from other objects, such as pipes, vessels and tools were excavated, suggesting that metal was being re-cycled and reduced to a fragmentary state for smelting and re-working. Glass slag was also retrieved, suggesting, for the first time at Vagnari, that glass might have been produced in the *vicus*. Evidence also for agricultural production was found in a hearth associated with the excavated building, the charred remains indicating that macaroni wheat was cultivated as a cereal crop on the estate. This data is important because records for charred plant remains recovered from contemporary deposits at other sites in the region are extremely sparse, and at Vagnari virtually non-existent until now.

With the financial support of the Hugh Last and Donald Atkinson Funds, we were able to fund the work of a ceramics specialist, David Griffiths (University of Leicester), to examine and analyse the excavated pottery from the *vicus* and the cemetery. Pottery of the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C., in the form of regional grey and Campanian black glaze wares, indicates that activities began here much earlier than the establishment of the imperial estate, although it cannot be determined as yet what kind of occupation was present on the site.



An almost complete grey glaze bowl of the 1st or 2nd c. B.C. was recovered from a context of the 2nd c. A.D. The use and/ or deposition of this vessel at such a late date is particularly interesting.

The first season of excavations at Vagnari *vicus* produced a useful and diagnostic assemblage of pottery of the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D. Even though the inhabitants of the *vicus* were of a relatively low-status, a broad range of regionally produced and foreign imported products was present. These included Italian and North African transport amphorae; regional and Albanian domestic storage cook wares; and fine local and imported table wares (including Italian *terra sigillata* from southern and northern Italy and African Red Slip wares). Further detailed analysis of regional

products from well stratified deposits at the *vicus* in the coming seasons may indicate periods of local and regional productive and economic growth. A detailed study of the pottery from the *vicus* can be utilised to investigate aspects of production, trade and exchange on local, regional and international levels.

One of the most important aspects of the pottery from the cemetery is the presence of complete and well-dated vessels, both imported and local products and ceramic lamps, such material being very useful in identifying and dating more fragmentary ceramics from the *vicus*. Furthermore, the choice of vessels for the grave and the intentional breakage of some of them before deposition also give us insight into burial rituals and the meaning and importance of certain artefacts to the deceased.

Fieldwork in 2013 will focus on the exploration of the new evidence for industrial activity and domestic habitation, with a possible nearby kiln (tile or pottery?) also being investigated. The connection between industrial production and domestic habitation is of significant interest and importance in understanding living and working conditions in the *vicus*. Further retrieval of materials for scientific analysis will enable an informed assessment of the sourcing of raw materials and the socio-economic implications of manufacturing. An exploration of the agricultural management of the estate lands also will help us understand elite involvement in the exploitation of the environment and the impact of the estate on the Apulian landscape.

The stable isotope and DNA analysis of the skeletal sample from the cemetery, conducted by Tracy Prowse (McMaster University), has indicated the mainly local origin of the population, but 20% of the inhabitants of the *vicus* were born in places such as North Africa and East Asia. The influx of such people of diverse origin must have changed the cultural and ethnic identity of the area considerably. The ceramics also point to regional and foreign trade and exchange. Thus, the material culture and the physical remains of the inhabitants of the *vicus* and its territory underscore the connectedness of the estate with the highest social echelons of Rome and with other, more distant, parts of the Roman world, even though Vagnari today languishes as a rural idyll in splendid isolation.

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