Background
The settlement of Vagnari in Apulia can be dated by the earliest artefactual material to the 4th century B.C. This, and other settlements belonging to the Italic Peuceti, began to be deserted in the 3rd century B.C., as a result of the Roman conquest of southern Italy. The fieldwork of the last two years has shown that after a period of abandonment, a new settlement was established on the Vagnari plateau in the late Republican period, with occupation beginning in the 2nd century and dropping off after the middle of the 1st century B.C. This settlement at Vagnari attests to a resuscitation of occupation driven by Roman economic interests and reveals something about the changing dynamics of land use in Apulia after the Roman conquest. The late Republican settlement at Vagnari may be attributed, perhaps, to the seizure of land by powerful senatorial families from Rome who, as Appian (Civil Wars 1.7-8) tells us, grew rich by colonizing areas following the Roman conquest. The most extensive phase of occupation at Vagnari dates to the Roman imperial period, to the first four centuries A.D.
The 2018 study of the pottery assemblages from Vagnari vicus aimed to determine precisely the date at which the imperial estate was founded, to assess the relationship between the pre-imperial (2nd-1st century B.C.) and imperial (1st-4th century A.D.) phases of the settlement, and to ascertain to what extent a change from private, elite ownership to imperial possession transformed the region and its inhabitants’ way of life. The assessment of pottery groups from the Vagnari necropolis aimed to reveal differences in status and funerary ritual in the ceramic assemblages of cremation and inhumation burials and to clarify burial chronology. Work on the ceramics was carried out by David Griffiths in July 2018, and was, in part, funded by the Roman Society.

Results
It is now clear that the imperial settlement was established and experienced a significant burst of activity at the very beginning of the 1st century A.D. This is the period in which the emperor - very likely Augustus- took possession of the late Republican estate lands and set up the administrative and distributive centre for his imperial estate at Vagnari. Inheritance might be the mechanism through which the estate entered Imperial hands, since there is hardly any evidence that emperors acquired properties through purchase. Thus, by the late 1st century B.C., a Roman landowner and potential supporter of the first Roman emperor, Augustus, may have bequeathed his property at Vagnari to him.

Base of a large regional red-slip platter of the early 1st century A.D.
Spot-dating of vicus ceramic material confirmed multiple contexts dating to the 1\(^{st}\) century B.C. and 1\(^{st}\) century A.D., and also significant deposits from the 3\(^{rd}\) and 4\(^{th}\) (and possibly 5\(^{th}\)) centuries. Full analysis of the ceramic assemblages needs to be carried out, however preliminary observations indicate that the early imperial phase of the vicus (1\(^{st}\) century A.D.) is dominated by relatively high-status pottery, including Italian terra sigillata, glazed thin-walled ware cups and beakers, and other fine wares. Inter-regional imports of early imperial date include amphorae from the southern and eastern Mediterranean regions of the Roman empire (Egypt/Palestine, Tunisia). This represents a significant change in material culture from the late Republican period when the pottery used by the occupants of that settlement consisted of regionally manufactured wares typical of the Greek colonies and Italic settlements of southern Italy. It is possible that the new imperial settlement was populated by settlers coming from regions beyond Vagnari, bringing their material assemblages and consumption habits with them, however without skeletal remains of this period, we cannot tell for certain where these people came from.

Strontium and oxygen isotope data from burials of the 2\(^{nd}\) to 4\(^{th}\) centuries A.D. in the Vagnari cemetery suggest that by this time the population was born primarily at or near Vagnari or, more generally, in the southern part of the Italian peninsula.

We can also now recognise that significant new developments occurred at Vagnari at the very end of the 1\(^{st}\) or in the early 2\(^{nd}\) century A.D., in particular with the addition of a winery, reflecting the emperor’s diversification from cereal crop cultivation to viticulture. The pottery from contexts of the late 1\(^{st}\) to 2\(^{nd}\) century A.D. was more utilitarian than in the previous period, and this is also when Adriatic imports started to arrive at Vagnari. Furthermore, from the 2\(^{nd}\) century A.D., table wares from North Africa become more prevalent.

The pottery from selected contexts in the Roman cemetery at Vagnari was also studied. The material in much of the cemetery is very similar to the 2\(^{nd}\)-century deposits in the vicus. It consists largely of utilitarian pottery and cannot be considered high status, even though it was deposited as grave goods in cremation burials which, arguably, might indicate a higher status in themselves. Even the pottery from one of the more elaborate burials of the 2\(^{nd}\) century, –that of a child-, although containing gold wire earrings, a bronze mirror, coins, and other metal objects, consisted of nothing other than local, utilitarian wares. Many of the vessels from the cemetery were for consuming food and drink, with numerous small bowls and beakers. A small quantity of storage and cooking vessels were recovered from two graves. All of the pottery considered to be grave goods was locally and/or regionally produced (southern Italy); the only imported pottery present was in the grave backfills, notably African Red Slip ware sherds. Spot-dating of pottery from a further nineteen graves (from excavations in 2016 and 2017) was carried out. The bulk of the pottery examined in 2018 dates from the 2\(^{nd}\) century A.D., although in previous seasons material from the 3\(^{rd}\) century has also been well represented. As noted above, no late Republican or very early imperial graves have yet been located.

The pottery study has significantly enhanced the understanding of the role ceramics played in the lives and deaths of people living at Vagnari over a period of 500 years. The integrated and collaborative study of the archaeological material from this imperial estate is of profound importance for the site and the region.
Outlook

It is evident that the imperial vicus is very likely to have been installed in the early first century A.D. as a successor to a late Republican settlement established on the same site in the second century B.C. It became the administrative and distributive centre of the imperial estate in this period. Imperial properties in Italy have been studied primarily on the basis of historical texts and epigraphic evidence. The well documented archaeological sequences of occupation and diagnostic assemblages at Vagnari in Puglia offer a valuable and fresh perspective on profound changes in social and political circumstances, population mobility, and economic regimes in the context of Roman imperial ownership. The archaeological fieldwork at Vagnari enables us to document and better understand the transformation of a late Republican agricultural settlement in private possession into a vast estate owned by the Roman emperor in ancient Apulia.

There was added educational value to the fieldwork in 2018 because the ceramics specialist also trained two undergraduate Archaeology students in pottery processing and analysis. These students, both from the University of Sheffield, were able to take advantage of this experience thanks to bursaries generously provided by The Archaeology Committee of the Roman Society.
Relevant Publications:
M. Carroll (2016), Vagnari. Is this the winery of Rome’s greatest landowner?, Current World Archaeology 76: 30-33
M. Carroll and T.L. Prowse (2016), Research at the Roman Imperial Estate at Vagnari, Puglia (Comune di Gravina in Puglia, Provincia di Bari, Regione Puglia), Papers of the British School at Rome 84: 333-336
M.V. Emery, R.J. Stark, T.J. Murchie, S. Elford, H.P. Schwarcz and T.L. Prowse (2018), Mapping the origins of Imperial Roman workers (1st–4th century CE) at Vagnari, Southern Italy, using $^{87}$Sr/$^{86}$Sr and $\delta^{18}$O variability, American Journal of Physical Anthropology 166.4: 837-850
T.L. Prowse and M. Carroll (2018), Research at the Roman Imperial Estate at Vagnari, Puglia (Comune di Gravina in Puglia, Provincia di Bari, Regione Puglia), Papers of the British School at Rome 86: 333-337

Vagnari Vicus Archaeological Project website:
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/archaeology/research/vagnari

Vagnari Roman Cemetery Project website:
https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/anthropology/field-schools/field-schools