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## EXPLORING THE ROMAN IMPERIAL ESTATE AT VAGNARI, PUGLIA (COMUNE DI GRAVINA IN PUGLIA, PROVINCIA DI BARI, REGIONE PUGLIA)

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### EXCAVATIONS IN THE VICUS

Excavations by the University of Sheffield in the central village (*vicus*) of the Roman imperial estate at Vagnari continued in the summer of 2016. Since 2012, excavations have shed light on the economy of the emperor's estate, demonstrating that a wide range of cereal crops were grown and processed here, and that specialist industries included iron-working, lead processing and tile-making, with a peak in production in the second century AD. The 2015 excavations revealed the first evidence for wine-making at Vagnari. Testament to this was a wine fermentation and storage room (*cella vinaria*) of the late first and second centuries AD in which very large ceramic wine vats (*dolia defossa*) were fixed in the ground (Fig. 1).

Trenches were opened in 2016 to investigate an area adjacent to and east of the winery, and they shed important light on the early phases of settlement activity at Vagnari. The most exciting new discovery was a partially excavated building with storage facilities that pre-date anything found thus far in the Roman *vicus*. The pottery, loom weights, ceramic oil lamps and iron implements that were retrieved in a reused storage shaft here can be dated to the Hellenistic period, to the second century BC at the latest. This structure was reused and enlarged for the very first Roman building in the early first century AD, almost certainly when the land became an imperial possession. This new structural and artefactual evidence enables us now to address a range of crucial questions regarding the nature of human activity, changes in population and site use in the centuries following the Roman conquest of Apulia.

The new imperial building complex of the early first century AD was a relatively high-status structure, with floor coverings of white and grey marble slabs. Several very large panes of window-glass retrieved here also suggest a well-appointed structure. Some of the stone walls of this Roman building were preserved, although in places they later had been removed down to the foundations. A bronze coin of Titus, minted in his father's reign in AD 74, was found on top of one of the robbed-out walls, indicating



Fig. 1. Excavating walls, floors and a storage pit of the early first century AD in the *vicus*.

that the building was dismantled around or after this time. It was replaced with another structure.

The new stone-built structure, on the same orientation, was much simpler than its predecessor. It generally had beaten-earth floors, although one room had a floor made of well-worn river cobbles. This building was altered several times in the second and third centuries, although a smashed tile roof still *in situ* in two rooms suggests that the collapse of the superstructure marked at least its partial abandonment. A coin of the early fourth century lying immediately on top of a robbed-out wall provides useful evidence for the final destruction of the building.

The structural and *in situ* artefactual evidence retrieved in 2016 demonstrates beyond doubt that there was a predecessor settlement at Vagnari, which was appropriated and adapted when the imperial estate and its *vicus* were created in the early first century AD. This Apulian region clearly had not been completely depopulated or rendered uninhabitable after the Roman conquest in the third century BC, although it remains to be clarified in further excavation seasons precisely who built and lived in the settlement in the second century BC. Future investigations aim also to pursue further evidence for a change in status of the imperial *vicus*, from a relatively high-status settlement with glass windows and marble floors in the first century AD to a village that intensified its focus on its economic output in agriculture and industry in the second and third centuries.

## EXCAVATIONS IN THE NECROPOLIS

The necropolis at Vagnari is located on the southern half of the site, separated from the village area by a small ravine that divides the site into two parts. Excavations in the

necropolis have been underway since 2002, with the majority of the 130 burials excavated dating to the second and third centuries AD, and a small number dating to the first and fourth centuries. At the end of the 2015 field season four burials were left unexcavated, so one goal of the 2016 season was to reopen the previous year's trench (Trench 109) and excavate these burials. In addition to reopening Trench 109, we also opened a new trench (Trench 119) to the north and west of Trench 109. Trench 109 was 11 (north–south) × 6 m (east–west) in dimensions, and Trench 119 was 6 (north–south) × 10 m (east–west) (Fig. 2). Ten burials were excavated in the 2016 field season (three infant/children; seven adult).

As noted in previous seasons, most of burials uncovered in both trenches were *a cappuccina* burials, characterized by an inhumation deposited in a shallow pit and covered by a series of tegulae laid over the body in an inverted 'v' shape. Two exceptions to this were a simple pit burial (F331) found immediately east of F329, and an *a cappuccina* burial containing an *in situ* cremation (F325) in Trench 119. Cremation burials are relatively uncommon in this necropolis, and this is only the fourth cremation burial uncovered at this site. The dates for the previously excavated cremation burials (F104, F201, F302) range between the second and third centuries AD,

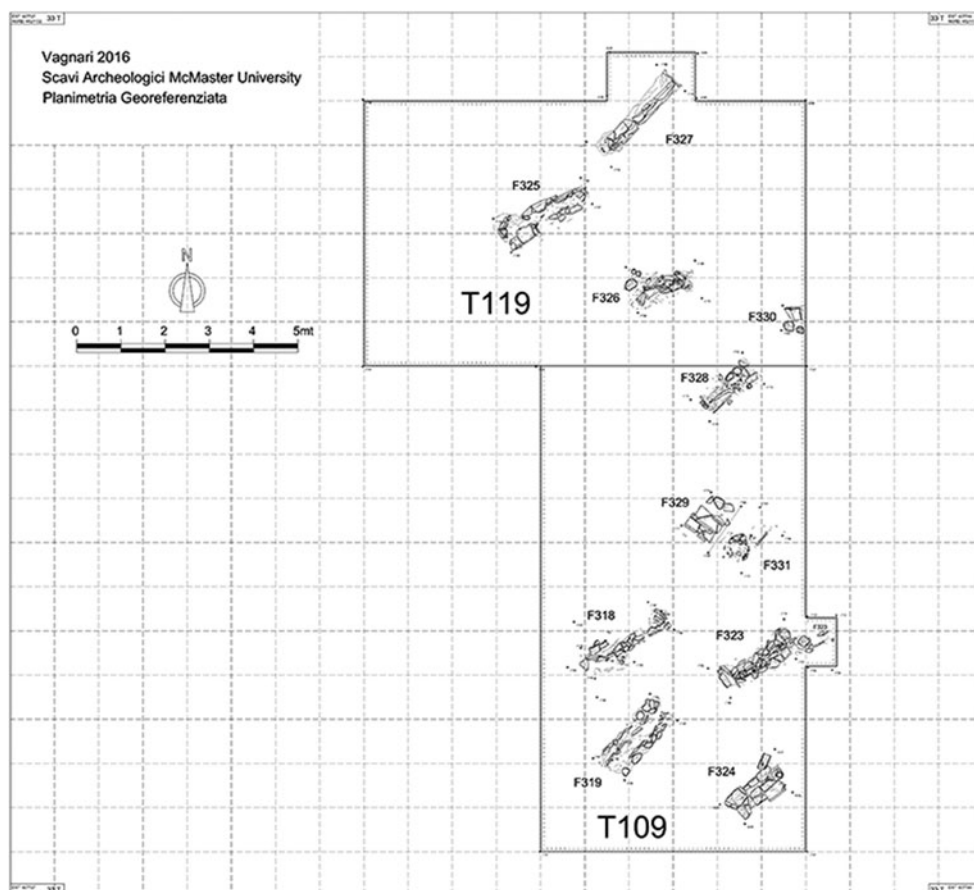


Fig. 2. Plan of the trenches opened in the necropolis in 2016.

so these atypical burials are contemporaneous with the majority of burials in the necropolis. Most burials are oriented in a southwest–northeast direction, which is consistent with the general orientation of burials in the rest of the necropolis.

All of the burials were single interments, with grave-goods typically placed around the feet, with the exception of the pit burial (F331) that had only a few ceramic fragments associated with the skeleton. Both adults and children are found in this necropolis, with no specific area of the cemetery reserved for infants or children. A small *a cappuccina* tomb (F329) contained the poorly preserved remains of a neonate, along with fragments of an unguentarium; and another *a cappuccina* burial with a libation tube (F328) contained the remains of a 2–3 year-old child. This latter burial also contained 29 iron nails located around the edges of the burial pit, suggesting that this child was buried in a wooden box or coffin along with a large quantity of grave-goods (ceramic oil lamp, bronze-alloy coin, two ceramic vessels, *circa* six glass vessels, bone pin, amulet, pendant and hobnails). Three other burials in previous years had similar burial treatments (that is, evidence of a wooden container in the grave), and only children in the Vagnari necropolis appear to have been buried in wooden containers (F202 (2006), 9 months  $\pm$  3 months; F228 (2008) 1 year  $\pm$  4 months; and F285 (2011) 1.5–2 years). The only other burial in the 2016 excavations that was noteworthy in the quantity and quality of the grave-goods was the cremation burial (F325) in Trench 119. This is consistent with the other cremation burials found at the site that contain items (for example, bronze drinking vessels) suggesting higher status burials.

Recent biochemical analyses of the Vagnari skeletal sample reveal that most of the population buried at this site were born locally (Prowse, 2016), and ancient DNA analysis of some of the Vagnari individuals has revealed the possible presence of malaria in the region when the *vicus* was an active settlement in the second century AD (Marciniak *et al.*, 2016).

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