

The Making of a Roman Imperial Estate

Archaeology in the *Vicus* at Vagnari, Puglia

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Cover: Views of excavations at Vagnari Vicus

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Maureen Carroll

In this monograph, the historical and physical context of the imperial estate and its central *vicus* is explored. The results of the 2012–2019 excavations and study seasons are presented, and questions are addressed that pertain to the role of the imperial estate in the Roman economy and the importance of the emperor as landowner in the context of elite status and competition.

An endeavour such as an excavation requires considerable input from a variety of people, especially if it runs for several years, and I have the pleasurable task here of acknowledging a range of individuals and institutions. First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Alastair and Carola Small who encouraged me to continue their research in the *vicus* and who so graciously offered their help in many ways and shared information with me over the years. They have been a joy to work with. Tracy Prowse, whose excavations take place in the field opposite ours, has shared insights and information on the burials she investigates, shouldered responsibilities for permit applications, and been an excellent partner in organising all aspects of the infrastructure of an excavation. Myles McCallum and Hans vanderLeest, who directed the excavations on top of the hill at San Felice, also were generous with their expertise and time, and helped out with many matters of fieldwork organisation in the early years of the *vicus* excavation.

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2012: Joao Freire de Andrade, Aaron Kulakiewicz, Gabrielle Lawrence, Jonathan Moulton, Lucie Pařtiková, Mara Polansky, John Quarrell, Victoria Rose, Martin Trenz.

2013: Sam Bromage, Jak Martin, Otis Gilbert, Mark Mason, Sharnvir Dhillon, Lindsay Mitchell, Courtenay Chrichton-Turley, Catherine Kendall, James Platt, Florence Douglas.

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Finally, this volume was written over the course of 2020 and 2021, the most unimaginably difficult year(s), due to the corona virus taking its toll on so many people and affecting so many lives. There have been some delays in finishing the book, originally planned for December 2020. Library access has been limited, and access to museum collections has been non-existent. Had the situation been different, there might have been some references we could have chased up or some artefact *comparanda* we might have located, but in the current circumstances that would have necessitated further delays in completing our work. We have done remarkably well to get the job done and disseminate the valuable knowledge gained in this project, and I am grateful to all colleagues who have gone the extra mile to fit this research into their disrupted schedules.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction. Exploring the Imperial Estate at Vagnari, 2012–2019

Maureen Carroll

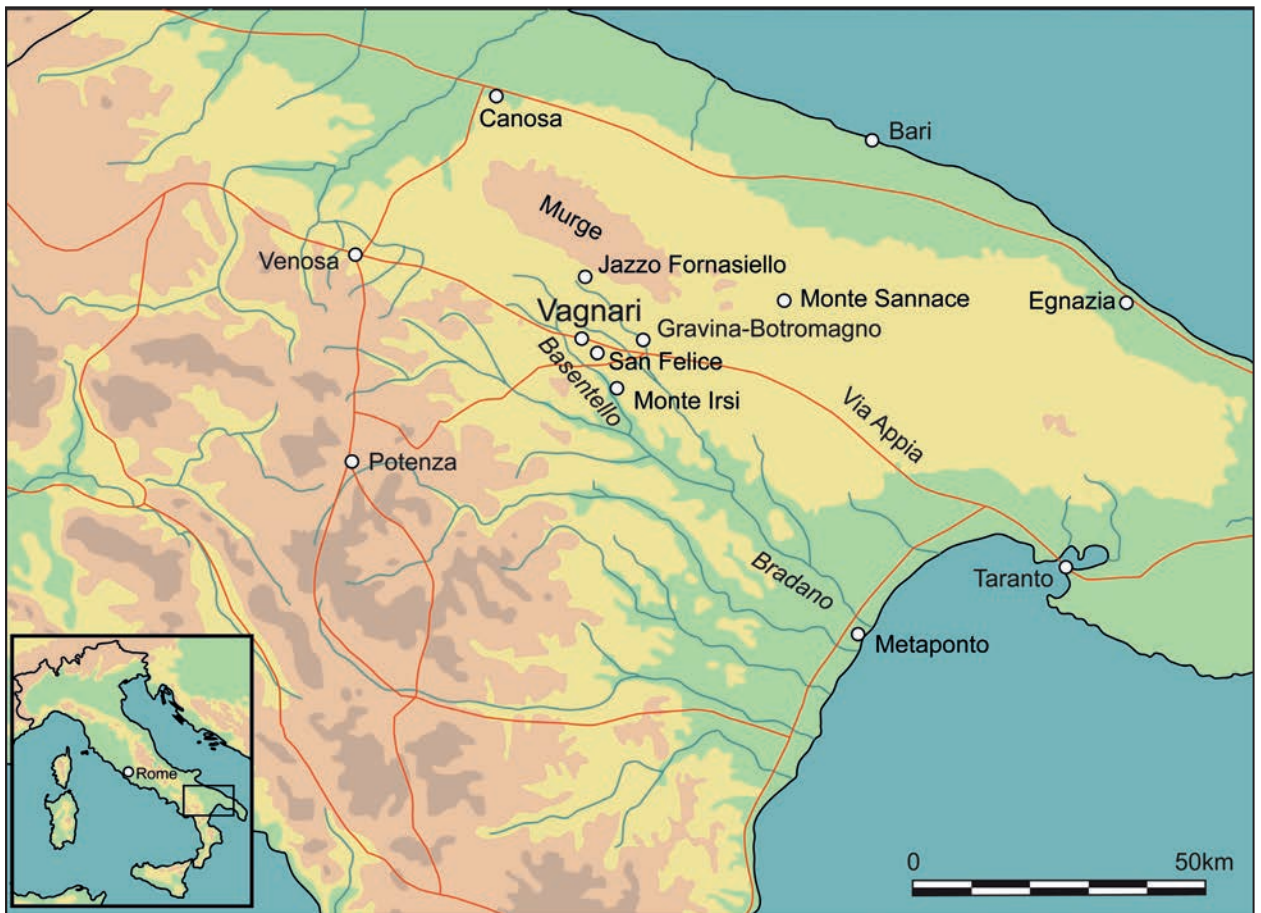


Figure 1.1 Map of South Italy showing the location of Vagnari and other relevant settlements.
Drawing I. De Luis, after a map by C. Small.

The site of the Roman settlement at Vagnari lies about 15km northwest of Gravina in Puglia (Provincia Bari) in agricultural land that today is heavily ploughed and planted annually with wheat (Figure 1.1). It lies on a gently undulating plateau overlooking a valley to the north, on the other side of which the land rises up to Monte Marano (Figure 1.2). South of Vagnari, the land slopes upwards to the San Felice plateau (Figure 1.3). To the west lies the valley of the Basentello River, a tributary of the Bradano, the main watercourse in the west separating the pre-Apennine hills from the plateau of the Murge in the east. The Bradano, emptying into the Ionian Sea off the south coast of Italy, marks the boundary between Apulia (modern Puglia) and Lucania (modern Basilicata). Somewhere very near Vagnari, the

Via Appia, the ancient north-south road originating in Rome, was located, and this major Roman artery, as well as a nearby east-west drove way (*tratturo*) from upland Lucania to Gravina used for transhumance in antiquity, must have contributed considerably to the prosperity of Vagnari and even to the selection of this location for the settlement (Gabba 1990; Small 2011a: 11–12; Small and Small 2011: 383–86; Piepoli 2014; Adamo 2016: 94).

The discovery of the Roman village or *vicus* and the extensive land holdings that belonged to it is the achievement of Alastair and Carola Small who mapped this large agricultural estate (potentially at least 25km² in size) through field-walking and surface collection in 1999 and 2000. The collected material, including



Figure 1.2 View from San Felice over the Vagnari plateau (yellowish-green vegetation, photo middle), the slope of Monte Marano (right), and the water of the Lago di Serra del Corvo/Diga del Basentello in the distance.
Photo M. Carroll.



Figure 1.3 Drone photo of the Vagnari plateau. The vicus lies to the left of the ravine (in the centre of the photo), the cemetery to the right. In the background right is the hill of San Felice.
Photo Veronica Ferrari and Giuseppe Ceraudo, Laboratorio di Topografia antica e fotogrammetria dell'Università del Salento.

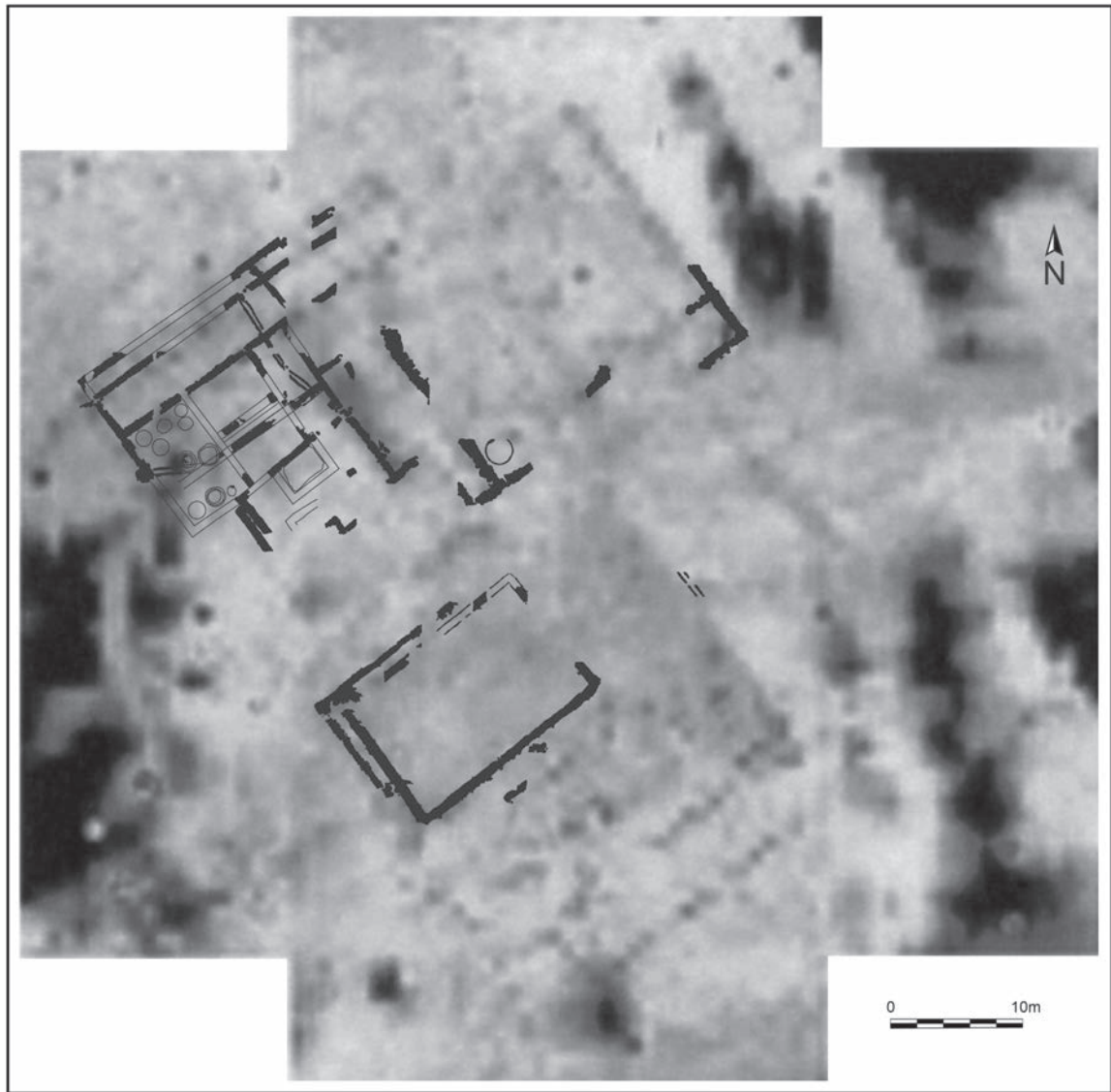


Figure 1.4 Original geophysics plot-out by John Hunt with excavated remains superimposed on it.
Drawing J. Moulton.

the roof tiles made and stamped by imperial slaves, confirmed that the settlement on the plateau at Vagnari was Roman in date and that the estate to which it had belonged was an imperial property established in the 1st century AD. It was the largest and richest site detected in the entire survey zone. Three distinct, but related, focal points of the imperial estate subsequently were investigated archaeologically (Figure 1.3). The *vicus* on the Vagnari plateau north of the ravine was explored in a series of exploratory trenches in 2001–2010 by teams led by Alastair Small from the University of Edinburgh and Giuliano Volpe from the University of Foggia (Favia *et al.* 2011; Favia *et al.* 2011a). The Roman cemetery, lying south of the *vicus* on the other side of the ravine, has been the focus of ongoing investigations by Tracy Prowse from McMaster University since 2003 (Small *et al.* 2007; Prowse and Small 2009; Prowse *et al.* 2014; Brent and Prowse 2014). Survey work by the Smalls also led to the discovery of another Roman site

on the hill above Vagnari at San Felice. This modest villa site, built in the second half of the 1st century BC, and in imperial possession from the 1st to the mid-2nd century AD, was excavated by Myles McCallum from St. Mary's University and Hans vanderLeest from Mount Allison University from 2005 to 2013 (McCallum *et al.* 2011; McCallum and vanderLeest 2014).

Two years after Alastair Small completed his fieldwork in the *vicus* in 2010, the University of Sheffield began to excavate and explore the buildings, the agricultural facilities, and the manufacturing provisions in the village. Our aim was to gain insight into the socio-economic complexities of the estate, the role of slave and free labour, and the working and living conditions of the inhabitants. Crucial in deciding where to begin excavating was the resistivity plot-out produced by John Hunt in 2006–2007. Figure 1.4 shows the original geophysics plan with the excavated remains



Figure 1.5 The photo (2012) shows the stone-built drains under the walls and floors of the portico building that showed up on the geophysics as lines.

Photo M. Carroll.

of all excavation campaigns superimposed on it. In the northern sector of the plot-out, a structure was discernible that was almost 30m long and with a southwest-northeast orientation, and it appeared that this building was divided internally by walls into small rooms of identical or very similar size. These invited comparison with rows of cells known at some Roman villas and often interpreted as slave quarters, although not without deserved scepticism (Carandini and Ricci 1985: 157–63, 175–80, figs. 157–58, 167–68; Marzano 2007: 129–48; Marzano and Métraux 2018: 17–18). It is clear that imperial slaves worked at Vagnari, and they will have worked at other imperial estates in the region. The imperial slave Gratus, who oversaw a tile-making operation for the emperor and stamped his tiles with *Grati Caesaris*, for example, not only supplied the *vicus* at Vagnari with roof tiles, but also the buildings at nearby San Felice and San Gerolamo as part of the same estate (Small *et al.* 2003). And the imperial properties in Apulia were not only numerous, but also large in size, with an extensive workforce and population (Maiuro 2012: 203). The emperor would have owned many slaves in his workforce, especially on a rural estate, and so it was entirely plausible for us when we began work at Vagnari that slave quarters might have formed part of the *vicus*, although we wanted to test whether the structures or the associated material culture would enable us to identify them (Small *et al.* 2003; Chelotti

1994 and 2007). With the resistivity plot in mind, the site of the building potentially subdivided into small cells on the northern edge of the *vicus* was the one chosen to launch the Sheffield project, but cells of identical size are not what we uncovered, because the ‘walls’ dividing the building into what looked like rooms turned out simply to be stone drains under the floor of the building (Carroll 2014) (Figure 1.5). As it became clear in subsequent excavation seasons, the rooms in this building, however they originally were divided from each other, were probably multipurpose, being used for storage, crop processing, habitation, and other things we cannot identify. Whether slaves were involved in anything happening in this building cannot be proven.

Far from having a disappointing first season, however, we were encouraged by the condition and extent of the archaeological remains to continue working here, opening large trenches annually until 2018 (Figure 1.6; see also Plates 1–2). Two study seasons were conducted in 2014 and 2019. The investigations have far exceeded our expectations. Despite the lack of a luxury villa or imperial residence on it, the *vicus* cannot be categorised simply as a ‘Roman industrial village’ (Gualtieri 2018: 168), because the excavations have shown that this imperial estate had a broad economic basis, ranging from cereal crop cultivation to tile production and

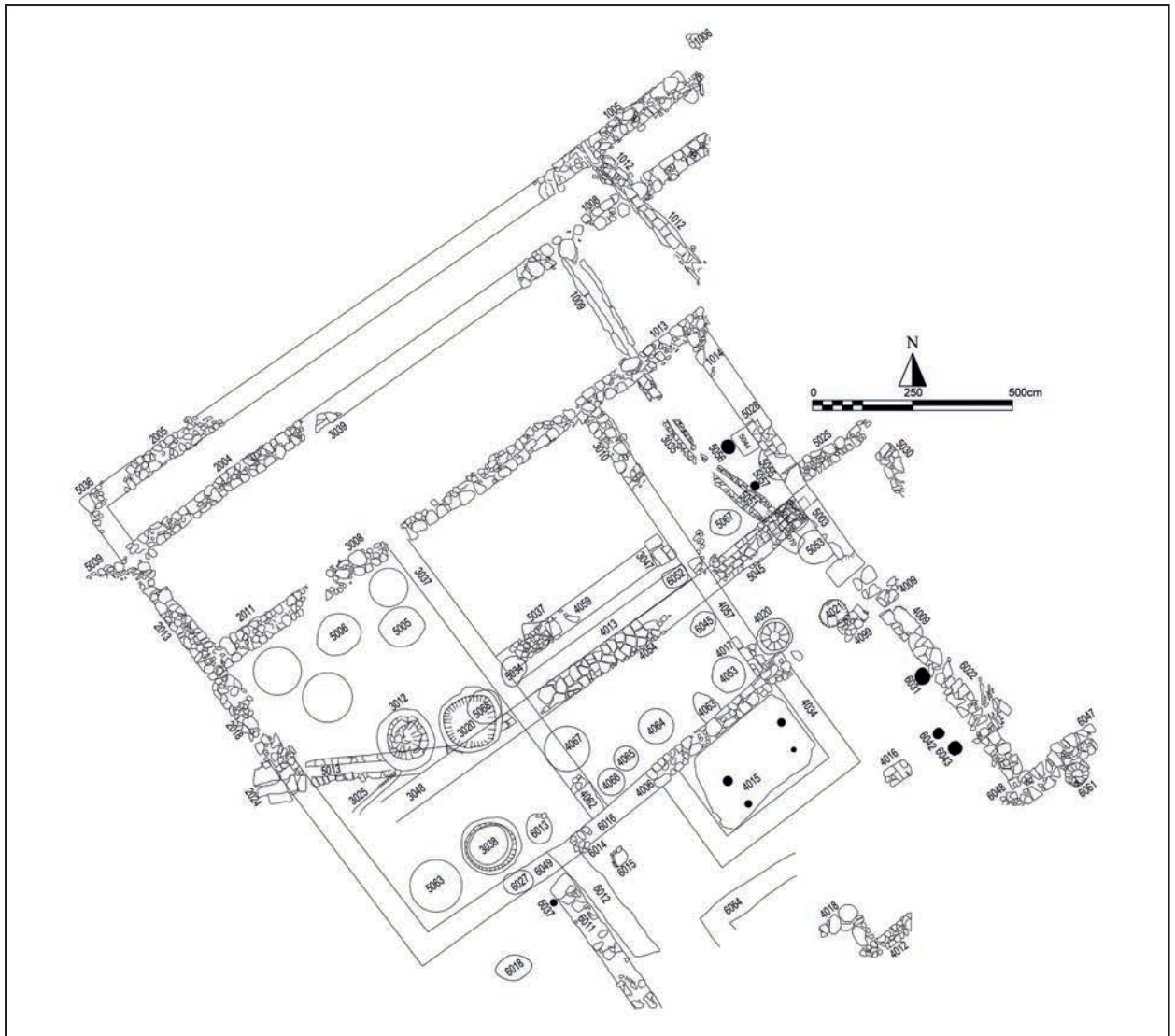


Figure 1.6 Overall multi-phase plan of excavated remains 2012–2018.
Plan J. Moulton.

metal-working, with further diversification to include viticulture in the 2nd century AD, all of which have left traces in the *vicus* (Carroll 2016; Carroll 2019; Montana *et al.* 2021). A rich array of material culture, including ceramics, glass, metals, and worked stone and marble, has been retrieved, and extensive assemblages of archeobotanical and faunal remains have been added to the physical evidence for life at Vagnari. The excavations also have revealed a range of stone-built structures in this sector of the *vicus* that were first erected in the early 1st century AD, possibly under Augustus, and subsequently altered, expanded, and refurbished until shortly before the middle of the 3rd century. All together, these strands of evidence shape our understanding of the diversity of the economy of the estate and the role of the *vicus* and its inhabitants in organising and managing work and income for the emperor in Italy and beyond. This is important also because this imperial estate is situated in a landscape that is a considerable distance from Roman urban

centres in eastern and coastal Apulia, all of which have been the subject of far more intense archaeological exploration and whose economic, cultural, and social integration in the Roman state is better understood (Grelle and Silvestrini 2013; Fioriello and Magiatiordi 2013; Grelle *et al.* 2017).

Our research at Vagnari also highlights the great importance of this site for an understanding of earlier periods following the Roman conquest of the region, long before the imperial estate was established. Although we have considerable information from Roman historical texts about key events, military campaigns, and named leaders involved in expansionist activities and conflicts in the 3rd century BC, the ancient literary sources on southeast Italy in the 2nd century are scarce (Yntema 2013: 237–43). It is on archaeology that we must rely for an understanding of the profound impact of the Roman conquest on the culture, society, and economy of the populations inhabiting the settlements and landscapes

in the relevant regions. It is in this context that the exploration of the site of Vagnari has an immense value.

Pre-Roman Apulia was inhabited on the coast by various Italic peoples, including the Dauni in northern Apulia and the Messapi in the south, but the central coast and western inland area of Apulia belonged to the Peuceti, an independent and culturally important political entity in the Iron Age with a major defended settlement on an extensive plateau, today's Botromagno, opposite Gravina (Small 2011a: 15; Small 2014a; Lombardo 2014) (Figure 1.7). Rome had embarked on campaigns to annex and control the independent territories in Italy from the 4th century BC, and Apulia was a key region for such activities (Fronda 2010: 13–34). The large Peucetian settlement on Botromagno, known to Greek and Roman writers as *Silvium*, was sacked by the Romans and prisoners were taken in 306 BC (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 20.80). After this, the settlement collapsed and went into sharp decline, as excavations in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s indicated (Small 1992: 13–15; Small 2001: 44–45). Recovery in the 3rd century was not possible because of continuing conflicts on southern Italian soil, above all between Rome and Carthage and their respective allies (Fronda 2010: 53–99).

Field survey by Carola and Alastair Small suggested that, on the basis of diagnostic pottery, the Vagnari plateau had been inhabited in the 4th century BC, with occupation ceasing in the 3rd century BC (Small 2011a: 16; C. Small 2011: 61–62, fig. 2.13). This is now supported and confirmed by our fieldwork. There was a lack of 3rd-century material in our excavation, although we did retrieve a Neapolitan bronze coin of the third century BC and a silver *victoriatu*s minted in Rome in 211 BC. Very occasionally fragments of residual pottery predating the 3rd century were encountered. This settlement, and others in the Peucetian countryside in western Apulia, would have been connected to and perhaps dependent on *Silvium*. Small (2014c: 22) suggests that an area of c. 100 km² must have fallen within its territory. They all must have suffered with the conquest of *Silvium* in 306, the Roman conflicts between Rome and Carthage in the 3rd century, and the Roman reprisals aimed at the supporters of Hannibal, the Peuceti included, at the end of the second Punic war in 202 BC (Grelle 2010; Fronda 2010: 253–79, 307–24). Disruption and abandonment in the 3rd century not only are attested archaeologically at Vagnari, but also at other smaller settlements in the vicinity, as recent fieldwork at Jazzo Fornasiello near Gravina and at the Iron Age settlement on the San Felice plateau indicates (Lambrugo and Pace 2017: 36–37; Depalo 2017: 35; Small



Figure 1.7 The Iron Age settlement of *Silvium* (Botromagno), seen from Gravina in Puglia.
Photo F. Taccogna.

2001: 40, 44; Small and Small 2017: 14; on Lucania, see Isayev 2007: 169–74).

Land conquered by the Romans became common property of the Roman state, *ager publicus*, however the impact of this annexation in Apulia can be measured best through archaeological exploration, again underscoring the value of excavating at Vagnari (Grelle 2010; Roselaar 2010). Roman historians such as Appian (*Civil Wars* 1.7) and Horace (*Epode* 3) gave the impression that Apulia long after the Roman conquest was not a desirable or liveable place, and they referred to it as ‘made desolate by war’ and ‘parched and dry’. But this is political propaganda, and archaeology tells a different story.

Crucial structural and artefactual evidence emerged in 2016 that demonstrates the inaccuracy, or at least the politically biased nature, of Roman historical sources such as these. After a hiatus of perhaps a century, people were living again on the Vagnari plateau in the 2nd century BC. This resuscitation of occupation fits the picture of renewed occupation driven, perhaps, by Roman economic interests, with local involvement, in the late Republican period elsewhere in the region (Roselaar 2014). A new Roman villa and *vicus* were built on the ruins of *Silvium* in the mid-2nd century, for example, probably with a focus on agriculture and textile production, and the contemporaneous establishment of a Roman villa built over the remains of Iron Age structures is attested at Monte Irsi on the border between Apulia and Lucania (Small 1977: 99–101; Small 1992: 15–18; Small 2001: 39, 44–49; Goffredo 2017: 307–09). Furthermore, on the San Felice plateau above Vagnari, a private villa was established in the second half of the 1st century BC (McCallum *et al.* 2011: 36; McCallum and vanderLeest 2017; Goffredo 2017: 311–13).

The late Republican settlement at Vagnari, thriving possibly because of its advantageous location on the Via Appia and the *tratturo* connecting it to *Silvium* and sites in Lucania and beyond to eastern Apulia, continued to be occupied until the mid- or late 1st century BC. Alastair Small has argued convincingly that the Via Appia was not extended into Apulia until the second half of the 2nd century BC, and this must have been a significant factor in reviving settlement at Vagnari (Small 2011a: 18–19). Economic opportunities offered by the Roman dominance of southern Italy and the resulting connectivity with areas beyond southern Italy and the Adriatic also will have fostered this renewed occupation of land still classified as Roman *ager publicus*, but worked and exploited by Italians and Romans alike (Roselaar 2014; Roselaar 2019: 103–08). Whereas the Gracchan agrarian reform law of 133 BC saw arable land in the fertile territories in eastern and

coastal Apulia redistributed through centuriation and assigned for agricultural and commercial exploitation to individuals, such as demobilised soldiers and new settlers, the region around *Silvium* and the surrounding rural settlements in more remote western Apulia was left undivided and used in part as grazing land (de Ligt 2004; Roselaar 2009; Small 2014a: 54–56). Chelotti (2014: 253–54) highlights the ‘political-institutional void’ which characterised some areas of Apulia in the second half of the 2nd century BC, including the territory in which Peucetian settlements such as *Silvium*, Altamura, and Gioia del Colle-Monte Sannace had been located.

Whether the late Republican settlement and its lands at Vagnari were managed by a member of the Roman or the Apulian elite, we do not know. Neither do we know the mechanism for the acquisition of the land by the emperor in the early 1st century AD, but because *Silvium* and its hinterland possibly belonged to unassigned *ager publicus*, a realistic scenario is that a piece of this simply was carved out for the imperial property at Vagnari (Chelotti 2010; Chelotti 2014: 252–54, 257–58). This is related to the settlement history of this unurbanised region which did not see the transfer of Roman state land assets to municipal ownership in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC (Mangiatordi 2011: 429, n. 61; Fiorielli and Mangiatordi 2013). And there was a link between imperial domains and public land holdings, the former often deriving from the latter (Purcell 2014: 270–71). After an interruption of late Republican occupation at Vagnari of perhaps a few decades, the curtain opens on the first phase of Vagnari as a property newly acquired by the *princeps*, and the *vicus* flourished; the villa on the hill at San Felice, until then run privately, also is now incorporated into the imperial estate and refurbished with tiles supplied by the same *Gratus Caesaris*, as at Vagnari (Small *et al.* 2003). Given that Vagnari was established in an area without an urban character, a large village such as this that acted as an administrative and redistributive centre of the emperor’s extensive domain not only will have attracted a diverse population to live and work there, but also functioned as a nucleated settlement providing some of the daily amenities, social connections, and economic networks offered by bigger towns and cities elsewhere in the southeast of Italy. If the survey data in the *Ager Venusinus* has been interpreted correctly, the territory surrounding the Roman colony of *Venusia/Venosa* (founded 291 BC, reinforced 200 and 43 BC) in the late Republican and early Imperial period is marked by a plethora of small and medium-sized farms and villas, but villages are lacking (Launaro 2011: 137–38, 302–16, Table A.24). Because the colony of *Venusia* was the urban focal point with political and social roles in this region, villages, as nucleated rural settlements, may not have been needed to fill settlement gaps or provide otherwise missing services. Further west in the

territory of *Silvium*, on the other hand, the lack of towns of Roman municipal status (*municipia*) any closer than 50–60km (*Genusia/Ginosa*, *Rubi/Ruvo di Puglia*) must have been a factor that contributed to the significance of the large, nucleated settlement at Vagnari and the assumption of its function as a political, social, and economic focus. The longevity of the central settlement of the imperial estate is testament to its importance to the region (Maiuro 2012: 295). Its position on the Via Appia, linking Vagnari to *Venusia* in the northwest and *Tarentum* to the southeast on the Ionian Sea, since 122 BC a Roman colony, must have gone a considerable way to alleviate some of the remoteness of the whole district (Marchi 2014; Piepoli 2014).

In the next chapters, the historical and physical context of the imperial estate and its central *vicus* is

explored. The results of the 2012–2019 excavations are discussed, with an overview of buildings and other features according to the phases of settlement to which they belong. Specialist reports and discussions on all categories of the material culture and environmental material retrieved at Vagnari take up the next sections of the volume. A concluding chapter contextualises the late Republican and Imperial settlements and their population, the evidence for agricultural and industrial production, and the water supply of the plateau. It also addresses the question of ownership, continuity, and the role of the imperial estate in the Roman economy and the social, political, and ideological importance to the emperor of this form of land ownership in the framework of elite status and competition.