

## Excavations in the Roman cemetery at Vagnari, 2008 Preliminary report

Tracy Prowse – Alastair Small

Excavations of a Roman period cemetery resumed in July 2008 at the site of Vagnari, South Italy<sup>1</sup>. Vagnari is located 12km west of the modern city of Gravina in Puglia (Bari) (fig. 1). Geophysical survey and excavation of the site, in progress since 2000, has revealed the presence of a large settlement covering approximately 3.5 ha., divided into two by a ravine. Ongoing excavations at the site have uncovered evidence of housing and a large industrial zone, including areas for tile production and iron working<sup>2</sup>. Occupation of the site ranged from the 4th c. BC to the 6th c. AD. Most of the settlement was located on the north side of the ravine until the Late Antique period when new buildings were developed on the south side. The cemetery is also located on the south side of the ravine, beyond the industrial zone and the Late Antique buildings (fig. 2). Excavation of it began in 2002 since when 69 burials have been excavated to date. Most of the burials so far excavated can be dated between the late 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, though there were some later intrusions in the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

A number of stamped tiles discovered in and around Vagnari indicate that the settlement and the surrounding territory formed part of an imperial estate<sup>4</sup>. The ongoing bioarchaeological investigation of the cemetery provides an opportunity to examine the lives of a relatively unknown segment of the ancient Roman population, the workforce of

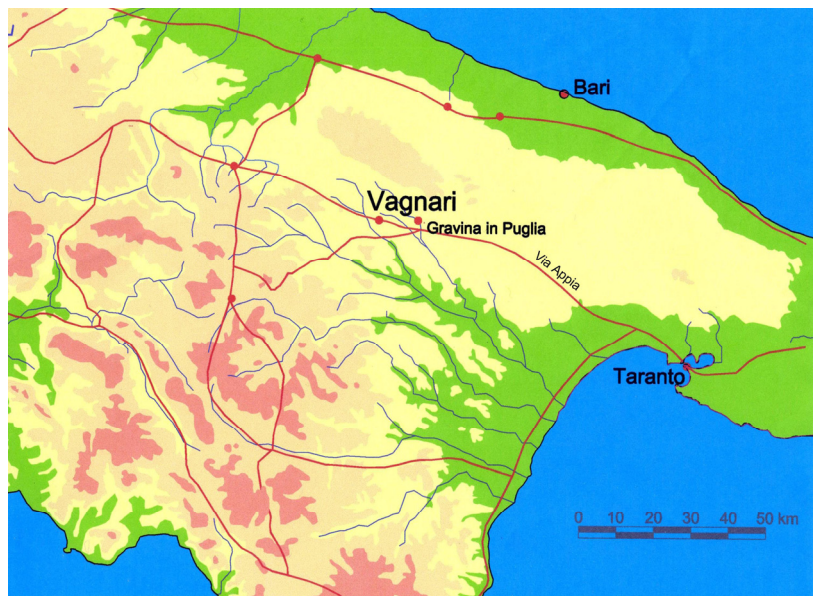


Fig. 1. Map of southern Italy showing the location of Vagnari.

<sup>1</sup> The excavation was carried out with a *concessione di scavo* granted by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali to Prof. Alastair M. Small (University of Edinburgh) who directs the overall project at Vagnari. The director of the excavation in the cemetery is Prof. Tracy Prowse (Southern Illinois University Carbondale). The team in 2008 was composed of students from the two universities and of several skilled volunteers from the U.S.A., Britain, and Gravina. The study of the finds is the responsibility of Philip Kenrick who has developed the database used for the artifacts records. Tonia Petrafesa is responsible for the consolidation of all finds requiring special treatment. The artifacts draftsman is Sally Cann. The survey of the site is done by Franco Tacogna of Gravina, who also provides technical assistance in photography and computing, and takes care of much of the local administration.

We are grateful to the following institutions for their support of the excavation: the Office of Research Development and Administration at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, the British Academy, the Fondazione Ettore Pomarici Santomasini of Gravina, the Banca Popolare di Puglia e Basilicata. We also wish to record our gratitude to the owner of the site, Dott. Mario de Gemmis Pellicciari who has done much to facilitate the excavation. We thank the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Puglia, and in particular the Soprintendente Prof. Giuseppe Andreassi, and Dott.ssa. Giussepina Canosa, Direttore of the Centro Operativo of the Soprintendenza at Gravina, for their constant support of the project.

<sup>2</sup> See FAVIA *et al.* 2005; SMALL 2005; SMALL-SMALL 2005. The definitive report on the excavations of 2000-2005 will be published shortly.

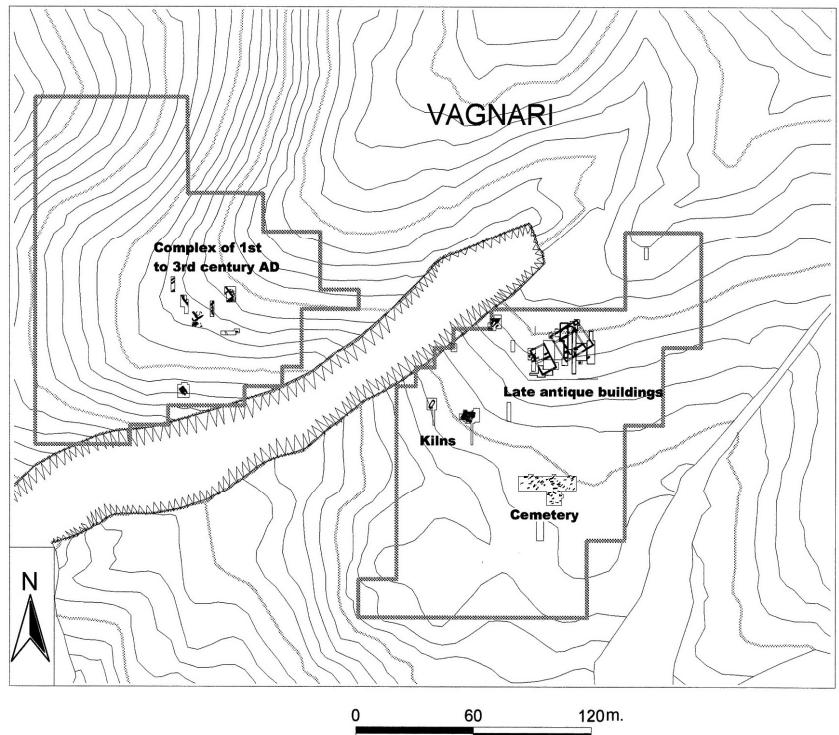
<sup>3</sup> SMALL *et al.* 2007.

<sup>4</sup> SMALL *et al.* 2003; SMALL-SMALL 2005.

Fig. 2. Plan of Vagnari showing the location of test trenches and the cemetery.

a productive imperial estate located far from any urban centre. This research also provides important evidence for regional variation of funerary customs in Roman Italy.

Excavations in July of 2008 continued work in two trenches (39 and 49) that had produced a large number of burials in previous field seasons (fig. 3). The tops of the graves were located approximately 50cm below the surface and had been covered by protective netting before the trenches were back-filled at the end of the previous year's field season. All of the burials were located in the same layer of silty brown soil with white inclusions that is likely soil that has washed down from higher areas of the site over time. The relatively shallow depth of the burials is shown by the libation funnels placed vertically over some of the graves, which must have emerged above ground level in the Roman period. There is considerable variability in the alignment of the burials, although several run in an approximately NE-SW direction. The deceased was usually buried with a small number of grave goods, often placed near the feet.



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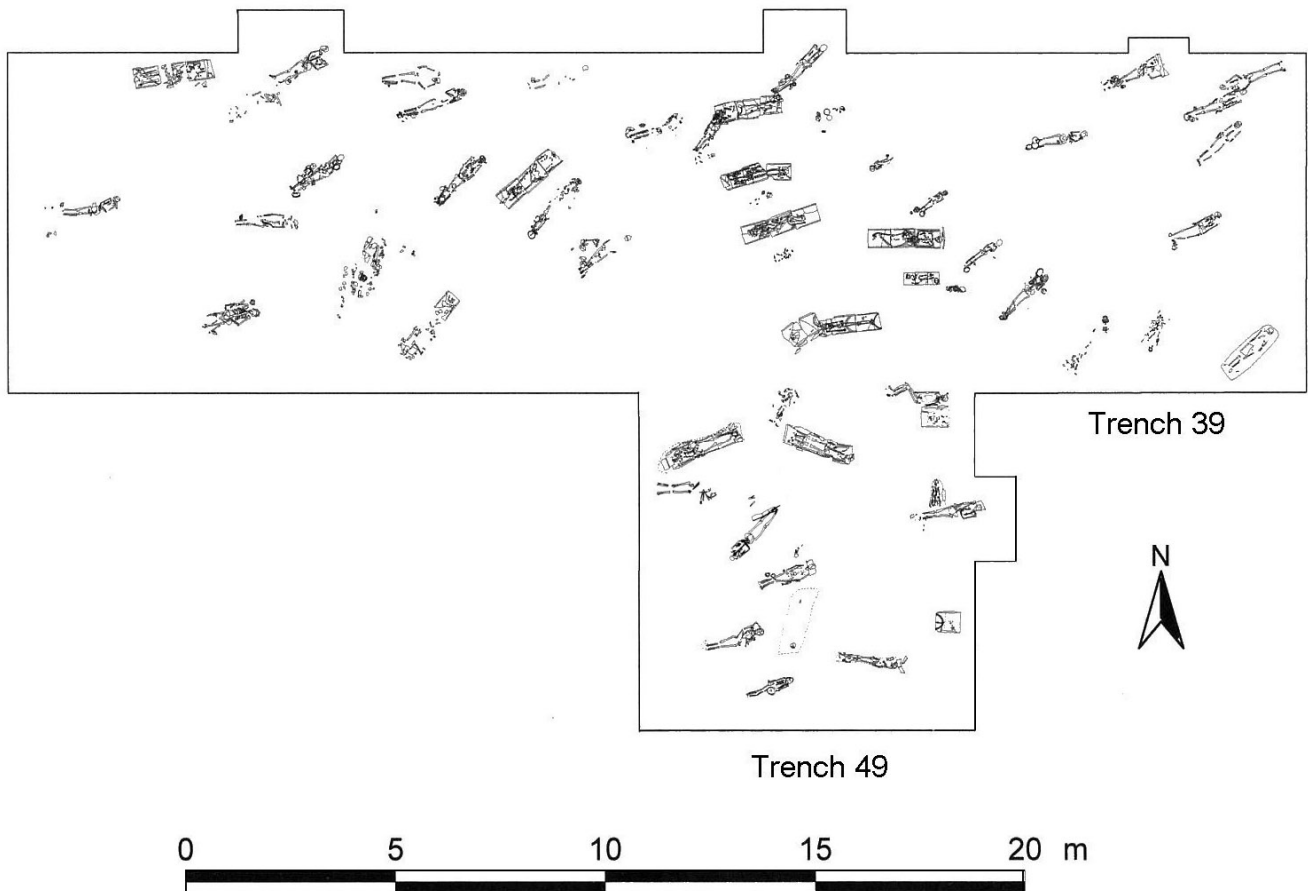


Fig. 3. Plan of Cemetery (2002-2008), showing the location of trenches excavated in 2008.

Twelve burials were excavated in 2008 (3 in Trench 39 and 9 in Trench 49) (figs. 4-7). In Trench 39, an additional burial was exposed, but not excavated, in an eastern extension of the trench, indicating that the cemetery continues towards the East. Another burial was identified in the West baulk of Trench 49, indicating that it also continues to the West.

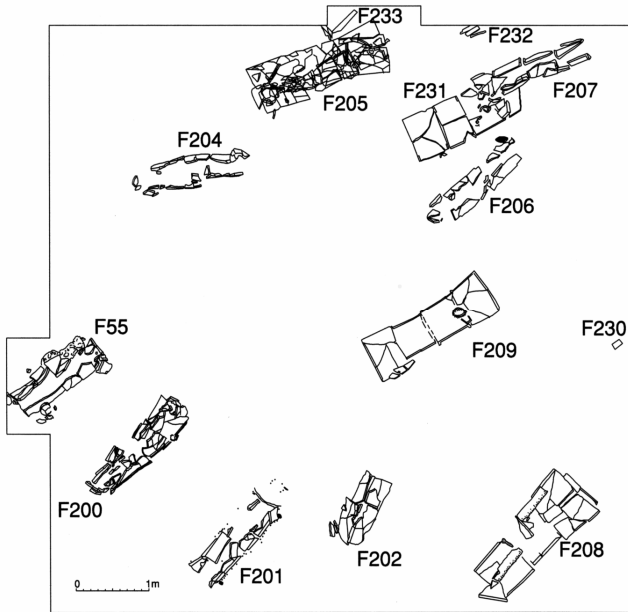


Fig. 4. Plan of grave covers in Trench 39 (2006-2008).

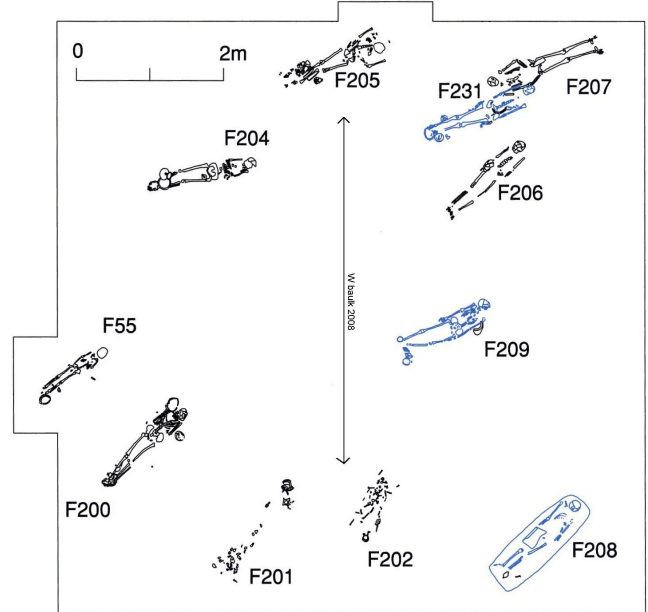


Fig. 5. Plan of excavated burials in Trench 39 (2006-2008). Those excavated in 2008 are shown in blue.

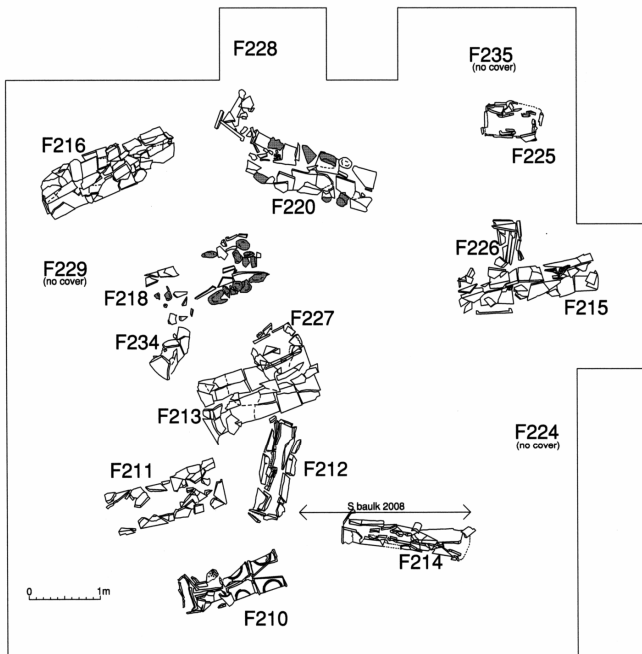


Fig. 6. Plan of grave covers in Trench 49 (2007-2008).

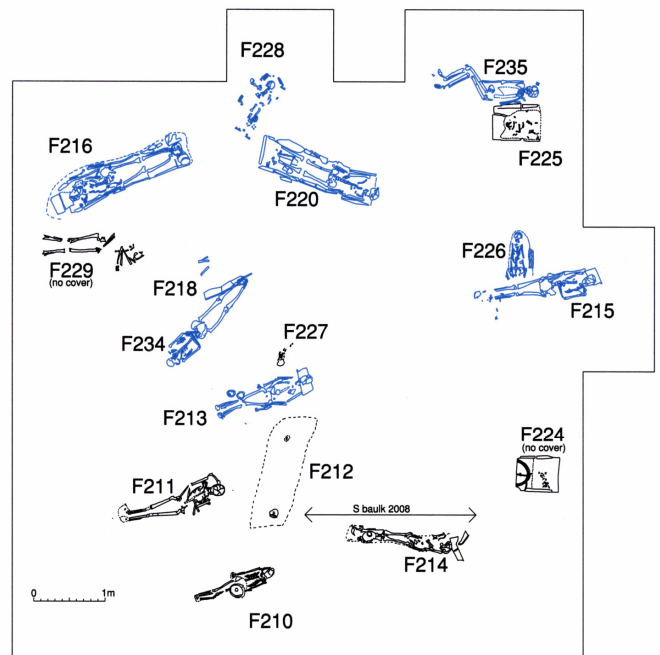


Fig. 7. Plan of excavated burials in Trench 49 (2007-2008). Those excavated in 2008 are shown in blue.

### Trench 39

The area excavated in 2008 measured 4m (E-W) by 8m (N-S), sufficient to expose the remaining three burials that had not been excavated in 2007 (figs. 4-5). All three were laid in a NE-SW direction. Two of the burials excavated in this trench were 'libation' burials (F209, F231), in which the skeleton was laid in a simple pit covered horizontally with *tegulae* (figs. 8-9). The *tegulae* were set with their long sides perpendicular to the main axis of the burial. Two curved *imbres* tiles were placed vertically over the *tegulae*, forming a funnel to be used in pouring libations



Fig. 8. F209 with 'libation' tube.



Fig. 9. F209 skeleton with grave goods at the feet.

to the deceased. Fragments of pottery and glass were found around the top of the libation tube in F209, and in F231 pottery fragments were found inside the tube. Similar burials were found during the 2002 (F41, F44, F59) and 2004 (F131) excavations. F209 is of particular note because it was the deepest burial uncovered to-date. The *tegulae* covering the skeleton were 103 cm below ground level and the bottom of the burial pit was 155 cm below the surface. Dating of the grave goods will help to indicate whether or not this deposition is earlier than other burials in the cemetery.

The other burial excavated in this trench (F208) was in the SE corner, and extension trenches were opened to the South (2m E-W; 0.5m N-S) and East (1m E-W; 6m N-S) in order to expose it fully. F208 was a typical 'a cappuccina' burial, constructed by stacking *tegulae* over the individual in the form of an inverted 'V', with curved *imbrices* placed along the line where the inclined *tegulae* met. An additional burial (F230) was partially exposed in a 1 metre extension trench along the eastern edge of Trench 39. A libation tube was revealed, and a globule lamp ('a *perline*') and cup with handle were found immediately south of the top of the tube. A total of 11 burials have now been excavated in Trench 39.



#### Trench 49

The trench measured 8m (E-W) by 6m (N-S). Three extension trenches were excavated along the North and East baulks in order to expose all the burials fully (figs. 6-7). All the graves in this trench were 'a cappuccina' (fig. 10), with the exception of F235, a simple pit in the NE corner of the trench containing

Fig. 10. F213 'a cappuccina' burial.



Fig. 11. F215 with imbrex headrest (E-W), intersecting and disturbing the earlier burial (F226) (N-S).

an individual in a semi-flexed position lying on the right side. All of the other adult burials were laid on their backs in an extended position with the arms at the sides or across the body.

The orientation of the burials varied: the majority ran in the usual NE-SW direction, but some were oriented N-S (F226, F228) and others in an E-W direction (F215, F235). Two of the 'a cappuccina' burials contained skeletons resting on a row of tegulae (F216 and F220), set with their flanges perpendicular to the main axis of the burial. In addition, three skeletons had an imbrex underneath the cranium serving as a headrest for the deceased (F213, F215, F216: figs. 11 and 13-14). This practice has been observed in four other burials at Vagnari.

An infant burial (F228) at the North end of the trench contained 13 iron nails set around the edges of the burial, most of them with their tips pointing inwards. A similar arrangement of nails was noted in another infant burial excavated in 2006 (F202), in which 12 nails surrounded the skeleton. In that case, traces of organic material indicated that the infant was buried in a wooden coffin, which must have been constructed with the iron nails. No traces of organic material were found during this year's excavation of F228, but the similarity in number and orientation of the nails suggests that this was another burial in a wooden coffin.

A fragment of a *tegula* recovered from the burial (F220) was decorated with what appears to be a 'fish' symbol (with an eye) impressed into the surface before firing (fig. 12)<sup>5</sup>. The decoration was facing inwards (i.e., towards the skeleton), so it would not have been visible to passers by. Normally tiles were decorated with finger-impressed arcs and deep thumb prints, but this is the first decorated tile of this type found at Vagnari. It seems probable that the motif was intended to represent a fish, but whether it should be interpreted as a Christian symbol (*ichthys*) is more doubtful. The other grave goods were typically pagan, including a bent nail. Such nails were fre-



Fig. 12. Tegula fragment from F220 with impressed 'fish' figure.

<sup>5</sup> A similar motif was found on a *tegula* fragment from the villa at S. Gilio in Basilicata (information from Helga Di Giuseppe).



Fig. 13. F213 (adult male) with iron prong near left hand, two iron blades on right side of body, bronze vessel at right knee, and lamp inside ceramic vessel.



Fig. 14. F216 (adult male) with bronze grave goods at feet (including bronze vessel).

material has been fully restored and classified, but a few preliminary statements about the grave goods can be made at this time. All of the burials had grave goods associated with the skeleton, with the possible exception of F226, just discussed.

The burial goods were typically located around the feet of the deceased, with the exception of a number of metal objects and items of personal adornment (see below). Many of the pottery vessels were broken and were deposited in fragments, often with some pieces missing, as was seen in burials excavated in previous years, but there appear to be a number that were complete. Lamps were found in four of the excavated burials (F208, F209, F213, and F216) and outside two burials (F215 and F230). Bronze coins were deposited in five of the burials, in varying positions (e.g., chest, face, pelvis) (Table 1).

#### *Metal finds*

This year's excavation was notable for the relatively large number of bronze and iron artifacts recovered from the burials. A large iron nail was deposited inside a ceramic vessel in F209, F213, F216, F231, and F235. The burial F213 contained the skeleton of an older adult male and a notable number of grave goods, including: 1 iron and 4 bronze rings, 4 bronze attachments, a copper alloy belt buckle, a bronze vessel, a bone gaming piece, and 3 iron implements (2 blades and 1 prong). Most of these items were found on the upper torso and near the pelvic region, so they suggest that this individual was 'dressed' with these items when buried (Table 2 and fig. 13).

F216 contained another adult male buried with a large number of metal artifacts (Table 2). When the burial was initially discovered in 2007, a large spear point was found lying on the north side of the 'a cappuccina' cover.

quently deposited in burials at Vagnari for magical purposes, intended probably to prevent the shade of the dead from returning to the world above<sup>6</sup>.

At least two graves were disturbed by later intrusive burials. F234 was originally identified as an infant burial to the SW of F218, but once the badly preserved remains of F218 were removed, it became apparent that most of the structure covering an adult individual (F234) had been destroyed in the construction of the later burial (F218). F226 was the burial of a young child in which the south half of the grave (and skeleton) was disturbed by the deposition of a later adult burial (F215) (fig. 11) No grave goods were found inside F226, but it is possible that some pottery fragments and a lamp recovered from outside the burials in 2007 were originally deposited with the deceased child and were later disturbed and re-deposited outside the burials when F215 was constructed.

#### *Burial artifacts*

A definitive analysis of the artifacts will be undertaken after the

<sup>6</sup> SMALL *et al.* 2007: 145-6.

**Table 1. List of Burials Excavated in 2008 and Associated Artifacts**

Feature #	Burial Type	Lamp	Coin	Iron Nail	Other Metal	Bronze	Glass	Pottery	Hobnails
208	Cappuccina	x	x	x			x	x	
209	Libation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
213	Cappuccina	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
215	Cappuccina	x**						x	x
216	Cappuccina	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
218	Cappuccina				x	x		x	x
220	Cappuccina			x	x	x		x	x
226	Cappuccina							?	
228	Cappuccina			x (13)***			x	x	
230*	Libation	x						x	
231	Libation		x	x	x		x	x	x
234	Cappuccina		x					x	
235	Pit			x				x	
<b>Total</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7+13</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>

\*Unexcavated (artifacts found next to libation tube)

\*\*Lamp found outside of F215 on north side; may have originally been inside disturbed burial F226

\*\*\*These nails (12 large, 1 small) were located around the edges of the burial and were probably used in the construction of a coffin for this child. They are different in function from the large “magical” nails typically found bent and inside a pot, so they are listed separately in the total at the bottom of the column.

**Table 2 – Metal Objects Found Associated with Burials**

Feature #	Description of iron objects (excluding nails)	Description of bronze/other objects
209 (juvenile, sex?)	Flat, rectangular iron object	Bronze ring and inlay 2 bone pins
213 (adult male)	Iron blade, curved Iron blade Iron prong Iron ring and inlay	Bronze vessel w/ handle Copper alloy belt buckle 4 bronze rings 4 bronze attachments 3 bronze/metal pins Bone gaming piece
216 (adult male)	Iron blade (curved) Iron spear head (found outside burial in 2007)	5 bronze rings 1 silver (alloy) ring and inlay 1 bronze attachment Bronze vessel w/handle Bronze decorative piece
218 (unknown)	Iron prong	Bronze ring
220 (adult male)	Iron blade Iron ring	Bronze ring
231 (adult male)	Iron blade	

In 2008, further exposure of the burial structure revealed a curved iron blade and 4 bronze rings close to the location of the earlier find. When the burial was excavated, 2 rings (near each hand), a bronze attachment, a bronze decorative piece, and a large bronze pot were recovered, along with numerous other grave goods (Table 2 and fig. 14). In total, 13 metal rings were recovered from 5 burials, and 9 iron implements (spear, blades, and prongs) were recovered from 6 burials. Preliminary age and sex analysis of the remains indicates that 4 of the 6 individuals with iron implements were adult males (F213, F216, F220, and F231).

#### *Preservation of skeletal material*

The preservation of the skeletons varied, being especially poor when the burial structure was damaged (e.g., F218). The infant burial (F228) was also badly preserved, but this is likely due to the fragility of infant bones. Ten

burials were of adults of varying age; the remaining two were of an infant (F228) and a child (F226). With the exception of F235, all of the dead were lying in an extended position, with the arms at the sides of the body or across the body at the pelvis or chest. The orientation of the cranium, like that of the burials, was variable, though in most cases the head was to the NE. A detailed demographic and palaeopathological analysis of the skeletal material is in progress.

#### *Future work*

The excavation in the cemetery at Vagnari is an ongoing project. Geophysical surveys of the site (to be published shortly in a forthcoming volume on the site) suggest that less than one third of the area covered by burials has been explored to date. It is proposed to continue excavation of the cemetery in 2009. Meanwhile work continues on preparing the definitive publication of the tombs, the human remains, and the associated grave goods.

Tracy Prowse  
tprowse@siu.edu  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Alastair Small  
University of Edinburgh  
aandcsmall@tiscali.co.uk

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