

Philip Kenrick

VAGNARI IN PUGLIA: A ROMAN SETTLEMENT WITH ILLYRIAN CONNECTIONS?

The Masseria Vagnari lies in a small side-valley of the River Basentello in Puglia, some 12 km to the west of Gravina-in-Puglia and 60 km SW of Bari on the Adriatic coast (**fig. 1**). Excavations here, in open farmland, have since 2000 progressively revealed a village of the Roman period which appears to have been at the centre of an imperial estate.¹ The site is very close to the presumed line of the via Appia, though of this no trace has been detected. The area is still cultivated, and is available for excavation only at the height of summer, once the crop has been harvested. What has been found here is a *vicus*, an unpretentious settlement with evidence for tile production and iron-working, which stood on an imperial estate, acquired by either Augustus or Tiberius.² The site plan shown here (**fig. 2**) is an amalgam of excavated features and others inferred from geophysical survey: it is sufficient to show the regular, but modest, character of the buildings.

The excavation has yielded typical habitation-context artefacts, i.e. an abundance of pottery but almost always fragmentary and rarely allowing the reconstruction of complete profiles. However, to the SE of the settlement, the excavation has also uncovered part of its associated cemetery. The burials here are beneath tiles, *a cappuccina*, and those so far excavated appear to range from the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD. As accords with the nature of the settlement, the burials indicate people of modest means. The regular presence of hobnails around the feet, and the occasional presence of tools-of-the-trade such as pruning knives, suggest that these were workers on the land. Nevertheless, they were accompanied in death by a few offerings in the form of terracotta vessels and lamps, and since these – whether intact or deliberately broken but largely complete – give us a more substantial insight into the pottery in use at the time, it seemed useful to try to identify the sources and the cultural traditions that they reflect.³

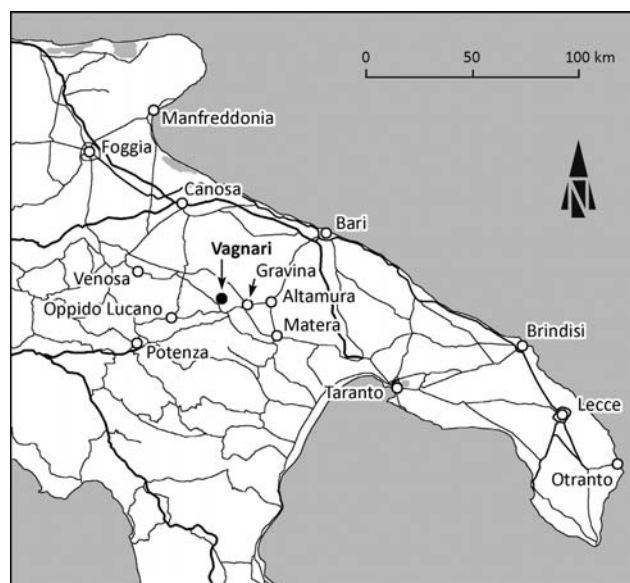


Fig. 1. Part of Southern Italy, showing modern roads and towns, and the location of the site at Vagnari.

With regard to fine wares brought into the region from outside, Italian terra sigillata of the 1st century AD is present, but in small quantities. The origin of these fragments is varied: there may be some which come from Etruria (**fig. 3,1**), one or two fragments may have come down the Adriatic from sources in the Po Valley (not illustrated) and there are certainly one or two from the workshop of *Creperius* which is located somewhere in Apulia, perhaps close to Venosa (**fig. 3,2**). None of these wares occur in the burials, which are later in date.

In the cemetery, there are fine-ware dishes represented, in two imported fabrics, Eastern Sigillata B and African Red Slip Ware. The former, from the Meander Valley in Asia Minor, is not uncommon in the Adriatic and is represented by occasional examples in the Roman burials at Portorecanati near Ancona.⁴ In the Vagnari burials, two examples have been found, of Hayes (1972) Forms 60 and 63. I show here the Hayes 63 dish (**fig. 3,3**); both items probably belong to the first half of the 2nd century. The African Red Slip Ware,

¹ The excavations have been carried out by a multi-national team under the over-all direction of Professor Alastair Small, to whom I am indebted for the invitation to study the domestic pottery from the site. I have been responsible for the material excavated between 2000 and 2009. A first substantial monograph has already appeared in print: see SMALL 2011. The pottery drawings reproduced in that volume and in the present article were made by Sally Cann. Numbers with the prefix 'P' are excavation inventory numbers.

² This is implied by the discovery of locally-manufactured tiles stamped by an imperial slave, *Gratus*. See A. M. SMALL, New evidence from tile stamps for imperial properties near Gravina, and the topography of imperial estates in South-East Italy. *Journal Roman Arch.* 16, 2003, 301–321.

³ At the time of writing, only the burials excavated in 2002 (the first

season in the cemetery) have been published: see SMALL/SMALL 2007.
⁴ See MERCANDO 1974, 155 fig. 9,3a; 306 fig. 219,136a.

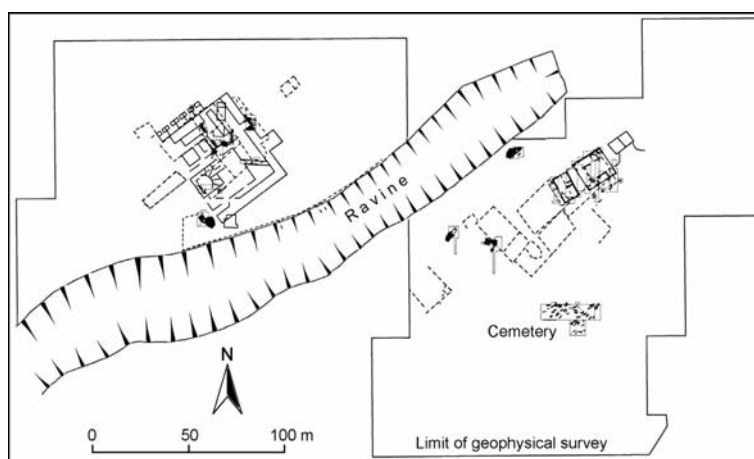


Fig. 2. Vagnari: plan of the site, showing features inferred from geophysical survey and revealed by excavation. After SMALL 2011, 83 fig. 3.16.

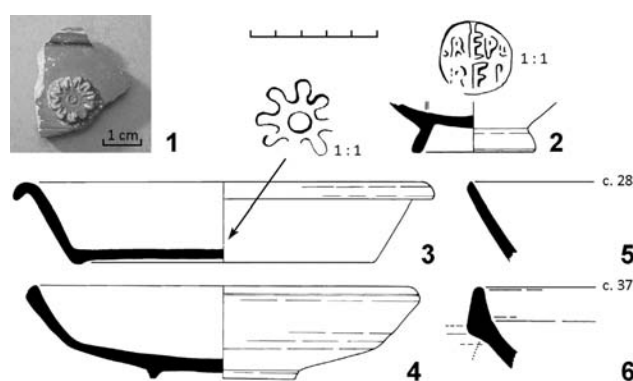


Fig. 3. Imported fine wares at Vagnari. **1** Italian Sigillata from Etruria (? – P787: SMALL 2011, 97 and fig. 4.18); **2** base of a cup in Italian Sigillata by *P. Crepereius* of the Venosa region (P685: SMALL 2011, 89 and figs. 4.4, 4.5); **3** Eastern Sigillata B (P771: SMALL/SMALL 2007, 195 and fig. 39); **4** early African Red Slip ware (fabric A – P765: SMALL/SMALL 2007, 200 and fig. 42); **5** fourth-century African Red Slip ware (fabric C – P866: SMALL 2011, 271 and fig. 6.48); **6** fifth-century African Red Slip ware (fabric D – SMALL 2011, 148 and fig. 5.11). – Scale 1:3 except where indicated.

of which single largely-intact examples were found in nine burials, fits in neatly after the Eastern Sigillata B, in the late second and first half (probably) of the 3rd century. The forms are Hayes (1972) 14, 16 and 17 (see **fig. 3,4**). From other parts of the site, there are scraps of the fine, central Tunisian, C fabric of the 4th century (**fig. 3,5**) and of 4th or 5th century D fabric (**fig. 3,6**).

This is the easy stuff. More challenging, but possibly of greater interest, are the fine wares which do not derive from the well-known Mediterranean-wide productions, and the plain and cooking wares. My attention was drawn particularly to the last-mentioned category when the report on the first season's work in the cemetery was published,⁵ and I was immediately informed – independently, by both John Hayes and Paul Reynolds – that I had examples of Butrint cooking ware.⁶ This reminded me that the Iron-Age tribes

of Apulia – the Daunii, Peucetii and Iapyges/Messapii – are considered to be of Illyrian origin, that is, connected to the peoples in Albania just across the Straits of Otranto.⁷ Illyria and Epirus are not so very far away: Butrint (ancient *Buthrotum*) is no further from Vagnari than is Rome, and while the Albanian coastline is not very hospitable where the crossing is shortest, the distance from *Brundisium* at the end of the Via Appia to *Apollonia* at the beginning of the Via Egnatia is about 65 nautical miles or 120 km (see **fig. 4**). Two questions now arise. Firstly, are there significant parallels between the Roman pottery found at Vagnari and that found on Albanian sites? And secondly, if so, were the vessels made in Apulia or on the other side of the Adriatic?

⁵ SMALL/SMALL 2007.

⁶ Ibid. 165 and fig. 164, P774; 195 and figs. 39, 40, P770; here **fig. 6,1** and **3**.

⁷ This is hinted at by Pliny (NH III.11.102, describing the *Pediculi* near Brindisi as descendants of Illyrians) and other ancient authors. See also DE LA GENIÈRE (1979, 76–79) for cultural links between the opposite shores of the Adriatic in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages and D'ANDRIA (1999, 108) for immigration from the Balkans into the Salento in the 9th and 8th centuries BC.

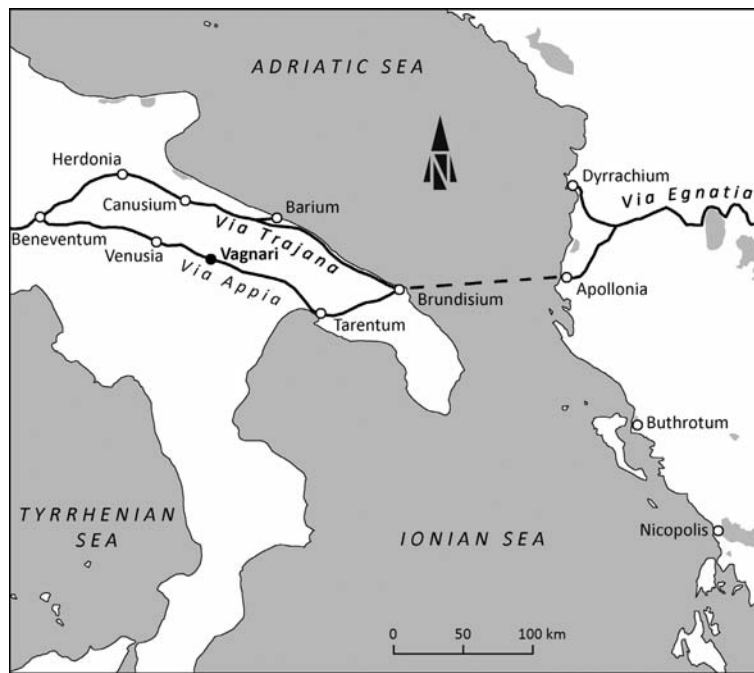


Fig. 4. The Straits of Otranto, showing part of the route in Roman times from Rome, via the via Appia, the sea-crossing from Brundisium to Apollonia and the via Egnatia to Thessalonica and Constantinople.

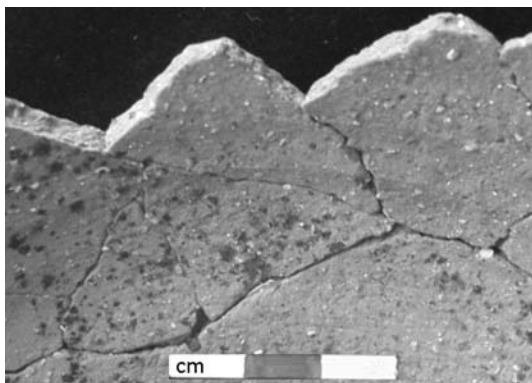


Fig. 5. The appearance of 'Sandy 8' cookware at Vagnari (P5233).

I shall start with the easiest case, that pointed out to me by my colleagues. Amongst the vessels in sandy cookwares are four examples – exclusively from the burials, as it happens – in a pinkish or grey-brown clay with abundant large angular inclusions of chert, quartzite (?) and iron ore; the inclusions are prominent at the surface and the feel is very rough. (This is named 'sandy grey 2 ware' in SMALL/SMALL 2007 and 'Sandy 8' in the evolved excavation database.) **Fig. 5** gives an idea of the distinctive appearance of the ware; **fig. 6** shows the forms hitherto recorded and one of the tell-tale signs of this production, the curious sort of umbilical button in the centre of the base. This results from the vessel being thrown on the wheel upside down, and is the effect produced when the potter finally draws the clay together in the centre in order to finish off the base.

Fig. 7 shows similar cookpots from other sites, including finds from the heel of Italy, at Otranto (**fig. 7,1**) and at Va-

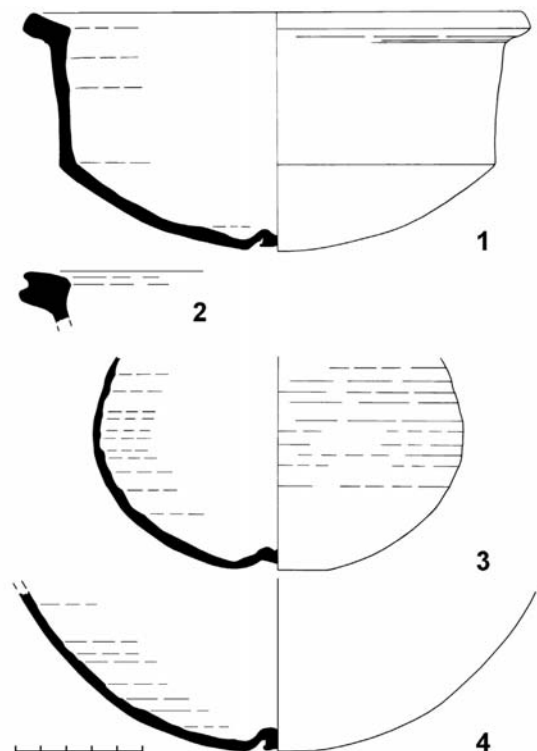


Fig. 6. Profiles of vessels in 'Sandy 8' cookware from Vagnari. 1 P774 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 165 and fig. 15); 2 P5173 (cemetery, trench 49, unstratified); 3 P770 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 195 and fig. 39); 4 P5233 (cemetery, trench 59, burial F245). – Scale 1:3.

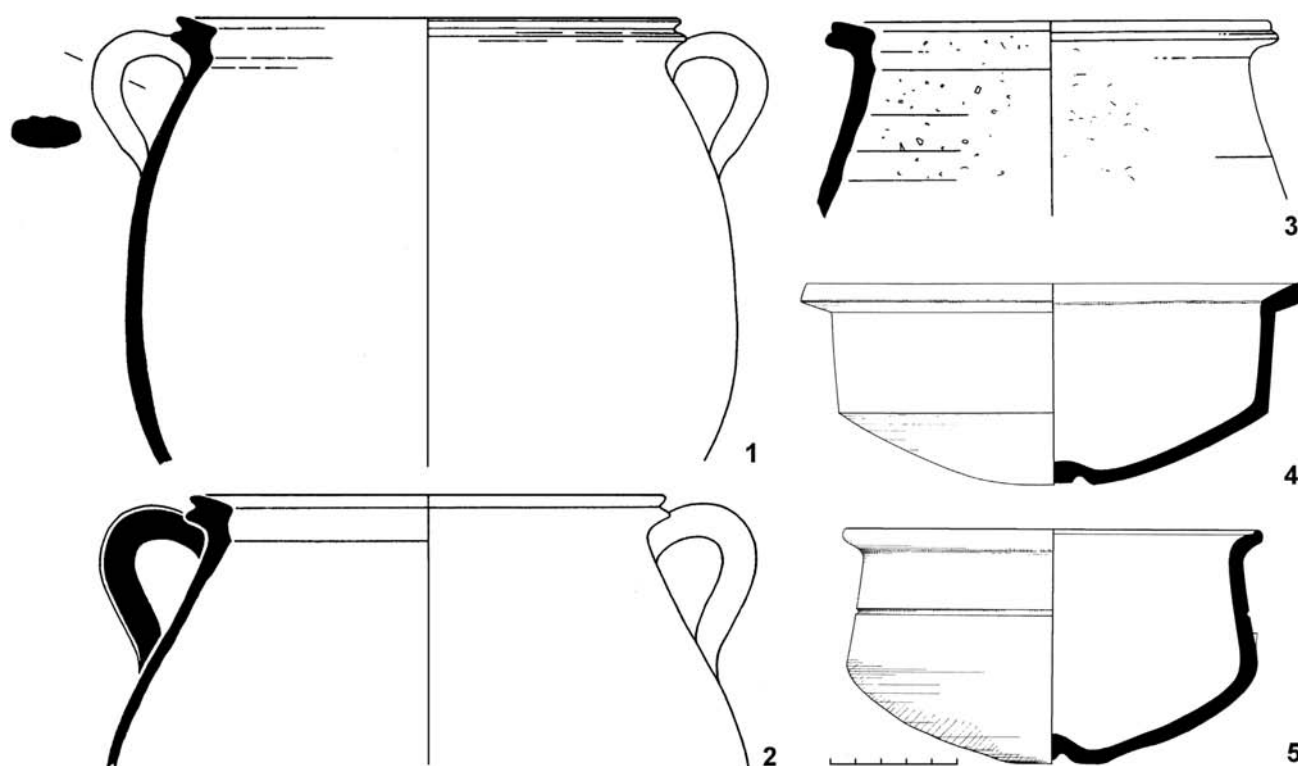


Fig. 7. Vessels in 'Illyrian Cooking Ware' from other sites. **1** Otranto (SEMERARO 1992, 69 and fig. 4:2, no. 312); **2** Valesio (YNTema 1995, 287 and fig. 161, no. 49); **3** Butrint (REYNOLDS 2004, 227 and fig. 13.75); **4, 5** Olympia (WALTER 1958, 61 fig. 50, d and e).

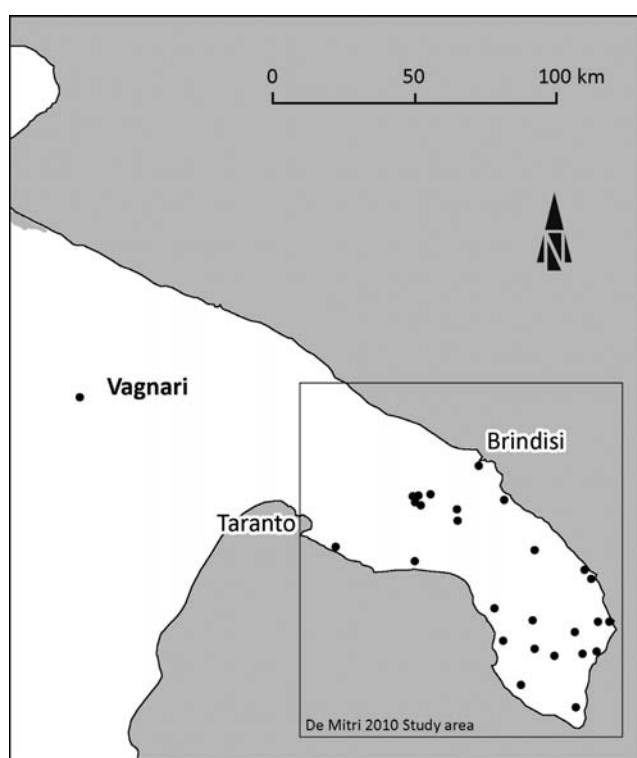


Fig. 8. The heel of Italy, showing the recorded distribution of 'Illyrian Cooking Ware' (after DE MITRI 2010, 686 fig. 7).

lesio (between Brindisi and Lecce: **fig. 7.2**), together with items from Butrint (**fig. 7.3**) and Olympia (**figs. 7.4** and **5**). In point of fact, since I published the first pieces, a useful preliminary account of this ware, of its Albanian origins and its distribution in the Salento, was given at the LRCW3 congress in 2008 by Carlo De Mitri.⁸ **Fig. 8** shows the study area covered by his article and the recorded incidence of 'Illyrian Cooking Ware'. It should be noted that, while he recorded occurrences at twenty-five sites, this represented only nine per cent of the sites yielding Roman pottery: the region is therefore not the source of this ware. Vagnari now provides another minor element for the penetration of the ware inland in central Puglia, and for its relatively early presence there. It must be presumed that it reached other parts of Apulia, though not the north, for if it had reached Ortona (*Herdonia*: see **fig. 4**) it would surely by now have been noted. De Mitri suggested that the major period of importation was between the mid 3rd and early 4th centuries, though an example found at Otranto is as early as the late 1st or early 2nd. The Vagnari pieces occur in burials dated approximately in the 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd. The origin of this ware may surely now be accepted as Balkan, but perhaps Epirote rather than Illyrian, inasmuch as the ware is more common at Nicopolis⁹ and Butrint (*Buthrotum*)¹⁰ than at Durrës (*Dyrrachium*).¹¹ The examples illustrated in **fig. 7.4** and **5** from Olympia in the Peloponnese, while lacking in adequate fabric descrip-

⁸ DE MITRI 2010.

⁹ See MOORE 2001, 82 fig. 6.

¹⁰ See REYNOLDS/HERNANDEZ/ÇONDI 2008, 84.

¹¹ Ibid.

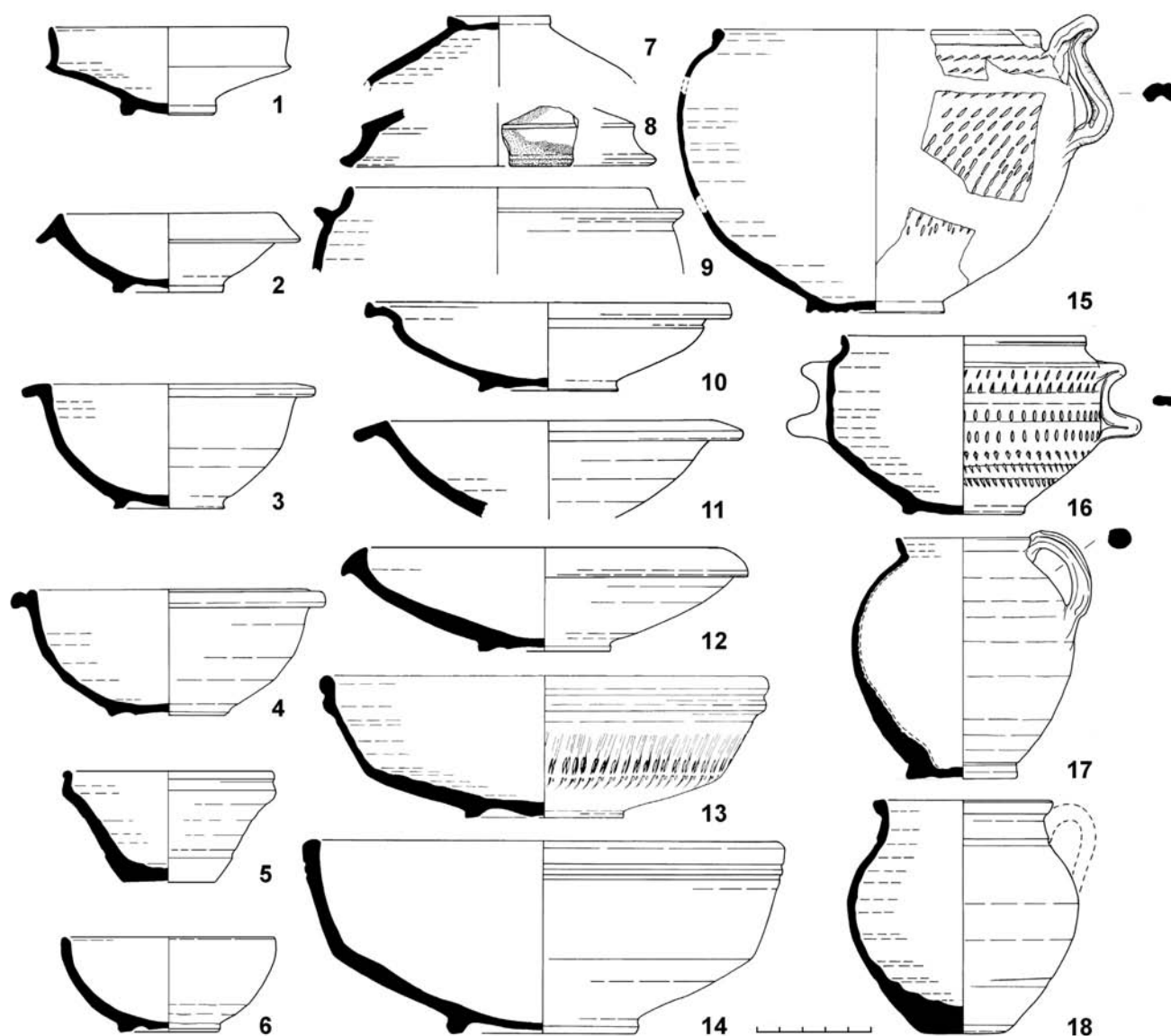


Fig. 9. Typical examples of 'Regional Red Slip Ware' from Vagnari. – Scale 1:3.

tions, may surely also be attributed to the same ware: the correspondence between **fig. 7,4** and **fig. 6,1** from Vagnari is particularly striking, while the grooved-rim cookpot as **fig. 7,1–3** is also attested at Olympia.¹²

Turning now to local wares, I have found simply from visual inspection with a hand-lens that many different qualities of pottery at Vagnari (terra sigillata, other slipped fine wares, plain buff wares and sandy cookwares) appear to contain a very similar suite of mineral inclusions. These I have described as sparse to moderate fine mica together with clear, white and earthy red specks, which may or may not be quartz, calcite and iron ore. Because of the variety of products and their frequency, I infer that they were produced somewhere not very far away from Vagnari – and not as far as Ordona, for instance, where the published fabrics mostly include black particles. I have not had an opportunity to travel around in search of close matches, nor to carry out any chemical or mineralogical investigations.

At the finer end of this spectrum are tableware vessels in both slipped and unslipped versions. When present, the slip is dull, in shades of orange, red or brown, and typically uneven. There is certainly more than one fabric represented amongst the Vagnari finds. With regard to this material, there is a danger of confusion due to the improper (or inconsistent) use of terminology. Pottery studies are already bedevilled by such inconsistencies, to the extent that it is now impossible to give any sort of logical explanation for the current use of the term "terra sigillata." The confusion is compounded by different usage in different languages. In the present instance I want to draw attention to those items of tableware which tend to be described in English as 'colour-coated ware' or 'slipped common ware', the latter being a direct translation of the Italian 'ceramica comune dipinta'. **Fig. 9** shows typical forms found at Vagnari.¹³ Many of them are clearly related to

¹² WALTER 1958, 61 fig. 50a.

¹³ These are as follows, and are previously unpublished unless otherwise indicated. 1 = P1236 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 210 and fig. 50); 2 = P1035 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 166 and fig. 16); 3 = P1329 (burial F132); 4 =

shapes in what we choose to call *terra sigillata* (e.g. nos. 1–3) or red slip ware (e.g. nos. 13, 14). So why do we not call these wares by such names? The surface coating is intended to cover the whole vessel, and technically it is a slip, so I think that to call it ‘painted’ or ‘colour-coated’ rather than ‘slipped’ is perverse. Equally, I would suggest that the contrast in colour between the body-clay and the slip (which might incline us to define some specific category of ware) is no greater than that associated with what we have become accustomed to call ‘Eastern Sigillata A.’ I am convinced that the purchaser of the day would have regarded the poorer versions – in terms of form, function and appeal – as simply the cheaper end of a range which embraces what we call *terra sigillata* or red slip ware; and I think that we create artificial barriers to our own understanding if we place them in another category of our own creation. For the Vagnari reports I have chosen the term ‘Regional red slip ware.’

So what do I mean by ‘regional’? I mean that when I came from working in other parts of the Mediterranean to look at this material in 2002, it was unfamiliar to me and I had not seen it before. The typology embraces cups and dishes which we can readily recognise as having finer counterparts in African and Italian fine wares, thin-walled drinking vessels and *ollete monoansate* which occur also in plainer wares. There is also what looks to me like a distinctive lidded pyxis (nos. 7–9). In the search for parallels, it became clear that such products are a regular component of early to mid-imperial contexts at Ortona,¹⁴ and it seems to me that they also occur there residually in late Roman contexts. **Fig. 10,1** and **2** are examples from Ortona which have been attributed to the 5th–6th centuries, but which are surely imitations of 3rd-century forms in African RS Ware.¹⁵ Likewise, **fig. 10,3** is from the late antique farm at Posta Crusta (Ortona), cited as vaguely similar to the African RS flanged bowl Hayes 91;¹⁶ it is surely the same as the pyxis from Vagnari (**fig. 9,9**), of which several examples were found in a context attributed approximately to the first half of the 2nd century.¹⁷ Closer and more abundant parallels are provided by a deposit of about

AD 180 at the villa of Masseria Cicotti, only some 20 km away in the Bradano Valley, near Oppido Lucano (see **fig. 1**).¹⁸ This contained the same cups, dishes and beakers, with the same interest in broad rouletted surfaces.¹⁹ Also present were two rims of the same vessel with a flanged rim which I have called a pyxis²⁰ (one reproduced here in **fig. 10,4**) – but without what I took to be the corresponding lid.

Fracchia and Hayes, reporting on the Masseria Cicotti material, noted that similar forms occurred in unslipped and coarse wares in much the same clay, and inferred that these were local or regional products,²¹ as I concluded at Vagnari. But how far does this tradition extend, and where is it centred? There are a few parallels from burial contexts at Brindisi and Otranto, but there is not a great deal of published material from which comparisons may be drawn. From the cemetery of via Cappuccini in Brindisi are recorded two small dishes which appear to be very close to **fig. 9,1** from the cemetery at Vagnari.²²

There is also material to be considered from the other side of the Adriatic, and here I return to my initial theme of cultural (or at least commercial) exchange with Illyria and Epirus. The article previously referred to on material from early imperial levels in the Forum of Butrint included several items reproduced in **fig. 10,5–9** which are described as ‘Nicopolis brown (or red slip) ware’.²³ The term is due to Paul Reynolds, based on his personal knowledge of (unpublished) pottery from Nicopolis, about 100 km further along the coast in northern Greece (see **fig. 4**). The comparison with the Vagnari material is suggestive, though not close. From Durrës (*Dyrrachium*) on the other hand, have been reported the ‘local’ imitations of African RS Ware reproduced in **fig. 10,10–13** which closely resemble **fig. 9,13** and **14** from Vagnari.²⁴ I therefore feel that as the body of published material grows, we would do well to be aware of the possibilities of regional interchange between Apulia and the opposite coast of the Adriatic in the first centuries of the Roman empire, and to seek evidence of this even among quite modest artefacts.

philip.kenrick@arch.ox.ac.uk

P1332 (burial F132); **5** = P5197 (burial F234); **6** = P5176 (burial F231); **7–9** = P950, P948, P945 (SMALL 2011, 103 and fig. 4.23); **10** = P5019 (burial F201); **11** = P1026 (burial F104); **12** = P5033 (burial F204); **13** = P1304 (burial F117); **14** = P1051 (burial F94); **15** = P767 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 204 and fig. 46); **16** = P1033 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 170 and figs. 16, 18); **17** = P705 (SMALL/SMALL 2007, 178 and figs. 24, 25); **18** = P1333 (burial F137B).

¹⁴ See DE STEFANO 2008.

¹⁵ ANNESE 2000, 300 and tav. 6, types 1 and 2 in ceramica comune dipinta.

¹⁶ LEONE 2000, 401 and tav. 5, type 13.1.

¹⁷ See SMALL 2011, 99–104 and 371.

¹⁸ FRACCHIA/HAYES 2005, 150–152, ‘slipped common wares.’

¹⁹ Compare in particular FRACCHIA/HAYES 2005, table 4 no. 34 with **fig. 9,15** and **16**.

²⁰ Ibid. nos. 35 and 36.

²¹ Ibid. 149–150.

²² COCCHIARO/ANDREASSI 1988, 176 ustrinum B, no. 320, ‘argilla beige, vernice arancio malcotta’; ibid. 196, tomb 112 no. 343.

²³ See REYNOLDS/HERNANDEZ/ÇONDI 2008. The items shown in **fig. 10** are the following: **5** = fig. 9,27; **6** = fig. 13,43; **7** = fig. 14,53; **8** = fig. 7,17; **9** = fig. 9,28.

²⁴ See SHEHI 2008, 14 and fig. 4. The items shown in **fig. 10** are the following: **10** = fig. 4,43; **11** = fig. 4,44; **12** = fig. 4,46; **13** = fig. 4,47.

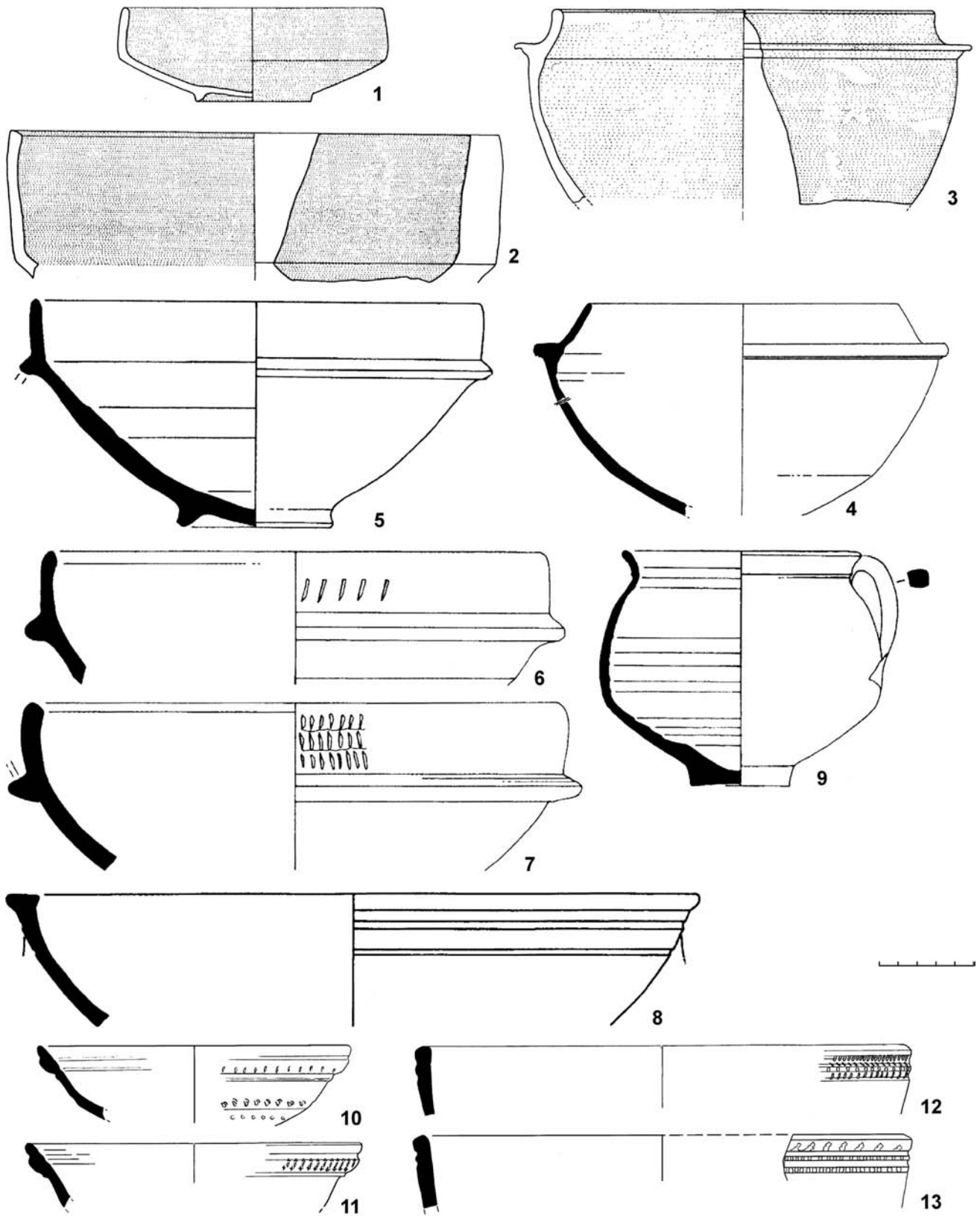


Fig. 10. Regional slipped wares. 1–3 from Ortona; 4 from Masseria Cicotti; 5–9 from Butrint; 10–13 from Durrës. – Scale 1:3.

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