

VILLA MAGNA: AN IMPERIAL ESTATE AND ITS LEGACIES. EXCAVATIONS 2006–10

To the workers of Villamagna, past and present

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Published with subventions from the Von Bothmer Publication Fund of the Archaeological Institute of America,
the BancAnagni (Banca di Credito Cooperativo di Anagni) and the British School at Rome.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONOGRAPHS OF
THE BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME

The British School at Rome, London
2016

Tools

The same gender divisions are present if we consider the few objects related to artisanal activities, listed in the online catalogue under 'household and utilitarian'. These include fifteen needles — nine in bronze, five in bone and one in iron (O111) (Fig. 5.81) —, all of which came from contexts dating to the fifth or sixth century. Generally rather thin, they include two bone needles with multiple eyes (O550 and 594) (Fig. 5.81) that were probably used for sacking — if they were not used for hairdressing, as Janet Stevens has suggested recently. Four bronze spindle hooks also came from late layers (O181, 311, 689 and 831) (Fig. 5.81),²²⁵ although the absence of anything that might be identified as a spindle-whorl makes this activity rather uncertain.

Other craft tools, such as chisels or knives, are conspicuous by their absence: a single knife blade was found relating to the fourth-century occupation (O871) and two more from the sixth century (O372 and 578). There is a possible awl (O194) from a sixth-century context. However, the presence of a fine bronze compass, O679 (Fig. 5.82), again from a sixth-century context, is intriguing. This is very finely made and decorated with horizontal bands that frame an 'x'. Other indications of literacy or technical skill come in the form of two *styli* (O507 and 737), both in iron — in contrast to the three bronze examples from the winery. Finally, it is clear that some of the work of the households took place at night. In addition to the very numerous lamp fragments, both in pottery (120 fragments) and glass (see Fentress and Gaianigo, pp. 163–4 and Hoffmann, p. 178), there are several

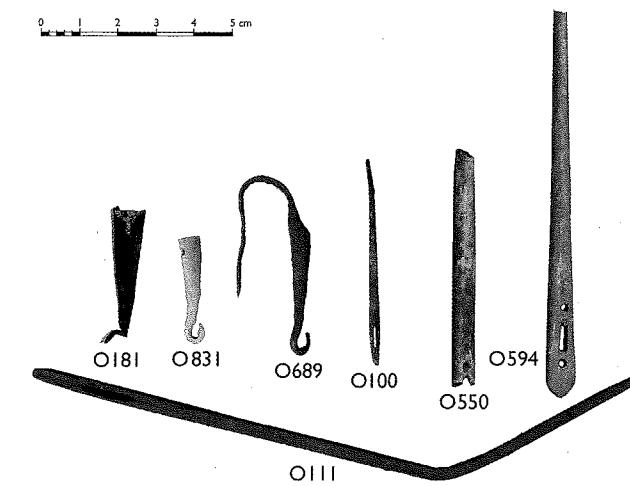


FIG. 5.81. Spindle hooks and needles. Scale 1:2. (Katy Fentress)

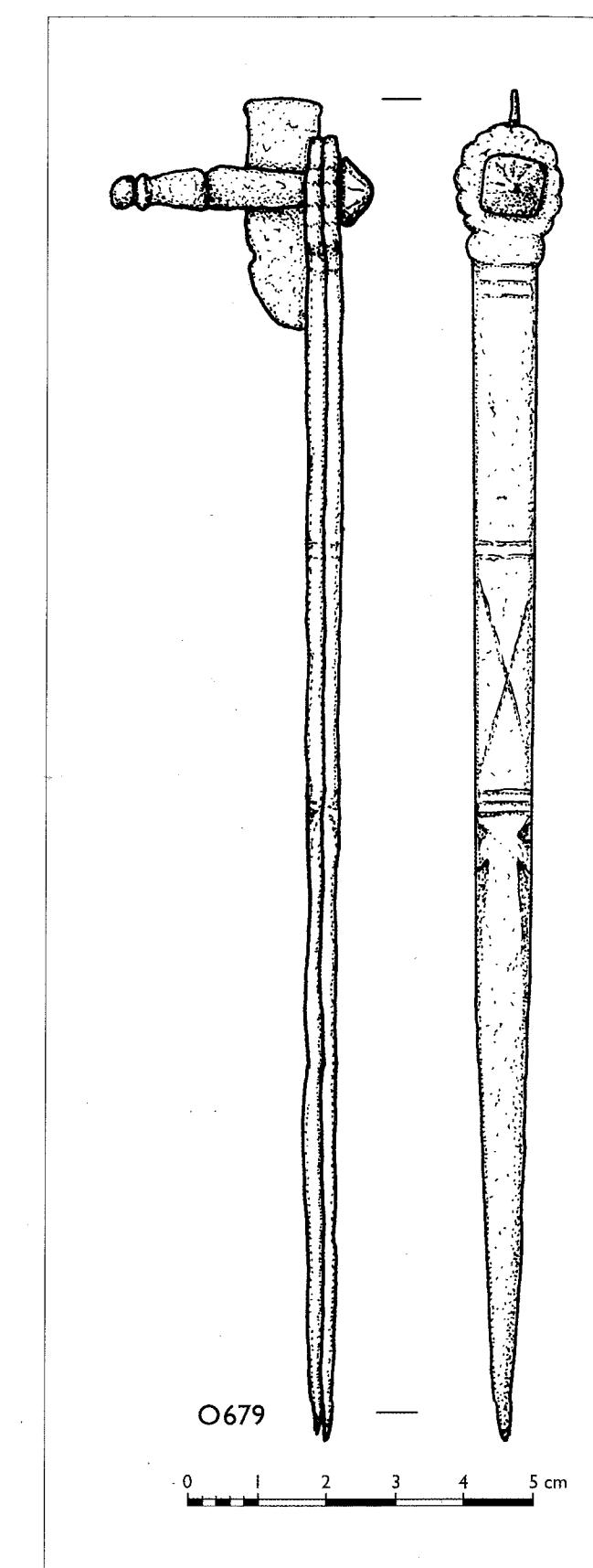


FIG. 5.82. The compass O679. Scale 1:1. (ER)

elements that seem to represent suspension hooks for glass lamps (O841 and 1036), to which might be connected some of the thin chains.

Furnishings

Finally, the furnishings from the barracks give us no sign of decorative fittings: there are some locks and keys, thirteen bronze tacks (compared to 33 tacks from the *casale*) and eleven bronze strips that may be identified as mounts for boxes or other furnishings. An iron mount in the form of a thumb or claw (O148), which may come from a tripod stand, is an exception to the general lack of any decoration — the one known parallel for such a figural tray-grip is in silver.²²⁶ Finds relating to leisure activities are limited to a single, possible, mouthpiece for a flute (O683), from Room 23.

Conclusions

A striking feature of the excavation at Villa Magna is just how different the assemblages are from different areas. At the winery, for the Roman period, furniture mounts form the vast majority of the finds, and the single costume element is a fine brooch. At the barracks the situation is reversed: there are numerous costume elements, generally devoid of any trace of decoration and reduced to the purely functional — keeping hair in place and clothes on — and a certain number of tools, largely related to textile working. The finds from the site generally are of fairly modest quality, and largely domestic in character. This fits well with the interpretation of the building as housing for dependent labour of both sexes, either free or slave. Although our inclination is toward the latter interpretation, slave collars and chains, or even the iron rings associated with slaves (Plin. *NH* 33.23), are no more evident than military equipment. However, a find from the topsoil does support the hypothesis that slaves were housed in the barracks. This is a leaf-shaped bronze pendant with a large loop at the top (O70) (Fig. 5.83). It closely resembles a class of pendants, or tags, found on slave collars and generally dated to the fourth and fifth centuries in Rome.²²⁷ These are all inscribed with admonitions to catch the runaway, although there is some indication that blank ones were also worn by slaves. The large loop at the top seems to confirm that the pendant hung from a thick collar, although without an inscription we cannot confirm that it belonged to a slave.

Whatever the status of the inhabitants of the barracks, it seems useful to look at the distribution of

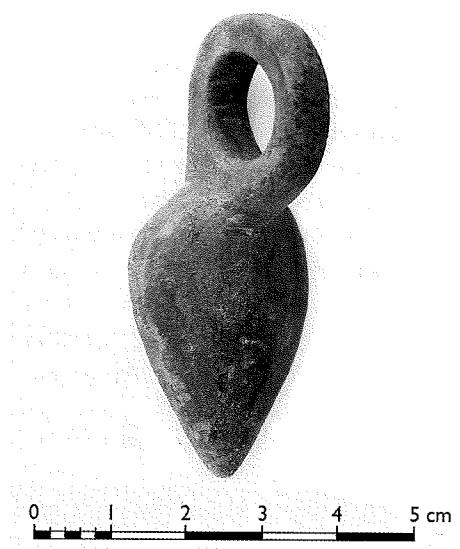


FIG. 5.83. Bronze leaf-shaped pendant O70, perhaps from a slave collar. Scale 1:1. (Katy Fentress)

objects with some gender specificity — hairpins, pins, jewellery apart from rings, needles (all of which reasonably can be assumed to be used by women) and rings and belt elements (probably used by men).²²⁸ Figure 5.84 shows that the vast majority of these finds comes from the central drain, and may result from casual loss or breakage occurring in any part of the structure. However, it may be significant that all of the other finds came from the rooms on the north side of the building. This is true, as well, of the infant burials of the fifth century (see Andrews, pp. 132–5). It might be suggested from this that that side of the building, with its two-roomed suites, was reserved for families, while the single rooms were occupied by single males.

AN IMPERIAL GEM

Giuseppe Castellano

O687 (Fig. 5.85), a red carnelian intaglio measuring 12 × 9 × 2 mm, emerged near the southern section of Area D, from an ashy burnt layer that covered the east–west road and is covered by the destruction of the portico. The stray gem lay to the west of the late north–south ditch near the portico's southern edge. In the centre of the intaglio is a finely detailed eagle, three-quarters to the right with folded wings and fanned tail. It perches on a low rounded altar with its beak to the left clutching a wreath, beneath which hangs an upturned crescent. In the upper right an eight-pointed star floats above a sceptre. Though it lacks the formal control and figural realism of the finest engravings, ours seems to be a high-quality gem.



FIG. 5.84. The distribution of gendered small finds. (EF/MA)

The star, crescent and sceptre are associated with the Antonines, though the style and iconography suggest that it was manufactured in the late second or early third century; the gem must have been residual in the late sixth-century context in which it was found.

The eagle is a common motif on gems and comparable examples fall into three categories. The first has an eagle alone on an altar, often with a laurel, symbolizing imperial apotheosis.²²⁹ The eagle on gem 1259 of the National Museum of Aquileia is stylistically almost identical to ours, as is that of 722 at The Hague, also from Aquileia.²³⁰ Two intaglios from Bath are also similar. On the first is an eagle nearly identical to ours. The second gem, similar though lacking the wreath, emerged from the same drain at the temple of Sulis Minerva as 32 others of the late first century.²³¹ Villa Magna's eagle is probably later still

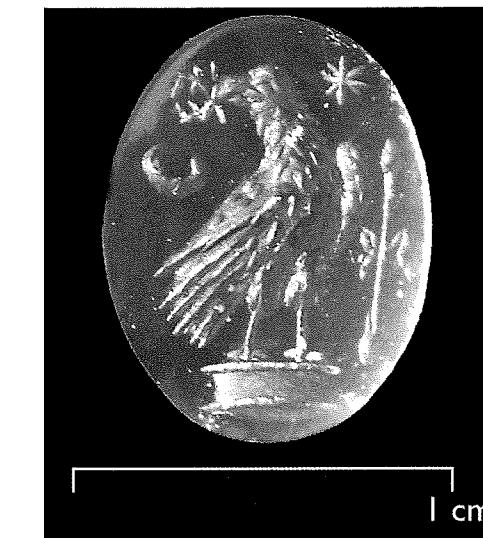


FIG. 5.85. Carnelian intaglio O687. Scale 5:1. (Cezar Nicolescu)

and is more finely detailed, suggesting a gem of particular quality for its time. Finally, a second- to fourth-century intaglio from Roman Gordion bears a similar eagle, though somewhat crude in execution.²³² All of these, however, lack the star and crescent. The second category features legionary standards and represents straightforward legionary gems: similar gems come from Romano-British military contexts.²³³ Our intaglio belongs to a less-common third category, a combination of triumphalist imperial and celestial iconography. The star and crescent render it a salvific amulet of fate and astral protection, a personal talisman of divine providence. The closest example is in the Ashmolean Museum.²³⁴ On that intaglio Jupiter Dolichenus stands beside an eagle and standards, beneath two stars and an upturned crescent. It is the only similar gem that combines the star, the crescent and the eagle. Jupiter wields a *fulmen* and *bipennis*, symbols of power comparable to the sceptre. Together, these symbols represent the victorious empire and the cult of divinity that sanctions and protects it.

Vespasian propagated the cult of Graeco-Egyptian Serapis in thanksgiving for his perceived assistance at Alexandria, assimilating elements of his iconography, including the star and crescent. The star and crescent also accompany Aion, god of time, who is often depicted turning or presiding over the Zodiac wheel. Aion and his attributes figure in Antonine iconography, notably on the base of the column of Antoninus Pius. The relief depicts a winged Aion flanked by eagles bearing the imperial couple into *apotheosis*, the emperor holding an eagle sceptre. Imperial worship of Aion reinforced the bond between Rome's *aeternitas*, the deified emperor and the celestial bodies.

Our intaglio is a compact, sophisticated piece of good luck and victory art. The eagle, standard of Rome and the bearer of deified emperors, clasps the wreath of victory on the Capitoline altar, seat of Jupiter's *providentia*. The sceptre is a triumphal symbol of imperial and divine power. The star and crescent recall Aion's wheel of time and the cosmic nature of eternal Serapis. The gem's stylistic elements and context on the road at the entrance to an imperial villa may suggest an owner with military experience or a close connection with the emperor. Whoever wore it stamped an affirmation of Rome's eternal glory on all his papers and carried prominently on his person a salvific talisman of empire. It is an iconographic articulation of Rome eternal, victorious beneath the starry aegis of divine providence, legitimized by a syncretizing assimilation of foreign gods by the imperial cult.

THE DOLIA²³⁵

Candace Rice

Six cuts for sunken dolia were found in the building complex of Area D. Four were found in individual rooms and two were found in the portico (below, Fig. 6.5) The southernmost dolium was the only dolium found *in situ*. These dolia were seemingly intended for storage within the individual units of the complex and most likely held grain.

In contrast to the situation in the *cella vinaria*, the remains of several more dolia (distinguished by their rims) were recovered than cuts, indicating that the unexcavated rooms also had sunken dolia. Rims from fourteen dolia were recovered from Area D. Unlike the dolia from the *cella vinaria*, most of the dolia from Area D were poorly made. They were constructed in a range of tables and there was no attempt at standardization. Rim profiles vary greatly and diameter measurements range from 20 to 42 cm.

There are two dolia that are slight exceptions due to the quality of construction: the dolium that was discovered in its entirety *in situ*, albeit fractured into many pieces (D7), and one dolium that survived scattered in a destruction layer, but with most of its pieces present (D8). These two dolia were of higher quality manufacture, with more defined rims and a stronger fabric. The fabric is similar to the fabric of the dolia from the winery: the same local clay source was used, but there were no mica inclusions. Interestingly, none of the dolia from the *cella vinaria* seem to have been reused in Area D, suggesting that the *cella vinaria* was still in use at the time of the construction of the barracks.

D7 (Fig. 5.86). This complete dolium was found in the portico on the southern side of the complex. The dolium has a rim diameter of 30 cm and a volume of approximately 255 litres.²³⁶ While no dolia lids have been definitely recovered, regular discolouration of the rim suggest that it was covered with a lid.

D8 (Fig. 5.87). A complete rim and the majority of the body fragments of this dolium were recovered. The

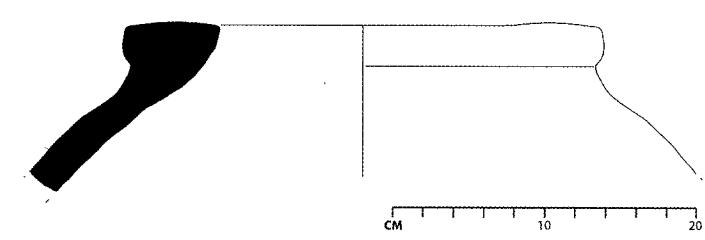


FIG. 5.86. Dolium D7. Scale 1:5. (ER/CR)