

# New evidence from tile-stamps for imperial properties near Gravina, and the topography of imperial estates in SE Italy

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## PART I. THE STAMPED TILES, by A. M. Small

Four tiles recently found in the territory of Gravina (Puglia) bear the stamp of the emperor, or of Gratus, an imperial slave. They provide new evidence for the beginning of imperial estates in SE Italy, and for the emperor's involvement in tile-production, and they add a significant new element to our knowledge of the topography of imperial estates in SE Italy:

(1) Fig. 1. Inv. P.1388. Flat fragment, probably of a *tegula*, 3.0-3.2 cm thick. Pale yellow clay (5Y 8/4). Stamped GRA[ti] / CAE[sa]ris with impressed letters in 2 rows. H of stamp frame 3.7 cm; max. pres. L of stamp (to edge of frame) 4.5 cm. H of letters 1.6-1.7 cm. The missing part of the inscription can be restored on the evidence of the stamp to be discussed next.

The tile was found by P. Favia in July 2001 during the excavation of a Roman industrial settlement near the Masseria Vagnari (fig. 5). The site, which extends over c.3.5 ha, is located in a side valley of the Basentello river, c.12 km WNW of Gravina. It lay on or close to the Via Appia which followed the upper part of the Basentello valley in its course between Venusia and Silvium.<sup>1</sup> Its proximity to the road helps to explain the development of the site as a centre for the production of tiles in the first two centuries A.D.

The tile was found lying in topsoil, immediately above the stoke-hole of a kiln (fig. 6), in an area where there is a dense scatter of tile wasters on the surface. When the kiln was excavated, numerous other wasters were found in the fill of the combustion chamber and stoke hole, leaving little doubt that the kiln was used for firing tiles, especially *tegulae*. Since the upper part of the combustion chamber has been damaged by the plough, it seems most likely that our tile was brought to the surface from the ruins of the kiln by ploughing.

The pale yellow colour of the clay, which contrasts markedly with the darker colours of the other tiles discussed here, shows that the piece has been mis-fired, and a firing crack which runs through the tile across the line of break above the stamp and a little to the left of it strongly suggests that it is a waster. The obvious implication is that it was produced at Vagnari. This is confirmed by instrumented neutron analysis (INAA) of the clay of the tile carried out by Volterra and Hancock (Appendix 2 below), which shows that there is no significant difference between the trace-elements of the clay of the tile, and those of clay from the edge of a ravine adjacent to the site where there are traces of ancient quarrying (figs. 5 and 7).

Radiocarbon analysis of a large piece of charred firewood found in the stoke hole gives a date between the late 1st c. B.C. and the beginning of the 2nd c. A.D. for the last use of the kiln,<sup>2</sup> but a small wall-herd of Italian *terra sigillata* found near the top of the fill of the combustion chamber must have been deposited after the kiln had ceased to be used. It suggests that the kiln was abandoned before the middle of the 1st c. A.D.

The letter-forms of the stamp conform to standard types of the Early Empire, and the formula slave-name *Caesaris* (without *servus*) was widely used in funerary inscriptions of imperial slaves in the 1st c., and occasionally later.<sup>3</sup> Since there is no evidence to show that imperial slaves ever worked in the *villicae* of private owners,<sup>4</sup> the tile works at Vagnari and in all probability the village and surrounding estate too must have been owned by the emperor himself.

This is the only stamped tile found so far at Vagnari, where 8,000 kg of tile fragments have been sorted and weighed. It seems likely, therefore, that tiles stamped by Gratus were normally exported from the site.

1 Cf. S. P. Vinson, "Ancient roads between Venosa and Gravina," *PBSR* 40 (1972) 58-90. For Silvium, which was situated c.1 km west of Gravina, see A. M. Small (ed.), *Gravina. An Iron Age and Republican settlement in Apulia* vol. I (British School at Rome 1992) 121-22.

2 The radiocarbon dates, provided by G. Cook of the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre at East Kilbride, are as follows: 1960 ± 50 BP, 1σ cal BC 36 - cal AD 116, cal BP 1985 - 1834, 2σ cal BC 51 - cal AD 131, cal BP 2000 - 1819.

3 H. Chantraine, *Freigelassene und Sklaven im Dienst der römischen Kaiser* (Wiesbaden 1967) esp. 175 Table IIa, 398-99; P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris* (Cambridge 1972) 48-52.

4 P. Weaver, "Imperial slaves and freedmen in the brick industry," *ZPE* 122 (1998) 239.