

The Upper Sabina Tiberina Project:
Report for the Archaeological Institute of America
Rutgers University – Newark

My archeological dig took place near the village of Vacone, a small town on the outskirts of Rome; specifically in the Sabine region (figure 1.1). In antiquity, the town was named after the Goddess Vacuna, the temple of which still remains as a converted church. But for my purposes, it would be the archeological remains of an Ancient Roman Villa that would bring me to Vacone. In a general sense, an Ancient Roman Villa was another home for Romans aristocrats to go to in order to escape hectic urban life. The Villa's agricultural setting allowed Aristocratic Romans to feel as if they were harking back to their country's agricultural origins. Villas were economic units as well recreational. Usually producing cash crops such as Olive Oil or Wine, these Villas would allow owners to see their slaves create these goods first hand. Our Villa in the Upper Sabina is one of the largest in the region. And its four Olive Oil presses also suggest it had one of the largest oil production in all of Italy. My experience at the site would allow me gather skills necessary for archeological work, and even show me firsthand how some historical conclusion can be drawn from archeological data.

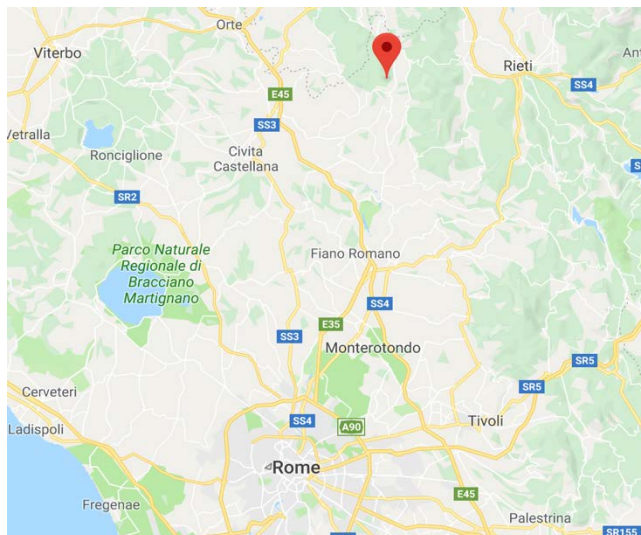


Figure 1.1: A General Overview of the Location of Vacone relative to Rome. The Sabine region is most notorious for the Roman legend of the stealing of the Sabine women.

My first week would be the most educational in my acquisition of archeological skills. James, an archeological student from England, would become my Trench Leader for the duration of my study. A most enthusiastic lecturer, he would teach me my basic archeological skills as well as pass the time by discussing the politics of Ancient Rome. Despite my plumbing experience of picking soil to reveal water piping, archeology picking was about shaving small flat layers of soil. It was precision, rather than quantity or speed, that made a good picker. Additionally, during my time with James I would learn how to trowel the top layers of soil in order to reveal different contexts. The context layer *pise* is what still sticks out from my memory, usually green in color and a clay like texture it was the level of the collapsed walls of the villa. In my first week we had the task of removing this *pise* layer, and then following its removal we would participate in digging the deepest hole on site. Nicknamed the “pit” by my fellow peers, the deep trench was assumed to have once been used as a bath complex. However, as James pointed out, such assumptions are mere guesses only; being based simply on the deep level floor and the wall tiles. While in this “pit” I found my most interesting find for the first two weeks: a dark glass bracelet. Purple in color, such a glass bracelet was made during the Lombard Period, signifying that the bath may have been made during the Early Middle Ages – to the disappointment of both James and myself.

For the Second Week I was put into Conservation. A sudden shift in gears, Conservation was not about digging to discover new finds, but rather conserving what has already been found: floor mosaics; pottery; and even painted wall plaster. However, for

my group specifically, we got the unique task of revealing the most preserved column base on site. This area of the Villa is considered to be entrance. The columns would have held up a tile roof, acting similar to a modern porch. Unearthing one of these columns was a delicate process of using a trowel to take off layers of dirt, while making sure not to damage the plaster (figure 2.1). The columns were made of plaster as opposed to marble because marble columns were normally too expensive for private dwellings, even for wealthy aristocrats. Apart from the column, I would also have the task of washing the porches various Mosaics with a simple water and a brush – revealing the artistic colors that had been covered for so long (figure 2.2) More intricate perhaps would be the conservation of painted plaster. Plaster can be prevented from peeling off by applying a limestone cement very gently on its cracks, and then keeping the cement slightly damp until it dries by leaving a covering over it (figure 2.3). My time in conservation made me realize that archology is not only a historical tool, but also an



Figure 2.1: My friend Eric continues my previous work of taking off the final layers of dirt from the column. Notice how the plaster layers are separate from the inner support structure of the column. The plaster would have been molded and then painted for appeal, while the limestone would have acted as a support structure.



Figure 2.2: Samra, my conservation partner, continues to washes the mosaic floor of the patio. The pink colors really began to come out as we washed of the dirt. Some of the individual mosaic tiles naturally occur from Northern Africa – exemplifying Rome’s options of diverse resources. The center had unfortunately been damaged from the roof collapse of the villa. Notice the Roof Tile is left in the center so the entire mosaic structure stays intact.



Figure 3.3: This picture contains perhaps the most well preserved plaster column and plaster wall painting on site. Notice the flower design on the red background. Additionally, the tarp covering signifies that someone had added limestone cement recently.

During my Third Week, the group would clear out a majority of the soil layers above the *Opus Spacatum* floor. *Opus Spacatum* was a type of floor the Romans used for production areas of a compound. The diagonal pattern allowed for heavier weight and easier clean up (see figure 3.1). This production area was right underneath the Villa's four olive oil presses, a number that indicated a very large olive oil output for the era. Interestingly, there was a small dome above these olive oil presses, which may have been thought by later inhabitants that the site was a church rather than a Villa. I was given the task of removing the thin layers of *pise* above the *opus spacatum* floor (figure 3.2), and although I personally did not find anything, my friend Eric would find what appears to have been a women's comb from the Early Empire. Having just reached the *opus spacatum* level, it would be in our last week that we would come upon even more finds in this area of the site.



Figure 3.1: This picture is not from our site, but is a generic example of an *Opus Spacatum* floor. The diagonal pattern allowed for greater support of weight, and easy clean up. Two factors much needed for Olive Oil production. In the next picture (figure 3.2) you can faintly see me standing on a similar *Opus Spacatum* floor.



Figure 3.2: A picture of me awkwardly smiling as I dust off dirt from the Opus Spacatum floor. Notice the various roof tiles layered behind me, this is an example of a roof tile collapse – long after the sites was abandon. In between the roof tiles and the floor is where most of our interesting finds would be found in Week Four.

The Fourth Week would perhaps become the most eventful. On Tuesday, as I was picking the final layers off in Trench 3, I had noticed a rather long and thin piece of a twig. The “twig” was in fact no twig at all, instead it was a small piece of a child’s Ulna (the inner bone of the wrist). Upon further investigation by my trench supervisor and I also discovered the surface of an entire skull, revealing to us that we had come upon a full body grave (figure 4.1). This was not the first grave found in our sites history, but it was however the first found for the 2018 season. In order to allow our Osteologist to properly examine the bones, my supervisor sent my friend Eric and I to

other side of the trench away from the grave. However, despite our new location, we would discover another child grave in the same trench. This discovery came after we picked off a few layers and found large pieces of pottery condensed in one area, and upon troweling a bit further, we realized the pottery was of an entire anaphora (figure 4.2). Inside the broken anaphora was skeletal remains of a small child. It seems whoever buried the child had used the anaphora as a sarcophagus.

These two burials would be part of four found at this specific context level above the *opus spactum*. The graves date to the Lombard Period (700 - 770 AD); a couple centuries after, not only the site's abandonment in 200 AD, but of the Fall of Rome itself. These graves presence allow us to hypothesize some of the following conclusions: First, that the residents of Vacone had forgotten that the site was originally used as an Agricultural Villa. Second, that the people who buried these graves may have thought the site was a church, due to the small dome on top of the site. Thirdly, it is possible that a new migration of people came to Vacone who did not know the local history of the small village.



Figure 4.2: The Amphora found by both me and Eric. I have added a yellow outline so one can better make out the shape: Notice, specifically, the top of the amphora as this cone shape signifies that this is indeed one entire amphora. Although it is not shown in this photo, underneath the dirt would be another bone corpse of a small child.



Figure 4.3: The cleaned up version of the bone remains I found during my fourth week. Notice the large boulders at the feet of the body, as well as the head: signifying that the person was intentionally buried. Additionally, notice the body is right above the Opus Spacatum floor granting us knowledge that the site had not collapsed yet at the time of burial.

Overall, my time at the Upper Sabina Project was a unique and enjoyable experience. More importantly, the field study gave me an on hands view of archeology and various skills associated with the work. The finds I came upon during the dig were

exciting, but perhaps more interesting was how archeologist can use these discoveries to propose conclusions about the historical past. Specifically, I am grateful for the *Archaeological Institute of America* for granting me the *Jane C. Walbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship*, which allowed me the possibility of going on this field study in the first place. The trip gave me the ability to gain the fundamental skills and experience necessary for my pursuits as an archeologist – and allowed me to firmly conclude that this is path I wish to follow.



The final picture taken on site, of which the close friends I made during my trip came together for one photo. Notice as well the beautiful rolling hills of the Sabina, I sight I hope to see again one day...