Gerace 2018 – Summary of the Results of the UBC Excavation

The UBC excavation of a Roman rural site at Gerace in central Sicily, in collaboration with the Assessorato dei Beni Culturali della Sicilia and of the Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali di Enna, continued for a fifth season from 7th May to 2nd June 2018, thanks to renewed funding from the Social Studies and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Work concentrated this year on Areas D and F.

The kiln in Area F

Area F contained a large kiln measuring 4.95 m by 3.54 m, partly excavated in 2017. It was built in the fifth century AD, almost certainly in its first half, and had two subsequent phases. Of the primary kiln, the whole of the easternmost north-south flue at the back of the structure was excavated in 2018, as well as a small part of its east-west central flue (Fig. 1, right). As a result of this work, it is now confirmed (the hypothesis was tentatively raised last year) that the brick cross-walls of this kiln were made of mud brick, which only became hardened during the firing of the kiln while it was in use. Late Roman kilns in Italy, for example at Montelabate (PG) and Pellaro (RC), have been recognized as having been built using this time-honoured material, but the kiln in Area F at Gerace is the first example of Roman date known in Sicily, and the latest chronologically anywhere. The ‘arches’ of the central flue were not of normal, semicircular type; each mud brick was merely set horizontally closer and closer towards the central passage, before a single flat brick was able to bridge the remaining central opening at the top (Fig. 2). This type of construction, known as a corbel arch, was used in the seventh and sixth centuries BC to build Etruscan tombs in central Italy, and later also in Sicily in the Greek classical period (for example, at Selinunte); it is not a true arch at all. The Gerace kiln principally produced unstamped roof tiles, of which many overfired and distorted examples have been found; but excavation of the fill in the rear flue (Fig. 1, far right) produced also overfired wasters of dolia (large containers for agricultural produce), as well as thick, circular bricks with central holes, used in making columns. In the absence of knowledge of the existence of any other kilns at Gerace in the immediate vicinity of that in Area F (geophysics suggested there are none), it is logical to conclude that these products were also made in the same kiln during its first phase of operation, and were shovelled here from nearby waste dumps when this part of the kiln went out of use.

In a second phase, also at some period during the fifth century, the original kiln was found to be too large, and it was reduced in size by filling in all of the lateral flues and half of the main central flue, in order to create a much smaller kiln. Not all of the latter could be excavated, because a tree, which could not be

Figure 1. Overall view of the kiln in Area F, from south. Scale: 1 m
Figure 2. A corbel arch. Scale: 20 cm
removed, stands over the *praefurnium* area of both the primary and the secondary kiln. The only new construction necessary to create the second kiln was a fresh wall to mark its back limit: lying across the major east-west flue of the original kiln, it was very poorly constructed, not even built vertically in parts. Of the new secondary kiln, about 1.30 m (east–west) x 1.10 m of its firing chamber was uncovered down to floor level (*Fig. 1*, left centre). The main supporting piers for the arch which supported the floor of the chamber above were, however, the original mud-brick ones of the phase-1 kiln. Unsurprisingly, they were scorched black by continual use, having served in two successive phases of the kiln’s life (*Fig. 3*). In this secondary phase, the products of the kiln appear to have been exclusively roof-tiles. It seems likely that this kiln was abandoned when élite life at Gerace came to an end, at some time during the second half of the fifth century – if indeed it was still in production then, and had not already gone out of use a few years earlier.

*Figure 3. Detail of the south wall of the secondary kiln, from the north. Scale: 1 m*

Later, in the sixth century, vertical furnaces were excavated, extraordinarily, within the thickness of some of the former mud-brick walls. This would not have been possible if these walls had been constructed of kiln-fired bricks in the conventional manner. The purpose of this early Byzantine industrial activity is enigmatic. One of the pits was excavated in 2017, and another next to it (on the west side, the central one of three: *Fig. 1*, top left) was excavated in 2018. We are, however, no nearer to understanding what was being produced as a result of this activity: all that both pits contained was earth, blackened by fire, with only tiny quantities of very fragmentary pottery. One new discovery was made in 2018: at the bottom of the excavated shafts a small semicircular hole allowed air to pass from one shaft to another. It means that fire could be applied to the bottom of one shaft if an adjacent one was empty at the time, and the space therefore could be used for firing the contents of the adjacent shaft then in use. Without the presence of these small flues, it would be difficult to get any draught for creating a fire in whichever shaft was currently being employed. This, however, does not explain why all three pits are full of burnt material (unless one is redeposited), because logically, at the last firing, one of the pits dug should have been empty in order to apply fire to the contents of the adjacent shaft. A radiocarbon date from burnt material excavated last year in the more easterly shaft gives a 95% probability that this activity occurred during the sixth century AD, and it therefore belongs in the early Byzantine phase of settlement at Gerace. The same applies equally, of course, to that excavated in 2018.
The bath-house – structure
Further up the hill, in Area D3, excavation continued in the frigidarium (room 6) of the bath-house, partly excavated last year. It was found to have its entrance in the west wall, 99 cm wide (Fig. 4). The sandstone threshold slab was rather irregularly cut, and in the gap between it and the room’s mosaic floor, ten small strips of marble, some of them reused from wall veneer (three fragments have a pair of lines scored on them), were inserted. Cipollino (from Euboea), pavonazzetto (Afyon in Turkey), giallo antico (Chemtou, Tunisia) and probably Proconnesian (Sea of Marmara, Turkey) can be recognized among the marbles used.

Figure 4. The entrance to the frigidarium in the west wall, from the east. Scale: 20 cm

A horseshoe-shaped structure (room 9) was discovered along the frigidarium's north wall, towards its eastern end. Internally it measured 1.91 m wide (east–west), and c. 1.84 m to the rear of apse. It seems clear that this was a water feature, as there is a small square hole in the back wall, just below a funnel-shaped rear embrasure, through which water was fed (presumably via a lead pipe), and what appears to have been a substantial exit drain at the south-east corner (Fig. 5, below centre). Curiously, however, no trace of floor was found, nor did any plaster survive on the walls. It is possible, although it seems unlikely, that the feature was never completed. More plausibly, the arrangement may have been that of a simple, freestanding marble basin, perhaps resting on a marble slab laid without much foundation (since the feature was intended only to be viewed, not entered or walked on), and that both were removed when the baths were stripped in the second half of the fifth century. This occurred after a probable earthquake which brought life in the baths to an end (see below). The apse was originally roofed by a semi-dome of squared blocks, of which the lowest course and part of the second remained in position (Fig. 5, top left).

The opening to the fountain area was originally fronted by an arch, of which the supporting pier on the right and the springer (the bottom voussoir of an arch) remained (Fig. 6, right of scale). This would once have been matched by another pier on the left-hand side of the opening. In the earthquake of c. AD 450/500, this latter pier must have collapsed. After the ensuing decision to try and repair the baths for reuse, the fountain was eliminated from the plans. The apse wall on this west side was cut back (Fig. 7, immediately to the left of the ranging pole; cf. Fig. 5), and a new, very roughly-built wall was constructed on top of what had been a low parapet (approximately 45 cm high above the frigidarium floor) in front of the fountain. The poor quality of the new masonry can be seen on the inside, where it contrasts with the neater facing of the parapet wall below (Fig. 7, left; also Fig. 5), but the former of course was never intended to be seen: the interior of the apse was due to be filled completely with earth. Nearly all of the north and west walls of the frigidarium were in the process of being rebuilt as part of this new scheme, but
they were not yet finished and no plaster had been applied. The fragments of walling that do bear plaster (most substantially at the east end of the north wall: Fig. 6, bottom and right) belong to those parts of the original bath-house walls which were reused *in situ* when the rebuilding program started after the earthquake. Then, suddenly, the refurbishment project was aborted: a decision was taken to abandon the baths and strip out anything of value.

Within the *frigidarium*, some two metres of deposits remained to be excavated in 2018 over two-thirds of its area. As in 2017, these layers, part of a systematic dumping of soil when the baths were filled in, and not therefore representing casual rubbish, contained finds consistently belonging to the second half of the
Figure 7. Interior of the apse, seen from the north-east. Scale: 2 m

Figure 8. Skeleton of a dog, in one of the fills of the frigidarium. Scale: 10 cm

Figure 9 (left). African red slip ware lamp, from the fill of the frigidarium, second half of the fifth century AD.

Figure 10. Copper alloy suspension hook and chain. From the fill of the apse, of the same date. Scales: 5 cm
fifth century AD. They provide a terminus ante quem non of c. AD 450 for the earthquake which caused the baths to stop working. Among the finds in these fills were the skeleton of a small dog (Fig. 8), and a damaged African red-slip pottery lamp, of which the discus design is largely missing (Fig. 9). Originally it had probably featured a seated lion, of which one paw and its long tail are preserved. From the fills in the apse (room 9) came *inter alia* a small copper alloy chain, possibly for hanging an object like a lamp or a steelyard weight (Fig. 10), and a kitchen *mortarium* (mixing bowl), with grits in its base to help grind food. This find can be identified from its fabric as having been made at Nabeul on the Cape Bon peninsula in Tunisia, a place still famous to this day as a pottery-making centre (Fig. 11).

![Figure 11. Mortarium from the fill of the apse, c. AD 450/500. Scale: 10 cm](image)

The south wall of the *frigidarium*, uncovered in 2017, was examined in greater detail, and the use of *pisé* (rammed earth) in the upper part of the construction (above the horizontal stone string course) was confirmed. Some marks on the white plaster in the lower part was seen to have had red paint applied to it at one point, probably without special significance. It seems likely that this plaster was originally covered with marble wall decoration, and there are some score marks, both vertical and diagonal, which might represent guide-lines for the placement of marble slabs. Along the east wall of the *frigidarium*, further work on one of the two cold pools (7), most of which was excavated last year, has demonstrated that its south wall had two separate phases: to the original wall using yellow mortar was added later on its north side a narrower wall employing white mortar. It had been hoped to excavate also the second cold pool (8), but these plans were not realized because of the presence of a tree above it.

**The bath-house – the frigidarium mosaic**

The mosaic floor of the *frigidarium*, 6.25 m x 5.85 m, together with its inscription, was completely exposed (Fig. 12); it was laid c. AD 380. A circular terracotta drain, 32 cm in diameter, was placed slightly off-centre (Fig. 13). The whole floor slopes down slightly in all four directions towards it, in order to achieve the rapid drainage of any water that was spilt on the floor when bathers emerged from the two cold pools. The pattern of the mosaic consists of pairs of overlapping and intertwining irregular hexagons ("shields"), each pair tangent with an adjacent one; the hexagons are edged with laurel bands. Four ribbon-bordered octagons each contain circular rosettes; in the centre of each of these was a monogram (discussed below). The design results in a series of irregular quadrilateral panels being left in the field. They are approximately lozenge-shaped, but two sides of each have a different length from that of the other two. There are 27 of them in all on the floor, each containing an ivy leaf (*hedera*) (for one, see Fig. 13). It is estimated that the mosaic used a total of approximately 250,000 tesserae in its composition.
The only other mosaic in the Roman world to use tangent ‘shields’, from an apse in the *triclinium* of the Maison de Bacchus at Djemila in Algeria, has guilloche borders to define each ‘shield’, not laurel leaves, and is 70 years later (it was laid c. AD 450) than the Gerace floor. Other pavements using the crossed ‘shields’ pattern do occur quite widely in the Roman Empire, especially in Italy and North Africa, but the normal arrangement is to have each pair of ‘shields’ separated from the next by octagons, lozenges, regular-sided hexagons and/or diagonal squares (usually two of these), and also to employ a guilloche border to edge each ‘shield’. One example of this type of design is known in Sicily, at Marsala. Only a single site has yielded mosaic floors displaying this variant pattern but using laurel-wreath borders, and that is the villa at La Olmeda near Pedrosa de la Vega in Spain, also of the late fourth century (in the peristyle floor and in two other pavements). The Gerace mosaic, in using pairs of overlapping irregular hexagons in a tangent arrangement, in conjunction with laurel-wreath borders framing the hexagons, is without parallel in the Roman Empire.

Whether the mosaic is the work of Africans, or of Sicilians using African-inspired copybooks, is not certain. Our earlier work at Gerace suggested that the latter was more likely, in that the mosaic floors were not sufficiently numerous to warrant the presence of overseas African mosaicists. It was also suggested that there was no reason why a competent Sicilian workshop, using African-inspired designs and restricting itself to geometric compositions, could not have laid these floors. That remains the more likely hypothesis, even after the discovery of the *frigidarium* mosaic in 2017/2018; but the view might require modification if further mosaic floors are discovered elsewhere in future excavations at Gerace.
The frigidarium mosaic’s inscription

Apparently also unique anywhere in the Roman Empire is a mosaic with an inscription on all four sides. The newly uncovered parts of this probably read: PHILIPPIANORVM PRAEDIA FEL[cia]/ (palm branch) CAPITOLINIS GAVDIVM: ‘(may) the estates of the Philippiani prosper. Joy from the Capitoline (sc. contests)’. (The rest, found in 2017, reads PL[ur]A FABRICETIS MELLIORA DEDI/CETIS ASCLEPIADES SENESCAS CVM TVIS: ‘May you build more things, may you dedicate better things. Asclepiades, may you grow old with your family.’). The inscription is damaged at the north-west corner, so the reading of the end of the west side cannot be taken as certain, but felicia is likely (literally ‘(May) the estates of the Philippiani (be) prosperous’, with the verb sint understood). There was surely also an ivy leaf next to the A of felicia, as one is present at or very near all the other corners: there would have been room for it at the beginning of the north side, to the left of the palm branch (Fig. 14). The estates are envisaged as being run by ‘the Philippiani’, i.e. Philippianus and son, if Asclepiades, named on the south side together with a wish (‘may you grow old with your family’) was indeed his son, as seems very likely. Asclepiades may have been quite young at the time, even a baby. The birth of a son and heir would have encouraged Philippianus to change the estate name from praedium or prædia Philippiani to praedia Philippianorum, as often happened in the second generation of estate ownership. The fact that no roof-tiles have been found bearing a new stamp, PHILIPPIANORVM (although one, now lost, is listed in the Sicilian section of Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum), might indicate that Asclepiades did not in fact live to a great age.

CAPITOLINIS GAVDIVM may mean ‘joy to the Capitolini’ (i.e. using the dative case). If so we have to imagine the Capitolini as patrons or business partners of Philippianus, presumably horse-trainers who bought horses from the presumed stud at Gerace and successfully trained them to win races in local circuses (the source of the ‘joy’ mentioned in the inscription): race-tracks are known to have existed in Sicily in late Roman Catania and Syracuse. The name Capitolinus occurs quite widely across the Roman Empire; there is a Kapitolina, for example, on an inscription from the Syracuse catacombs. Clearly the relationship of these Capitolini with Philippianus must have been close, to warrant such prominent mention on the showpiece mosaic in the latter’s private bath-house – not least because the Capitolini also feature in a monogram in one of the mosaic’s central roundels (Fig. 15). Much more plausible, however, is the alternative explanation that ‘Capitolinis’ refers to the agones Capitolini, Greek-style games in Rome instituted by the emperor Domitian in AD 86 and still presented in the late fourth century; they are also referred to as the Capitolia. In that case, CAPITOLINIS would be an
ablative of origin, meaning ‘arising from’ the Capitoline (contests). We know that these had an equestrian component, and also it seems very likely that it was the victorious horse-owner who won the fame and glory there, not the charioteer as in Roman-style games (*ludi*). The palm branch, as a symbol of victory (Fig. 14), would indicate that Philippianus as horse-owner won at least one race in these contests in Rome, so the ‘joy’ (*gaudium*) would be that of Philippianus himself. Interestingly, it seems likely that musical and theatrical contests at the same *agones Capitolini* in Rome are depicted on mosaics in the private quarters of the great villa near Piazza Armerina, only 15 km away, laid forty or so years earlier than the Gerace mosaic. Or does the text express only a wish, like the rest of the inscription, and victory was hoped for rather than already achieved? If this was the case, however, it seems strange that he was devoted enough to the Capitoline contests to invent a monogram for them and inscribe it in his mosaic (Fig. 15). Either way, it would seem to confirm, if this interpretation is correct, that Philippianus had business interests in, and direct contacts with, Rome itself. Study of the animal bones at Gerace had already indicated (in 2017) the relative importance of equids in the faunal assemblages (although many come from fifth-century contexts, indicating perhaps a continuity of the business over several generations), and the imagery on tile-stamps makes the landowner’s obsession with horses in the second half of the fourth century clear.

Of the monograms featured in the mosaic’s four central roundels, that containing the monogram CAPITOLINI has already been discussed (Fig. 15). The roundel diagonally opposite contains a monogram of Asclepiades, assumed (as noted above) to be Philippianus’ son (Fig. 16). The monogram in a third roundel, PHILIPPIANI, was discovered last year: here it must be in the nominative case (as the other monograms are), i.e. ‘the Philippiani’ (father and son). The monogram in the fourth roundel was destroyed in antiquity (it might have been a repeat of PHILIPPIANI). This was not a deliberate effacement, but probably an accident (spilt mortar?) during the new building work after the earthquake of AD 450/500, referred to above. The mortar is rough and uneven; no attempt had ever been made to create a smooth surface for walking on, as one would have expected if the baths were to have been put back into action. As we have seen above, that never happened.

*The early Byzantine settlement*

A further part of the modest early Byzantine settlement, which grew up on the site, probably c. AD 500, after élite life at Gerace had come to an end, was excavated in 2018, immediately to the north-east of the baths. The trench (Area D4) was opened as an extension of Area D3, because masonry had been observed in the north-east corner of the 2017 trench, and we were curious to know whether it was Roman or
Byzantine. Three phases of structures were identified here in 2018, all built within the sixth and seventh centuries AD. Of phase 1, two walls were uncovered, one on the west side with a doorway, and another at an irregular angle to it on the south, also apparently with a doorway. In phase 2, the doorway in the west wall was blocked and a further wall was built on the north, not parallel to the south wall; it abuts, with a straight joint, the pre-existing west wall. In a third phase, this structure was demolished and filled with earth and rubble, and a new structure was constructed on the same alignment as the north wall of the phase-2 building, but slightly further north and at a higher level. This was the south wall of a house or other building, the full extent of which still lies buried to the north. Its entrance, 92 cm wide, with its door jambs still in place on either side, was also identified (Fig. 17). In front of the latter was a huge, flat-lying slab (89 cm x 54 cm), and other unevenly-laid stones constituting a roughly-paved, open-air yard. A further wall was built on the east to enclose this yard, and a small oven (to the right in Fig. 17) was constructed against it. The roof tiles found in all three phases are of the early Byzantine type with combed or finger-made decoration, previously recorded at Gerace and indeed known elsewhere in Sicily: a well-preserved example, of which the complete dimensions could be recorded (72.5 cm x 28.5 x 1.2 cm; what remains of it weighs 4.25 kg), is shown in Fig. 18. Also from the east side of D4 comes a Roman brick, found unstratified but probably re-used in a Byzantine structure. The presence of finger impressions on the back of it, in the form of an X, make it certain that this was a pila brick for use in a hypocaust. The monogram ‘Philippian’ appears on its upper surface (Fig. 19). This is the first time that evidence has been found at Gerace that pila bricks were among the ceramic products manufactured on the estate.
A series of vital questions still remains to be answered at Gerace. A free-standing bath-house, small but elegantly equipped with marble and mosaic, does not normally stand alone. Does another villa, the elegant and grander villa of Philippianus, lie somewhere near the baths, undetected by geophysics, but waiting to give up its secrets? One would have thought that constructing a new house would have taken priority over a new bath-building (if the villa in Area A, surely unfinished, is to be regarded as only a temporary residence for him after a disaster in the 360s, later to be used by his dependents). Alternatively, did he die before a grander villa was even started, and did Asclepiades, if he lived to adulthood, choose to live elsewhere, perhaps on another estate? Only further research can suggest answers to these intriguing questions.

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Further reading

- R. J. A. Wilson, 'Philippianus and his late Roman estate in central Sicily: the Gerace project', *Current World Archaeology* 89 (2018), 16–23