

## Filling a GAP in Our Knowledge: The Gangivecchio Archaeological Project (GAP)

Since the summer of 2000, the University of Iowa and the Archaeological Superintendency of Palermo have collaborated on the archaeological investigations of the site of Gangivecchio, Province of Palermo, Sicily. Gangivecchio is a 56 hectare estate in east central Sicily, centered on the Abbey of Gangivecchio, a Benedictine abbey founded in 1364 and now the private property of the Tornabene Family. Since initial surface investigations in 1974, it has been known that the site appears to possess an occupation sequence of long duration, perhaps going back to Hellenistic times, but with even tantalizing hints from the Greek colonial period. Most of the ancient evidence is from the period of the High Roman Empire, 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Test pits in the courtyard of the Abbey document Late Roman, Byzantine, possible Arab, and certainly Norman components to the site, as well as a full sequence of Medieval to modern components.

One crucial facet to the project is the deployment of ground-penetrating radar (GPR) on the site. In 2004, 22 radar grids, covering an area of more than 3,500 sq m were investigated with data analysis continuing to this day. A deliberate intention to test excavate the radar results has been at the heart of the GAP project, to assist in the development of the radar technique for archaeology. Results to date have been extremely encouraging.

In 2012, a new, three-way collaboration between the University of Iowa, the Archaeological Superintendency of Palermo, and the University of Palermo (division of Medieval Archaeology, Faculty of Arts and Letters) was established and a joint field-school was run in June and July of 2012, with 10 American and 6 Sicilian students. The University of Palermo contingent worked on the basement of the Abbey, aiming to clarify details of the medieval component of the site, while the University of Iowa contingent concentrated on the

area of the densest concentration of Roman artifacts on the site, a field close to the abbey called Parcel 19, which had been investigated with radar and test pits previously.

Utilizing the Sicilian preferred excavation technique of the Barker-Harris stratigraphic method, a 10 m x 10 m grid was opened initially in Parcel 19, and then narrowed to a 5 m x 5 m trench. The 5 m x 5 m unit was chosen for its location where long linear features had been identified by the GPR investigations, believed to be architectural features, most likely walls. Surface collections on the mound in Parcel 19 strongly suggested the presence of a Roman villa (due mostly to the ubiquitous finding of mosaic pieces – the *tesserae*). Excavations confirmed that one of the linear features was indeed a wall. Associated artifacts were all Roman, with strong representation of Italian *sigillata* and African Red Slip ware, as well as Roman coarse wares. The working hypothesis regarding Parcel 19 continues to be that the site was once a Roman villa, part of the agricultural powerhouse network characterizing this region of Sicily, especially in and around Enna (only 30 km away and visible from the Gangivecchio property). The poet Claudian reiterated the long-standing claim that Enna was the place where the Demeter-Persephone legend was played out in his *Rape of Proserpina* (Hall 1969), clearly maintaining the region's claim to agricultural production primacy.

Gangivecchio is a site of tremendous significance, not least because of its exceptionally long trajectory of occupation. Its significance as a Roman site stems from the fact that, aside from a few notable exceptions, such as Morgantina and Piazza Armerina, as Moses Finley once observed (Finley 1971) the interior of Sicily under the Roman empire remains a great unknown. Work at Gangivecchio promises to help elucidate the details of the agricultural economy of Sicily under the Roman empire, as well as reveal details about daily life in this, the cross-roads of the ancient Mediterranean Roman world-system.

## References

Finley, Moses I. 1971. *Ancient Sicily*. Chatto and Windus, London.

Hall, J. B. 1969. *Claudian De Raptu Proserpinae*. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 11. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.