

EXCAVATION IN THE TERRITORY OF
METAPONTO



1974

The University of Texas at Austin

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Cover: Fragment of a fourth century B.C. South Italian Red Figured vase with a head of Apollo (?) found during the 1974 UT Campaign at Pizzica, near Metaponto. Attributed by A. D. Trendall to the Painter of Berlin-Branca.

EXCAVATION IN THE TERRITORY OF METAPONTO

Excavation by the University of Texas in the territory of the Greek colonial city of Metaponto, in Southern Italy, has two objectives: to train graduate students in its classical archaeology program in field techniques and to study the special archaeological and historical problem of the relationship between a Greek city and its territory.

Founded about 650 B.C. by Greek colonists from Achaia on the northern coast of the Peloponnesus, Metaponto was soon (because of its fertile wheatland) one of the richest colonies in the West. The great historical importance of this early colonial movement is just beginning to be appreciated. Not only did the Western Greek cities make valuable contributions to Greek civilization, they passed it on to the Etruscans and Romans.

Archaeology is providing the documentation of this unfolding story. Aerial photography followed by excavation has revealed that the city of Metaponto was one of the earliest in the West to have a regular city plan, with streets and avenues intersecting at right angles, uniform blocks, flanked by water and sewer lines. This innovation dates from the late sixth century B.C., the period in which the great philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras lived at Metaponto.

The site of Metaponto is important because it reveals much, not only about city planning but about the organization of the territory, the countryside around the city, and the life of its inhabitants. About this aspect of Greek civilization we are in almost total ignorance. The University of Texas excavation is thus a pioneering effort in an important area of social and economic history.

The territory, besides providing part or all of the food supply of the city, also served as the burial ground, and as an area for future expansion. The landscape would have included farmhouses, villas, villages, rural sanctuaries and necropoleis. In a largely agricultural colony such as Metaponto the economic and social infrastructure of the territory was especially important. Here, the city's varying fortunes and history cannot be divided from those of its territory.

The study of the territory of a Greek city in Southern Italy or Sicily has an added interest and value in the light that it can shed on the process of colonization, division of lands, and relations with the indigenous peoples. The cultural exchange and penetration of the interior of Italy by the Greeks which eventually hellenized the entire peninsula including Rome, with profound effects on the future course of western civilization, began

in the territory immediately outside the early colonies like Metaponto.

Metaponto was chosen because it is particularly well-suited for this study both from the point of view of the wealth and availability of the archaeological data and the disposition of the authorities to encourage and assist exploration.

Until it was reclaimed for agriculture fifty years ago, the land, plagued by malaria, had lain abandoned since Roman times. The remains of ancient farmhouses and sanctuaries, and even the narrow roads dividing the original tracts of the early sixth century B.C. have been preserved. Over a hundred farm sites can be identified from aerial photographs of the region.

Systematic exploration of the entire territory of Metaponto through aerial photography was carried out in the 1960's under the direction of the Soprintendente di Basilicata, Professor Dinu Adamesteanu. A dozen farm sites have since been excavated by British, French, German, Rumanian, as well as Italian expeditions working in collaboration with the Soprintendenza. In most cases, due to pressures of time, only the main farm building has been explored. There are still many unanswered or partially answered questions.

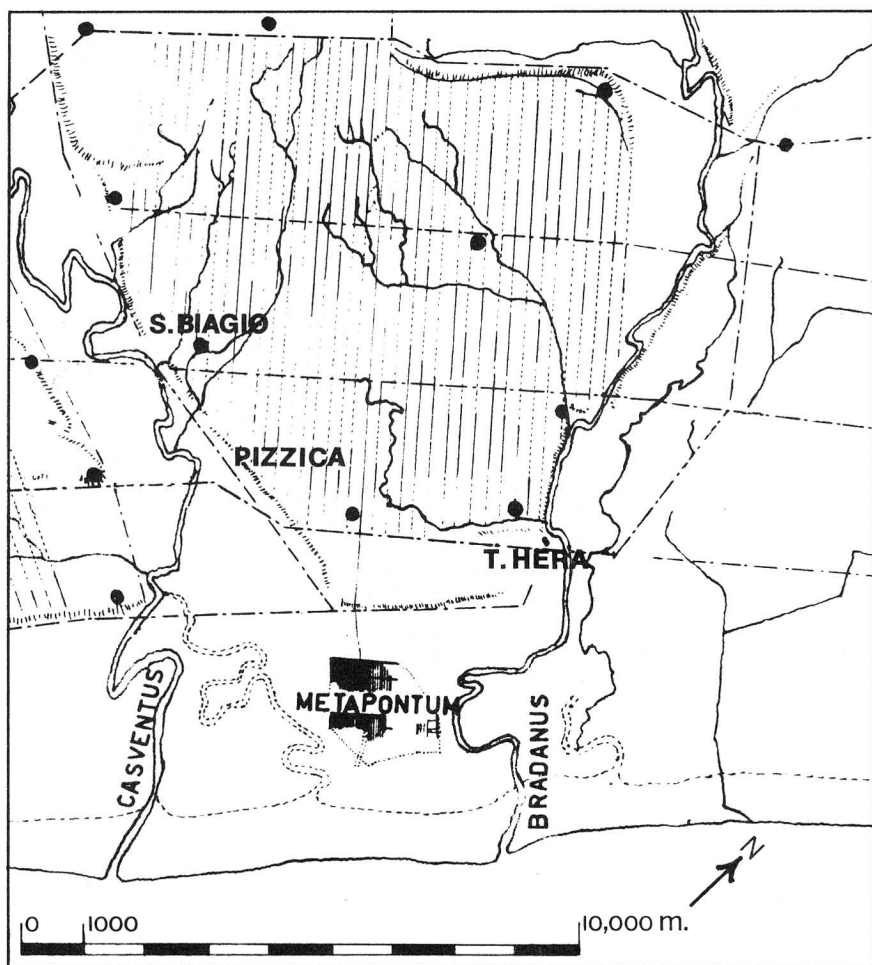
At what point in its history was the division of the land around Metaponto made? Was the territory settled all at once or in stages? Unexplored is the question of the general layout of the Greek farm, not only of the main buildings, but also their relation to the outbuildings, sources of water, roads, local shrines, and cemeteries. Still to be investigated is the evidence bearing on the kinds of crops and animals raised at various periods at Metaponto, and the types of agricultural machinery in use. What is needed is a fully excavated farm whose various phases can be accurately dated.

With these considerations in mind, as well as the University's concern to find a suitable training ground for graduate students, a site was chosen. A brief survey, made in March 1974, indicated that it would be both interesting and manageable. Permission was granted by the Italian government to begin excavation in June 1974.

Map of the territory of Metaponto. The vertical lines are the original boundary markers of the 6th century B.C. The site (Pizzica) and the sanctuary of San Biagio indicated, along the Casuentus (Basento) River.

REPORT ON THE 1974 CAMPAIGN AT PIZZICA NEAR METAPONTO

The area known as Pizzica Pantanelle, two kilometers, as the crow flies, from the ancient walls of Metaponto, along the valley of the Basento River, is the site of the excavation, undertaken by the University of Texas in collaboration with the Soprintendenza alle Antichità della Basilicata, and with the generous cooperation of the Ente Sviluppo of Metaponto, who own the land.



There in the autumn of 1973, in the course of work for a new international school of agriculture, a project of the Ente Sviluppo, a bulldozer uncovered what appeared to be a dozen or more hut floors with ancient pottery. Subsequent trial trenches by the Soprintendenza revealed significant concentrations of roof tiles of the classical period, which seem to have formed the roof of one of the numerous farmhouses discovered in the surroundings of Metaponto.



The trench on the north side of the hill, where the tomb with the tile cover was found. In the background, the buildings of the agriculture school.

The work of the University of Texas, under the direction of Professor Joseph C. Carter, began on June 27, 1974 and lasted for seventeen working days. Participating in the project were University of Texas graduate student Herbert Edmundson, Nelson Foss of the John Cabot International College in Rome, who acted as surveyor, and volunteers Alexandra MacKenzie and Catherine Detruit, students of archaeology at the Sorbonne. The work crew consisted of Giuseppe di Taranto, Alfredo Gallitello and Alfredo Grieco. At crucial states, the work benefitted from the assistance of the acting Soprintendente, Elena Lattanzi, the assistant of the Soprintendente Antonio Indice, and by Antonio Paolucelli, the draftsman of the Soprintendenza who did the site plans.

The program for this first year was to make a series of exploratory trenches in order to determine the location and extent of the classical farmhouse. Concurrently, a group from the University of Lecce led by Prof. Antonio Cremonisi undertook the exploration of the hut floors already exposed by the bulldozer.

The first trial was made on the summit of the spur projecting eastward into the valley of the Basento. A grid of five meter squares was layed out beginning near the western confine of the area of the bulldozer cut. This was the area of the greatest concentration of classical pottery on the surface.

NEOLITHIC HUT, AND TOMBS

The plowed earth, which formed a layer about 40 centimeters thick directly over virgin soil, contained a mixture of materials from late neolithic (Serra d'Alto type) to Roman (*terra sigillata scura*). Black glazed pottery of the fourth century B.C., however, predominated, and not a few fragments of red-figured pottery of the same period were discovered. Among them were a head of a youth by a contemporary of the Darius painter, and two fragmentary and quite unusual votive plaques in the form of female heads. Circular cuts in the virgin earth in this area, resembling in their



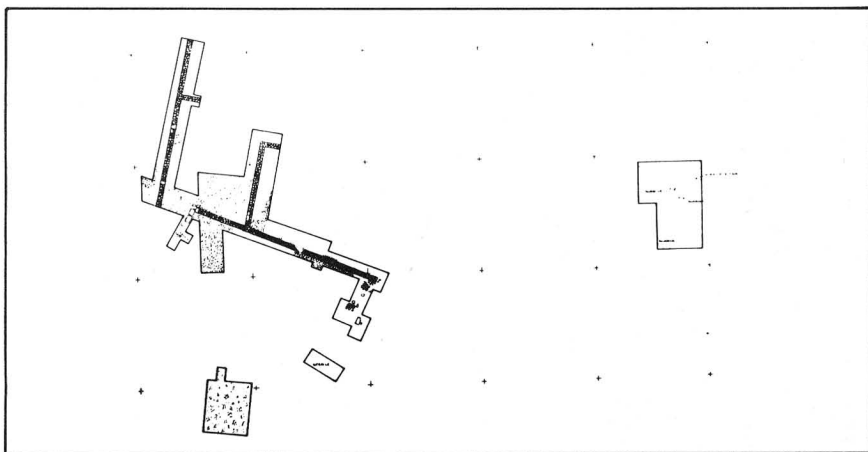
A fragmentary votive mask in terracotta, 4th century B.C., to be associated with the sanctuary on the site (see below).

form and dimensions the "hut floors" found further east, contained some neolithic impasto pottery. Subsequent exploration of these by the group from Lecce brought to light part of a neolithic hut floor and a tomb of the Roman period with half the skeleton of a young girl. Two other tombs were found intact nearby. The shallow burial was made in a wooden coffin which was then burned. There were no grave offerings. These inhumation-cremation burials would appear to date from Roman times and should probably be associated with the latest phase of the farmhouse, subsequently found to the west, in the saddle of the hill.

Beyond these three tombs and the traces of neolithic dwelling, the entire hilltop proved to be honeycombed with large circular pits containing material from diverse periods. Most of these may be of recent date—the work of farmers attempting to clear the land for the plow. One, however, is clearly Roman, since all the ceramic material from it is *terra sigillata*. Another, excavated jointly by Lecce and the University of Texas, contained farm implements in stone, a millstone and a basin, which should also be associated with the farmhouse.

GRECO-ROMAN FARMHOUSES

Exploration in the area of the tile fall about 20 meters to the west of the tombs revealed three extensive walls, each built with a different construction technique.



Plan of the Greco-Roman farmhouse and the Roman cemetery on the hilltop. Neolithic material discovered in the areas marked *scarica*.

An east-west wall, approximately 15 meters long was constructed entirely of stone. At its western extremity it turns south, and here large squared blocks are employed. A sounding in depth on the south side of the wall produced significant quantities of 4th century B.C. black glaze ware, and not long later. To the north of the wall is an extensive fallen roof. The tiles are Roman. Pottery, including an intact unguentarium found just under the tiles, dates the collapse to around the time of Christ. The roof finishes on the east beside the western wall of a room, which measures 8 meters from north to south. Its east-west dimensions are yet to be determined. This wall is constructed primarily with stones, but with tiles used as fillers.

To the west is a third wall, neither end of which has been discovered. The construction technique, using tiles as a leveling course directly on the ground, is paralleled in a late Roman villa nearer the walls of Metaponto. It is not aligned with either of the other walls and would seem thus to belong to a still larger structure to the west.



Careful work reveals the tile foundation course of the late Roman building's long N-S wall.

There is much work to be done yet in clarifying the plans and history of these structures, which are clearly among the most extensive farm buildings to have been found thus far in the area of Metaponto. The proximity of the farm to the city would suggest that it is also perhaps one of the earliest farm sites. A special effort will be made in future work to discover the farm of the archaic period.

FOURTH CENTURY B.C. TOMB

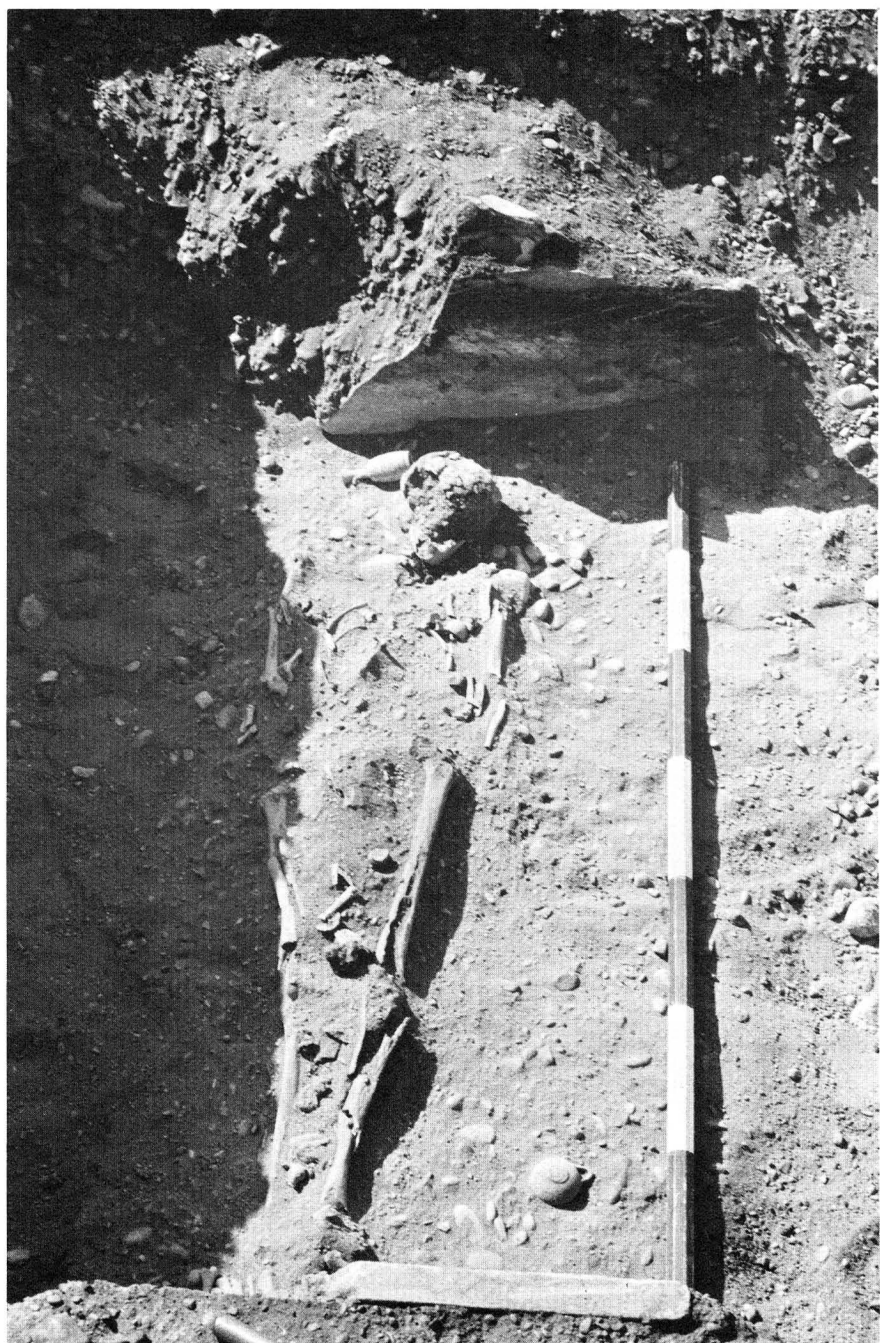


The fourth century B.C. tomb with tile cover in the course of excavation.

On the opposite slope of the hill, fifty meters to the north, three extensive trial trenches were dug in the last days of the excavation. The first touched the western end of a tomb covered by three large curved terracotta slabs, of the sort found also at Cozzo Presepe. Inside was the skeleton of a young male—behind his head a red-figured lekythos, at his foot a shallow cup. He wore on his left hand a bronze ring with carnelian scarab, which has an incised design. Future cleaning will reveal its subject. The form of the ring is that of several found in 4th century tombs of Taranto.

Though this is an area of large necropoleis, the date of the tomb suggests at least the possibility that it should be associated with the fourth century B.C. phase of the farmhouse.

The occupant of the tomb with the tile cover with burial offerings.



SANCTUARY

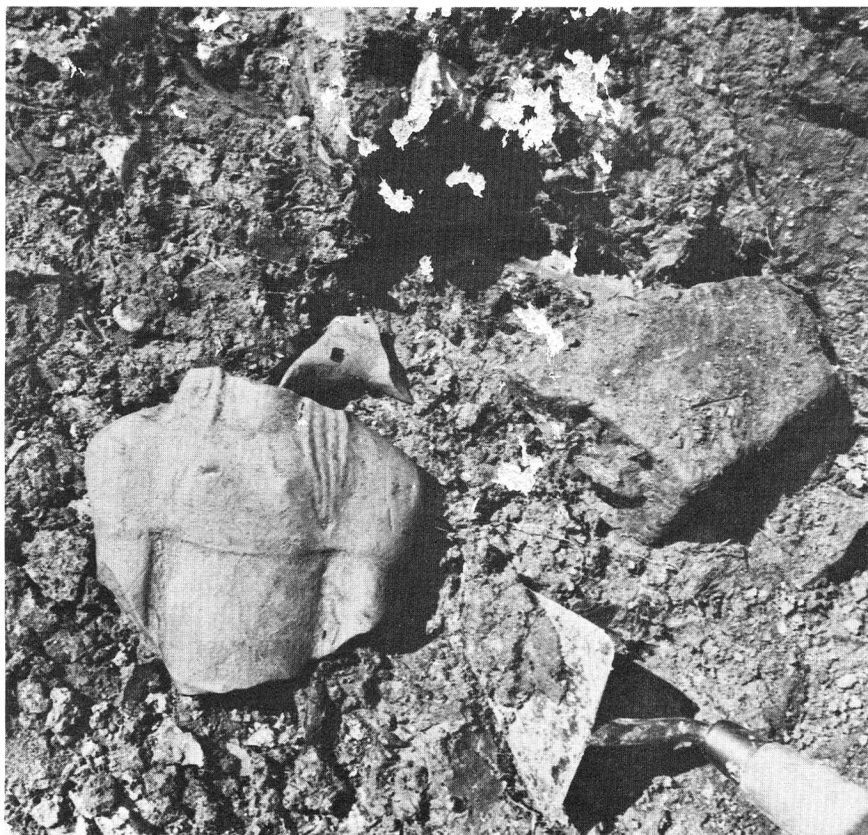
At the foot of the hill on which the farmhouse sits runs a recently enlarged irrigation ditch constructed by the Consorzio Bonifica. The ditch is fed at the eastern end of the hill by a cool spring. Just below the farmhouse is a well, known as the well of San Nicola, who, it was learned from the farmer nearby, gave his name to the whole hillside. According to local legend, there was a church of San Nicola here. No trace has yet been found, though a number of intact medieval vases were found in the trench on the north side of the hill.

Late in this brief campaign our specialized worker Guiseppe di Taranto made a surprising discovery. When the water in the irrigation ditch was low, ancient building blocks could be seen in the banks. He identified a large deposit of pottery in the south bank, and the cross-section of fallen roof in the north bank. The form of the tiles indicate that the building from which they came is archaic Greek.

Exploration along the north bank revealed a small cache of a half-dozen tiny vases, either perfectly intact or broken by the pressure of the clay on top of them. The grouping strongly suggested a votive deposit (in fact, similar vases had been found at the sanctuary of San Biagio just two kilometers up the valley of the Basento). Then the definitive evidence that a sanctuary was nearby: a few feet from the deposit of vases appeared the headless bust of a female divinity in terracotta—a votive, identical in form to those found at San Biagio. Her name is unknown. At San Biagio she is represented from the end of the seventh century B.C. onward, holding a variety of animals, sea creatures, and children. The evidence suggests that she was a fertility goddess worshipped by the indigenous peoples and later, in the same places, by the Greek farmers who built the sanctuary at San Biagio.

Two of the votive cups from the sanctuary deposit. A miniature wine mixing bowl, and offering dish. (The scale is in centimeters.)





Votive figurine in the bank of the irrigation ditch at the moment of discovery.

The similarities between San Nicola and San Biagio are striking. Apart from the votives, there is the coincidence of the neolithic settlement, the springs and churches at both places (attesting the unbroken tradition of the holiness of the spot). The precise location of the sanctuary at Pizzica must, however, be determined in a subsequent campaign of excavation.

SUMMARY

Although the surface, literally, has only been scratched, excavation this summer, limited as it was, confirmed the initial assumptions about the worth of this site. Its intrinsic historical and archaeological value is far greater than imagined. The farm site, with its Republican and late Imperial phases documents important phases in the history of Metaponto, and reveals much about the life of the farmer, his domicile and his worship. The existence of the sanctuary, completely unsuspected in this area, provides a unique opportunity to learn about the religion of the country people.

The sanctuary, when it is excavated, will undoubtedly shed much light on the still obscure, but vitally important question of the role of the native pre-Greek cults, in the development of Western Greek religion.

The range of materials, structures, archaeological and historical problems, further make Pizzica an ideal site for training graduate students in field techniques and providing them with a valuable opportunity to begin their careers in an alive and rapidly developing area of research.

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