

Excavations at the ‘Project of 100 Roman Farms’, Lucca, Italy: The 2006-2008 seasons at Palazzaccio

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In 2005, the University of North Carolina at Asheville and New York University in Florence joined the ForumUNESCO *Project of 100 Roman Farms* headquartered in Lucca¹. The focus of the UNCA/NYU-Florence excavations is a Roman farmhouse located in an alluvial plain known as the Sesto/Bientina Marsh southeast of the city of Lucca (fig. 1).

The building, known locally as ‘Palazzaccio’, is one of more than one hundred ancient Roman farms in the plain of Lucca uniquely preserved by catastrophic flooding of the Serchio (ancient Auser) river. The flooding, which began in the 4th century CE, ultimately created what became the largest lake in Tuscany until it was drained in the mid 1800’s (fig. 2)².

By the Middle Ages, various stories about the lake circulated among the local Lucchese, all sharing a repeating theme— namely, the destruction of a formerly great and powerful city called ‘Sextum’ buried under the lake after a single, horrific flood. Indeed, during this same period, local fishermen could orient themselves on the lake by reference to underwater structures of this ‘city’ visible when the water levels were particularly low³. Until the draining of the lake in the mid 1800’s (part of the reclamation of arable land around Lucca), the lake covered not only a vast amount of area but also significant evidence of Luccan paleohistory⁴. Extensive surveys of the area under the direction of Giulio Ciampoltrini and later Michelangelo Zecchini revealed the existence of numerous settlements dating to the Prehistoric, Protovillanovan and Etruscan periods as well as the 100 -plus farms from the Roman period⁵. The unique preservation of this dense concentration of farms has permitted the area to receive protected status as a unified archaeological zone, in that the history of each settlement is crucial for the overall significance and historical development of all sites in the plain⁶. Since 1999, under the ForumUNESCO *Project of 100 Roman Farms*,



Fig. 1. Palazzaccio, general view of site.

¹ See <http://www.provincia.lucca.it/unesco/100fattorie.asp> for a database of the Roman farms. For a preliminary report, see L. Taylor and C. Ewell 2006. We would like to thank all colleagues and institutions who have graciously provided support and offered collaboration since the inception of the project including Michelangelo Zecchini, Giulio Ciampoltrini, Alessandro Mrakic, Luca Cascinu Mara di Giulio, the Comunes of Porcari and Capannori and ForumUNESCO.

² For a brief history of flooding, see COSCI 2006.

³ See http://www.provincia.lucca.it/unesco/cartografia_cennistorici.asp for a comprehensive list of historical documents relating to the lake and plain.

⁴ The extent of the marsh covered the southeast Luccan plain from Capannori to Castelvecchio di Compito, from Paganico to Altopascio, and from Porcari to Bientina.

⁵ CIAMPOLTRINI 1999.

⁶ Italian law 431/1985 article 1, letter m.

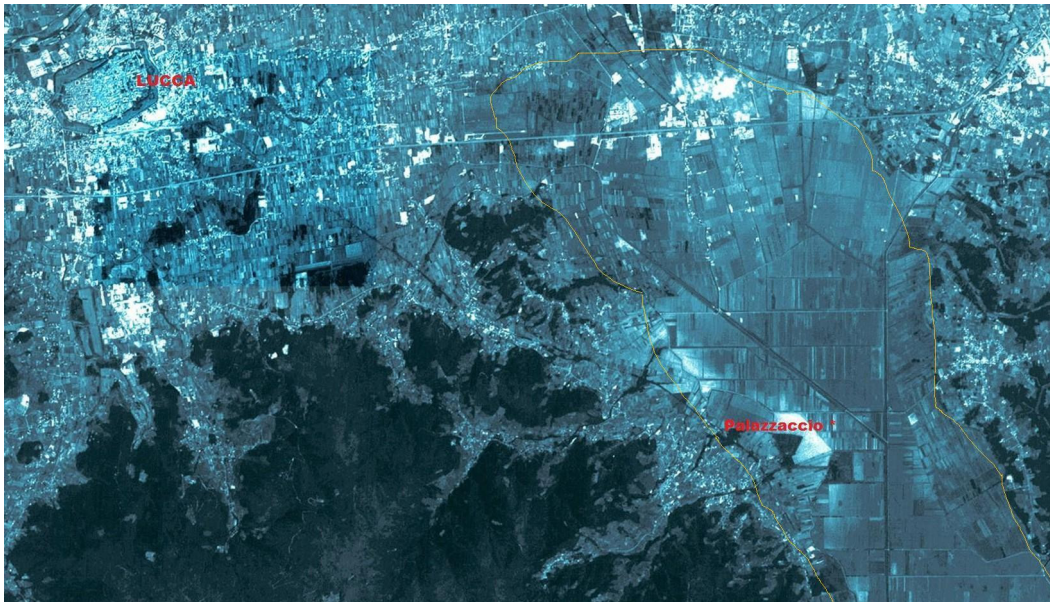


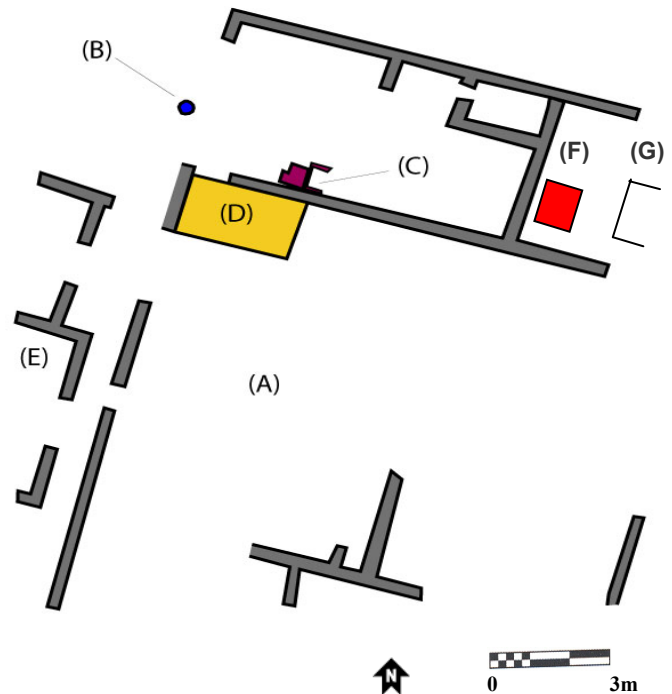
Fig. 2. Satellite image of area with overlay of lakebed (photo courtesy of A. Mrakic).

Fig. 3. General site plan, Palazzaccio (Courtesy of J. Samuels).

two of the farms have been fully excavated—Fossa Nera A and Fossa Nera B⁷. Palazzaccio (fig. 3) is the third complex under exploration, made possible by a high level of collaboration between international and regional institutions.

The vast majority of the farmhouses in the Lucan plain date back in their earliest phase to around 160-150 B.C.E. following the Roman capture of Luca and establishment of a Latin colony there in 180 BCE⁸. Under the Romans, the territory was centuriated with the attendant creation and distribution of lots measuring approximately 180 X 180 meters (*25 actus quadratus*) to tenant farmers. Like Fossa Nera A and Fossa Nera B, as well as the other farms, Palazzaccio was one of a pair of farms sited on opposite sides of branches of the Auser River⁹. Despite the threat of periodic flooding - episodes of which have been documented archaeologically - close proximity to a water source seems to have been a crucial factor in the original foundation of most of the farmsteads. Their arrangement in pairs, however, is a phenomenon that may reflect a degree of functional and/or economic interdependence during the early occupational phases.

When our excavations and field school at Palazzaccio began in 2005, we anticipated, based on the evidence at Fossa Nera 'A' and 'B', a structure that in its earliest Republican phase was modest in size but became increasingly complex in its layout and features over various iterations. Measuring only 13.5 X 13.5 meters in their foundation phase, Fossa Nera 'A' and 'B' eventually doubled in size and encompassed both domestic and utilitarian areas and features. By the early imperial period, each farm was furnished with threshing floors, a well, and sheds while Fossa Nera 'A' added a pressing floor for grapes and Fossa Nera 'B' a torcular for olives¹⁰. Other indications of what could be expected at Palazzaccio had been revealed by limited investigation of the site prior to our initial season in 2005. In 1988-1990, under the direction of the Gruppo Archeologico Capannorese, and in 2000 and 2002 under Prof. Zecchini and ForumUNESCO. Random soundings and limited excavation in the northern part of the site had revealed various external and internal wall sections as well as other features. While approximate dates of these features were ascertained, their phasing remained unclear.



⁷ Fossa Nera A: ZECCHINI 2001; Fossa Nera B: ZECCHINI 2006. To date, over 120 farms have been identified.

⁸ Livy XL.43.1. Velleius Paterculus (l.15) puts the date at 177 CE.

⁹ See CIAMPOLTRINI 2004a: 9-44.

¹⁰ On the torcular, see GIUNTA 2006.

Additionally, the physical limits of the complex and the internal spatial sequence remained largely undefined. Our research strategy, given the particular history of investigation at the site, has been twofold, seeking to piece together the disparate information generated during the previous campaigns and, at least initially, to establish the physical boundaries of the site. To these ends, targeted excavation in the northern part of the site has focused on connecting previously explored and newly explored areas while more extensive excavation in the southern part of the site has focused on defining the external footprint of the building. After four seasons, integration of the results of previous years with our findings is yielding a complex picture of a farmstead occupied from the 2nd century BCE until it was abandoned sometime in the 3rd century CE¹¹. Palazzaccio now appears to be defined less by similarities with the other excavated farms than, in many ways, by its differences with them. Not only was the site occupied for much longer than the other excavated farms, it appears to have been considerably more extensive and, during some of its phases, may have participated in a level of luxury consumption unparalleled at the other farms. All of this raises interesting questions about the role of Palazzaccio within the system of farmsteads here and the organization of agricultural production and processing among the farms, issues we'll return to after considering what we know about the complex to date.

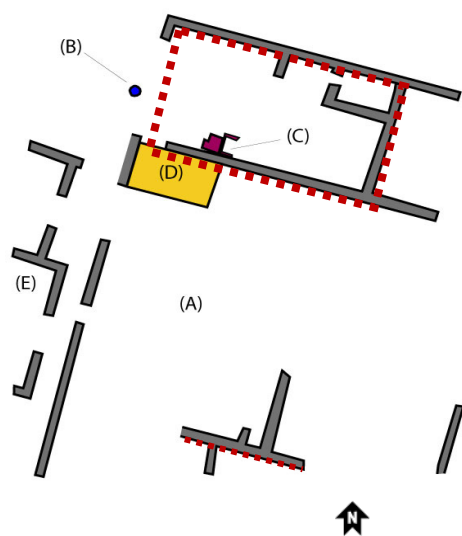


Fig. 4. Phase I in red.



Fig. 5. Phase I wall (W1) in southern part of site.

The footprint and boundaries of the complex in the earliest phase still remain largely undefined and, indeed, not a lot can be said about the configuration and feature of the farm during the first hundred and fifty years of its occupation. Our predecessors excavated a series of walls in the northern part of the site including an external wall running east-west where a small sondage into the foundation trench produced fragments of Volterranean black gloss dating to the mid 2nd c. BCE, that is, soon after the colonization of Luca¹². The dating of this wall agrees also with the typology of foundation structures and orientation seen at Fossa Nera A and B where the walls in the earliest phase of those farms are constructed of dry-laid sandstone and quartzite and have a 10-12 degree declination east of north¹³. Both farms also have an original footprint of 13.5 m X 13.5 m, and this same metric appears at Palazzaccio along the E-W dimension (fig. 4). Our original thinking, thus, was that the core of the republican period complex was located in the northern part of the site. Excavations in 2005 and 2006, however, in the far southern area of the site revealed a wall (W1) typologically similar to the northern walls, also with associated fragments of Volterranean black gloss in the lowest strata (fig. 5). Some 20 meters separates the northernmost and southernmost walls and the relationship between the two areas remains to be defined. Ascertaining this relationship may prove problematic as the

¹¹ Ceramic evidence after the early third century CE is scant. The latest identifiable ARS type found by our team includes fragments of Hayes Form 23B (casserole form, late second - early third centuries CE). A few fragments of local fabrics which seem to imitate later third and early fourth century ARS 'C' wares (Hayes Form 50, for example) have been recovered every season.

¹² Unpublished interim report.

¹³ ZECCHINI 2006: 58. The local Monti Pisani furnished a ready supply of sandstone for the construction of the farms (for a general geology of the area, see RAU and TONGIORGI 1974).

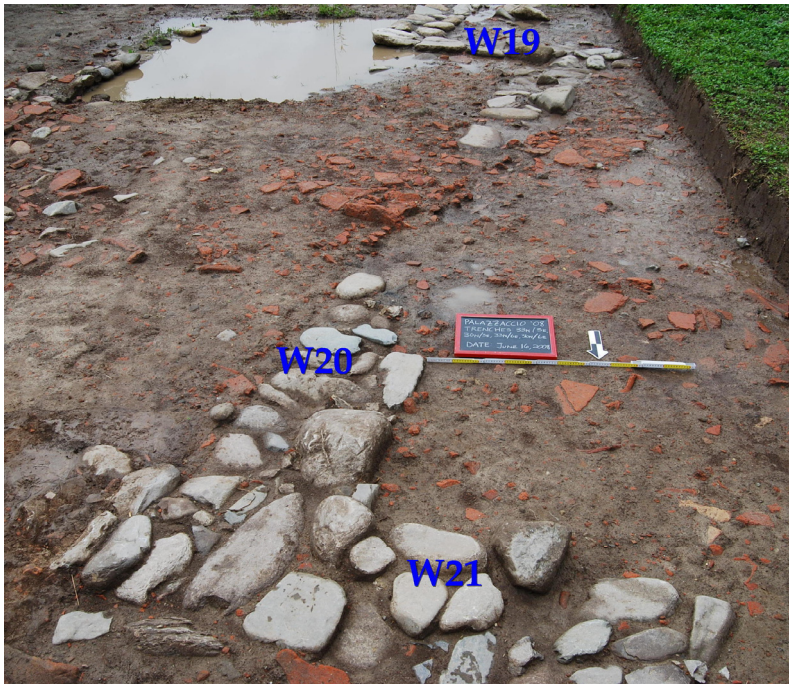


Fig. 6. W19-21 and ingress, western part of site (Phase I?).

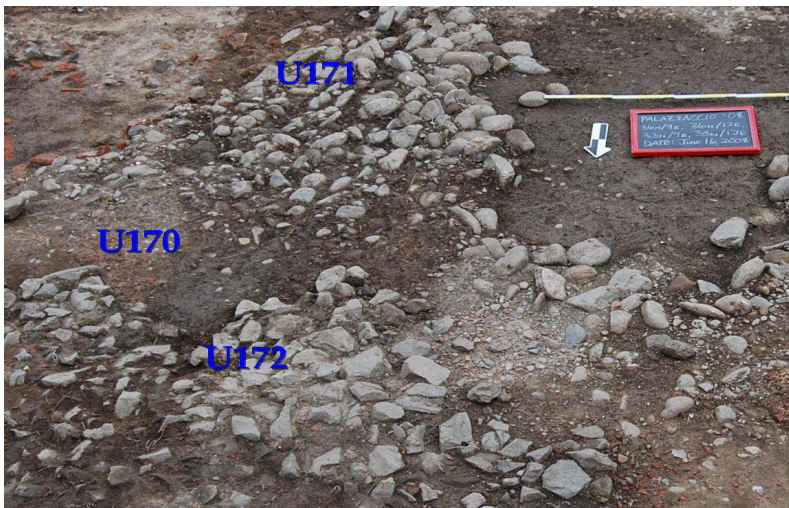


Fig. 7. Stratigraphy of pressing floor.

intermediate area between has been seriously disturbed by a large ditch during the 19th century land reclamation.

Perhaps more enigmatic is the relationship of the northern section to newly excavated walls along the western area of the site. In 2006, a series of trenches cleared of plough-zone revealed a wall (W12) running NS for some 12 meters at a declination of approximately 8 degrees and composed of sandstone and brick/tile in a mortar bed, all features typical of Phase II (early imperial) construction¹⁴. Further exploration west of the wall during the 2008 season, revealed a completely unanticipated series of interconnected walls (W18-21) forming two spatial units, each with a large door in the east wall (fig. 3: E; fig. 6). The construction and orientation of these rooms indicate that they belong to the first phase though this will need to be confirmed with ceramic evidence. The appearance of a 10 cm layer of fragmentary brick and tile overlaying the entrance, wall and much of the northern room suggests a roofed and, perhaps, residential space. The entrance to the southern room underwent modification at some later date as indicated by a series of stones placed there to block passage. The relationship of these rooms, or building, to the structure(s) to the east remains to be defined both chronologically and functionally and the area will be a primary focus of excavation in the 2010 season.

Around the late first century BCE/early first century CE, Palazzaccio seems to have undergone a major restructuring, one that was coeval with a large reworking of the city of Lucca and the countryside. Between 40 and 27 B.C.E. Octavian expropriated the territory of Lucca, much of which was then re-colonized by veterans. This second wave of colonization entailed a reorientation of Lucca and the countryside reducing the declination from 10-12 degrees east of the north axis to 8 degrees¹⁵. Both Fossa Nera A and B underwent major expansions and restructuring during this period

and preliminary evidence suggests that Palazzaccio did so as well.

We know a bit more about the spatial sequence of the complex and the various internal features from this phase, particularly those associated with the *pars rustica* or productive area of the complex. In 1990, excavations in the northwestern part of the complex revealed two brick vats - one a 1.5 x 1.5 meter square and the other a 1.5 x 1 meter rectangle, both with preliminary ceramic dates in the early first century CE (fig. 3: C). Both are covered in hydraulic plaster suggesting that these were part of a *cella vinaria* used for the pressing of grapes perhaps originally similar to one found at Fossa Nera A, where a single vat was found in association with a pressing floor and connecting channel. At Palazzaccio, however, neither channel nor pressing floor had been found until the 2008 season when excavations immediately south and southwest of the vats revealed a spatial unit measuring 3.76 X 4.45 meters with three superimposed floor surfaces, though with large lacunae (fig. 3: D; fig. 7). The most recent of these (172), most likely a repair of an earlier floor, consists of irregular sandstone rocks.

This surface overlies an earlier floor composed of rounded river stones and smaller pebbles in a matrix of hydraulic mortar (171) which, in turn, overlies a matrix of brick and tile fragments (170), perhaps the subfloor for the

¹⁴ See ZECCHINI 2001: 152.

¹⁵ ZECCHINI 2001: 151-153 and ZECCHINI 2006: 62-73.

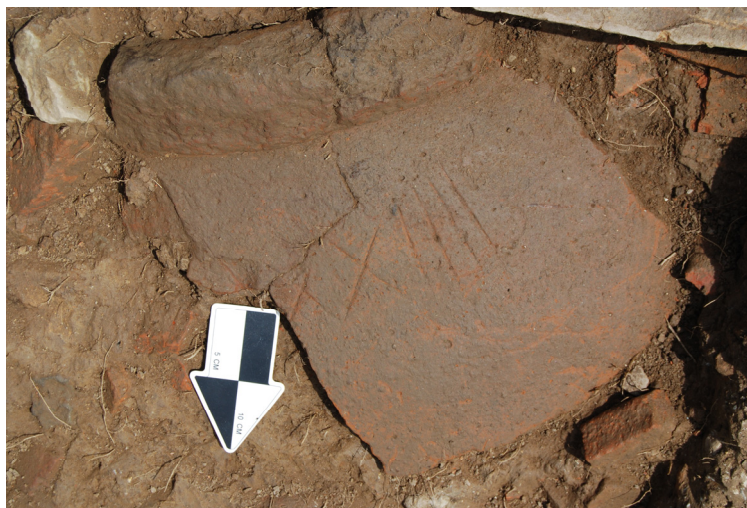


Fig. 8. Dolio fragment with graffito.



Fig. 9. Terracotta cubetti.

to shed light on the function of this feature and provide definitive phasing evidence¹⁹.

One other important addition perhaps in the northern part of the complex during the first century CE was a decorative floor system of terracotta *tesserae*. Though none have been found *in situ*, ceramic cubes ranging in size from 4 cm to 6 cm (fig. 9), have been recovered sporadically from 1st century CE levels just north of the vats as well as in the fill of the vats. At Fossa Nera B, a similar floor made of terracotta cubes was discovered *in situ* in its entirety. The cubes at Palazzaccio exhibit a range of colors and were most likely part of a polychromatic floor, unlike the monochromatic floor at Fossa Nera B²⁰. In 2008, some fifteen polished and squared metamorphic stones appear

mortared floor above. The use of hydraulic mortar as well as the close association with the vats suggests that this was the pressing floor served by the vats and preliminary ceramic evidence from the lowest level indicates that the vats are contemporary. Oddly, an associating channel still has not been discovered though it may yet be revealed at a lower elevation. The vats were, somewhat surprisingly, not in use very long, having been infilled and covered with a beaten earth floor sometime in the early second century CE. Whether the pressing floor simultaneously fell into disuse or was adapted for secondary usage remains unclear.

Storage and fermentation of wine in this area is further suggested by the discovery of a large *dolium* fragment with the roman numerals 'XXVIII' inscribed on its shoulder (fig. 8) and found contiguous to the floor at the NE corner¹⁶.

Other additions in the north part of the site dating to Phase II include a well in the north-western part of the site and two other features—a three-sided brick feature and stone threshold - in the northeast (fig. 3: B, F & G). The well was excavated by our predecessors in 2002 to a depth of 50 cm and then to a depth of 1.5 meters - the limit permissible without a stabilizing structure - by our team in 2006¹⁷. Aside from a few fragmentary pig bones and local coarseware fragments, there was an astonishing dearth of material. This may be partly explained by a possible adaptive reuse of the well. When it was discovered in 2002, the rim of a *dolium* had been mortared in place around the outer edge suggesting that the well may have been converted for some sort of storage purposes¹⁸. Results of our soil samples taken from the well may shed light on the nature of this feature.

The brick feature and stone threshold were also discovered by our predecessors but not fully excavated. Though typologically similar to a brick *impluvium* at Fossanera B, the feature at Palazzaccio obviously lacks a third side, at least at this elevation. Future exploration in this area is needed

¹⁶ CIAMPOLTRINI and GIANNONI 2009: 74 note a similar dolium with XXV incised on the shoulder from the nearby farm in the via Maritiri in Capannori.

¹⁷ The well at Fossa Nera A dates to the Augustan period (Zecchini 2001: 108) while the evidence at Fossa Nera B suggests a Late Republican date (ZECCHINI 2006: 67). Fragments of terra sigillata italica were found during the 2002 excavation of the well at Palazzaccio.

¹⁸ Zecchini has made the interesting suggestion that this could have functioned as a sort of cool seasoning pit for cheeses or other products.

¹⁹ ZECCHINI 2006: 62.

²⁰ *IBID.* 62-63.

red in late 1st century levels in trench 33N/9E just south of the vats. Mostly black or nearly black in color and uniform in size (2 cm³), these were most likely originally inset into a floor of terracotta cubetti²¹.

Excavations in the past few seasons have revealed some important if not wholly illuminating information about the southern part of the complex during this second phase. In 2006, excavations uncovered a wall (W8) along the southeastern part of the site similar to W12 (see above) along the western part of the site west. Identical in construction and declination (8 degrees), the walls suggest an expansion and/or significant reconfiguration in the southern part of the complex during the 1st century CE. In 2005 and 2008, a series of trenches opened in the west and southwest part of the site revealed no architectural remains in a large expanse, leading us to believe that this area may have functioned as a courtyard, a feature seen also at the other farms (fig. 3: A). Our assumption at this point is that W12 was the western perimeter wall of the courtyard and W1 was the southern perimeter wall. Postholes discovered in the 2007 and 2008 seasons in the northern and southern parts of this presumed courtyard suggest shed roofing in areas contiguous to the rest of the structure. A dense concentration of large tile fragments appeared along the EW axis of the northern part of the courtyard. The distribution pattern and large size of the fragments (measuring 14-15 cm) indicate that this was most likely a collapsed shed roof.

The courtyard area appears to have been the locus of varied activity and use. The northern area, located immediately south of the pressing floor, produced significant evidence of burning in a 9 cm deep matrix (unit 166) measuring approximately 1m X 5m. Trenches in the south and southeast of the courtyard have consistently produced a large volume of pottery (African red slips, *terra sigillata italica*, impasti) and small (2-4 cm) brick and tile fragments uniformly distributed across the horizontal plane. Unlike the concentration of large tile fragments along the northern edge of the courtyard, the varied ceramic material here suggests a deliberate packing and/or floor raising during the later phases of life at the complex. Under these strata, however, a blackish brown clay silt suggests a concentration of animal activity in the earlier phases of the complex. Finally, while taphonomic processes should not be underestimated when dealing with a lacustrine stratigraphy as at Palazzaccio, two artefact distribution patterns here are suggestive; both loom weights and lead fishing weights (fig. 10) have been discovered in the southeastern corner of the presumed courtyard and nowhere else at the complex.

In addition to fishing weights and loom weights, artefact assemblages from the second and later phases of the farm include diverse pottery assemblages of local coarse wares, fine walled wares, *terra sigillata italica* (many of nearby Pisan manufacture), African red slip ware dating into the 3rd century as well as luxury consumer goods such as decorative glass, prismatic gold beads, an glass inlaid bronze fibula from Gaul, and various decorative bronze objects. Previous excavations at Palazzaccio uncovered similar types of prestige goods. These artefact assemblages differ from those recovered at Fossa Nera A and B where both the volume and variety of luxury goods is noticeably less.

This brings us back to the question of Palazzaccio's role within the system of farms in the Luccan plain. The whole of the complex, whether it included a single building or multiple buildings, or perhaps both at different phases, extends over 900 square meters; this is significantly larger than the other excavated farms which, even during their later, larger phases, covered approximately 400 square meters. Our research at Palazzaccio, like our understanding of the system and hierarchy of farms around Lucca, is still in its early infancy yet what we are beginning to learn from these farms collectively has important implications for the organization of agricultural production and the microeconomy of this rural area. At Fossa Nera A, a *cella vinaria* attests to the production of wine at this farm; this feature is notably absent from Fossa Nera B where instead a *torcular*, or olive press, has been excavated. All these features have one thing in common, however, and that is their relatively modest size. What this could suggest is a division of production among the farms, perhaps in pairs or larger groups. The pressing floor and vats at Palazzaccio attest to the production of wine at our farm while the recovery of ceramic slag from the courtyard area may also reflect some type of ceramic processing²². Diversified production at Palazzaccio could have contributed to a relatively higher level of subsistence, a fact suggested by a number of artefacts recovered at the farm.

Future work at the site will hopefully shed light on this important question of microeconomies among farms in the Luccan plain and Palazzaccio's role within them. Though hampered by the historically lacustrine environment of



Fig. 10. Lead fishing weight.

²¹ A Roman floor of terracotta cubetti with inset stones in the Roman section of the Museo Guinigi, Lucca, provides a possible comparison.

²² Four pieces of ceramic slag were recovered from various areas of the courtyard during the 2007 and 2008 seasons.

the site, our on-going analysis of botanical and faunal remains may also contribute to a larger understanding of agricultural production at Palazzaccio and how this may have changed over the course of the site's long occupation.

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