

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: 29 (Classics)		
Title of case study: Public Archaeology and Community Engagement at Roman <i>Aeclanum</i>		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Ben Russell	Senior Lecturer	2013 – ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No.		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Russell's work at the Roman city of <i>Aeclanum</i> (Mirabella Eclano, Italy) has contributed to the exposition and preservation of tangible cultural heritage and has enhanced local engagement with and investment in that heritage, via open days for school children, media attention, visitor numbers, new educational initiatives and the securing of funding for the construction of a new museum. The result of this work, carried out with Italian partners including regional and national authorities, schools, not-for-profit organisations, and the British School at Rome, has led to an opening up of the site to new local and international audiences. It has also resulted in much-needed investment in the site at a time when cultural resources in the region generally are under severe threat.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The excavations at <i>Aeclanum</i> (modern Mirabella Eclano, Avellino province, Campania) combine a range of cutting-edge archaeological, computational, geophysical and bioarchaeological techniques to reconstruct the urban history of this strategic Roman city. The 5-year project (2016-2020) is a collaboration with the archaeological <i>Soprintendenza</i> of Salerno and Avellino, the <i>Comune</i> of Mirabella Eclano, and the British School at Rome. The project is directed by Russell, Senior Lecturer in Classical Archaeology at University of Edinburgh, and G.F. De Simone, director of the non-profit Apolline Project organization, with a team made up of 15 staff members and between 50 and 100 students each year, 50% of them on average from UoE.</p> <p><i>Aeclanum</i> is a perfect test case for this multi-method approach. The site is largely untouched and is free from modern encroachment. From an archaeological perspective, <i>Aeclanum</i> is interesting for three reasons: 1) it sits in the centre of the Italian peninsula and was bisected by the <i>Via Appia</i>, the most important road in Italy; 2) although the city was spared by the Vesuvian eruption of 79 CE, it was hit by a massive earthquake in 346 CE and another Vesuvian eruption in 472 CE; and 3) it developed into an important early Christian centre, whose most famous resident was the bishop Julian: an important early Christian thinker, rival of St Augustine, and local celebrity (the church and school in Mirabella Eclano are named after him).</p> <p>Russell and his team set out to understand the economy of this city, how its population coped with natural disasters, and why it developed into an important Christian centre. Work began at <i>Aeclanum</i> in 2016 with an extensive programme of geophysical survey to map the underground remains [3.1] and a photogrammetric and architectural survey of the standing structures. New conservation work was undertaken on a mosaic, originally exposed in the 1950s, to ensure its preservation and to allow it to be made visible to the public.</p>		

Excavations began in 2017 and continued in 2018 and 2019. These have focused on the baths, the theatre, the forum and market of the city, a domestic area, and the *Via Appia* itself [3.2, 3.3, 3.4]. The most significant new data concern the city's later history, when it was hit by both an earthquake and an eruption. In collaboration with expert volcanologists, our excavations in 2017 and 2018 showed for the first time that the 472 CE eruption had struck this far inland [3.5]. These results have important ramifications for our understanding of this major natural disaster affecting much of central Italy just four years before the fall of the western Roman Empire. At the local scale, the new excavations have revolutionised our understanding of the city's topography, the location of its key structures, its population (c. 4,000: almost the same as that of the modern *Comune*) and the ways in which they responded to these disasters.

3. References to the research

- 3.1 G. Strapazzon, B. Russell and G.F. De Simone (2017). Integrating GPR and excavation at Roman Aeclanum (Avellino, Italy). In B. Jennings, C. Gaffney, T. Sparrow and S. Gaffney (eds). *AP2017: 12th International Conference of Archaeological Propection*. Oxford, 242-244.
<http://archaeopress.com/ArchaeopressShop/Public/displayProductDetail.asp?id=%7BF416405F-76C8-427D-8585-2F60384CF276%7D>
- 3.2 G.F. De Simone and B. Russell (2018). New work at Aeclanum (Comune di Mirabella Eclano, Provincia di Avellino, Regione Campania). *Papers of the British School at Rome* 86, 298-301. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0068246218000041>
- 3.3 G.F. De Simone and B. Russell (2019). Excavation and survey at Aeclanum in 2018 (Comune di Mirabella Eclano, Provincia di Avellino, Regione Campania). *Papers of the British School at Rome* 87, 336-340. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0068246219000163>
- 3.4 B. Russell and G.F. De Simone (2020). New excavations in the central and southern sectors of Aeclanum in 2019 (Comune di Mirabella Eclano, Provincia di Avellino, Regione Campania). *Papers of the British School at Rome* 88, 368-373.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0068246220000136>
- 3.5 G.F. De Simone and B. Russell (2019). The late-antique eruption of Vesuvius in AD 472 and its impact from the Bay of Naples to Aeclanum. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 32, 359-389.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759419000187>

4. Details of the impact

The University of Edinburgh–Apolline Project excavations at *Aeclanum* have drawn new attention to this neglected site, which sits at the heart of a small, relatively poor town (Mirabella Eclano). No longer well connected to other areas of Italy, the town's identity is very much bound up with recent natural disasters (including a major earthquake in 1980, which killed thousands of people) and with its Roman and Christian heritage. Prior to the start of the project, systematic exploration at *Aeclanum* had not been undertaken since the 1950s. The site received few visitors and was little utilised or understood by the local community. Additionally, the area was continuing to suffer the effects of large-scale emigration following the earthquake.

Starting from this base, the research undertaken by the UoE–Apolline Project has opened the site up to a range of new audiences, achieving impact in three areas:

Cultural heritage and conservation

Nearly 300 students (an average of 75 students annually) coming from more than 80 universities in 15 countries, have been trained on the project. This influx of people of various nationalities has been noted in the local press [5.1], as has the impact of the project in general:

'This is a formidable tool for the promotion of the territory, which will bring a great return' [5.2a].

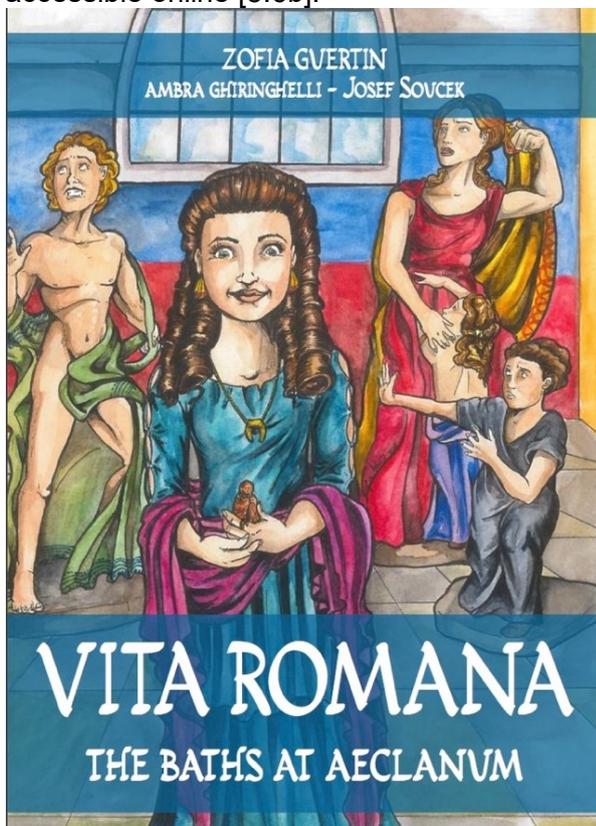
Uncovered remains have been conserved on-site to enhance its appearance: amongst these a large mosaic has been restored and roofed [5.3]. The key archaeological evidence from the site has now been published in international journals for the first time [3.2-3.5] and what is visible on the site to visitors has correspondingly increased.

Local community and schools engagement

Public events organised by the project team have capitalised on increasing interest in *Aeclanum*. The first of these, held in 2016, attracted 700 members of the local community (counted in using a mechanical clicker). It comprised tours of the site, performances of ancient drama and lectures on Roman history. The project seeks to engage children in particular, as the future of this region. To that end, every year since the first public event was held a special open day for children has been organised, focusing on archaeological methods and life in a Roman city [5.2a, 5.2b]. At least 300 children have attended each year, filling out feedback forms on their experiences, using words such as 'fun', 'beautiful' and 'interesting' to describe it [5.4]. The former mayor is keen to emphasise this element of the project's impact:

'For the first time, the archaeological remains were really opened up for members of the public, above all for the very youngest ones' [5.5].

The project team has also developed a graphic novel [5.6a] aimed at children, which tells the story of two characters who also feature in the resources distributed at the open days. This was prompted by a request from local teachers to have access to material beyond the excavation season. This novel is downloadable and can be used by teachers, alongside other resources produced by the project team (including posters, activity books and maps). It has attracted attention internationally and is currently featured, along with other illustrations commissioned for the *Aeclanum* project, in an exhibition entitled *Illustrating Ancient History: Bringing the Past to the Present*, at the Museum of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge. The exhibition is also accessible online [5.6b].



The project's impact on visitor numbers at the site has been substantial. During the first year of the project (2016), the archaeological superintendency recorded a six-fold increase in visitor numbers compared with the previous year (rising to 6,147 in total) [5.7].

Investment

Crucial to the sustainability of our impact has been the winning of funds (EUR350,000) from the Italian government for the transformation of a building on the site, owned by the Italian road authority (*casa cantoniera*), into a museum [5.8a]. In 2017, the sub-secretary of the Ministry of Culture visited the excavations to find out more about the project [5.9]. Reflecting the importance the town council attaches to the excavations, in 2018 it signed a multi-year lease [5.10] enabling it to expand the museum and to bring objects hitherto stored elsewhere, and not available for public viewing, back to the site and to display them alongside new finds.

This investment is all the more important because recent shifts in Italian politics have led to regional cuts in cultural funding, leaving the only other archaeological site in the province overgrown and often closed to the public. Were it not for this project, a similar fate would have befallen *Aeclanum* [5.8b, 5.8c, 5.8d].

A key local official, the *Assessore ai Beni Culturali, Turismo, Istruzione e Fondi Comunitari* of the Comune of Mirabella Eclano, says of the project's impact:

'Beyond just their scientific value, the new excavations have given to the community a new sense of, and awareness of the significance of, cultural heritage, as well as tangible things in the museum and teaching aids about the site' [5.8a].

Summing up the project's impact, a local newspaper described *Aeclanum* as 'truly the jewel of Mirabella Eclano' [5.2a].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1. Articles in *Il Messaggero* (2017 and 2018) on the excavations, the project, the range of nationalities attending the site and the display of material from the site as far afield as China.

5.2.

- a) Article in *Il Messaggero* (July 2019).
- b) Video on PrimaTivvu (July 2018), on public archaeology at the site:
http://www.primativvu.it/archeologia-pubblica-agli-scavi-di-aeclanum-centinaia-di-bambini-per-scoprire-come-vivevano-gli-antichi-romani/?fbclid=IwAR0QPW_WORGJ5vNzoVvyub6vP_xheqmwLUAdB_L62BuTvJ8YPlscZoBrl

5.3. Photographs showing the conservation of the late antique mosaic and the building of the roof, funded jointly by the UoE–Apolline Project team and the Comune di Mirabella Eclano.

5.4. Questionnaire feedback provide by school children visiting the site.

5.5. Former Mayor of Mirabella Eclano (testimonial letter, 23 November 2019). Evidence of the impact of research activities at *Aeclanum*.

5.6.

- a) Z. Guertin, A. Ghiringhelli and J. Souček. *Vita Romana*. Archaeokids.
<https://www.archaeokids.com/vita.html>
- b) Illustrating *Ancient History. Bringing the Past to the Present*. University of Cambridge (24 November 2020). <https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/story/illustrating-ancient-history/>

5.7. B. Bianco (2017). Folloni, diecimila visitatori in più. // *Messaggero*. Article on visitor numbers at cultural attractions in the region.

5.8. Investment evidence in regional context:

- a) Assessore of Mirabella Eclano (testimonial letter, 26 September 2019). Testimonial explaining the impact of research activities at Aeclanum on investment.
- b) Press release describing complete cuts to cultural funding in 2011.
<http://ambientesa.beniculturali.it/BAP/?q=ufficiostampa&ID=616>
- c) News coverage of collapse of structures at site in Atripalda.
<https://www.atripaldanews.it/2013/04/16/antica-abellinum-sopralluogo-dei-tecnici-della-soprintendenza-entro-un-mese-ripresi-i-lavori-di-protezione/>
- d) Limited funds and overgrown state of Atripalda in 2019.
<https://www.atripaldanews.it/2019/08/01/abellinum-erba-alta-tra-le-rovine-del-parco-archeologico-di-via-manfredi-foto/>

5.9.

- a) Article in // *Messaggero* (2017).
- b) Photograph of sub-secretary visiting the site in 2017.
- c) Video interview on IrpiniaTV
(<https://www.facebook.com/itvonline.news/videos/1730366946988316/>) with the sub-secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Russell explaining the importance of the research.

5.10. Article in // *Messaggero* (2018) on the *Comune's* securing of the *Casa cantoniera* adjacent to the site.