

Erika Zane – Doctoral School Research Award 2023/2024

The Environmental Context, Agricultural Potential and Location Choices of Roman Villae in Italy

The Doctoral School Research Award enabled me to travel to Italy to conduct essential sampling activities for my research project, which aims, through an interdisciplinary study encompassing Classics and Geography, to understand the extent to which environmental factors may have influenced the location and function of Roman luxury villas. A key aspect of my project involves the analysis of lake environmental records and botanical macrofossils from two archaeological sites in Italy, making fieldwork a fundamental component. Thanks to financial aid from the Doctoral School, I could personally carry out the sampling activities at the archaeological sites of Villa of Titus (Lazio) and Villa of Realmonte (Sicily).

On June 5th, I travelled to Villa of Titus to collect core samples from the nearby Lake Paterno. I joined a team formed by RHUL staff, including my supervisors Erica Rowan and Simon Blockley, the palaeoecology laboratory technician Marta Perez Fernandez, and two undergraduate students. The goal of the project was to obtain cores from deeper levels of the lake, which we attempted by using a small boat: one person on the boat would push the corer into the lake while two others assisted from the shore. By the end of the day, we successfully collected multiple cores from different areas of the lake, reaching levels deeper than those accessed in previous years. This experience was incredibly enriching for me, as it was my first time participating in coring activities. Being trained by my supervisors allowed me to learn various techniques and methods in this field, which will undoubtedly be fundamental to my career development.

While working at Lake Paterno, we were also invited to visit the archaeological site of Villa of Titus, currently being excavated by a team from Saint Mary's and McMaster Universities. Myles McCallum, the director of the project, gave us a tour of the villa's structures and shared some of the recent discoveries. Having analysed materials from the site in the past months, I was particularly excited to see the site in person and to discuss my data with Myles to better interpret them.



Coring activities at Lago Paterno



Excavations at Villa of Titus

A few days after completing the coring at Lago Paterno, I flew From Rome to Sicily to reach my second research site: Villa Durruei di Realmonte in Agrigento. This stunning maritime Roman villa overlooks the Mediterranean and is renowned for its beautiful mosaics and luxurious decorations. Excavation activities are being conducted by the University of Catania, and I will be the first researcher to carry out archaeobotanical studies on the site. The plan for this site was to collect pollen samples and some soil samples to retrieve botanical remains. While working at the villa, several students expressed interest in learning about archaeobotany. With the approval of the excavation director, I had the opportunity to train these students, demonstrating sampling techniques and processing methodologies. Specifically, I introduced them to the method of flotation, which is used to recover botanical remains from soil samples. This experience allowed me to test my teaching skills for the first time, and it was rewarding to see students' enthusiasm for the subject. Additionally, having trained individuals on site meant that someone could support me in collecting and processing samples, and continue the activity even after my departure.

By the end of my stay in Sicily, I had successfully collected pollen samples from various areas within the villa and processed several soil samples, which I brought back to the UK for further analysis. I also produced sampling guidelines to ensure that the excavation team was well prepared to continue collecting soil samples effectively.



Mosaics at Villa of Realmonte (on the left) and a cistern from which I took pollen samples (on the right).



Samples processing at Villa of Realmonte

I am profoundly grateful to have been awarded the 2023/ 2024 Doctoral Research Award. Thanks to this financial support, I had the invaluable opportunity to personally collect samples fundamental to my research, all by the end of my first PhD year. This achievement means that I now have the essential materials to begin laboratory analysis, marking a crucial step forward in my research project.