

GYMNASIUM OF AGRIGENTO REPORT OF THE 2024 AND 2025 SEASONS

The third excavation campaign in the Gymnasium of Agrigento took place from September 2 to October 18, 2024, and the fourth from February 24 to April 1, 2025. Both were generously funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). Thanks to the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility for Teaching program we were able to conduct an on-site field school in both years, in collaboration with the Politecnico di Bari, bringing together students from both universities.

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The gymnasium of Agrigento has been excavated between the 1950s and 2005. While parts of a race-track section and a pool were revealed between two stenopoi, the extension of the gymnasium and particularly the existence of a palaestra as well as the construction date could not be securely determined. A project launched in 2019 in cooperation between the Parco Archeologico e Paesaggistico Valle dei Templi di Agrigento, the Freie Universität Berlin, and the Politecnico di Bari aims to solve these questions. Based on the results of a geophysical survey carried out in 2020 and published in 2022,¹ excavations were carried out in four campaigns between 2022 and 2025. Preliminary reports of the first two campaigns have been

¹ M. Trümper – S. Kay – E. Pomar – A. Fino – Th. Lappi – P. Santospagnuolo, New Research at the Gymnasium of Agrigento, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 2022, 132–167.

promptly published.² The results of the third campaign will shortly be published in conference proceedings,³ and an assessment of all four campaigns will soon be provided in a journal article.

In 2023, seven trenches were made in the palaestra (fig. 1) and one in the race-track section. In 2024, four trenches were made in the palaestra and one in the area between the race-track section and the pool (fig. 2). The architectural survey that was carried out in 2020, 2022, and 2023, was also continued in 2024 and 2025. In the following, the results of both seasons are briefly summarized.

The continuation of the stenopos was found that bordered the race-tracks and the pool terrace in the west. Furthermore, on a terrain of 62.50m length, several monumental walls and benches of calcarenite ashlar were discovered that correlate, in material, technique, and orientation, with the walls of the race-track complex and the pool. The walls and benches are located at different levels, suggesting that the palaestra terrace was further subdivided into two different terraces. The lower terrace was laid out 60cm above the pool terrace and had a north-south extension of 23m, the upper terrace was 4–5m above the lower one, with a north-south extension of 39.50m (including the newly found auditorium, see below). In the palaestra section, at least six rooms can now be reconstructed (fig. 3). That the palaestra belonged to the gymnasium is suggested by five roof tiles stamped with ΓΥΜ (for ΓΥΜΝΑΣΙΟΥ) that were found in the destruction debris layer of rooms 2 and 4/5 in 2023 and 2024.

- **Room 1** had a size of 3.40m north-south by at least 12m east-west, if it extended west to the stenopos, which is very likely. The room had an earth floor. Two thresholds of 1.25m and at least 1.40m widths to Room 2 survive but were later blocked. The accessibility and function of Room 1 cannot be securely determined, but it may have served as an access corridor between the pool and the palaestra section.
- **Room 2** had a size of 5.50m north-south by 6.50m east-west, if extended to the stenopos. It was provided with a pavement of calcarenite slabs, the southern half of which was removed later, presumably when the two southern doors were blocked. While the rooms of palaestrae were commonly not paved except for bathing facilities, no water supply, drain, or basins were found here that would identify the room as a *loutron*. Furthermore, the existence of at least two wide doors in the south wall speaks against the use of the room as a *loutron* because *loutra* were usually remotely located and protected from unwanted views.
- **Room 3** had a size of 5.50m north-south by 4.50m east-west and was provided with a bench along the north wall and paved with an *opus spicatum* floor. While the floor suggests again the use of water, no evidence of this was found. The room must have been accessible from the east and served for activities involving sitting.
- Between Rooms 3 and 4, an **ambitus** of 0.80m north-south by at least 14m east-west, if extended to the stenopos, was found.
- **Room 4** had a size of 11.00m north-south by 23.00m east-west. The northwest corner as well as the northeast corner were found in 2025. The room was equipped with an earth floor and benches along the walls which survived in the south and along the western half of the north wall; at the west and east walls, the floor level was not reached. While the room must

² M. Trümper – Th. Lappi – A. Fino – C. Blasetti Fantauzzi, The Gymnasium of Agrigento. Report of the First Excavation Campaign in 2022, *Thiasos 12*, 2023, 275–308; M. Trümper – Th. Lappi – A. Fino, The Gymnasium of Agrigento. Report of the Second Excavation Campaign in 2023, *Thiasos 13*, 2024, 103–133; M. Trümper – T. Lappi – A. Fino, *Il Ginnasio di Agrigento*, in: M. C. Parello (ed.), *L'isola dei tesori. Ricerca archeologica e nuove acquisizioni. Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Agrigento, Museo Archeologico Regionale „Piero Griffo“, 14-17 dicembre 2023)* (Bologna 2024) 555–562.

³ M. Trümper – Th. Lappi – A. Fino, The Gymnasium of Agrigento: Changes in Design, Training Activities, and Cultic Practices, in: G. Mouratidis – N. Kazakidi (eds.), *Education in and Beyond the Greek Gymnasium* (forthcoming 2025).

have been accessible from an unknown space in the east, a centrally located wide door (3.30 m) in the north wall opened to a small, covered auditorium, Room 5.

- **Room 5** had a size of 7m north-south by 12m east-west and was built into the slope between the lower and upper terraces of the palaestra (fig. 4). It included 7-8 half-circular steps that provided space for about 150-200 people. Two narrow staircases provided access to the seats. The orchestra (space in front of the seats for performances) and the doorway to the large room were paved with a simple cement floor. Like all other walls and structures of the gymnasium discovered so far, the seats of the auditorium were made of local calcarenite; most of them were simply set onto the hard natural clay that served as foundation of many walls and structures of the gymnasium. The auditorium was most likely part of the original design of the gymnasium, and the preliminary assessment of finds from its impressive (over 2 m) deep foundation trench (fig. 2: TR 25) confirms the chronology established in previous campaigns: the gymnasium was built in the 2nd century BC.

While simple in design and decoration, the auditorium is a sensational discovery for several reasons. The building type – a small covered “theater” without a stage building – was well known in the Hellenistic world, esp. in Sicily where it was used for council houses (bouleuteria) in many cities in the 2nd/1st centuries BC. Agrigento itself provided such a bouleuterion at its agora. But there are no parallels for an auditorium in a gymnasium of the 2nd/1st centuries BC. A similar room is only known from the monumental gymnasium in Pergamon which was built by the royal family of the Attalids in the 2nd century BC, but only provided with an auditorium in the mid-2nd century AD. These auditoria most likely served for the intellectual education of young men, for lectures, rhetorical performances, and the like, and maybe also for corresponding competitions. This shows that the patrons of the gymnasium in Agrigento were concerned with both physical athletic and intellectual education of young citizens.

Two inscribed blocks (1.50 x 0.50 x 0.50 m) were found in the orchestra (fig. 5); one of them preserved parts of the original white plaster and red color in the letters. The blocks had probably been reused for an unknown (artisanal?) installation in the orchestra before the walls of the palaestra were partially robbed out and covered by a destruction layer in the first half of the 3rd century AD. The inscription was partially destroyed during this process, and it originally covered at least two further blocks that have not been found. But the inscription can still be partially read, thanks also to the generous support of PD Dr. Sebastian Prignitz (director of the Inscriptiones Graecae at the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities). The text mentions a gymnasiarch (leading official of the gymnasium) and a person that financed most likely the renovation of the roof of the apodyterium from his own funds and dedicated this to Hermes and Heracles, the two tutelary deities of Greek gymnasia. As only a few inscriptions from Agrigento’s more than 1000 years of history have survived, the new find is of great interest and significance.

Apodyterium normally refers to the changing room of baths and gymnasia. Such rooms can easily be recognized in baths where they were located close to the main entrances and often provided with benches and niches in the walls. In contrast, their location, design, and function in gymnasia is much more debated. If the large room with benches was called apodyterium in antiquity, then it is unlikely that it was only used for changing. Instead, because of its immediate proximity to the auditorium, it was probably also used for intellectual activities, lessons, and agreeable sojourns. Only future research can clarify, however, whether the inscription was really related to the large room with benches or to another room that has not yet been found.

- **Room 6** on the upper terrace was a vestibule of 5.50m north-south by at least 6.70 m east-west size, with a monumental threshold from the stenopos, for a door with two wings, and possibly a bench along the south wall.
- The auditorium was flanked by two **areas in the west and east** that may have been open terraces. While the western terrace extended to the stenopos and maybe to the vestibule

Room 6 without further subdivision, the extension of the eastern terrace to the north and east can currently not be determined. Two channels were found at different levels on the western terrace, and one on the eastern terrace. Their provenance, destination, date, and function remain to be clarified.

Trench 22 was made in the race-track section, to the north of an exedra-shaped structure that has a size of 6.20 x 3.90m (fig. 6). In 2005, the exedra-shaped structure had been reconstructed as a fountain that was drained into the well of the hydraulic complex to the north of the exedra. Trench 22 served to verify the existence of this drainage channel from the northwest corner of the exedra. Excavating to below foundation level of the exedra, no evidence of a channel was found (fig. 7). The monument served instead most likely as an honorary exedra.

Trench 27 was made at the border between the race-track section and the pool terrace (fig. 1). While research in the 1990s to 2005 had recognized that this area was significantly reused after the abandonment of the gymnasium the area was never fully excavated and studied. At least four different phases could be identified here. 1) A monumental east-west running wall may have belonged to the gymnasium and may have supported a large staircase between the race-track and pool terraces. 2) The blocks of this staircase were reused in a monumental steep ramp that may date to a late phase of the gymnasium or to an even later period. 3) A room of unknown function was built on top of the ramp. 4) The wide northwest-southeast running wall at the bottom of the valley that includes blocks of the pool certainly belongs to an even later use, probably in the 18th/19th century.

The chronological development of the gymnasium could be further clarified in the last two campaigns. The gymnasium was built in the 2nd century BC and saw a major remodeling in the Augustan period (31 BC – AD 14). The newly discovered inscription may have been engraved under Augustus because it resembles the inscribed benches that were discovered between the 1950s and 2005 in the race-track section. This monumental inscription documents that a gymnasiarch dedicated the benches during the reign of Augustus from his own funds to Hermes and Heracles.⁴ The paradromis section was significantly changed during the remodeling because it was provided with the inscribed seats, a separate loutron in the northeast corner, the honorary exedra, an altar, and maybe a tribune for a larger audience (fig. 6).

Archaeological evidence in Rooms 1, 2, and 5 of the palaestra suggests that the rooms were reused for artisanal or commercial purposes shortly before the entire complex was finally abandoned. The final abandonment entailed significant spoliation of the walls which were then covered by a destruction layer. Finds from this layer suggest that this process occurred in the first half of the 3rd century AD. While the race-track section was reused in late antiquity for a complex of monumental, presumably commercial buildings, and in later periods for various industrial purposes, evidence of reuse in the palaestra area dates most likely to the 18th/19th century AD.

Future research will focus on three areas: 1) the areas to the west, north, and east of the auditorium (Room 5); 2) the northern part of the upper terrace of the palaestra, to the north of vestibule 6; 3) the various features in the race-track section the date and function of which needs further clarification.

⁴ ISicily 1418.

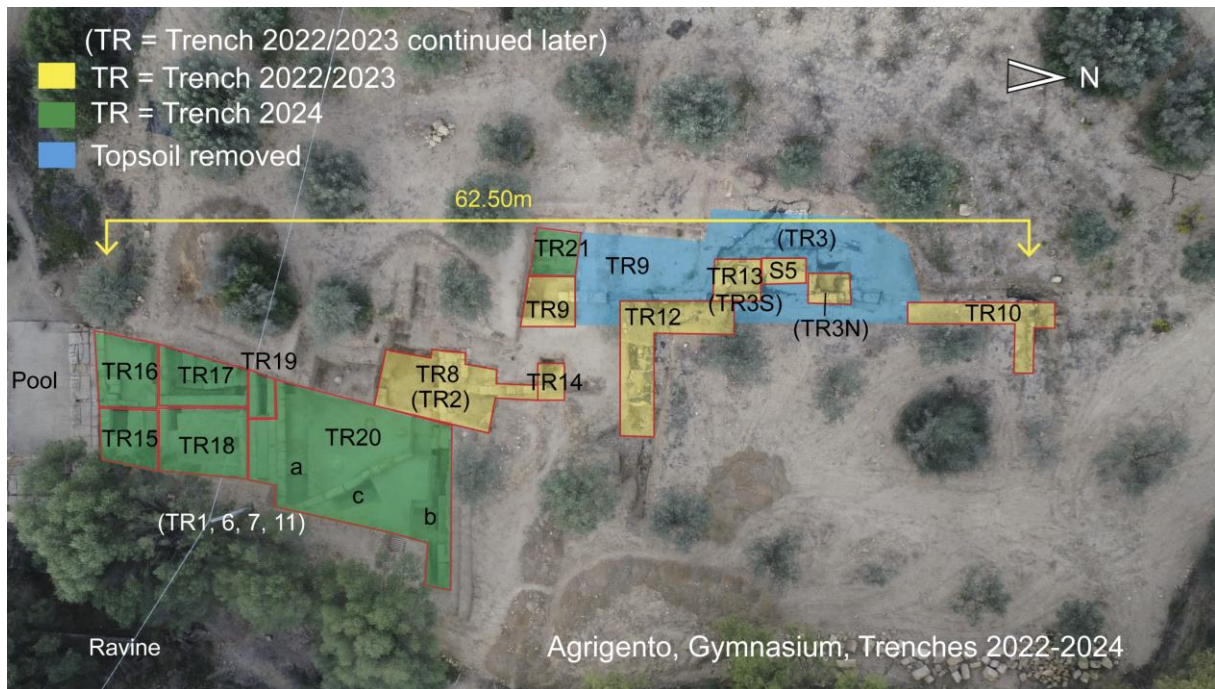


Fig. 1: Location of trenches 2024; Thomas Lappi – Monika Trümper, © FU Berlin



Fig. 2: Location of trenches 2025; Thomas Lappi – Monika Trümper, © FU Berlin

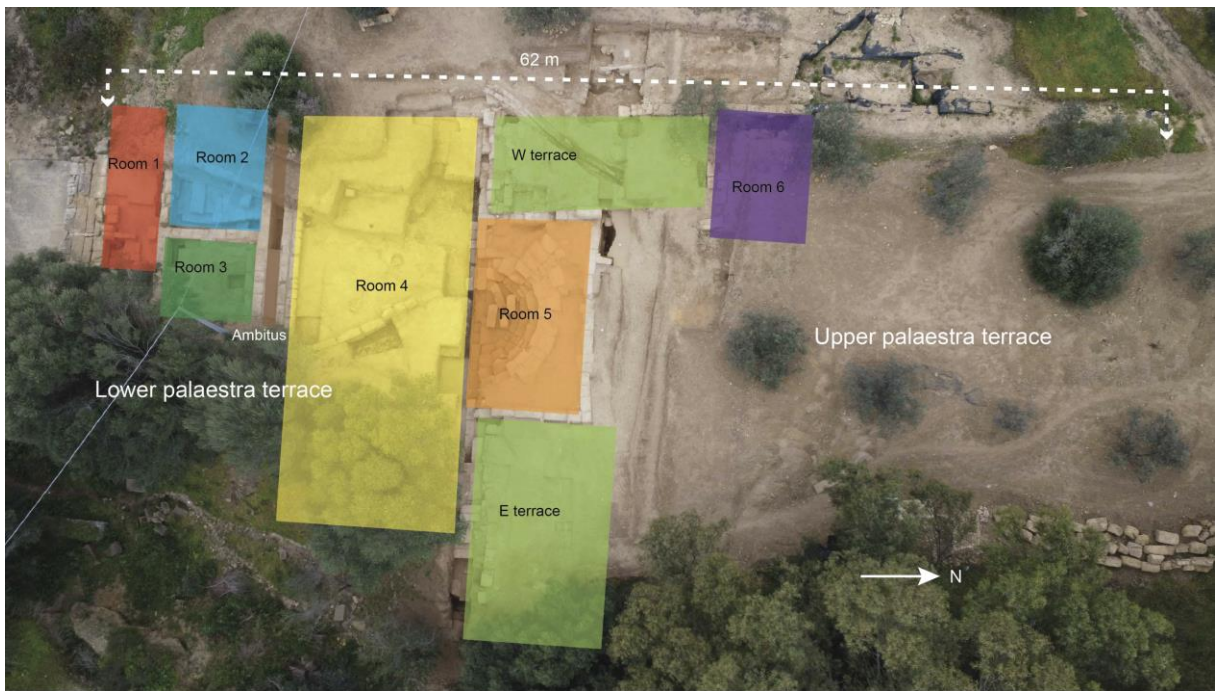


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of rooms; Thomas Lappi – Monika Trümper, © FU Berlin



Fig. 4: Room 5, auditorium, from S; Rolf Sporleder, © FU Berlin



Fig. 5: Room 5, auditorium, orchestra with cement floor and inscribed blocks from S; Rolf Sporleder, © FU Berlin

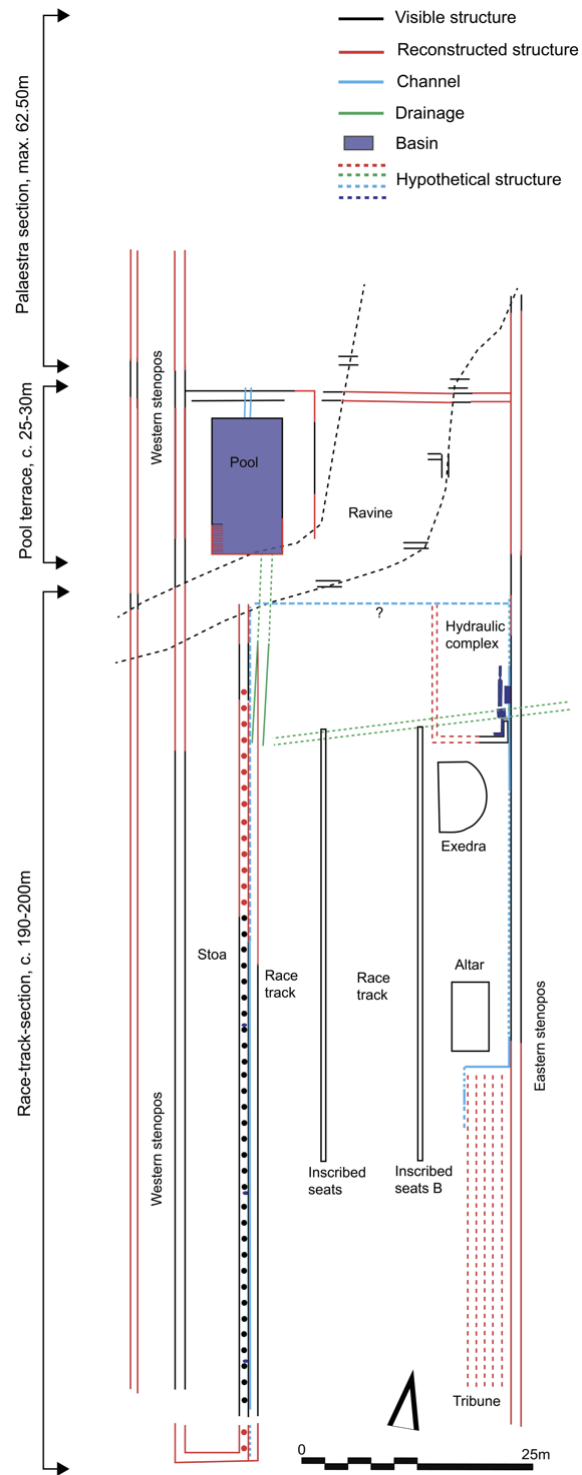


Fig. 6: Reconstructed plan of the gymnasium, phase 2, Augustan period; Monika Trümper, © FU Berlin



Fig. 7: Trench 22 in the race-track section, to the north of the exedra-shaped structure; Blanca Kupke, © FU Berlin

Monika Trümper – Thomas Lappi – Antonello Fino