Villas, Sanctuaries and Settlement in the Romano-British Countryside

New Perspectives and Controversies

Edited by
Martin Henig, Grahame Soffe,
Kate Adcock and Anthony King

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List of Contributors

KATE ADCOCK
Hon. Editor, Association for Roman Archaeology.
aranews2@gmail.com

ANTHONY BEESON
Late Hon. Archivist, Association for Roman Archaeology.

MARTIN BIDDLE
Emeritus Fellow of Hertford College, University of Oxford OX1 3BW.
martin.biddle@hertford.ox.ac.uk

DAVID BIRD
Former Head of Heritage Conservation,
Surrey County Council.
davidgeorgebird@ntlworld.com

JOHN COLLIS
Professor Emeritus, Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield.
j.r.collis@sheffield.ac.uk

MARK CORNEY
Independent Archaeological Consultant and Researcher. Faulkland, Somerset.
mark.redpig@btinternet.com

STEPHEN R. COSH
Stephen R Cosh, DLitt, FSA. Archaeological writer and illustrator. Vice chairman of ASPROM (Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics).
stephencosh675@btinternet.com

ROY and DIANA FRIENDSHIP-TAYLOR
Directors of Piddington Villa Museum and Excavation Project.
dianaf-t@hotmail.com

CHRISTINA GRANDE
Former Senior Lecturer in Classical art and architecture, University of Winchester.

MARTIN HENIG
Visiting Professor, Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Research Adviser to the Association for Roman Archaeology. Wolfson College, University of Oxford, OX2 6UD
martin.henig@wolfson.ox.ac.uk or;
School of Archaeology, 36 Beaumont Street,Oxford,OX1 2PG
martin.henig@arch.ox.ac.uk

ANTHONY KING
Hon. President, Association for Roman Archaeology. Professor Emeritus of Roman Archaeology, School of History and Archaeology, University of Winchester, Winchester SO22 4NR.
tony.king@winchester.ac.uk

VICTORIA LEITCH
Hon. Researcher, University of Durham. Publications Manager, British Institute for Libyan and North African Studies.
victoriamleitch@gmail.com

DAVID RIDER
Field Archaeologist, physical and virtual model-maker and horologist.
davidirider2@gmail.com

GRAHAME SOFFE
Editor and Hon. Chairman, Association for Roman Archaeology, Former Archaeological Investigator, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) and Lecturer in Archaeology.
saxbysoffe@aol.com

DAVID TOMALIN
Visiting Professor, Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Southampton. Former County Archaeologist for the Isle of Wight. Trustee of the Vectis Archaeological Trust.

STEPHEN G UPEX
Former Professor of Landscape Archaeology, University of Brunei; Tutor, Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge; 25 Church Street, Warmington, Peterborough PE8 6TE.
stephenupex@hotmail.com or
stephen.upex@tutor.ice.cam.ac.uk

BRYN WALTERS
Founding Director of the Association for Roman Archaeology.

PHILIPPA WALTON
Lecturer in Roman Archaeology, University of Reading.
p.j.walton@reading.ac.uk

ROGER WHITE
Former Senior Lecturer in Roman Archaeology, University of Birmingham.
rhw2109@gmail.com

PATRICIA WITTS
Patricia Witts, PhD. Author and specialist in Roman mosaics.
pat.witts42@gmail.com

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Roman villas in Britain and beyond

New discoveries and new interpretations of their role in culture, religion and landscape

Martin Henig, Anthony King and Grahame Soffe

The genesis of this volume was a conference held in the Stevenson Lecture Theatre at the British Museum, 13-14 June 2009, jointly organised by the Association for Roman Archaeology (ARA) and the British Museum's Departments of Prehistory and Europe, and Portable Antiquities and Treasure (Soffe 2009, 73; Walters and Soffe 2009). It followed a similar event by the ARA in the 1990s that resulted in the publication of the volume *Architecture in Roman Britain* (Johnson and Haynes 1996) which contained several papers on villas, and can be seen as the basis on which the initiative for the current volume was founded.

The rationale for the 2009 conference was to challenge the traditional focus on villas as agricultural establishments, following the emphasis by Rivet on a definition of a villa as 'a farm which is integrated into the social and economic organisation of the Roman world' (1969, 177). Economic interpretations have tended to dominate villa studies in Britain, especially in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Branigan and Miles 1988), together with socio-economic interpretation of villa plans (e.g. Smith 1997). There had been suggestions, however, that other lines of interpretation could be equally important, notably in the article by Graham Webster (1983; 1991, 95-111) on Chedworth and its possible role as a sanctuary rather than a villa. By the 1990s, the move away from strictly economic interpretations had become more marked, as surveyed in two brief but influential papers by Webster (1993; 1995). Other villas were put forward by Webster as potentially religious shrines rather than purely villas, notably Great Witcombe, Gloucestershire, Box, Wiltshire and Gadebridge, Hertfordshire. Of these, Great Witcombe is the subject of re-evaluation in this volume (Walters and Rider; Beeson), together with new findings concerning Chedworth itself (Walters and Rider; Beeson; Cosh, all in this volume), while Box has been considered elsewhere, including the possibility of a sanctuary to the west of the main building (Corney 2012, 68-73). Gadebridge has been the subject of further excavation since Webster's papers, but the report did not take up the suggestion of a religious reinterpretation (Neal 2001, 124).

In preparation for the conference, speakers were asked to present in-depth interpretations that might lead in new directions, for instance villas with unusual origins, with unconventional architecture, or with topographical locations that might challenge an agricultural purpose. Did some of the villas, both newly discovered and very well-known, have architectural elements that could lead to their being interpreted as something else altogether, such as a religious sanctuary? Were some villas primarily leisure retreats, without a clear agricultural function? Finally, how far did the chronological sequence at a villa indicate changes in usage?

Most of the speakers who delivered papers at the conference are represented in this volume, with the exception of a small number who published their research elsewhere. It has taken far longer than we had hoped and anticipated to collect and edit these papers, and we apologise to those contributors who sent in their contributions on time. Others were held up by new research, or the evidence presented gave rise to new papers or appendices being commissioned. The result is we hope a far better book than it would have been, though inevitably in a work of this sort more questions have been raised than answered. All the papers were fully revised in 2020/21.

As this introduction was reaching its final draft, news of an important mosaic acquisition came through, concerning the sumptuous villa at Dewlish, Dorset (Hewitt *et al.* 2021; Randall 2021). A panel from one of the mosaics, dating from the second half of the fourth century (Fig. 1.1; Cosh and Neal 2005, 74-86, mosaic 164.8) had been lifted at the time of the excavation in the 1970s, and kept in Dewlish House until sold at auction in 2020. It was afterwards sold to a foreign buyer, and was set to leave the country, unless an equivalent to the valuation of £135,000 could be raised. Following a vigorous campaign, it was successfully acquired for Dorset County Museum in Dorchester (where other portions of the mosaic are displayed) thanks to grants from several charitable organisations, including the

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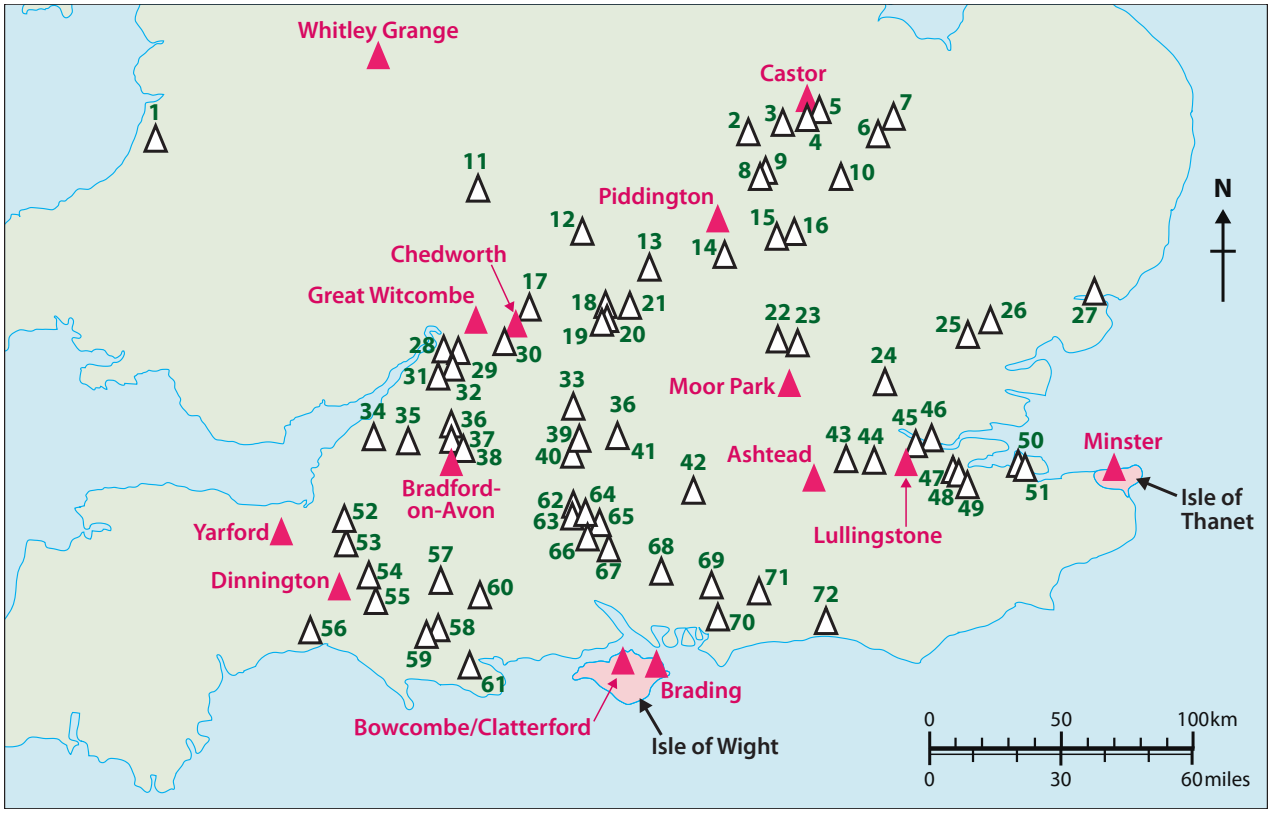
Figure 1.1 The 'Leopard Mosaic', from Dewlish villa, Dorset. This was recently acquired for Dorset County Museum from private owners, after a fund-raising campaign. (Photo courtesy of Dorset County Museum and Anthony Beeson)

Association for Roman Archaeology. This is the only almost completely surviving figural panel from the site and depicts a leopard leaping upon the back of an antelope. Highly naturalistic, it seems to be influenced by similar scenes of animal conflict from North Africa, though the general style of the mosaic and others from the villa shows it was the work of a regional Durnovarian workshop. The mosaics and wall-paintings from villas in Roman Britain had artistic merit equivalent to those of Mediterranean villas, especially during the fourth century.

Museums such as the one at Dorchester have a vital role to play in promoting our understanding of Roman villas, and also in preserving the Roman past for public display (Dawson 2021). Only a modest number of villa-type sites in Britain have mosaics and structural remains *in situ*, and still visible to the public. These include Chedworth, Great Witcombe, Brading and Lullingstone, all discussed in this volume, although several others, amongst them Fishbourne and Bignor, both in West Sussex, Rockbourne, Hampshire, Newport, Isle of Wight, Littlecote, Wiltshire, Crofton, Greater London, and North Leigh, Oxfordshire, may also be visited (cf. Allen and Bryan 2020). The Association for Roman Archaeology has links with many of these sites, and membership of the ARA offers a discount or free entry into the vast majority of them (see *ARA News* 43, 2020, for further information).

Changing interpretations

This volume appears to be the first collection of papers on the villas of Roman Britain since Malcolm Todd's *Studies in the Romano-British villa*, published as long ago as 1978, although of course a great deal of work has been done over the past 45 years. Very important studies, including those by Ernest Black (1987), Keith Branigan and David Miles (1988), Richard Hingley (1989), T. F. C. Blagg (1990; 2002), Eleanor Scott (1993), Roy Friendship-Taylor, ed. (1997), J. T. Smith (1997), Pat Witts (2000), John Manley (2000), David Tomalin (2006) and Barry Cunliffe (2008; 2013a), have vastly increased our knowledge, while the great corpus of *Roman Mosaics in Britain* by David Neal and Stephen Cosh (Neal and Cosh 2002; 2009; Cosh and Neal 2005; 2010) has not only provided a comprehensive listing of villa mosaics mostly of fourth-century date but



Key to numbers: **1** Abermagwr; **2** Stanion; **3** Cotterstock; **4** Haddon; **5** Orton Hall Farm; **6** Chatteris; **7** Stonea; **8** Stanwick; **9** Redlands Farm; **10** Rectory Farm; **11** Bays Meadow; **12** Pillerton Priors; **13** Croughton; **14** Bancroft; **15** Marsh Leys; **16** Newnham; **17** Turkdean; **18** Shakenoak; **19** Stonesfield; **20** North Leigh; **21** Tackley; **22** Gadebridge; **23** Gorhambury; **24** Chigwell; **25** Great Holts Farm; **26** Rivenhall; **27** Little Oakley; **28** Frocester; **29** Woodchester; **30** Ditches; **31** Wortley; **32** Kingscote; **33** Alfred's Castle; **34** Gatcombe; **35** Keynsham; **36** Truckle Hill; **37** Box; **38** Atworth; **39** Littlecote; **40** Castle Copse; **41** Boxford; **42** North Warnborough; **43** Beddington; **44** Keston; **45** Darenth; **46** Northfleet; **47** Snodland; **48** Eccles; **49** The Mount, Maidstone; **50** Bax Farm; **51** Hog Brook; **52** Shapwick; **53** Low Ham; **54** Lufton; **55** Halstock; **56** Holcombe; **57** Hinton St Mary; **58** Druce Farm; **59** Dewlish; **60** Tarrant Hinton; **61** Bucknowle; **62** Thruxton; **63** Grateley South; **64** Dunkirt Barn; **65** Fullerton; **66** Houghton Down; **67** Sparsholt; **68** Meonstoke; **69** Batten Hanger; **70** Fishbourne; **71** Bignor; **72** Southwick.

Figure 1.2. Map of villas in Table 1.1, and of the villas that are the subject of papers in this volume (individually named). NB, seven villas in Table 1.1, Aiskew (N Yorks), Beadlam (N Yorks), Eastfield (N Yorks), Ingleby Barwick (Teesside), Ketton (Rutland), Lyde Green (S Gloucestershire), and Bratton Seymour (Somerset; cf. this volume, Fig. 13.1, no. 9) are not shown on this map. (Map by Nicholas Hogben)

made many basic plans accessible (see also Cosh 2020). Sarah Scott's study of the art and architecture of these villas (Scott 2000) places them, or at least the richer villas of the Late Roman period, in their social context.

At a more specific level, individual villas have been published in significant numbers over the last four decades, both as substantial monographs, reports in journals or as more synoptic papers and volumes. A selection of these is given in Table 1.1 and on the map, Fig. 1.2, to illustrate the rich resource now available to students and researchers into Romano-British villas. It is very apparent from the number of reports, especially those of the twenty-first century, that much activity has been undertaken on villas in Britain. An important contributory factor has been the use of modern geophysical survey methods, which have found new sites, such as Dinnington (this volume), or established the full plans of those already known, such as Low Ham, Somerset (Payne *et al.* 2019) or North Leigh, Oxfordshire (Creighton and Allen 2017). These techniques have fully proved their worth in increasing our understanding of villas, and are destined to be a major element in most field projects in the future. The older technology of aerial photography still yields important discoveries, however, such as the villa at Abermagwr, Ceredigion, discovered from the air during the drought of summer 2006 (Davies and Driver 2018).

Table 1.1. Select list of villa excavation reports and studies from Roman Britain, 1990-2020.

Site	County	Reference
Abermagwr	Ceredigion	Davies & Driver 2018
Aiskew	N Yorkshire	Shepherd 2021; Shepherd *et al.* 2022
Alfred's Castle	Oxfordshire	Gosden & Lock 2003
Ashtead	Surrey	Bird, this volume
Atworth	Wiltshire	Erskine & Ellis 2008
Bancroft	Buckinghamshire	Williams & Zeepvat 1994
Batten Hanger	W Sussex	Kenny *et al.* 2016
Bax Farm	Kent	Wilkinson 2011; n.d.
Bays Meadow	Worcestershire	Hurst 2006
Beadlam	N Yorkshire	Neal 1996a
Beddington	Surrey	Howell 2005
Bignor	W Sussex	Aldsworth & Rudling 1995; Rudling & Russell 2015
Bowcombe/Clatterford	Isle of Wight	Busby *et al.* 2001; Tomalin, this volume
Box	Wiltshire	Corney 2012
Boxford	Berkshire	Beeson *et al.* 2019; Dunbabin 2020
Bradford-on-Avon	Bath and NE Somerset	Corney, this volume
Brading	Isle of Wight	Hanworth 2004; Cunliffe 2013b; Tomalin, this volume
Bratton Seymour	Somerset	Hughes & Biddulph 2020; *The Newt in Somerset* 2021
Bucknowle	Dorset	Light & Ellis 2009
Castle Copse	Wiltshire	Hostetter & Howe 1997
Castor	Cambridgeshire	Upex 2011; this volume
Chatteris	Cambridgeshire	Evans 2003
Chedworth	Gloucestershire	Papworth 2021; Esmonde Cleary *et al.* 2022; Walters & Rider, this volume
Chignall	Essex	Clarke 1998
Cotterstock	Northamptonshire	Upex 2001
Croughton	Northamptonshire	Dawson 2008
Danebury Environs villas	Hampshire	Cunliffe 2008
Darenth	Kent	Black 1981; Beeson 2020
Dewlish	Dorset	Putnam 2007, 97-116; Hewitt *et al.* 2021; Randall 2021
Dinnington	Somerset	Croft 2009; King & Grande, this volume
Ditches	Gloucestershire	Trow *et al.* 2009
Druce Farm	Dorset	Ladle & Bithell 2016; Beeson 2016; Ladle 2022
Dunkirt Barn	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 7
Eastfield	N Yorkshire	Beeson 2021
Eccles	Kent	Ratcliff 2018; Stoodley and Cosh 2021
Fishbourne	W Sussex	Cunliffe 1991; 1998; Cunliffe *et al* 1996; Manley 2000; Manley & Rudkin 2003; 2005; 2006
Frocester	Gloucestershire	Price 2000; 2010
Fullerton	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 3
Gadebridge	Hertfordshire	Neal 2001

Site	County	Reference
Gatcombe	Somerset	Smisson & Groves 2014
Gorhambury	Hertfordshire	Neal et al. 1990
Grateley South	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 2
Great Holts Farm	Essex	Germany 2003
Great Witcombe	Gloucestershire	Leach 1998; Holbrook 2003; Walters & Rider, this volume
Haddon	Peterborough	Hinman 2003
Halstock	Dorset	Lucas 1993; Cosh 2022
Hinton St Mary	Dorset	Putnam 2007, 88-9; *Mosaic* 40, 2013, whole issue
Hog Brook, Faversham	Kent	Wilkinson 2009
Holcombe	Devon	Walters 1996
Houghton Down	Hampshire	Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 1
Ingleby Barwick	Teesside	Willis & Carne 2013
Keston	Kent	Philp *et al.* 1999
Ketton	Rutland	Henig 2022a; *ARA News* 47 & 48, 2022; Thomas *et al.* 2022
Keynsham	Bath and NE Somerset	Russell 1985; Walters 1996; 2015
Kingscote	Gloucestershire	Timby 1998
Littlecote	Berkshire	Phillips 2022; Walters 1996; Anon 1994
Little Oakley	Essex	Barford 2002
Low Ham	Somerset	Croft 2009; Henig 2019; Payne *et al.* 2019
Lufton	Somerset	Walters 1996
Lullingstone	Kent	Henig 1997; Mackenzie 2019; Henig & Soffe, this volume
Lyde Green	Gloucestershire	Hobson & Newman 2021
Marsh Leys	Bedfordshire	Luke & Preece 2011
Meonstoke	Hampshire	King & Potter 1990; King 1996; 2020
Minster in Thanet	Kent	Perkins 2003; Perkins *et al.* 2004-19; Tomalin, this volume
Moor Park	Hertfordshire	Leitch & Biddle, this volume
Mount, The, Maidstone	Kent	Houliston 1999
Newnham	Bedfordshire	Ingham *et al.* 2016
Northfleet	Kent	Biddulph 2011
North Leigh	Oxfordshire	Ellis 1999; Wilson 2004; Creighton & Allen 2017
North Warnborough	Hampshire	Wallace 2018
Orton Hall Farm	Peterborough	Mackreth 1996
Piddington	Northamptonshire	Friendship-Taylor, this volume
Pillerton Priors	Warwickshire	Sabin 2003
Rectory Farm	Cambridgeshire	Green 2017, 43-5; Lyons 2019
Redlands Farm	Northamptonshire	Keevil 1996
Rivenhall	Essex	Rodwell & Rodwell 1993
Shakenoak	Oxfordshire	Brodribb *et al.* 2005
Shapwick	Somerset	Abdy *et al.* 2001
Snodland	Kent	Dawkes 2015
Southwick	W Sussex	Standing 2014

Site	County	Reference
Sparsholt	Hampshire	Johnston & Dicks 2014
Stanion	Northamptonshire	Tingle 2008
Stanwick	Northamptonshire	Neal 1989; 1996b, 38-43; Coombe *et al.* 2021
Stonea	Cambridgeshire	Jackson & Potter 1996; Malim 2005
Stonesfield	Oxfordshire	Freshwater *et al.* 2000
Surrey villas	Surrey	Bird 2017
Sussex villas	E & W Sussex	Rudling 1998
Tackley	Oxfordshire	Sánchez 2021
Tarrant Hinton	Dorset	Graham 2006
Thruxton	Hampshire	Henig & Soffe 1993; Cunliffe & Poole 2008, Part 4
Truckle Hill, North Wraxall	Wiltshire	Andrews *et al.* 2013; Andrews 2016
Turkdean	Gloucestershire	Holbrook 2004
Whitley Grange	Shropshire	White, this volume
Wilts villas	Wiltshire	Walters 2001
Woodchester	Gloucestershire	Walters 1996
Wortley	Gloucestershire	Wilson *et al.* 2014
Yarford	Somerset	Croft 2009; King & Grande, this volume

Research on the Romano-British countryside during the 1990s to 2010s has moved away from a focus on villas to an approach that can be regarded as more holistic and landscape orientated, such as the major project *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain* that resulted in three influential volumes in the Britannia Monograph series (Smith *et al.* 2016; 2018; Allen *et al.* 2017). Other projects on similar lines (King 2004; Taylor 2007; Rippon *et al.* 2015; Millett *et al.* 2016, Part IV), also pushed the research direction towards agricultural exploitation, field systems, and integration of varying forms of rural settlement, as prefigured in the research agenda put forward by Webster (1995). This has been mirrored in other Roman provinces, too, notably northern Gaul and Germany (e. g. Roymans and Derks 2011; Habermehl 2014; Roymans *et al.* 2015; Reddé 2017/18). Nevertheless, villas are recognised as a specific form of ancient rural settlement, even if their definition can on occasion be problematic, and a recent volume on Mediterranean villas has highlighted their continuing importance as a focus of study (Marzano and Métraux 2018).

This volume draws on the recent landscape studies of Roman Britain, and has papers devoted to regional evaluations (Tomalin, Upex, this volume). It is, however, specifically concerned with a wide range of structures from the countryside of Roman Britain, which have all at one time or another been designated as Roman villas. They range from buildings of very modest size to country houses sometimes planned on a palatial scale and endowed with every luxury. Most of the medium sized and smaller houses were centres of agricultural production, and the wealth of the large estates would generally have depended on farming, doubtless from dependent, satellite tenant farms as in the case of the great estates of medieval and early modern times. However, some villas were industrial centres like Chesters, Woolaston, Gloucestershire, with its evidence for iron furnaces (Fulford and Allen 1992), Ashtead, Surrey (this volume) and the villa associated with a tile kiln at Crookhorn, Hampshire (Soffe, Nicholls and Moore 1989), while others both inland as well as on the coast, may have been based on pisciculture (fish farming), for example Shakenoak, Oxfordshire (Brodribb *et al.* 2005, 420-23, 553), or salt working, such as Bays Meadow, Droitwich (Hurst 2006). David Tomalin's paper in this volume discusses the significance of coastal villas and their links with maritime communications and exploitation (see also Tomalin 2006).

A significant theme in the volume is that it has become apparent that some buildings generally regarded as simple villas also had a religious aspect, where temples were contiguous to villas. This was almost certainly true of Chedworth, where several temples, one of very large size, a number of images of Diana as well as what appear to be two wings of rooms for presumably paying guests are suggestive of some sort of sanctuary. Is one to regard

the main block of the building with its rich mosaics in corridors, bath-house and *triclinium* as a luxury country house like that at Woodchester or rather in the nature of the guest house like that at the sanctuary of Nodens in Lydney Park also in Gloucestershire? More certainly the 'villa' at Great Witcombe and the partially excavated building at Moor Park, Hertfordshire (this volume), represent water sanctuaries on the lines of those in Gaul such as Fontaines-Salées. Lullingstone, discussed in this volume, is enigmatic, with evidence for religious cult extending from a second century shrine of the nymphs presumably of the River Darent in the basement, to offerings made in the third century before two marble busts, and finally a house church in an upper room. Near to Lullingstone, the large villa at Darenth also has good evidence suggesting a water cult was practised at this site, which may have been as much a public building as a private villa (Beeson 2020; Black 1981). Cult activity at villa sites may have originated in the Iron Age, as seen in the horse and foal burials under a mid/late Roman hexagonal building at Meonstoke, Hampshire (King 2020). The hexagonal building is an unusual architectural form for Roman Britain (King 2023) and was almost certainly a shrine adjacent to an aisled building, and probably part of a villa estate.

In the late Roman period, there is evidence for pagan religious rites in a triconch building beside the main villa and beside a stream at Littlecote (Walters 1996; Anon 1994) and in a room attached to the aisled villa at Thruxton, Hampshire (Henig and Soffe 1993; Cunliffe and Poole 2008, vol. 2, part 4). Apart from Lullingstone, Christianity was also present in Hinton St Mary, Dorset, as revealed by the well-known mosaic apparently depicting a bust of Christ set against a Chi-Rho, and at Frampton also in Dorset with a Chi-Rho in mosaic on the cord of the apse in its largest room (see a range of papers with references in *Mosaic* 40, 2013).

Whether luxury houses, working farms, centres of industry or religious sanctuaries, all the buildings discussed were components in a flourishing countryside, so in order to understand them it is important to consider the rural economy as several contributors have attempted to do. In this context, the early establishment of villas during the first century along the south coast, especially in West Sussex (Rudling 1998) or in Kent (e.g. Eccles; Stoodley and Cosh 2021), represents precocious building of Roman-style dwellings within a landscape that was still largely Iron Age in its economy and society. The inspiration for this is likely to have come from villa building activity in northern Gaul, where Iron Age to Roman sequences demonstrate continuity in agriculture and social organisation, integrated with the newly introduced Roman building techniques (see Agache 1978; King 1990, 92-5; Roymans and Derks 2011).

When villas are mentioned the arts, especially those of the architect and architectural sculptor and the mosaicist inevitably come to mind. With regard to the latter, the figural mosaics of fourth-century Britain are remarkable for their concentration on their owner's *paideia* in preference to, for example, amphitheatre scenes, often displaying an erudite knowledge of mythology. They range from the Greek and Roman epics, as in the mosaic depicting scenes from the denouement of the Iliad, showing Achilles dragging Hector's corpse behind his chariot and including a scene, very rare on mosaic, of the weighing of Hector's body, from a villa near Ketton, Rutland (Henig 2022a; Thomas *et al.* 2002; *Association for Roman Archaeology News* 47 and 48, 2022), and the Vergilian mosaics depicting Dido and Aeneas from the bath-house at Low Ham, Somerset (Henig 2019; 2022a), to representations of myths drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Hyginus' *Fabulae* (Henig 2022b). These include Apollo and Daphne at Dinnington (King and Grande, this volume), the myths of Hercules and Antaeus in a sculpture at Dinnington (*ibid*.) and a mosaic at Bramdean, Hampshire, and no less than five mosaics figuring Bellerophon at Hinton St Mary and Frampton in Dorset, Croughton, Northamptonshire, Lullingstone, Kent and now Boxford, Berkshire. At the last site in this list, however, the main subject was concerned with Pelops, very rare indeed on mosaics. The villa at Lullingstone contains a two-line poem which indicates knowledge of both Ovid and Virgil while the scenes on the Boxford mosaic and others probably derive from Hyginus (Beeson *et al.* 2019; see Henig 2019; Dunbabin 2020). Architecture and architectural ornament, as well as imported marbles from the richer villas are indicative of far-flung contacts (Blagg 2002). However, architectural plans and artistic styles also point to the villas of Britain being in many ways distinctive and locally conceived.

To place the buildings that form the main subject of this volume into context we have thought it good to include a couple of papers on villas in Gaul, where Ausonius and Sidonius Apollinaris provide valuable evidence for villas in Late Antiquity (Collis, this volume), as well as Italy, where the villa at Mola di Monte Gelato demonstrates how a villa became first a farmstead in the late Roman period, and then a focus for a dispersed village in the early middle ages (King, this volume). This is a sequence seen at many villa sites, amplified in the case of Monte Gelato by the presence of an early Christian church from the fourth century AD within the villa buildings.

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Anthony Beeson 1948-2022

This volume was in the hands of the publisher when the editors heard of the sudden and very untimely death of one of our contributors, Anthony Beeson. He was a leading light in the Association for Roman Archaeology, and for many years had contributed prolifically to its periodical publications, *ARA, The Bulletin of the Association for Roman Archaeology* and *ARA News*, as well as being a mainstay of the many foreign and British study tours run by the Association. He also published extensively on villa mosaics in *Mosaic* and wrote acclaimed books on Roman gardens and mosaics in Roman Britain (Beeson 2019; 2022). Perhaps his most memorable achievements in relation to villas were 'rescuing' the Newton St Loe Orpheus pavement (Beeson and Henig 1997), campaigning to save the Dewlish mosaic from export (see above), and his interpretation of the Boxford mosaic (Beeson *et al.* 2019). His considerable interest in villas and their architecture is attested by his contribution to this volume.

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