



## Review

*Villas, Sanctuaries and Settlements in the Romano-British Countryside*. Edited by M. Henig, G. Soffe, K. Adcock and A. King. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 95. Archaeopress, Oxford, 2022. Pp. xii + 368 pp., illus. Price £58. ISBN 978803273808, ISSN 9781803273815 (ePDF).

The editors of this volume seek to challenge an alleged agricultural focus on villas; could some be interpreted as ‘religious sanctuary’ or ‘leisure retreat’? Most of the papers are on individual sites or areas with just two or three classes of evidence (coins and mosaics, by Walton and Witts, both very useful). The long-running excavations at Piddington (Northants) are interestingly summarised by the Friendship-Taylor. White makes a strong case that Whitley Grange (Shropshire) was for entertaining rather than the centre of an agricultural estate, a ‘leisure retreat’, a key site in alerting us to this class. There then follow four papers all focusing on the two elaborate Gloucestershire sites of Great Witcombe and Chedworth, emphasising their potential religious roles. The main papers on both sites are probably more enhanced by a suite of computer-generated 3-D reconstructions. If only space here permitted engagement with these sites in the detail they deserve. For Great Witcombe it is argued that the plan and axial octagonal room make it more likely to have been a religious building. But it could equally be argued that the category of ‘leisure retreat’ offers a plausible alternative model. It would be interesting to explain the site’s orientation: something on the crest of the scarp? The temple complex at Haut-Bécherel (Côtes-d’Armor) may look an attractive comparison in two dimensions, but the differences from Great Witcombe are probably more important than the similarities. For Chedworth, the argument is that the complex was not a ‘villa’ but rather a healing sanctuary offering accommodation to pilgrims in a landscape studded with religious buildings. The 2022 publication of *Britannia Monograph 35* laying out the full range of evidence for the site has superseded much of this article (declaration of interest: this reviewer was lead editor for the monograph). Readers can therefore judge the evidence for whether it corresponds better with features at villas in Britain and beyond or better as a sanctuary/hostel (a problematic class of site with little in the way of comparanda or of criteria to distinguish it from villas) and here surrounded by a seriously under-evidenced group of tumescent tower temples (fig. 9.16/cover). Great Witcombe and Chedworth are the focus for a stimulating paper by the late Anthony Beeson identifying openwork stone panels with S-shaped motifs as part of the decoration of the roofs of religious buildings. Beeson notes that one from Chedworth is curved and suggests that it originally decorated the *nymphaeum*, an original and attractive insight. We can only regret that we are now deprived of further well-informed papers from him. At Chedworth, Stephen Cosh’s eagle eye has detected that on the well-known *nymphaeum* coping-stones one incised chi-rho is flanked by alpha and omega; he also suggests the stones were reused in front of the west gallery entrance. Mark Corney summarises the strange double villa at Bradford-on-Avon (Wilts), focusing on two aspects. As well as Building 1, equipped with mosaics, there was the near-identical in plan Building 2, lacking these fixtures. The latter is interpreted as for agricultural processing but in the style of a residence. Could it have been a residence abandoned in favour of erecting Building 1? Weird, but no weirder than the agricultural suggestion. Late in the life of Building 1, the main part of the central room was covered by a circular platform with a central setting, interpreted as a Christian baptistery with central font, despite the marked lack of resemblance to attested baptisteries. Could it be like the proposal for the Great Witcombe octagonal room, with a central basin or sculpture? King summarises his excavations at Dinnington and Yarford (Somerset), the former part of the extraordinary grouping around Ilchester. It yielded some exceptional sculpture, considered by Christina Grande, fitting into the growing evidence for the importance of this medium at villas. Bird’s elegant paper on the Ashted (Surrey) ‘villa’ and tile-works shows that ‘villa’ can be more a reference to building type than function. It is reminiscent of the ‘villa’ at Bay’s Meadow, Droitwich, overlooking the brine-works. At Lullingsstone (Kent), Henig and Soffe concentrate on two aspects of a possible ‘leisure retreat’. They

construct an entertaining inverted pyramid of speculation balanced on the marble bust of Pertinax. They also argue in another wide-ranging excursus that the mosaic inscription from the main room can be made to reveal a cryptogram of the name Avitus and, more dubiously, Iesu(s). The first question with cryptograms is why did the knowledge need to be concealed? Too dangerous (militarily, politically, religiously)? The authors suggest Avitus was an owner of the villa; so did the name really need to be encrypted? Likewise at this date Iesu(s)? Two papers examine areas rather than individual sites. Upex gives a useful summary of the lower Nene valley sites, including the extraordinary complex at Castor. At one stage a highly visible temple? The idea of an 'imperial estate' in this region still looms large because of non-villa areas, though where wealth was generated and where it was displayed may have differed. The other area paper looks at two islands, Wight and Thanet. The first part consists of a useful presentation of the relevant sites. The second part ill-advisedly uses Anglo-Saxon boundaries, seventeenth-century militia areas and land boundaries on the Irish Isle of Aran to try to reconstruct earlier insular land divisions. There are two papers on continental sites, but they are rather out on a limb. Overall, the volume does propose a range of different approaches to the 'villa'. Some convince more than others. The idea of a 'leisure retreat' needs serious consideration and development. As to religion, to paraphrase Beeson (p.190), a religious shrine in an establishment does not mean the entire complex is devoted to religion. But in general, for a volume seeking to shift the agenda it is disappointingly traditional in so many papers' focus on buildings and decoration. Two major evidence types, material culture and environmental, both of which have so much to tell us, are essentially ignored. So, a bit of a curate's egg – 'Parts of it are excellent'.

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