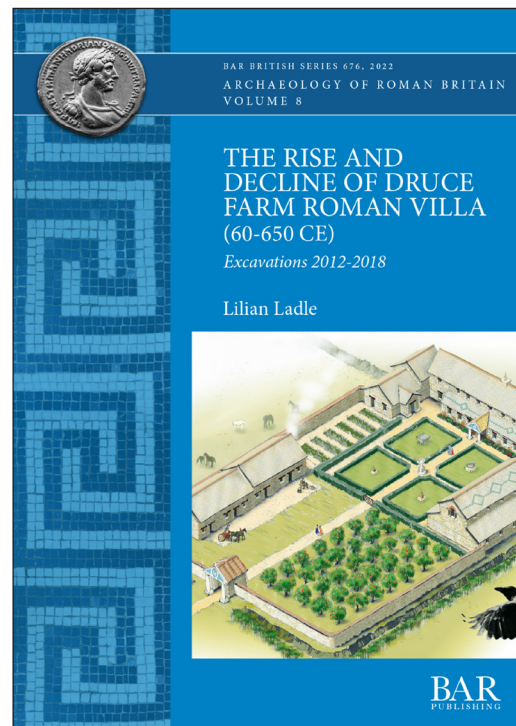


Book Review

Ladle, Lilian. 2022. *The Rise and Decline of Druce Farm Roman Villa (60–650 CE). Excavations 2012–2018*. BAR British Series 676. Archaeology of Roman Britain Volume 8. Oxford: BAR Publishing; 978-1-40736-001-0 paperback £95.

There has been something of a renaissance in Roman villa excavations and publication in recent years, with excellent monographs of developer-funded excavations at Dings villa near Bristol (Brindle et al. 2023) and Harpole villa, Northamptonshire (Simmonds and Lawrence 2022), and the publication of earlier excavations at Dewlish villa in Dorset (Hewitt et al. 2021). This volume presents the results of excavations at Druce Farm villa in Dorset (very close to Dewlish) that were undertaken by the East Dorset Antiquarian Society (EDAS) between 2012 and 2018, with funding obtained from a wide variety of sources, including the landowners and several members of the excavation team. It is a testament to the dedication of this largely volunteer team that less than four years after the final season of excavation they have produced such a well-illustrated and researched volume.



The site of the villa was first noted through local detectorists who uncovered a large amount of Roman material; a complex of buildings was confirmed by subsequent geophysical surveys, which led to the excavations over 153 weeks across seven years. Excavation strategies were refined each season leading to a comprehensive spread of 90 trenches covering the major buildings and outer boundaries.

The earliest activity revealed a small but important early Neolithic site, which although included in the volume is set to be published more comprehensively in a separate paper. A small quantity of Bronze and Iron Age pottery points to some activity during this period, but it was not until the immediate post-Claudian conquest period (c. 43–70 AD) that the first major occupation occurred, with a rectilinear enclosure system, outer ditches and a substantial masonry-footed building. This was termed in a somewhat understated way an ‘ancillary building’, which does beg the question, ancillary to what at this time? The building and enclosure arrangement is, as acknowledged, highly unusual for this period in the region, and there are convincing suggestions of an early military association of some kind. A new range of buildings developed in the later first to early second century AD, termed the ‘proto-villa’ phase, while the first ‘true’ villa complex (defined by buildings with painted plaster and tessellated floors) developed from the mid second century. The blurred boundaries of such definitions have been laid out elsewhere (Smith et al. 2016: 34) but suffice to say even if the ‘proto-villa’ was lacking certain embellishments, it was clearly of a different social and cultural status to most other contemporary rural settlements in the region. The complex then underwent additional further phases of development, including the provision of a grain dryer and an aisled hall, reaching its apogee in the early fourth century AD, along with many other villas in the region. Thereafter was a long period of gradual deterioration, although with some artefactual evidence for continued occupation until the sixth or early seventh century AD.

The monograph is presented within a fairly traditional structure, starting with a comprehensive background with a very useful illustrated summary of the phasing, followed by a more detailed chronological account of the archaeology, and then full specialist reports, ending with a final discussion. Experienced specialists were contracted by the project to analyse and report on the assemblages, producing expert reports of a high standard. Some finds specialist reports have been grouped by function (building materials, internal decoration), and others by material (stone, glass, bone, iron, non-ferrous, etc.) and all are generally clear, well-structured and very nicely illustrated. These include a number of interpretative/schematic illustrations that not usually shown in such monographs but are particularly welcome here, providing greater interest for non-specialists. Not all finds reports have accompanying

discussions, which would have been useful, though they are all well-integrated into the final monograph discussion. Two pottery reports are presented in the volume for reasons that are not fully explained. Additionally, a full quantification table by sherd count and weight of all pottery wares would have been useful, although this information is available in the text.

The environmental strategies, analysis and reporting particularly stand out, especially because, as the volume states, 'First-class environmental reports from Roman villas are few and far between' (p. 309). They enable a detailed reconstruction of the agricultural economy of the site and allow it to be fully compared with other sites in the region and further afield. There are also important insights into the use of non-native plant species, evidence for dyeing, woodland management and the probable consumption of a notable variety of animal species. Discrete deposits of small vertebrate remains are additionally present, which appear to be the result of a vacated building being inhabited by barn owls, thereby providing a fascinating insight into the later history of the site.

The final discussion chapter expertly weaves the different strands of evidence together to provide a compelling narrative of the development of the settlement. There is a full admission that there are many questions left unanswered, and the final conclusions leave interpretation open as to its role — an elite hunting lodge with periodic occupation, an administration centre for rural tax collection or simply a small country estate. Of course, it could have held all such roles over time.

The *Roman Rural Settlement Project* (Smith et al. 2016) recently lamented the lack of villa excavations excavated to modern standards. Fortunately, since that project concluded, we are now seeing this addressed not only through developer-funded work but also projects like the work at Druce Farm. As stated in the volume, it is testament to what can be achieved through a dedicated group of volunteers (along with a venerable JCB excavator!) working with their professional colleagues, which not only produced this fine volume, but also included extensive community and schools outreach programmes.

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