

Matthew S. Hobson and Richard Newman (Eds) *Lyde Green Roman Villa, Emerson Green, South Gloucestershire* (Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 85, 2021) vii, 203, col, b/w ill, maps, A4 Paperback, £38, [ISBN:9781803270463; e-publication ISBN: 9781803270470]

The Lyde Green series of archaeological investigations between 2012 and 2013 was a response to further development on the north-east outskirts of the expanding City of Bristol. The focus of the excavations was a low ridge overlooking a stream valley to the east into which a number of springs flowed. After a series of geophysical surveys and trial evaluation trenches, six area excavations were undertaken by Wardell Armstrong covering 4.83 ha. (12 acres). The editors of this volume 'received instructions to put bring the partly completed Lyde Green monograph to final publication.....as the excavations were becoming a rather distant memory.'

With such a large expanse being unearthed it was expected from the results of the pre-excavation interventions that a series of late-Iron Age and Roman structures would be present. However, the site had been severely damaged by stone robbing and modern agricultural activity which resulted in no floor surfaces of the Roman buildings surviving. The lack of vertical evidence in terms of stratigraphy was mitigated by the large area excavated and the 'horizontal' surfaces that produced a plan of a significant area of landscape from the late Iron Age to the late Roman periods. With the lack of stratigraphy at Lyde Green the finds became crucial to dating the development of the site and the structures. The editors contended that whilst other excavations in the area were 'fragmentary' because of the limited nature in terms of space revealed, the Lyde Green interventions would give a wider picture of a piece of past agricultural landscape.

There was a limited amount of evidence for Neolithic and Middle to Late Iron Age occupation which was not enough to determine continuity with the main use of the site. The focus of the settlement in the 2nd century originally lay on the southern side of the ridge and was a D-shaped enclosure with two phases. In the 2nd-3rd centuries the nucleus moved to the east of this enclosure resulting in a three-celled thatched structure surrounded by field systems which were probably related to stock rearing and arable farming. Traces of agricultural and non-agricultural production activities such as corn drying, iron

smelting and blacksmithing were recorded dating to the 2nd and 4th centuries and suggest a multifunctional farm estate.

It may have been a successful iron working enterprise that enabled a minor villa to be built in a prominent position on top of the ridge and likely the centre of the estate by the late 3rd century which continued well into the 4th century. The house was a tripartite corridor structure with two storeys and was stone-built with roof tiles. It was in a gated compound which may also have held a bathhouse, a toilet block, possible fleece washing, a two-celled agricultural building and a grain drier. There were also a number of cremations and three cist burials, the latter containing no skeletons but in two were hobnails belonging to shoes. The contributor suggests removal of burials when the family moved on demolition of the villa, and this might also suggest that the family deliberately destroyed the villa. After undertaking the unenviable task of analysing academic models to identify characteristics that might define a 'villa, it is suggested that the earlier structure below the crest of the hill does not fit the proposed criteria, while the later building above does: possible painted wall plaster with likely small areas of mosaic; if there was a bathhouse at Lyde Green it was simple with only a *tepidarium* and plunge pool. This indicates a pretension to be seen as an elite house.

One of the main aims of the post-excavation research was to place Lyde Green into the context of other 3rd and 4th century villas in the local settlement hierarchy and wider contemporary landscape which entailed the identification and distribution of the local villas and of their attributes in terms of dates of excavation and details of construction. Their number has increased in recent years related to urban development. It suggests that villas were not clustered around the major administrative settlements such as Cirencester but formed local agricultural communities, and it is clear that it was a crowded landscape in the Roman period

At Lyde Green there seems to be a direct continuity from the late Iron Age to the 3rd and 4th centuries followed by abandonment and this is repeated at some of the other villa sites. The author of this chapter suggests that these people still thought of themselves as Dobunnici. This is a difficult concept considering how little we know about this 'tribal' organisation, but there might have been some local historic group identity. In the early Conquest period elites might have wanted to build villas to show their degree of Romanisation, but by the period of Lyde Green this was of no consequence and these local

structures were only adopting some aspects of a Roman way of life. Increasing wealth might indicate social aspirations and competition in the area, hence the movement of the Lyde Green domestic accommodation to the crest of the hill from the less visible situation on the side of the ridge.

While there was a complete archive of the excavation and drafts of sections of an earlier attempt at writing a report, bringing up it to date when there was no direct experience of the site is fraught with difficulties. However, it was purposely designed that the finds and paleoenvironmental analyses were to be contained with the relevant chronological chapter making a harmonious whole. Similarly, in order to focus on the relationship of the Lyde Green villa to the those in the local and regional area readers are referred to the digital and museum held archive for stereographical detail. Both strategies work well, and this volume is highly recommended for its insights into Roman South Gloucestershire.

TIM COPELAND