

The Roman Villa at Rapsley: an interpretation

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The purpose of this note is to propose an interpretation of a particularly interesting site in the light of a recent paper in which a system of joint proprietorship was advanced as an explanation of many villas in Britain and Gaul (Smith 1978). I am indebted to Lady Hanworth, who excavated and published the Rapsley villa (Hanworth 1968) for suggesting the writing of this note and for comments on it, and for providing the block plan (figs 1 and 2).

The Rapsley villa does not conform to textbook notions of what a Villa should be like but it is, nevertheless, intelligible in the light of other sites which have been neglected because they too do not conform to the generally accepted ideas of what constitutes a building type or a settlement type. Fundamental to the understanding of Rapsley is its division into two parts by a fence, which should, I think, properly be called a wall; its Period III stone footings suggest a fairly substantial construction, perhaps of tempered clay equivalent to the Dorset material called cob, and strengthened by posts at 12 ft intervals. Evidence of such a construction of timber and stone footings was found elsewhere on the site and was widespread in Roman Britain. Just possibly the division of the site which is clearly traceable in Period III may go back to Period II, to judge by the distance separating the little Building 3 from a fragmentary contemporary structure near the south-east gate (Hanworth 1968, 8). Whatever the truth of this, Building 3 can be interpreted as a small house serving as a combined human and animal shelter, with a narrow longitudinal corridor between the two wings; indeed, it is difficult to interpret it otherwise, but its combination of a lowly function with a relatively sophisticated architectural feature, the front corridor which looks like a porticus, is without parallel among such dual-purpose farmhouses (Hanworth 1968, 8).

In the succeeding Period III the dividing wall was built, together with the long south wall and the two gates at its east and west ends. The most important structure on the site was Building 1, interpreted in the report as an aisled house (Hanworth 1968, 10). A point which tells against this interpretation is that the widths of the presumed nave and aisles are too nearly alike to permit such a construction, so until further excavation is possible the building is better thought of as a house of unknown plan with modest comforts which included a tessellated floor. On the east side of the dividing wall the principal structure, Building 6, combined in a very unusual way a small bath-house with some simple domestic accommodation. Just how much of the structure was bath-house is not perfectly clear; were Rooms 7 and 3 part of it, or could they have had a normal domestic use? The closest parallel, and it is not particularly close, is a small building at Worsham, Oxon (*VCH* 1, 319), about 78 ft×40 ft overall, compared with the 68 ft×30 ft of Building 6. Not having been published by its excavators the

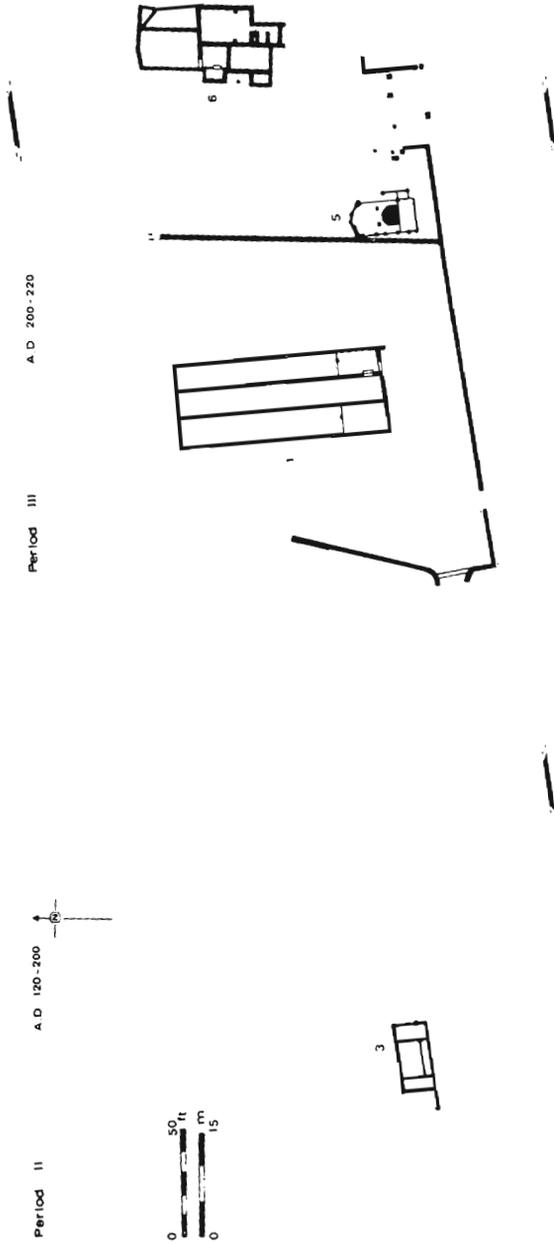


Fig 1 Rapsley Roman villa: outline plans of site, Periods II and III

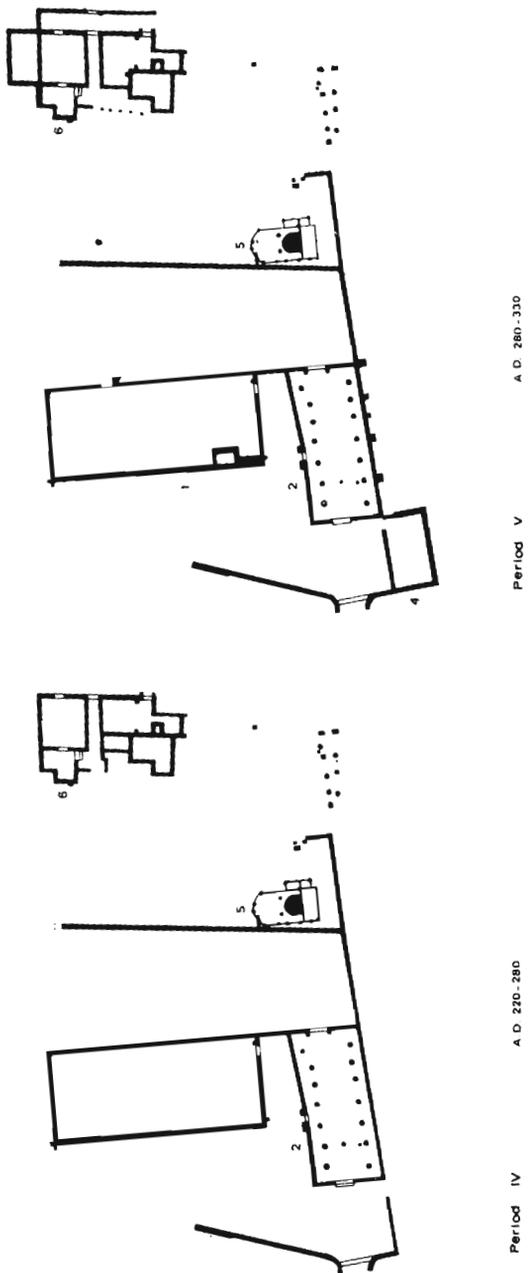


Fig 2 Rapsley Roman villa: outline plans of site: Periods IV and V

Worsham house is very uncertain in detail, but both it and Building 6 show that in a small establishment the bathing facilities need not have been provided in a detached structure. Another point of interest about Building 6 is the use, rarely observed on Roman sites but common in vernacular building of the 16th and 17th centuries, of mixed construction, part of the structure being in stone and part in timber (Hanworth 1968, 9).

Adjoining the dividing wall on its east side stood a small shrine. Its siting suggests it was common to the whole site but that whoever occupied the east house perhaps had greater rights over it and responsibility for its upkeep. Of the gate which might have been expected to provide access to it from the west complex no trace was found, unless it was the small piece of masonry projecting east of the junction of the boundary wall, so it is more likely that a gate stood somewhere north of the shrine. The shrine itself was associated with water, apparently a not uncommon thing in Roman villas. To the examples quoted (Hanworth 1968, 17) can be added the very remarkable one at Downton, Wilts (Rahtz 1963) and almost certainly the 'Cistern' in the earlier phases of the Gadebridge Park, Herts, villa (Neal 1974). And in this connection it may be asked why a number of symmetrically planned villas such as Ditchley, Oxon (Radford 1936) have a well set in front of the house in the middle of the courtyard, since this can hardly have been the most useful position for a water supply.

In Period IV, when both east and west establishments were much altered, the most significant changes concern the relations between buildings and entrances. Building 6 was constructed as a house and nothing more, but its principal front probably faced east, away from its neighbour, as it certainly did in Period V. On the other side of the dividing wall a new aisled building (Building 2) was aligned on the south-west gateway in a way which emphasises its separateness from Building 6 and most strongly suggests that we are dealing here with two independent establishments. The siting of the whole complex is quite unlike the conventional layout of a villa north of the Alps, in which the buildings are laid out so as to permit the proprietor to oversee the activities of his farm as easily as possible.

Building 2 had none of the conventional amenities of a Roman house and was quite reasonably interpreted as a workshop. Its plan, though, is strikingly like the kind of North German aisled farmhouse called a *Durchgangsdielehaus*, a term difficult to translate, which means literally 'a house with a threshing floor running through it lengthwise'. Now Building 2 is not quite that because although there are two wide doorways in the end walls there is between them, near the east end, a hearth which in the German type would be in one of the aisles. Not that the hearth of itself proves the building domestic, as the signs of lead-working around it show, and in passing we must be grateful to the author for pointing out that these relate to household needs; all too often such traces are elevated to the status of an 'industry' (Hanworth 1968, 24). It may well be that a building of this size with a hearth always had the partly domestic function of housing those who work in it and on the farm.

Evidently Building 1 also underwent extensive alteration when Building 2 was added, for the two were linked together by a wall. From the fragmentary evidence it appears that 1 also faced west, for once 2, which was either solely or primarily a workshop, had been built facing the south-west gate, some more

elegant approach must have been created to give access to a fair-sized house. If we consider the west boundary wall put up in Period III in this light, the thickening at its north end may signify some emphasis given to a gateway opposite the middle of Building 1, where the main house entrance might be expected. Perhaps it was just bad luck that outbuildings, the modern drive and trees prevented the finding of a northward continuation of the wall.

The impression of separateness given by the two parts of the villa is strengthened in the final Period V. At this stage the addition on the east side of Building 6 of the corridor or verandah, obligatory in all Romano-British houses of any pretensions, establishes beyond doubt that the house now turned its back on its neighbour. In this respect Rapsley may be compared with the recently excavated villa at Koerich-Goeblingen in Luxembourg (Metzler et al 1973) where, within an undivided earthwork enclosure, two modest-sized houses also turn their backs on one another.

At much the same time the south wall of Building 2 was altered in a rather enigmatic way. To it were added what were regarded as buttresses, which indeed they may have been (Hanworth 1968, 29); doubt is engendered only by the fact that not a single one touches the wall it was supposed to support. What may have happened is that 2 was upgraded by the addition of a colonnade of four bays, terminating at the west against, or one bay short of, the new Building 4. This does not account for the fifth and smallest base, the third from the east, and I can offer no explanation of it — but nor does the buttress theory — unless it served as the base for a minor monument of some kind: an inadequate notion in the absence of supporting evidence. But if a colonnade existed it would suggest that Building 2 was certainly more than a workshop at this period.

I have emphasised what appears to be the villa's dual occupancy because this, from the standpoint of social history, is one of the most important and least recognised aspects of Roman Britain. Evidence of what is known at a much later historical period as the 'unit system' (Hemp and Gresham 1942; Smith 1978) is not lacking in the northern provinces, but, since it has hardly ever been recognised for what it is, the villa at Rapsley, despite the inevitable incompleteness of its excavation, acquires a special importance. It is characteristic of such division that the two parts of a holding are unequal and they commonly have houses of different size and type. Building 6 in its final form approximates to a not uncommon kind of small house comprising two principal rooms with an entrance passage between them and a partition or verandah in front; its minor rooms, their irregularity determined by their origin in a bath-house, do not conform to a pattern. As for the western part of the site, its most striking feature is the conjunction of an aisled building, which may have been partly domestic, with a more ambitious house close at hand, an arrangement which in principle is like the familiar villa pattern of a main house the approach to which is flanked by an aisled house. The first villa of that type was excavated about two hundred years ago at Mansfield Woodhouse, Notts (Rooke 1787) and the most recent at Sparsholt, Hants. Where such villas have been fully excavated, a second flanking building has sometimes been found facing the first on the opposite side of the courtyard, and the line of the fragmentary north boundary wall suggests there is just enough space under the modern terrace and drive for another building north of the house.

It remains to add, firstly, that recent building works east of the present-day house have revealed no trace of the principal house which some archaeologists had expected to appear there, and, secondly, that the published reconstruction of Building 6 in Period V (Hanworth 1968, fig 13) does not altogether conform to the data provided by excavation. Comparison with the plan (Hanworth 1968, fig 8) shows that the row of posts on the west side of the building are not, as they are drawn, aligned on the corner of the projecting south room; rather, their setting-out suggests a cruder and less regular finish to this side of the house, and while this is not in itself a very important point it illustrates how easy (and deceptive) it is to tidy up just those irregularities of construction whose existence must have constituted a weakness in the building and tended to shorten its life.

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