

# Abermagwr Romano-British villa, Ceredigion, mid Wales: Interim report on its discovery and excavation

By TOBY G. DRIVER and JEFFREY L. DAVIES

## INTRODUCTION

Roman villas were high-status homes of wealthy landowners and sat at the heart of an estate. They are common throughout southern England and to a lesser extent in south-east Wales, with a few outliers in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire and a singleton in the middle reaches of the Usk valley (Arnold and Davies 2000, 80–7). Until 2010 Ceredigion had no known Roman villas. Archaeologists were inclined to view large parts of mid and north Wales as a region which saw a continuation of ‘native’ forms of settlement and tenure so precluding potential villa development. However, the remains of a small late Roman villa have now been confirmed by excavation at Abermagwr near Aberystwyth, demonstrating the establishment of at least one Romano-British farming estate far beyond the previously known limits of villa-building in Wales (Chapman 2011) and Ceredigion (Davies and Driver 2012).

The discovery raises significant new questions about the regional economy and society of late Roman Wales, raising the probability of other villa discoveries in the heartlands of mid and north Wales. The purpose of this short note is to describe the background to the discovery and excavation of the villa and to describe some of the key findings to date. As it has been compiled in the months following the second season of excavations, with a good deal of post-excavation processing and analysis awaited, what is presented here is likely to be refined and possibly even amended. A full academic publication is currently in preparation.

## DISCOVERY OF THE VILLA

Abermagwr lies towards the northern edge of the Trawsgoed basin in north Ceredigion, where the Ystwyth valley opens to form a broad, level gravel basin measuring some 1.7 kilometres east–west by 3.5 kilometres north-west/south-east (Fig. 1). Trawsgoed Roman fort lies at its centre, on the eastern bank of the Ystwyth. A mile distant from the fort, the north-west corner of a sharp-angled double-ditched enclosure at Abermagwr had long remained a puzzle, since its discovery as cropmarks through aerial photography by Cambridge University in 1979. It was photographed from the air on several occasions thereafter but could not be assigned a definite date. In 2006 Royal Commission aerial photography revealed the greater portion of a 1.1 hectare enclosure, together with an annex and the footings of a stone building in one corner (Fig. 2), visible as cropmarks in drought-ridden stubble following a cut of silage. Although this caused some excitement it was another three years before the opportunity to take the discovery forward arose.

### **Historical and place-name evidence**

The 1781 Trawsgoed estate map for Tan-yr-allt farm shows part of the northern boundaries of this outer enclosure fossilized in later field banks, prior to improvement and clearance to make one large field.

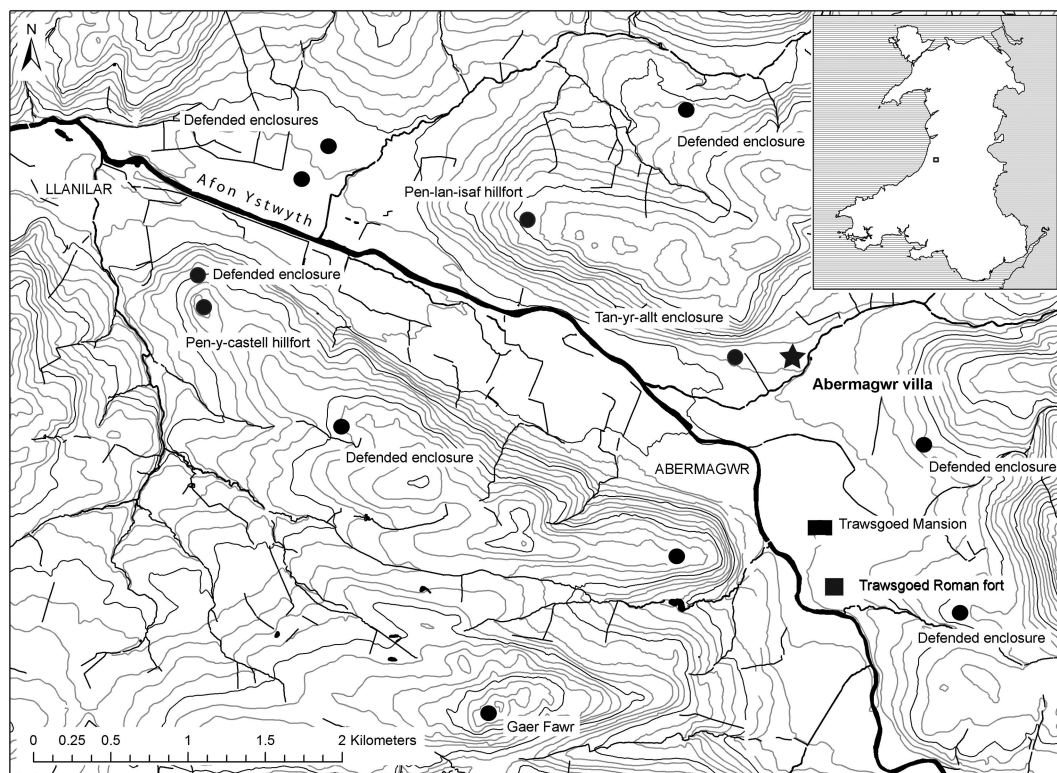


Fig. 1. Location map showing the position of the Abermagwr Romano-British villa (star) mid-way along the lowland corridor of the river Ystwyth, on the northern edge of the lowland basin occupied by Trawsgoed Roman fort (lower right) and, from the late medieval period onwards, the Trawsgoed estate. The landscape was well-settled during later prehistory with a number of hillforts and plough-levelled defended enclosures (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW; © Crown copyright and database right 2012, Ordnance Survey Licence number: 100017916).

The part of the field containing the villa is named ‘Dol capel’ suggestive of the site of a lost stone building. The place-name Abermagwr contains the element *fagwr* or *magwyr* understood locally as ‘ruin’, or ‘ruined homestead’, and may relate to the same building described by the ‘Dol capel’ name. The field containing the fort annex with its bathhouse and *mansio* outside Caer Gai Roman fort, Bala, is similarly called ‘Cae’r Capel’ (Hopewell, in Burnham and Davies 2010, 214) and this seems show a preponderance for communities of the Middle Ages or thereabouts to assign a religious/church/chapel origin to visible ruins. Both names at Abermagwr suggest that the villa survived as a ruin, or at least wall-footings, into the medieval period. There may be wider patterns in the attribution or usage of place-names to describe ruins which are of Roman date or character at this time than previously acknowledged. The Cornish villa at Illogan, explored in the early 1930s, lies on land at ‘Magor Farm’ in a field known as ‘Chapel field’ (O’Neil 1934). The parallels with Abermagwr are striking and hint at a greater role for place-name studies in the future identification of Roman sites in Wales and the west of Britain.



Fig. 2. Aerial photograph of the villa cropmarks from the south-east, July 2006, partly bisected by the Nant Magwr (foreground). Footings of the main stone house are visible at upper-right within the bivallate enclosure (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW, AP\_2006\_3798).

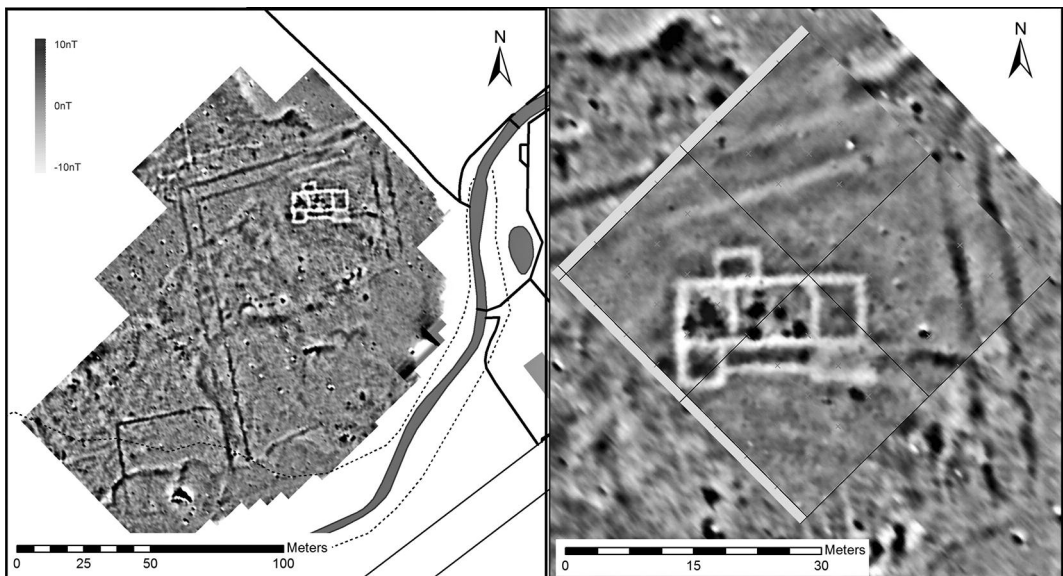


Fig. 3. Geophysical survey of the villa building and outer enclosures by David Hopewell for RCAHMW. (left) Initial survey in 2009 of the entire site; data clipped to  $\pm 10nT$ . (right) High-resolution  $20m \times 20m$  survey of the villa undertaken in 2010 immediately prior to the start of excavations (© Crown Copyright, RCAHMW; © Crown copyright and database right 2012, Ordnance Survey Licence number: 100017916).

### Geophysical survey

In 2009 David Hopewell of the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) undertook a geophysical survey (at  $0.25 \times 1\text{m}$ ) on behalf of the Royal Commission of what was then postulated to be either a villa, a Roman temple or possibly even a medieval building. This unexpectedly revealed the plan of a 22m long stone building with two *alae* or wings (Fig. 3). Although the plan was characteristically that of a Roman villa, and would have been confidently identified as such in south-east Wales or southern England, it was both unusual and unexpected in mid Wales. For this reason a two-week trial excavation was undertaken in July 2010 by the authors and funded by the Cambrian Archaeological Association (CAA) with logistical support from the Dyfed Archaeological Trust (DAT) and the Royal Commission. This work was immediately preceded by a high-resolution geophysical survey (at  $0.25 \times 0.5\text{m}$  on a  $20\text{m} \times 20\text{m}$  grid) to allow the trenches to be precisely positioned over the buried features, and to establish a site grid. This new survey revealed further details about the structure of the building and its immediate environs.

## THE ROMANO-BRITISH BUILDING

### Excavation strategy

Work in the 2010 season comprised a trench across the central part of the building (Trench A), with a second trench across the double ditches of the outer enclosure to its north (Trench B), designed to recover datable material from the ditch immediately to the rear of the building. In the event this section of ditch was obscured by a heavy overburden of hillwash and proved difficult to identify in plan; the fill was also devoid of artefacts and virtually indistinguishable from the hillwash. The fieldwork in 2010 confirmed the Romano-British date of the building though not of the enclosure ditches. A second season of excavation was undertaken for three weeks in July 2011 with a larger team of volunteers. Trench A was extended into the new Trench C allowing a larger part of the building to be properly examined, while a further cutting (Trench E) examined the edge of the eastern *ala* where the geophysical survey had apparently shown a ditch or drain leaving Room 5, then postulated as a heated room or possibly a bath. A smaller trench was dug through the double ditches of the enclosure (Trench D), while a shallow 'Education Trench' was dug some distance to the west of villa as part of the arrangements for an Open Day. This work was again generously supported by the CAA, RCAHMW and DAT but with additional funding from the Department of Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies and the Society of Antiquaries.

### Interim results

The form and plan of the stone building, together with the finds (see below), demonstrated that Abermagwr had all the trappings of established villas elsewhere, including a decorative roof of pentagonal stone tiles or 'slates', possibly ridged by *imbrices* which may have been obtained from the abandoned fort and bathhouse at Trawsgoed. It comprised a block of three main rooms measuring 22m east-west by 8m north-south, with a verandah (Room 7) and two projecting *alae* (Rooms 4 and 5) on the south (Fig. 4). A small room (Room 6) measuring  $5\text{m} \times 4\text{m}$  was later added to the rear of the building. Trench E, opened in 2011 alongside the south-eastern *ala* to investigate a potential drain identified on the geophysical survey, considered to indicate a bathhouse, was the most problematic. It revealed a large pit filled with dumps of building material and domestic rubbish, including quantities of Roman brick and tile. It may be that this was the construction trench for a heated room (Room 8) in a possible bathhouse, added to the south-eastern *ala* (Room 5). Stone *pilae* (pillars) to support a raised floor of a hypocaust may have been inserted, but never completed.

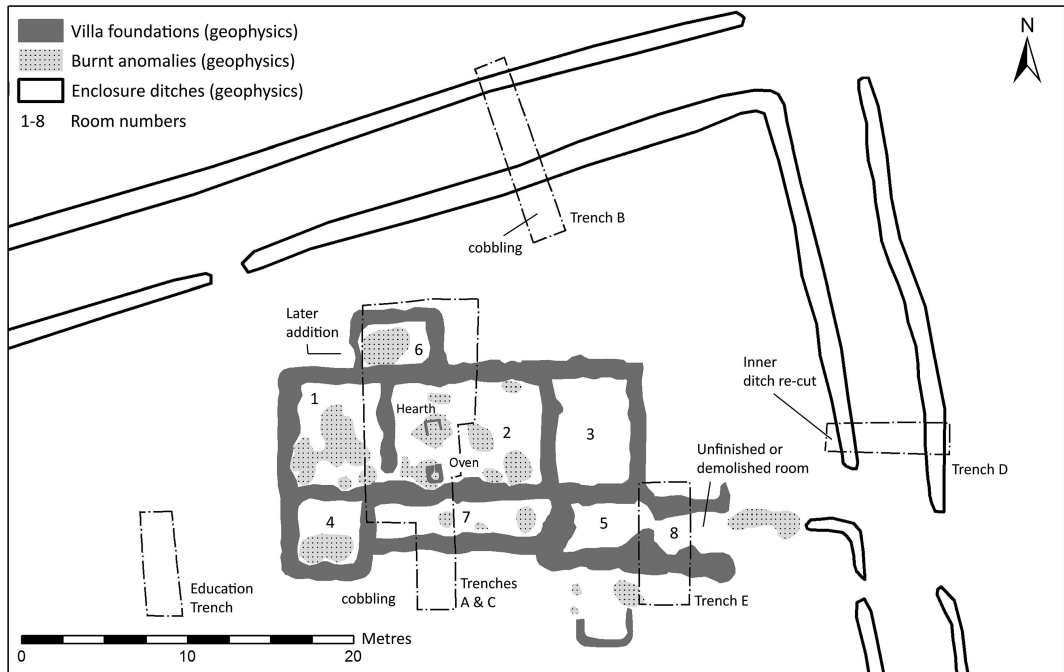


Fig. 4. Plan of the Roman villa, derived from geophysical survey, showing room numbers used in the text and positions of the 2010 and 2011 excavation trenches (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW).

In plan this was a distinctly Romanised building, architect-designed, and probably commissioned by a wealthy local. Although it faces due south, it is oddly skewed in the upper north-east corner of the double-ditched enclosure leaving, or avoiding, a 'blank' area to the west. From excavations on Roman villas elsewhere we may expect a pre-villa phase of occupation, in the form of early timber buildings, or contemporary timber barns and byres. As yet, any firm traces of these structures have proved elusive on the existing geophysical surveys but the 2011 section of the bivallate enclosure, in Trench D, to the east of the villa revealed a probable recut inner ditch. This suggests that the enclosure existed early in the history of the site, with the inner ditch being redug contemporaneously with the life of the house. Two pieces of glass, probably from one or two square bottles, were found in the basal deposits of the ditch and show little signs of weathering or wear. Initial identification by Professor Jennifer Price suggests a second-century date for these. Further work is required to determine the sequence and chronology of the bivallate enclosure.

No evidence has yet been found of any tessellation or mosaic flooring or painted wall plaster. Future investigations could usefully sample some of the remaining rooms of the villa for structure and function. Despite an initial narrow trench, the 2010 excavations established that all the rooms examined were floored with clay, as was the verandah, whilst a rectangular hearth was set into the west side of Room 2. The widening of the original trench allowed a far better opportunity to examine Rooms 2 and 6. The main feature of Room 2 was the central slab-lined hearth  $1.10 \times 0.95\text{m}$ , floored with flat slates. Some  $1.7\text{m}$  south of the hearth was a small circular clay-domed oven set against the south wall of the room (Fig. 6). Although cut by a later posthole and linear feature, likely to post-date the end of the villa, the western half survived measuring  $0.60\text{m}$  in diameter with a  $0.35\text{m}$  long throat, accessed from the north. In 2010 a

near-complete Black-burnished ware cooking pot, of the late third- to early fourth-century AD, was found broken alongside. The clay floor of Room 2 was carefully laid and gradually dipped in the centre towards the main hearth. One of the most interesting features observed on the floor were rectangular marks of *in situ* burning against the north wall, which may possibly be interpreted as the positions of wooden fixtures or furniture which stood against the wall and were lost in a fire at the villa. These potential fixtures can be placed in context by a find from Room 6. As well as four glass beads found scattered across the floor,



Fig. 5. Overview of Trenches A and C from the north towards the end of the 2011 season, looking across the villa with Room 6 in the right foreground, then the north and south walls of the villa (running left to right) defining Room 2, with the verandah beyond and finally the cobbled yard surface exposed at the narrow end of the trench. The main hearth in Room 2 can be seen in the centre of the image, while a figure works on the excavation of the oven against the southern (far) wall of Room 2. Rooms are exposed to original floor levels, with the building's foundations yet to be sectioned when this view was taken (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW).



Fig. 6. The oven against the south wall of Room 2 after excavation, with the throat to the right; the east half (foreground) was destroyed by a later posthole (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW).

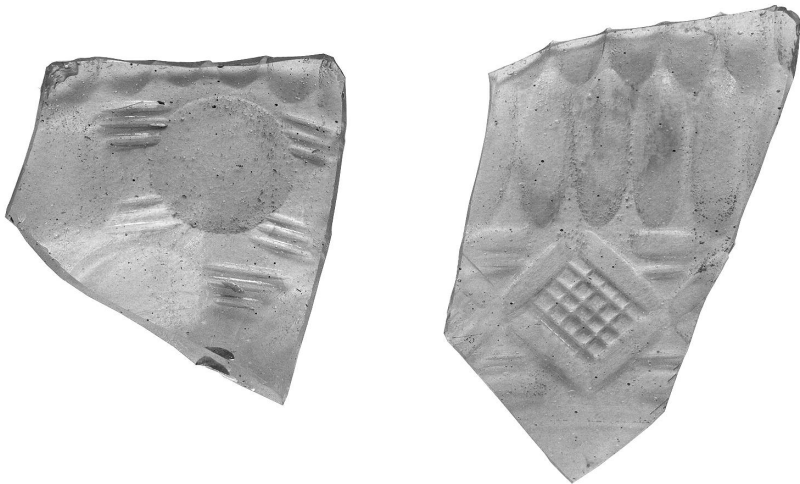


Fig. 7. Two of six fragments of decorated glass found in Room 6, which come from a deep convex facet- and linear-cut cup/bowl with several zones of decoration, a tableware vessel of some quality. Similar vessels were in use in the third/early fourth century AD (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW).

a bronze furniture fitting was also discovered giving us a vivid picture of the quality of Roman furniture in the building. The south-west angle of Room 6 was also the findspot of six fragments of an elegant glass vessel illustrated in Figure 7, a surprising and rare find in this corner of mid Wales.

Initial lead isotope analysis on two lead objects from the villa (a lump and a rectangular, perforated sheet, small finds 036 and 044) undertaken by Keith Haylock, a doctoral student from the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences at Aberystwyth University, suggests they originate from the nearby Frongoch lode in the Cambrian ore field, the site of an historic lead mine 5.2 kilometres east of the villa. Although more detailed analysis is now required this would be additional evidence for Roman mining and smelting in the region to augment that already identified by the Dyfed Archaeological Trust in their excavations at Llangynfelin, Erglodd, in north Ceredigion (see Poucher 2009).

### **The end of the villa**

The 2011 season has shed light on the final years of the villa and how its abandonment may have come about. Excavation confirmed that part of the slate roof over Room 2 collapsed during a fire and fell onto the clay floor. Then at least one fireplace in Room 1 was built of roofing slates (Fig. 8), some with their iron nails intact, demonstrating it was made and used after the villa roof had wholly or partly collapsed. A late phase in the use of the villa is also shown by a series of substantial postholes dug through the different rooms of the building; one or possibly two in Room 6, and two in the Room 2. A further linear feature, possibly a beam slot for a partition wall, had been dug across the verandah and into Room 2,



Fig. 8. Late hearth (062), likely to post-date the abandonment of the villa, sited in the north-east angle of Room 1, with the footings of the north villa wall (left) and the dividing wall between Room 1 and Room 2 (crossing left to right, with figure sitting across) visible. The slate hearth appears as a mass of flat roofing slates, some cracked, others displaying their pentagonal form and pointed tips. Many have their iron nails intact. North to the left (© Crown copyright, RCAHMW).



destroying part of the oven. It may be that these show a sagging roof being propped up during the use of a ruinous building, or even footings for a new timber shelter or building erected within the ruins. This fragile evidence of a late Roman, or post-Roman, history of the villa is part of what makes the Abermagwr site so special. As the site has never been deep-ploughed, stratigraphic evidence survives here that has been lost from so many other villa sites in south Wales and southern England.

### **Building material and stone robbing**

The building was roofed with stone roofing tiles (referred to locally as ‘slates’) made from local shale, forming the earliest known slated roof in Ceredigion. The majority were pentagonal, cut with five sides and a point forming a highly decorative roof, common elsewhere in Romano-British contexts. Triangular-trimmed slates from the very ridge were also recovered. Some of the slates were extremely heavy and a full report will elucidate some further details of the timberwork required to support their weight. Preliminary fieldwork in the local area has identified the closest geological sources to the villa which could have provided suitable stone for splitting into thin tiles, this being the Coed Craigyrogof ridge bordering the Ystwyth Gorge between 4–5 kilometres south-east of the villa, which is home to several post-medieval and recent ‘slate’ quarries.

The walls were built of local stone on deep cobble foundations (see below). It was previously thought that an upper storey, if such existed, may possibly have been timber-framed and of wattle and daub construction; however the quantity of quarried stone recovered from the site even after robbing makes a full stone elevation more likely. The villa was fronted by a cobbled yard of dumped river gravel, which was also found at the rear of the building bordering the inner enclosure ditch.

At the upper level, around 0.2m below the plough soil, excavations initially encountered considerable quantities of quarried building stone and slates. Where the geophysical survey had shown Roman wall lines, voids in the rubble, infilled with soil, were encountered. These turned out to be robber trenches, a feature of many archaeological sites where good quality stone was simply too precious a commodity to be left in a ruin. In the 2011 season further, ruthlessly efficient, robber trenches which had excavated all quarried stones from the wall lines, were encountered. All that was left, and what were appearing as wall lines on the geophysical survey, were the hard-packed clay and river-cobble foundations of the villa’s walls. The clay and packed stone foundations of the villa wall were found to be massive, being some 0.60m deep and packed with cobbles and boulders from the nearby river Magwr or the Ystwyth. The construction of the foundations of the villa alone must have required hundreds of tons of material to be brought to the site. Only in one place had the robbers left a single block of wall stone *in situ*, backed by clay-bonded cobbles, on the footing of the south verandah wall. It was barely 0.2m below the topsoil. Robbing may have occurred when the nearby Trawsgoed mansion was under construction in the sixteenth century, as place-name evidence indicates that the villa was probably a standing ruin into medieval times. A dump or collapse of original wall stones was found in Trench E along with several layers of dumping. These neat, squared blocks of locally-quarried stone give some impression of the quality of the original fabric. They may indeed have been robbed from the nearby site of the long-abandoned Roman fort at Trawsgoed, together brick and tile from its bathhouse. Several of the best blocks have been saved from the site for future museum display.

### **DATING**

Whilst the nearby Roman fort at Trawscoed was abandoned by *c.* AD 130 at the latest (Davies, in Burnham and Davies 2010, 288), finds from the villa indicate occupation from the mid third century

through to the mid fourth centuries AD. The analysis of the pottery by Dr Peter Webster has demonstrated some residual pottery on site from the late first and early second centuries AD, with the majority of finewares and kitchen wares dating from the late third to the middle of the fourth centuries AD. Three coins of Constantine I, minted in the first quarter of the fourth century AD, were discovered in 2010 and were crucial for the later dating of the site, all being found lying on or near clay floor surfaces beneath roof burning and collapse. Two further base silver denarii were discovered in Room 6, and are issues of Severus Alexander, one struck in AD 224, probably not in circulation beyond AD 250. The presence of a few sherds of late first- to early second-century pottery and brick and tile, including types normally found in hypocausted structures of similar date, raise issues as the nature of activity within the enclosure ditches prior to the construction of the stone villa. Certainly, on present evidence the stone building cannot be shown to pre-date the mid third century; however, pre-villa structures or settlement within the double-ditched enclosure cannot be dismissed and this is an avenue for future investigation.

### CONCLUSIONS

In 2000, one of the authors (JLD) described Maesderwen (Breconshire) and Llys Brychan (Carmarthenshire) villas as ‘remarkable northern outliers’ to the main zone of villa building in south-east Wales (Arnold and Davies 2000, 82). The discovery of the villa at Abermagwr has forced us to dramatically rethink the nature of the Roman countryside in mid and north Wales. The nearest recorded Roman villas to Abermagwr are Llys Brychan 49 kilometres (30 miles) south in the Tywi valley (Jarrett 1962; Murphy in Chapman 2010), lying within a polygonal univallate enclosure, whilst Maesderwen lies 62 kilometres (38 miles) to the south-east in the upper Usk valley. A new candidate for a probable villa is the stone building with an apsidal room at Plas Coch, Wrexham some 101 kilometres (63 miles) to the north-east excavated in 1994–96 (Jones 2012). The building was set within a double-ditched rectangular enclosure with similarities to Abermagwr. Whilst it is currently uncertain what form of building, whether domestic, military or administrative, is represented by the Roman bathhouse and associated finds at Tremadog, Gwynedd (Kenny 2005), some 67 kilometres (41 miles) to the north, the fact that it has produced roofing slates of similar form to Abermagwr together with late Roman pottery assemblage begs the question of whether this too could be a high status domestic building.

Whilst the process of obtaining specialist reports on pottery, metalwork, glass, building material and environmental samples now begins, to unravel a more complete and closely-dated history of the villa at Abermagwr, wider landscape studies also present themselves. In this respect, David Hopewell of GAT was commissioned in 2012 to undertake a geophysical survey of a sub-ovoid single-ditched cropmark enclosure of Iron Age type in the field to the west of the villa, near Tan yr allt farm (Hopewell 2012; Fig. 1, NPRN 405316). Although the air photo evidence remains clear and convincing, the geophysical survey under good ground conditions failed to find any evidence of the buried ditch. Its presence or absence may only be resolved by a trial excavation but it presently leaves the question of local settlement shift unresolved.

A thriving, prosperous, high status Romano-British farming estate would have possessed client farms and a network of friends and neighbours in the wider landscape. Attention turns to later prehistoric or Romano-British style monuments along the local reaches of the Ystwyth valley, which include the substantial, polygonal Romano-British style defended enclosure at Castle Hill, Llanilar, sited on the northern slopes just below Pen y Castell hillfort and commanding panoramic views of the Ystwyth valley to north-west and south-east (Fig. 1, NPRN 400287;). Future geophysical survey is planned at this site together with others in the locality, in order to place Abermagwr in a wider settlement context. Whilst

Abermagwr is presently the most north-westerly Roman villa in Wales, this is unlikely to reflect to the real situation. Clearly we are not at the end of the story of late Roman settlement in Ceredigion and mid Wales in general, but at the very beginning.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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