

# LATIMER—SOME PROBLEMS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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Probably the most difficult task facing the archaeologist is the adequate and satisfactory publication of his excavations. An excavation of even modest size and complexity will present serious problems of layout, illustration and finance to the director writing up the site for publication. An archaeologist is expected to publish as full and as detailed a report as possible, and yet, in these days of rapidly spiraling printing costs, to make it available to as wide an audience as possible by producing it at the lowest possible price. In both respects I believe Buckinghamshire can fairly lay claim to have set the rest of the country a good lead, for *Latimer*<sup>1</sup> is not only very cheap but also very detailed. Some have said that it is too detailed, but my objective in publishing so much detail was to make it possible for other archaeologists to make their own interpretation of the site at Latimer, if they believed an alternative interpretation better suited the evidence available. In this respect also, I think *Latimer* may claim to have been successful, and indeed Dr Webster's review of the book in the *Records* (XIX, 2, 1972, pp. 230-32) underlines this, for by studying the plans, sections and detailed descriptions of the levels published in the report he was able to offer several drastic re-interpretations of the site.

It is not customary to reply to reviews, but in this instance I think it is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, Latimer is a site of more than local importance because of its sequence of stratified Belgic, Roman and Dark Age remains, and for Roman Britain it is a site of importance also as one of only a handful of villas for which an up-to-date, comprehensive report is available. Secondly, the new interpretations which Dr Webster offers in his review all concern key points in the Latimer story, and ones which are of particular importance in a wider horizon than the Chilterns alone. It is intended therefore to briefly re-examine the three major points of disagreement between my own interpretation and Dr Webster's. In the discussion which follows, numbers in brackets refer to page numbers in *Latimer*.

## 1) *The Date of the Timber Building (Pre-Villa phase 2) and Villa Phase 1.*

My interpretation of these two phases was that the timber building was of late first- early second-century date, and that after a gap of some three decades or so the first stone villa was built c.150-160. Dr Webster's interpretation was that

<sup>1</sup> *Latimer: Belgic, Roman, Dark Age and Early Modern Farm* by K. Branigan, published by the Chess Valley Archaeological & Historical Society, 1971, obtainable from 6 Stanley Avenue, Chesham, Bucks.

Dr. Graham Webster, having considered Dr. Branigan's reply to his review, does not wish to make any rejoinder. [Ed.]

the timber building immediately preceded the villa, and was dated by material in level 8, Room 19 to c.150-160, the stone villa being erected towards the close of the century.

The key evidence is level 8 in room 19, a layer of occupation material overlying the building debris from the construction of the stone villa. This *must* date the construction of the stone villa since it was laid down after the timber building had been demolished, the site levelled, and the stone walls built—but before the floors were laid (see fig. 7). It is an occupation deposit associated with occupation of the shell of the building during its construction, a temporary phase well evidenced and discussed in the report (61-64). To relate this material to the timber building one would have to assume that the villa builders had removed an occupation deposit, demolished the timber building, levelled the site, built their walls, and then carefully spread the rubbish deposit back in the rooms and right up to the walls. Such a course of events is unlikely, to say the least, and does not explain the associated cooking platform in room 20 and two small hearth areas in corridor 11 which belong with the construction phase occupation in question. If further confirmation is needed it can be gained in two directions. In the floor make-up in room 20, an almost complete dish was found in a temporary hearth (63). One could hardly wish for a better piece of chronological evidence: a pot in use at the time of the floor being laid. Fortunately the type can be dated relatively closely from deposits at Verulamium, where this particular variety is used between c.140-170, and most frequently in the period c.150-160 (113). It is quite certain therefore that the stone villa cannot be placed towards the close of the second century AD. Equally between the abandonment of the timber building and the erection of the stone villa there was a gap of at least twenty-five years during which a tree took root *inside* the remains of the timber structure. Dr Webster suggests the tree may have been between buildings (but fig. 16 shows that it was clearly within the walls) or that it may have been sawn down not when the stone villa was erected but when the timber hut was built. This possibility was discussed at length and rejected in the report (61), since it could be shown that the saw would have to have been cutting the wood some 3ins. or so below the ground level at the time when the timber hut was built. Three different types of evidence therefore combine to produce a clear picture of a stone villa built in the mid-second century, and a timber building constructed much earlier and abandoned several decades before the villa was erected.

## 2) *The Abandonment of the Villa in the Late Third Century.*

A variety of evidence, all discussed (76-8) and visually presented on a plan (fig. 19) led me to suggest that in the late third century Latimer saw a period of serious decline and even a short abandonment. Dr Webster has suggested that occupation was continuous and that deposits of soil which I believed to be accumulations of humus and other natural debris probably represented earth floors.

At no point did the soil deposits show any trace of trampling or a trodden surface, and none of them were overlain by occupation deposits, so that there is no reason whatever to identify them as earth floors. Furthermore it is inherently unlikely that the occupiers of a villa with opus floors and mosaics in

the mid-third century, and tessellated floors and mosaics in the first decade of the fourth century should have gone through a period in between during which they laid earth floors.

The absence of soil deposits between phase 2 and phase 3 floors in some rooms does not really affect the picture at all, but it is not true to say that the clearance of such deposits is only 'assumed'. In the case of room 9 it was proved by the discovery of sherds there from three vessels which could be joined to other sherds from the same vessels found in the great dump of material to the west of the villa (79). A great clearing-out operation at the beginning of villa-phase 3 is very clearly documented on the site and in the report (79).

### 3) *Post-Villa Phase 1 Timber Structures*

Two timber buildings found east of the courtyard wall were placed by me in the first phase of post-villa occupation, and the larger of them (building 1, (fig. 22) was identified as a cruck building. Dr Webster suggests that the evidence for recognising these buildings as post-villa structures is slight, and that building 1 is really two separate, superimposed buildings—the earlier using post-holes and the later wall-trenches.

Dr Webster's case for seeing two successive buildings rather than a single one is based largely on his interpretation of fig. 14 and fig. 22 where he believes the drawings show eight post-holes as being cut by the wall-trenches, and two of them even losing their packing in the process. These latter lost their packing at the same time as the adjacent wall-trench, B, lost most of its depth in a subsequent levelling operation (47). As for the other posts, there is nothing in the drawings to suggest they are cut by the trenches; indeed the packing survive alongside the trenches. They are not of course circular post-pits, but this is not because the trenches have cut away part of the pits—the presence of the packing along the straight sides of the pits shows that they have not. The pits are straight on the side next to the trenches because they were dug up to the sleeper beams (89) which originally sat in the trenches. There is nothing in the drawings or description of the remains to suggest that posts and wall-trenches do not belong to a single building, and it should be noted that the chalk road surface which skirts the north edge of the wall-trenches does not overlie the most northerly post, as it should have done if the post belonged to an earlier building superseded by the wall-trench one proposed by Dr Webster.

As to the relative chronology of the building, it was freely admitted (89) that it could not be *proved* to be post-villa in date, but several important pointers to that conclusion were given (91). That the building was not erected until the phase 3 villa had at least begun to fall into disrepair can be demonstrated by three pieces of evidence. One wall-trench cuts into the wall of the villa gatehouse, first built for villa-phase 3. The levelled remains of this gatehouse and the courtyard wall were overlain by the chalk road which skirts the north end of the cruck building. Finally, the *packing* of one of the post-holes of the cruck building produced seven pieces of villa-phase 3 wall-plaster (92). Thus, the earliest possible time for the construction of the cruck building would be in villa-phase 3A, the beginning of its gradual abandonment.

That the cruck building was only erected after the villa was completely

abandoned cannot be proved, but I pointed out in the report (92) that even villa-phases 3A and 3B show that the occupation of the site was still essentially Romano-British. The baths were maintained, and floors were patched with tesserae, and later mortar and tile fragments. The cruck-building on the other hand is not Romano-British in character, and neither are subsequent buildings and associated material at Latimer. This observation does suggest that the last occupation of the villa and the erection of the cruck building are unlikely to overlap in time.

Having explained the evidence and the line of thought which has prompted my interpretation of the site at Latimer, it must be said that other interpretations are of course possible, and that the careful and critical reader such as Dr Webster will perhaps feel that some alternatives are more viable than the interpretation which I have adopted in *Latimer*. The essential point, on which I know I have Dr Webster's agreement, is that excavation reports *must* present all of the evidence on which an excavator has based his interpretation, and *should* reveal the line of thought which has led him to it.