

THE ROMANO-BRITISH VILLA AT BRISLINGTON

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The villa at Brislington (ST 620710) was discovered in December 1899, and became the object of probably the first "rescue excavation" undertaken by the Bristol City Museum¹. It was never possible to excavate the whole site, and the report issued in 1901 in booklet form did no more than publish a plan of the building and a brief description of the rooms, together with a cursory list of the artifacts recovered and deposited in the museum. Since 1900, the building has been completely inaccessible and it seems that it is likely to remain so. There is, therefore, no foreseeable opportunity to re-examine the remains themselves, and to establish by this means an outline of the building's history. On the other hand more recent excavations on Romano-British villas in the Bristol region have provided us with the architectural history of several buildings which are analogous to Brislington. The material from the 1899 excavations at Brislington is still stored in the City Museum and this is available for study. It does seem possible therefore to re-examine the Brislington villa on paper and perhaps to suggest the outlines of its history. The historical interpretation which follows is based on three sources of evidence: the plan and report published in 1901, the material recovered in 1899 and examined by me in August 1971, and analogous sites and material from the Bristol region.

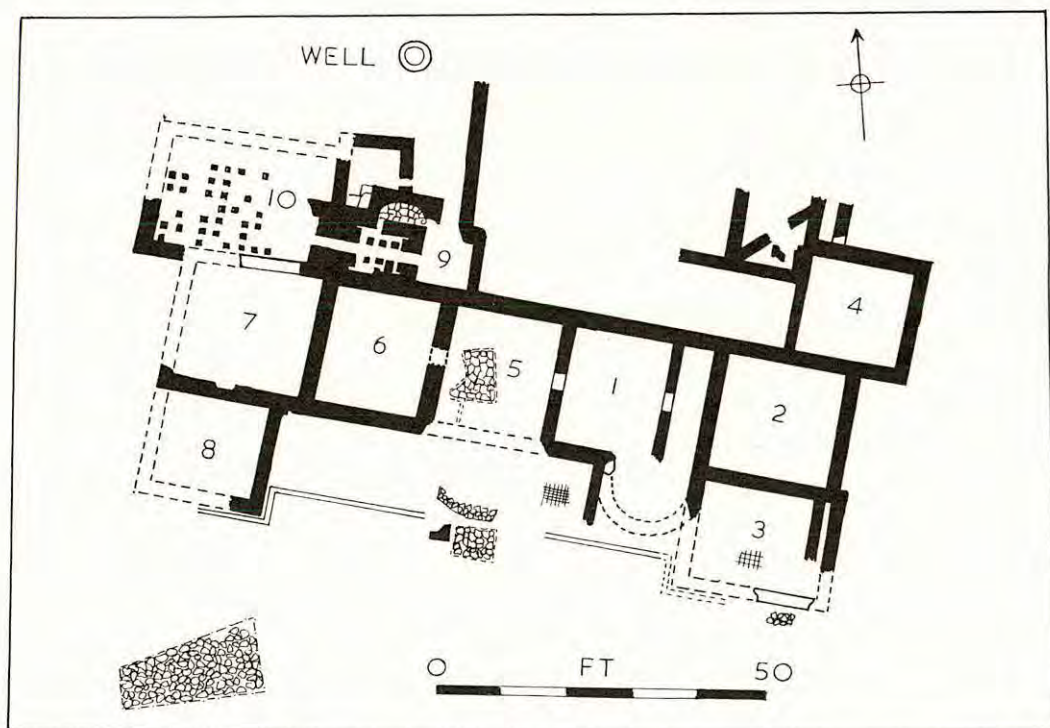


Fig. 1: The plan of Brislington villa, published in 1901.

THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF THE VILLA

The plan published in 1901 (fig. 1) at once suggests that it shows on a single plan the walls of several different phases, and this was recognised by the author of the excavation report². There is on the plan, and in the report, very little evidence to suggest which walls are primary and which secondary or even tertiary, but some general observations may be made, and so too may some useful and relevant comparisons with other villas in the region. On the basis of these I suggest that one can identify three or four phases in the history of the building.

Phase 1: Many Romano-British villas were first built as an oblong block of rooms which were

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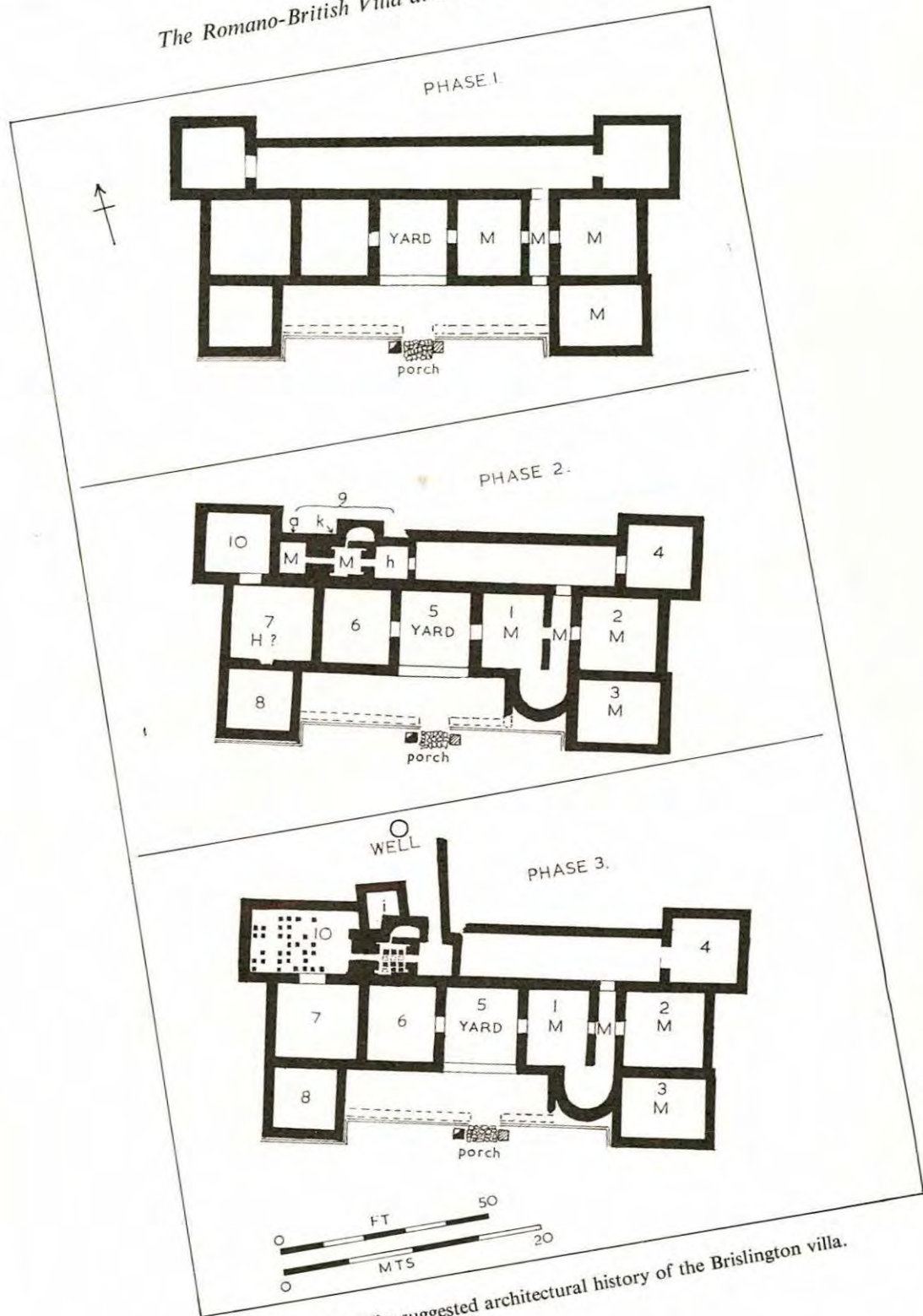


Fig. 2: The suggested architectural history of the Brislington villa.

interconnected, but if we are right in ascribing the foundation of Brislington to the last quarter of the third century (*infra* 81) it is highly unlikely that this was the case at Brislington. Parallels to such an elementary design at such a late period would be difficult to find, and certainly by the early third century, the bi-partite and tri-partite villa designs were widely in use in southern Britain. On general analogies, therefore, we may reject as unlikely the hypothesis that Brislington began as a block of either three or five rooms. The alternatives are that it began either as a bi-partite or as a tri-partite villa; the published plan really allows of no other possibility.

We may compare our suggested phase 1 plan with the plans of four other villas in the region, all sharing one peculiarity with Brislington, which suggests that the comparisons may be particularly relevant. This feature is the presence of an open yard at the centre of the villa block, a feature rarely found in Romano-British villas but occurring in a group of some ten or a dozen in Somerset and Gloucestershire³. The significance of its common appearance in the Bristol region is something I have discussed elsewhere⁴ and into which we need not now digress. Four of the villas in this group have been excavated in recent years and we have a reasonably clear idea of the architectural history of each of them. These are the villas at King's Weston⁵, Barnsley Park⁶, Frocester Court⁷, and Farmington⁸. Only at the first of these does the original villa plan suggest a parallel for the earliest plan at Brislington. At King's Weston the villa was of tri-partite plan from the first. The sequence at Barnsley Park is unusual, with two phases preceding the erection of the building which at present we call the villa. But when this building was erected, it seems to have been essentially bi-partite, though with a room projecting to the rear at one side. Frocester and Farmington are different again, each beginning as an oblong block with a large, open central yard⁹. At Frocester the villa then developed on the tri-partite plan, whilst at Farmington it became a bi-partite villa with front corridor and two projecting corner rooms. The evidence of these four villas is thus equally divided, as to the likelihood of Brislington being built as a bi-partite or as a tri-partite villa. It is perhaps relevant to note however, that neither Farmington nor Barnsley Park are developed from bi-partite villas into tri-partite ones. They see further additions and alterations, but these do not include the provision of either a rear corridor or projecting rear rooms. This point, and the *primary* appearance of a tri-partite villa (probably at about the same time) at King's Weston, perhaps favour the tri-partite hypothesis for Brislington.

We can say little of the interior furnishings of the villa at this time, but since the mosaic in room 1 was not, apparently, found in the apse attached to the room (and attributed here to phase 2) it seems likely that this, and the mosaics in rooms 2, 3 and the passage between 1 and 2¹⁰, were laid at the time when the villa was built. We shall see below that there is some stylistic evidence to suggest this too (*infra* 81).

Phase 2: If Brislington had been planned and built with a suite of baths from the first, then it is certain that they would not have been built into the middle of the rear corridor. There can be no reasonable doubt that the baths represent an addition to the original plan, and it is indeed possible from the published plan to suggest two phases in the baths themselves. In room 10, the plan strongly suggests that a small bath chamber was at some time demolished to make way for the large hypocaust heated room which occupied the north-west corner of the villa. If this interpretation is correct, then we see that developments in the baths fall into place. At the point marked 'k' on the plan, we can see the outline of a small square room, with a wall flue placed at each corner. To one side is the open room without pilae, labelled 'h', and to the north is the small apsidal room. To the west are the remains of the second rectangular room, the width but not the length of which can be established. If it was about the same size as the preserved room to the east of it, then it would have measured 2m × 2.6m. This would leave room for an original room 10 measuring a little over 5m square. Since room 4 at the opposite end of the rear corridor, the "twin" to room 10, measures 5m square these calculations seem to be along the right lines. The resulting plan also makes sense as a small bath suite. Rooms 9a and 9k would be tepidarium and caldarium, the apsidal room would become a small sweating chamber or possibly a small plunge bath (we have insufficient information about it) and either room 10 or room 9h would become the frigidarium and changing room. We cannot be sure which fulfilled this function, since we cannot be certain where the furnace was at this point. It could have been in room 9h, but it seems at least as likely that it was situated immediately north of 9a so that it would be accessible from the area at the rear of the villa. In this case 9h would have been the frigidarium. In any event, the baths would have provided a run of small but adequate rooms.

The main living rooms also probably saw alterations at this time. The insertion of a bath-suite

implies a desire to improve the quality of the accommodation offered by the villa, and a similar motivation surely led to the building of the apse, rather awkwardly stuck on the end of room 1 and across the small corridor next to it. Its peculiar position certainly suggests that the apse is not a primary feature, and so too does the absence here of any continuation of the mosaic found in room 1. It may be that with the building of the apse just here, room 1 was now regarded as the *triclinium* in preference to room 2, which was paved with the cantharus mosaic. There are suggestions in the report of 1901 of some evidence for a tile-built bench running around the apse¹¹. One other important alteration may be suggested, and that is the provision of a hypocaust in room 7. There is no evidence at all from the floor of the room itself, since the floor had been completely destroyed before excavation. Most of the walls had been reduced to their footings or in some cases were completely destroyed (fig. 1). The north and south walls however both show signs of having been rebuilt on slightly different alignments from their original position, and in the south wall there is a V-shaped "chimney" marked. This is strongly suggestive of a channelled hypocaust which was led up through this wall in flue pipes, and probably (to judge by its apparent rebuilding) through the north wall as well. It would have been fed by the furnace newly installed for the baths.

Phase 3: In the baths, it is clear that the small room we have labelled as 9a was almost completely demolished, only its north-east and south-east corners being preserved. Demolition seems to have been determined by a decision to replace this room with a much larger heated one, created by the extension of room 10. Only when room 10 was extended was it possible to build room i against it, and room i is therefore attributed also to this phase. In fact room i seems likely to have been the furnace room, although it could have served as a fuel shed. Descriptions of this room and the area outside of it are too brief to give any clue at all as to the function it performed.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE VILLA

It must be said at once that there is no stratified evidence at all for the chronology of any of the villa phases outlined above, and relatively little direct evidence for dating even from unstratified material. The foundation date of the villa is to some extent suggested by the coins and the pottery found on the site. The coin series begins with an *Æ* 3 of Victorinus (A.D. 265-7), followed by another of Allectus (A.D. 293-296), and seven of the House of Constantine. Pottery from the site examined by me in 1971 included only four or five sherds which *might* be given a second or third century date. The mass of pottery comprised two fabrics, grey ware and black burnished ware, and can be paralleled in well-dated deposits at Gatcombe of the period c.270-380. There is thus a good case to be made, on the basis of finds alone, for a foundation date not earlier than c.A.D. 270. On the other hand it is difficult to place the foundation date much later than c.A.D. 300, not only because there are, it seems, three architectural phases to accommodate in the period before 367 (*infra* 84) but also because of the evidence provided by the mosaics. For much of the information discussed here I am very much indebted to Dr. David Smith. At a recent conference, Dr. Smith drew attention to the "compartmented-flower design" of mosaic 1 from room 1 at Brislington. Gallic parallels and others from various sites in Britain suggest that this design was in vogue only from the Antonine period to the mid third century. It is extremely difficult therefore to see this mosaic at Brislington being laid after c.A.D. 300, and even this seems to be stretching the chronology to its limits. Dr. Smith has suggested to me that both this and the other main mosaic at Brislington (room 2) may have been laid by non-British mosaicists working with out-dated patterns. The point is that mosaic 2 is also unusual in that it is an example of the "mosaïque à couissirs", with no real parallels in Britain. There is one feature of mosaic 2, however, which is paralleled close by at Keynsham, and this is the way in which various colours are used to denote shading on the cantharus¹². The techniques used on the two canthari are very similar indeed and may suggest a relationship between the Brislington and Keynsham mosaics. Unfortunately, the foundation date of Keynsham is not well established either, but here too the coin series begins with an *Æ* 3 of Victorinus, followed by another of Tetricus. Taking all of the evidence into account, it does seem likely that the foundation of Brislington can be ascribed to the period c.270-300, and that the date probably lies nearer to 270 than 300. This is, in fact, in line with the general picture for the Bristol region. Of the other villas mentioned earlier, Frocester Court and King's Weston both seem to be built during this period, and I have listed elsewhere several other villas in Somerset and Gloucester which also appear to be built in the late third century¹³. Brislington seems to be part of a relatively widespread regional phenomenon.

The dating of phases 2 and 3 cannot be established in any way, except to note that they must both probably be placed within the period from c.A.D. 270-367.

THE VILLA ECONOMY

For an excavation of this period, where the published report leaves much to be desired, it is surprising how much we can say about the villa economy at Brislington. Evidence for agriculture is admittedly slight, being restricted to two rotary querns (which do not prove the practice of agriculture at Brislington of course) and perhaps some of the "implements with sockets for handles"¹⁴. One of these is illustrated in plate IX of the report and is seen to be either a bill-hook or a reaping hook like those known from Shakenoak and elsewhere¹⁵. Amongst the animal bones, the only draft animal represented is perhaps the ox.

Horse, for which evidence in the form of either bones or harness-pieces, often seems scarce on villa sites¹⁶, is attested at Brislington not only by bones but by horseshoes and a fragmentary bit. An extensive estate with sheep, goat and free-ranging cattle might be indicated by the evidence¹⁷. Poultry were seemingly kept in the vicinity of the villa¹⁸. The other use to which horse and dog were certainly put was hunting, which seems to have played a significant part in the economy. The report records that several tusks and teeth of wild boar were found, as well as the teeth of fox, and the bones of rabbit. Fragments of deer antler were also noted.

Finally we should note the evidence for metalworking on the site. A good many villas in the Bristol region, and indeed elsewhere, have produced similar evidence, and it should not surprise us to find iron stone, "scorious relics of iron", "clinker", and traces of the hearths which may have been used for re-melting metals, at Brislington. Most Romano-British farms presumably had their own small workshop. There is however an intriguing reference to a "curious mould" of stone¹⁹, and scraps of lead waste and sheet, and one wonders whether pewter might have been worked on the site. A small workshop may have stood outside the area of the excavations, to the west of the villa, since much of the furnace refuse and iron slag etc. was found to the west of rooms 7 and 10²⁰.

DESTRUCTION AND RE-OCCUPATION

Professor Haverfield regarded Brislington as a victim of the great conspiracy of A.D. 367, and recently both Frere and Webster have followed him²¹. I am entirely in agreement with them, although it must be emphasised that we cannot date the violent events at Brislington with any precision. The facts are plain enough. Four, perhaps five, people were slain in or around the villa, and their remains were tipped into the well to the north, some time after A.D. 337. In the villa building, the mosaics in rooms 1 and 2 both showed evidence of having been subjected to fire.

The attribution of these events to the raids of A.D. 367 is based, in my case, largely on the combined evidence from King's Weston, Keynsham and Brislington. At King's Weston, the west wing was burnt down and the portico pulled down in the third quarter of the fourth century²². At Keynsham at least one room (J), and possibly more, was burnt down; the skeletal remains of an adult were found in the debris over the floor²³. These scraps of evidence pieced together are strongly suggestive, to my mind, of a raid along the Avon, presumably by Irish pirates. A raid of this kind could have taken place at any time in the fourth century, but with a naval base perhaps still at Sea Mills²⁴, and a "shore-fort" at Cardiff, an extensive raid on this scale can most easily be understood in the context of A.D. 367. The dating evidence from Brislington and more particularly King's Weston helps to narrow the limits in this direction too.

We might now turn our attention to the deposits found in the well, which I believe throw additional light both on the raid of 367 and on its aftermath. In fig. 3, I show a reconstruction of the section based on the written description in the report. I have given level numbers to the deposits described and I would like to draw attention to the main features of some of these levels.

Level 3: is described as "some tons of coarse building material".

Level 4: the greater part of the deposit of bones and teeth are said to have been remains of ox or cow, including skulls with horn cores. The leg bones revealed the remains of "no less than about a dozen" cattle.

Level 5: The fourth skull here was incomplete. Of the seven pewter vessels, all were bent or dented, and two "had been broken to pieces by the fall of heavy material on them". From the same deposit came a complete pottery jug, another almost complete, and

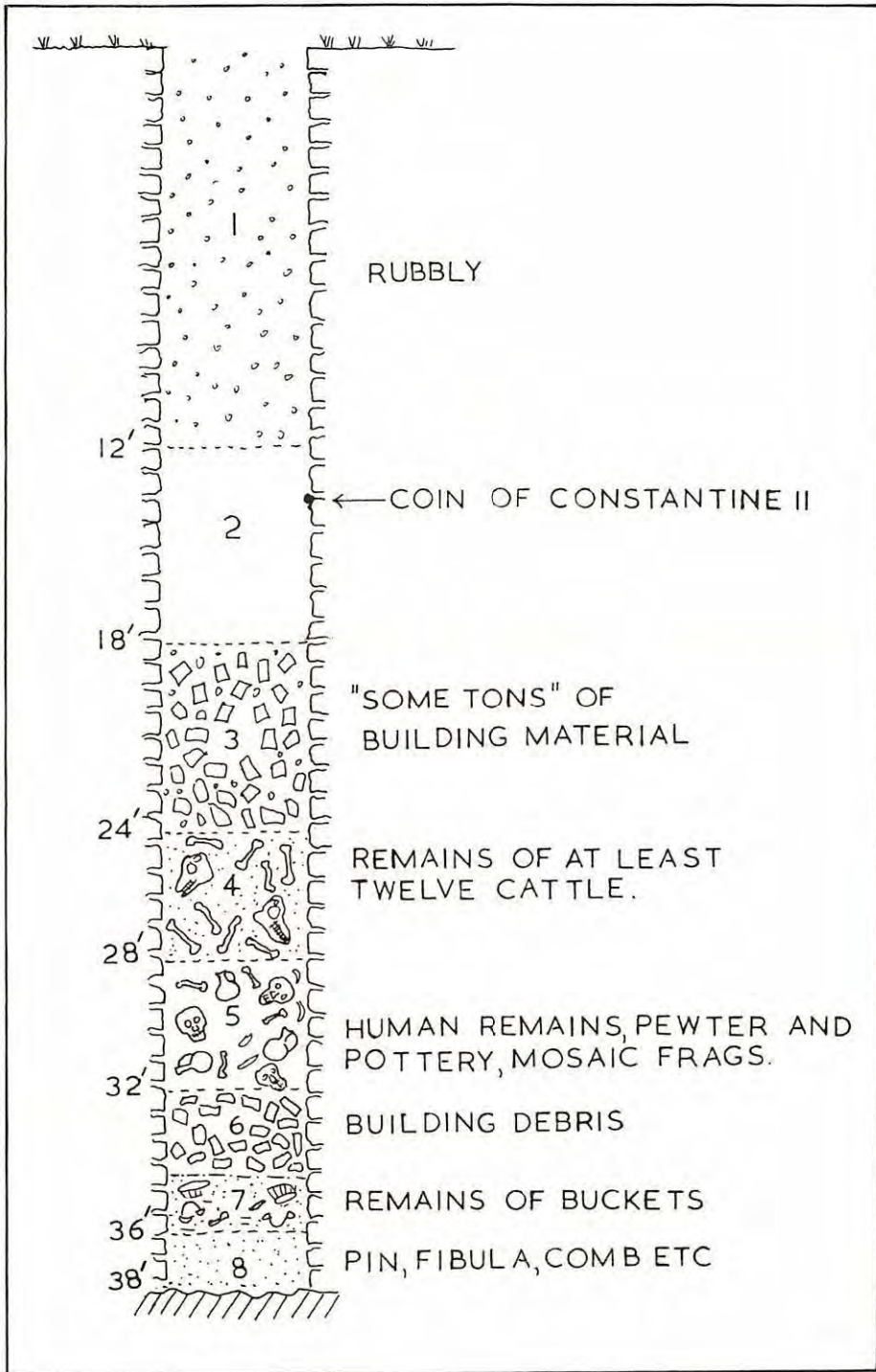


Fig. 3: A reconstructed section of the deposits in the well.

“other specimens of pottery consisted of fragments larger than usual”. There were also tesserae from the destroyed pavements.

Level 6: more building material.

Level 7: remains of wooden buckets, small sherds and bones.

Level 8: small sherds and bones, a brooch, a pin, a spoon and a comb.

The point in reproducing this information here is that the well seems to offer several clues about the course of events in 367 and after. With regard to the raid of 367, we assume of course that the skeletal remains represent the bodies of those killed during the raid. The material which occurs in the same level with the skeletal remains is interesting in that it includes a fine set of pewter tableware, the only complete pottery vessels found, and apparently large pieces of other pottery vessels suggestive of vessels which had been smashed at the time of destruction rather than over a period of time. These considerations, and the appearance of tesserae from the mosaics in the same deposit lead me to suggest that the occupants of the villa were attacked in their dining room, where the mosaic floor revealed traces of destruction by fire. It was probably at this time, rather than subsequently, that falling debris smashed pottery and two of the pewter vessels, and damaged the others. The mass of skulls and long bones from a dozen or so cattle might also suggest that some of the livestock was slaughtered by the raiders.

But it is unlikely that the raiders tipped the bodies of either the occupants or the animals down the well, together with “some tons” of building debris. If, as we may reasonably suppose, the building debris came from the villa, then we must envisage the raiders deliberately demolishing large parts of the building and carrying it to the well, or waiting until the fires had abated and then collecting material to fill the well. Neither course of action seems likely; there was no profit to be gained from these strenuous and time-consuming activities. In fact it is almost certain that a considerable period of time elapsed before the well was filled with human remains and building debris. On the ground near the well the excavators found a lower human jaw bone²⁵. It could conceivably be unrelated to the remains found in the well, but it is certainly more plausible to see it as part of the same group. If that supposition is correct then it implies, of course, that the bones in the well were dumped there not as corpses but as skeletal material. This makes more sense of the deposits in the well, which would then be put there by people who were clearing the debris from the villa. Levels 7 and 8 clearly represent the period of the well’s usage, but the first level above them is building material. Applying the rules of reversed stratification, which must presumably operate here, this would represent collapsed material from the villa walls, overlying the human remains and other debris in the dining room. These are found in level 5, together with loose tesserae from the damaged mosaic swept up with the rest of the occupation and destruction debris. Above this the remains of the slaughtered livestock were dumped. Finally, the last of the debris levels is “some tons” of building material seemingly unmixed with destruction or occupation debris of any sort. I suggest that this may be material from walls which were deliberately demolished by the new occupants of the site as being too unsafe to leave standing.

All of this of course implies that the site was re-occupied. From the villa itself there is really no clear evidence of this, although the excavators drew attention to “the unprotected condition” of the mosaics, which they compared to those at Newton St. Loe which were found covered by slabs²⁶. They thought that the Newton St. Loe mosaics had been deliberately protected in this way, but it is much more likely that the slabs were fallen roofing tiles. The absence of these tiles from the deposits overlying the Brislington mosaics is therefore significant, particularly as plenty of slabs of this type were found elsewhere on the site²⁷. It clearly implies that after the destruction of at least the eastern rooms of the villa in 367, the fallen roof debris was cleared from these rooms. This would only make sense if the building and estate were to be re-occupied. It is clear from the treatment of the skeletal remains that there is no question of the rooms being cleared to recover the bodies for decent burial.

A re-occupied Brislington is in fact what we might expect. Both Keynsham and King’s Weston were re-occupied after the raid of 367²⁸ and Whittington, which might have been involved in a raid at the same time, was also re-occupied. It is interesting to note the evidence from North Wraxall in Wiltshire, where bodies and building debris were found in the well, just as at Brislington²⁹. Here, occupation later than 367 was demonstrated by coins and by a late fourth century military buckle. Other west country villas have produced similar buckles, and I have suggested that spearheads from fourth century contexts at Keynsham and King’s Weston may also have belonged to members of the new forces raised in the west of England³⁰. Whether or not the new occupant of Brislington belonged to such a force we cannot say, but there is clearly the possibility that he did³¹.

- 1 W. R. Barker, *An Account of the Remains of a Roman Villa Discovered at Brislington, Bristol, December 1899*. (Bristol 1901). Hereafter referred to as *Barker*.
- 2 *Barker*, p. 10.
- 3 King's Weston, Frocester Court, Farmington, Barnsley Park, Rodmarton, Cherington; Chew Park, Somerdale, Littleton, Paulton, Brislington.
- 4 K. Branigan, *The Gallic Invasion of Gloucestershire*. *TBGAS* 91 (1972), forthcoming.
- 5 G. C. Boon, Excavations at King's Weston. *TBGAS* 69 (1950), 5-58.
- 6 G. Webster, Excavations at the Romano-British Villa in Barnsley Park, Cirencester 1961-66. An Interim Report. *TBGAS* 86 (1967), 74-83.
- 7 H. S. Gracie, Frocester Court Roman Villa, Gloucestershire. First Report, 1961-67. *TBGAS* 89 (1970), 15-86.
- 8 P. Gascoigne, Clearcupboard Villa, Farmington, Gloucester. *TBGAS* 88 (1969), 34-67.
- 9 The early villas at Frocester and Farmington though forming an oblong block, provide no parallels for the oblong block of rooms in the Brislington plan. In both of the Gloucestershire villas the central yards are much longer than they are wide, and they take up by far the greater part of the whole block in each case.
- 10 The mosaics in rooms I, II and the passage were figured by Barker and are reasonably well known, but *Barker* (p. 14) also refers to fragments of a mosaic in room III.
- 11 *Barker*, p. 13 "some square red bricks were found at the junction of the apse and the wall (c), and within the area of the apse were the remains of wall plaster and some tiles".
- 12 The similarities may be summarised: in each the cup is set in a surround with dolphins; each has four heart-shaped flowers in blue outline with red and white centres at the corners of the central panel; each cup has handles in blue, a mouth outlined in blue and red with a white centre, and a similar treatment of the body of the cup.
- 13 K. Branigan *op. cit* n. 4, fn. 37, to which may be added Chew Park.
- 14 *Barker*, p. 31.
- 15 A. C. C. Brodribb, A. R. Hands, D. R. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak I* (1968), p. 102, fig. 34, No's. 21-23.
- 16 It is difficult to produce the evidence without endless listing of individual sites but we may quote the many Chiltern villas, where horse bones are extremely scarce and only two harness-pieces are known from all the excavated villa sites: see K. Branigan, *Latimer* (1971), pp. 183-4.
- 17 The evidence from the well may indicate a herd of at least a dozen cattle (*infra* p. 82) whilst the appearance of horse bones and horseshoes, and plenty of cattle bones, might imply the free-ranging of cattle, cf. S. Appelbaum in C. Thomas (Ed) *Rural Settlements in Roman Britain* (1966), p. 102.
- 18 *Barker*, p. 32.
- 19 *Barker*, p. 28.
- 20 *Barker*, p. 15.
- 21 S. S. Frere, *Britannia* (1967), p. 356; G. Webster in A. L. F. Rivet (Ed) *The Roman Villa in Britain* (1969), p. 226.
- 22 Boon *op. cit* n. 5, pp. 16-17.
- 23 A. Bulleid, The Roman House at Keynsham, Somerset, *Archaeologia* 75 (1925), p. 118.
- 24 B. Cunliffe, *Fifth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent* (1968), pp. 267-8.
- 25 *Barker*, p. 32.
- 26 *Barker*, p. 22.
- 27 *Barker*, p. 28.
- 28 K. Branigan, The End of the Roman West. *TBGAS* 90 (1971), forthcoming.
- 29 G. D. Scrape, Roman Villa at North Wraxall. *Wilts Archaeol. Mag.* 7 (1862), p. 59ff.
- 30 Branigan *op. cit* n. 28.
- 31 *Barker*, p. 31, mentions iron daggers (not knives) amongst the finds.