A new Roman villa in Pembrokeshire

Rhostwarch Villa 2017 Interim Report

By Andrew Gardner and Kris Lockyear, with photographs by Adam Stanford

Summary

In 2016, a team led by Professor Kate Welham undertook a series of magnetic gradiometer surveys as part of the *Stones of Stonehenge* (SoS) project directed by Professor Mike Parker-Pearson (UCL), with partners. One of the fields surveyed was targeted because of a low mound visible in the LiDAR data. Much to the team's surprise, the results looked very much like a Roman corridor villa within an enclosure, with a separate square enclosure downslope. In the next field, the survey revealed a large D-shaped enclosure, which is a common form of Iron Age site in this part of south-west Wales.

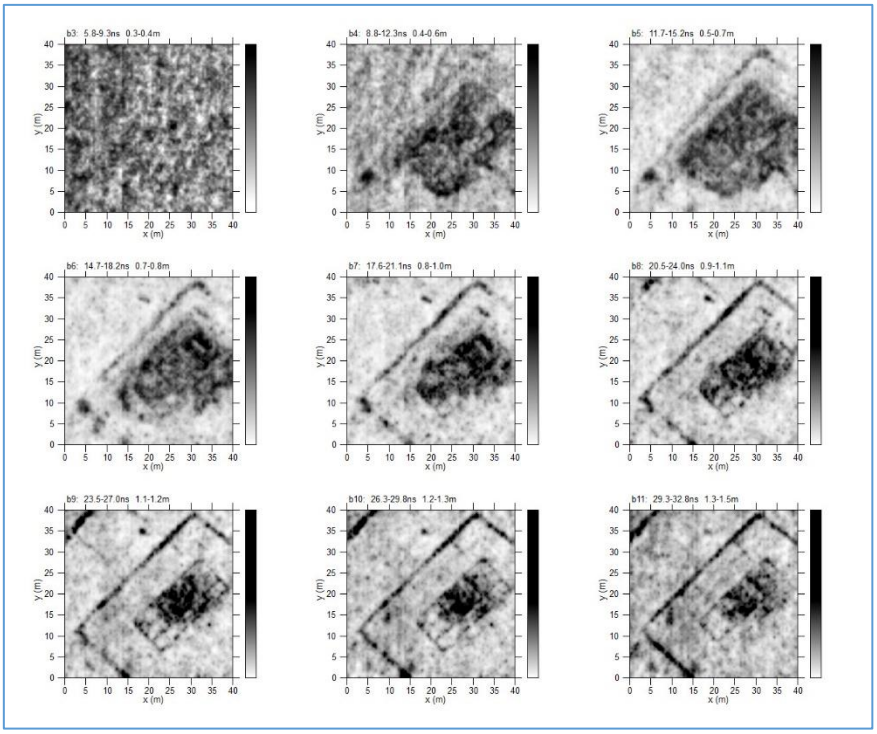
In 2017, Andrew Gardner and Kris Lockyear (UCL) undertook a short field season, under the auspices of the SoS project, to confirm the identification. Kris undertook a small GPR survey over the building, and over the smaller rectangular enclosure. The survey over the structure revealed clear wall lines and indicated a rectangular building within an enclosure wall. The second enclosure was not visible in the GPR data and probably has a ditched boundary

On the basis of this survey, two small trenches were opened over the putative villa. The first was 6m by 2 meters and placed over one of the walls of the structure. The second was 2m by 2m and placed over the enclosure wall. Almost immediately under the turf, roofing materials were encountered including hexagonal slates with a single upper hole, and ceramic imbrices; other finds recovered included part of a quern stone, a very small assemblage of pottery and some ferrous objects, all confirming the dating of the structure to the Roman period.

The most remarkable aspect of this find is its location in the far west of Wales, an area with hitherto limited evidence of Roman-style rural architecture, or indeed many other characteristically Roman sites.

Geophysical Survey

The GPR survey was conducted using a Mala 3XM system with a 450mhz antenna, with profile separation at 50cm. Although there were no significant results from the smaller enclosure apparently present in the field, the villa itself shows up very clearly in the GPR images. These take the form of 'time slices' showing the remains at different depths, and the corridor at the front of the villa, and interior rooms, are readily discernible (Figure 1).



(Fig. 1: Time slices from the GPR survey, processed in GPR-Slice)

Structural Remains

The clearest structural evidence was found in the larger of the two trenches, Trench 1. This comprised the footings of a clay-bonded stone wall, with up to three courses visible, despite areas of poor preservation (Figure 2). This ran diagonally across the northern end of the trench, along the line anticipated from the geophysical surveys. Considerable stone rubble in the centre of the trench and overlying this wall, along with tile (see below) and burnt clay and charcoal all attested to the likely destruction of a building with substantial masonry walls. No floor levels were reached in the trench.

(Fig. 2: Footings of villa wall in Trench 1, facing north)

In Trench 2, positioned to coincide with the enclosure boundary wall, no clearly coursed masonry was encountered, but a dense scatter of large rubble along the probable line of this wall seems to represent its collapse/destruction (Figure 3).

(Fig. 3: Probable collapse debris from enclosure wall in Trench 2, facing north)

Finds

Finds were fairly typical for a Roman-period site with limited later activity, albeit with not much pottery – though this is likely to be because only superficial deposits were excavated. Ceramic roofing materials were fairly abundant, including fragments of curved Roman tiles (imbrices) and flat stone roof slates, the latter with nail holes. Iron roof nails were also recovered, as well as domestic refuse including animal bone and a couple of sherds of pottery; the latter were black-burnished and red colour-coated wares characteristic of mid- to later Roman industries, vessels from which are common in Wales. A large quernstone fragment was also discovered.

Conclusion

The site is important because domestic architecture in the 'villa' style has not hitherto been recorded in south-west Wales. Roman villas in Wales are concentrated in the south-east, in the vicinity of Caerwent and Caerleon, while across much of the rest of the country Roman-period settlement continued to be dominated by indigenous Iron Age forms of architecture, typically stone-built and/or earthwork farmstead enclosures (e.g. Smith et al. 2016). Roman military presence extended north from Carmarthen, across Cardigan Bay, and a villa was recently excavated at Abermagwr, near Trawsgoed (Driver 2016: 121-4). A villa site in Pembrokeshire will open up a whole new range of interesting questions to do with the nature of life and cultural interaction in this frontier region.

Acknowledgements

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References

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