

Dai Morgan Evans: Rebuilding the Past A Roman Villa

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• **The book describes the building of a Roman villa based on a find from Sparsholt, Hampshire. Single chapters are dedicated to single structural elements of the reconstruction, discussing the possibilities, evidence and describing the chosen solution.**

In 2002, the Discovery Channel commissioned a ten part series charting the reconstruction of a Roman villa. The production team contacted Butser Ancient Farm where they were already building one. In June it was agreed that a villa based on Sparsholt, the original model, would be constructed. Work started in mid-July with the intention that the villa would be finished by the autumn, a time span of about four months. This proved to be unrealistic due to the necessity to demolish already existing parts, gross underestimation of the rate of building with flint and lime mortar and extremely wet weather. It is necessary to commend both the Discovery Channel and BAF that in comparison with other programmes (for example the time line imposed in the BBC programme *Secrets of the Ancients*, which harmed some good ideas) they sat down and reassessed the whole project. New work was planned to start, weather permitting, in March and be finished by the autumn. This plan succeeded and on Saturday 4th October 2003 the villa was officially 'finished'.

Without seeing the TV series, I am going to speak only about the book. It is not the usual companion to a series. It is concerned with the practical aspects

of reconstructing a functional house, as a house is not just a structure but also fulfils social functions that change over time.

After a general introduction dedicated to the theory of reconstructing houses from archaeological remains and the experimental construction of houses, we are taken straight into the Roman world. At first, it is necessary to find a definition for a Roman villa and its use. The task is not easy because the Roman Empire lasted for several centuries and covered regions with differing climates and cultural background. At the same time, various, usually fragmentary, descriptions and depictions come from across this vast area of time and space. It is therefore necessary to approach the evidence cautiously. The construction itself is based on part of a villa complex excavated in Sparsholt, Hampshire, by David Johnston from 1965 to 1972.

The single chapters then follow the construction of single elements starting with the walls, listing possibilities, evidence and chosen solutions. The walls are fairly straight forward compared to other elements. We know at least the thickness and at the lower part we can be sure of the material. The height is possible to

estimate from preserved fallen facades, we know the shapes of windows but their placing together with the material used to build the upper walls are only supported speculations. An important part of building the walls was gaining the necessary material, which had to be available locally. According to the BAF builders the bringing of flints used in building the lower 2 m of the wall and sorting them may be a simple task but it is very time consuming and took about 20% of the building time.

With the roof we encounter a different territory. Apart from solving construction problems of roof type and pitch, there is also the question of fulfilling the conditions of the planning permit (the villa should look as much like the local vernacular building as possible), of budget (tiles from Purbeck stone used in Sparsholt are expensive in modern world) and of schedule (the roof was prepared off site and put into place mostly with the help of a crane).

Next, it was necessary to consider the possible room uses. Are we dealing with private or public spaces? Would the room be used by the owner and his family or their servants/slaves? What impression would the owner want to make? These questions need to be answered to decide about both interior and exterior finish and decorative schemes. To choose the right type of floor the probable traffic through the area needed to be taken into account. The builders decided to use a variety of floors from a simple earth floor in the 'storage' room to a high status mosaic in the 'winter dining room'.

The problem of heating and controlling of windows and doors poses another cultural dilemma. What was

the tolerance towards cold and draft? What about smoke or insects and small birds? And while the experimental construction cannot answer these questions, the use of a variety of heating methods, various window grills, glass, shutters, curtains and wooden doors will allow the testing of their efficiency.

For me this book very much represents a textbook example on how to present an archaeological project to public. It contains a comprehensive list of evidence and a critique of sources. Although the builders attempted to build as authentically as possible, they had to make compromises and these are frankly described and explained. The author discusses the chosen solutions – for materials, techniques and finishes. There are comparisons with experiments carried elsewhere. Also the results of tests preceding construction of the building, which allowed for assessment of various techniques. At the same time, the book is an enjoyable and entertaining reading.

I have to admit that in this case I am not an impartial reviewer as I fell in love with the book from the moment when I read that 'the Roman Empire was in Britain for around four hundred years and changes to local practises and customs obviously took place during that period'. It states a very obvious truth, which seems often to be ignored in archaeological hypotheses and reconstructions and replaced with a pre-modern timelessness. I am looking forward to the new information gained both through observation and set tests.

Book information

Evans, Dai Morgan: Rebuilding the Past. A Roman Villa, Methuen 2003, ISBN 0 413 77396 5, 170 pages, many colour photographs

Summary

Dai Morgan Evans, Wiederaufbau der Vergangenheit: Eine römische Villa

Dieses Buch ist keine gewöhnliche Publikation in einer archäologischen Reihe. Es beschreibt den Bau einer römischen Villa auf der Grundlage des Befundes von Sparsholt, Hampshire. Es befasst sich dabei mit den praktischen Aspekten der Rekonstruktion eines funktionalen Gebäudes, denn ein Haus ist nicht nur eine Struktur, sondern es erfüllt auch viele soziale Funktionen, die im Laufe der Zeit wechseln.

Das Buch besteht aus einer umfassenden Auflistung der Befunde und einem quellenkritischen Teil. Auch wenn die Baugruppe versuchte, so authentisch wie möglich zu bauen, mussten Kompromisse gemacht werden, die offen beschrieben und erläutert werden. Die Verfasserin diskutiert die gewählten Lösungen – in Hinblick auf Material, Technik und Umsetzung. Das Buch ist zugleich auch als eine interessante und unterhaltsame Lektüre zu empfehlen.

Reconstitution du passé: Une villa romaine

Le livre décrit la construction d'une villa romaine à Butser Ancient farm d'après les fouilles effectuées à Sparsholt, Hampshir. Il traite les questions pratiques de la reconstitution d'une maison fonctionnelle parce que la maison, ce n'est pas seulement un bâtiment. En fait, elle remplit la fonction sociale qui change dans le temps.

Le livre comprend une large liste des ressources et la critique des données. Quoiqu'on s'efforçait d'être authentique, il était nécessaire de faire quelques compromis. Ceux-ci sont sérieusement décrits et expliqués. La réalisation est mise en question - matériaux, technologies, traitements de surface. Cependant il s'agit d'un livre bien lisible et intéressant.