Beth Munro: Recycling the Roman Villa. Material Salvage and the Medieval Circular Economy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. XVI, 262 p., 24 ill., 1 map, 6 diagrams, 12 plans, 22 tables. £ 85.00/$ 110.00. ISBN: 978-1-009-47558-7.

The latest phases of activity at Roman villas, their dereliction and their subsequent dismantling for their materials have been an increasing focus of study and interpretation over recent decades, in parallel with similar attention to the equivalent phases at urban and other sites. In this work Beth Munro seeks to provide a conspectus not only of what went on at villas between the fourth and seventh centuries but also to offer interpretations of what this meant for villa structures themselves as well as of their place in a period of rapid political, social and cultural changes. The book is based on an Oxford doctoral thesis of 2010, revised and with the addition of some more recent publications down to 2022. The years since 2010 are a time when the subject has been developing rapidly, so that there is a risk of the book being left behind, as will be seen. The scope is broad: Italy, Iberia, Gaul, Germany, Britain, from the fourth to the seventh century. Though the geographical area is large, it becomes apparent that the author's main expertise lies in Italy, both as regards knowledge of sites and approaches, an emphasis that does have consequences in her very restricted treatment of regions outside the peninsula.

Chapter 1 ("Introduction", pp. 1–21) sets out the prospectus for the study. Curiously, it does not really justify why "villas" (a notoriously ill-defined term) should constitute a category for study separate from other site types, especially other rural ones, apart from some comments on p. 13. The focus of the work is on the "post-villa phases" (p. 3) of occupation or activity when the main structures were no longer maintained, seeing these as "productive" episodes. The colonisation events have in the past been characterised by the pejorative term 'squatterisation', the reoccupation of a ruinous villa by new inhabitants, sometimes interpreted as 'barbarian' or 'Germanic', but more recently viewed as the local inheritors of the villa and its agriculture. Munro argues against such perspectives and in favour of placing these episodes and processes in the exegetic framework of reuse/recycling/reprocessing, the purposive exploitation of villa buildings and their materials, passing no cultural or ethnic judgements. She rightly points out that recycling of materials was a long-established and entirely normal practice in antiquity. The recent

debates over *spolia* in the late-antique Mediterranean basin is a part of this topic familiar to students of the period, but one which tends to concern itself with carved, inscribed or sculpted material rather than the totality of recoverable materials. Recycling is also, of course, a major modern concern. Despite the subtitle of the book, Munro is not looking to reinterpret the late Roman world in such terms, but rather to argue that in contrast to the 'throw-away' societies and economies of some of the modern Western world, people in antiquity were far more frugal and throwing away usable items much rarer.

Chapter 2 ("Valuable Villa Architecture", pp. 22–62) opens with considerations of how the materials of a disused villa could both hold value, not just financial but also cultural and historical due to their links with the past; equally they could find themselves devalued as the purposes to which they had been used became redundant ("Defining Material and Architectural Value", pp. 22–28). Much of the rest of the chapter is concerned with the technologies of (re)working materials such as stone, ceramics, metals or the production of lime, thus covering what is already well-known territory to no great effect. A case-study of the San Giovanni di Ruoti (Potenza) villa based on the full publication by Alastair Small and Robert Buck[1] shows what really detailed study can give us in terms of estimates of volumes yielded in a range of materials and in what sequence, demonstrating the value of detailed case studies.

Chapter 3 ("Villa Decline and Material Salvage", pp. 63–100) focuses on the processes and chronology of the removal of materials from disused villa buildings, especially the grandiose residential buildings which had expressed the particular economic, social and cultural conjuncture of the late Roman display villa. The first part of the chapter offers a tripartite chronological summary (fourth-sixth, sixth-ninth, ninth-fifteenth centuries), though with no discussion of the dating evidence and its very considerable problems. There follows a consideration of the evidence for the removal of materials, structured largely by place within a structure (furnishings, roofs, walls, floors, fixtures). But this evidence is essentially anecdotal, particular instances at particular villas, though there are not many of these and most are from Italy.

1 A. M. Small/R. J. Buck (eds.): The Excavations of San Giovanni di Ruoti. Vol. 1: The Villas and Their Environment. Toronto/Buffalo, NY/London 1994 (Phoenix. Supplementary Volume 33).

The Italian perspective also informs a theme of the final section of the chapter, that such demolition was often carried out by "travelling guilds" (pp. 68, 89), reflecting evidence for such organisations at Rome in the imperial period. Is there really evidence for this, or was removal of materials more opportunistic? Munro picks up on Robin Fleming's arguments for "ritual" deposits associated with life-events of buildings,[2] of which demolition and recycling deposits are germane here, though the former is argued at only three villas (one Italian, one French, one Spanish) and the latter at one villa in Switzerland and an urban site in Italy: hardly coherent or consistent evidence for such practices.

Chapter 4 ("Materials Organization and Stockpiling for Recycling", pp. 101–115) is a brief examination of whether materials were sorted and stockpiled against future reuse. Again, there is anecdotal evidence for this at a small number of sites across the West, which makes sense, but there does not seem be evidence for it as a consistent practice.

Chapter 5 ("Material Reprocessing at Villas", pp. 116–171) is a more substantial piece looking at the evidence for the recycling of materials on the actual villa sites. The first paragraph ("The Recycling of Roman Materials", pp. 119–123) puts forward the proposition that materials could have been reprocessed "for immediate sale" (p. 116), implying a market-oriented system. The chapter then reprises some of the approaches of chapter 2, looking at materials and the technologies for working them, though at a general level before the following sections look at evidence from specific villa sites. The villa at Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi (Toscana) presents excellent evidence for the systematic recovery and processing of certain materials such as glass (including recovering gold from it). The southern Italian villa of Faragola (Foggia) also affords evidence for systematic recovery, reprocessing and stockage in the sixth/seventh century. Various types of installation such as lime-kilns have been recovered and their purpose is clear; other heat-using installations could be for metals, glass or other materials. Again, this section ("Recycling Remains at Villas", pp. 123–150) proceeds by individual instances from a restricted range of sites; that these sites covered several hundred years renders them far from a structured picture. The chapter closes with a considera-

2 R. Fleming: The Material Fall of Roman Britain, 300–525 CE. Philadelphia 2021, pp. 95–118 (chapter 5: "Pragmatic, Symbolic, and Ritual Use of Roman Brick and Quarried Stone").

tion of the location of these installations in relation to the existing villa buildings, where the convenience of the recyclers seems to be the chief conditioning factor.

Chapter 6 ("Economics of Villa Recycling", pp. 172–193) examines the economics of villa recycling, proposing that the destinations for the recovered materials were either new buildings (villas or churches), markets for the sale of such materials, consumer markets, or markets for finished objects (p. 173). This places an emphasis on "markets" and thus on particular types of economic formation, an emphasis that runs the risk of being anachronistic, especially after the collapse of Roman systems in the West. This again seems to be conditioned by an essentially Italian perspective. Much of the rest of the chapter is again structured by material (stone, glass, lead, lime etc.) and again often in rather general terms with few villas discussed. One might make more of the case here for the importance of timber, little considered in the book and on p. 75 regarded essentially as destined to be fuel. But in a period that saw a massive shift to construction in timber (including wooden structures colonising the stone-built spaces of abandoned villas), and where stone churches still had timber roofs, there is more to be said. Economic models and networks are then proposed, essentially "[c]ost-saving" and "[p]rofit-driven" (p. 185), again introducing very modernist perspectives of 'economic rationality'. Of course the late-antique world knew about economic cost and profit, but to treat these as the main drivers rather than social, cultural or religious cost/benefit may be seriously to misinterpret motives. The chapter then considers the impact of road and river communications on the mobilisation of material from villas. One might (anecdotally) point to a specific instance of transport, the late-fifth-century request from Ruricius bishop of Limoges (Haute-Vienne) to his brother in Christ Clarus bishop of Éauze (Gers) thanking him for obtaining some columns for him and asking for a further ten smaller ones (presumably of Pyrenean marble and perhaps from villas such as nearby Séviac).[3] As the crow flies it is some 320 km from Éauze to Limoges and across rather than along river systems. The financial costs would have been considerable, but the profits will have been social and related to elite networking and mutual obligations rather than possible financial returns for any supposed *episcopus economicus*.

3 Ruric. epist. 2.64.

Chapter 7 ("Post-Roman Ownership and Legacy of Villas in the Western Provinces", pp. 194–217) has a title concerning post-Roman ownership and legacy of villas. In fact it is essentially to do with a question that hangs over all discussion of the reuse of materials from buildings: where was the material destined for? Buildings were almost always dismantled and materials recovered to fulfil actual needs. The destination for recycled villa materials is very often given as the (re)construction of churches, which given the evidence for reused materials in many early mediaeval churches is a reasonable hypothesis, though Munro rightly points out that two thirds of the villas "noted in this study" (p. 194) did not have churches built on-site. It is worth sounding another note of caution: the remains of villas that archaeologists encounter are overwhelmingly stone, brick/tile, ceramics and metals, which with the exception of ceramics dovetail nicely with church building materials giving a pleasing origin and destination story. But the instance of wood and timber noted above may argue that we need to be a bit more circumspect and that we run the risk of concentrating on what is easily visible. Munro argues that the initial impulse to church construction on or near villas reflected aristocratic religious practice, either for their personal observance or for that of their dependents or by alienation to the Church, thus giving a context for the recycling of villa materials into churches. It is proposed that this might happen at periods of change of ownership, but how to demonstrate ownership from archaeology? There is a certain focus on churches on the sites of or close to villas, but ownership of more than one property or other links with more distant churches might result in longer-distance movement of materials, or there is the instance cited above of long-distance movement of prestige materials. A second hypothesis is "[v]illa into [v]illage" where villa materials were reused to construct new, early-mediaeval nucleated settlements, sometimes on the site of the villa itself, sometimes at a remove ("Villa into Village? Recycling without Church Construction", pp. 207–213). In Italy this sometimes coincided with a pattern of settlement shift.

Chapter 8 ("Conclusions", pp. 218–224) ends the book with a brief summary of the main lines of enquiry and argument already discussed in detail.

This brief summary of a book of over two hundred pages has tried to lay out the main approaches, evidence and arguments. There is undoubtedly a great deal of thought and argument, much of it very useful in characterising some of the terms of how the debates might be framed. Nevertheless, the reader

may have picked up disquiet on the part of this reviewer over some of the approaches taken and it is time to make a number of them more explicit.

By the fourth century several hundred villas stood in the area studied; today not one of them remains intact, and they have all been subject to the "Recycling" of the title, almost always leaving no above-ground trace. Incidentally, why a handful buck the trend and do have above-ground structures remaining would be well worth considering. How to approach such a huge database, one of very variable quality because of the date and nature of any archaeological investigation? Clearly one could not expect a comprehensive study of all the sites within the confines of a doctoral thesis or between the covers of this book. Equally clearly therefore there has to be some form of sampling. Table 1.1 (pp. 15–16) gives us a "Summary of Case Study Sites", a grand total of thirty-nine sites to set against the several hundred possible, though no criteria for their choice are given beyond that they have evidence for recycling. Clearly this number is in no way statistically usable, rendering attempts at quantification on this basis invalid: everything remains at the anecdotal level. Chart 3.1 (p. 69) attempts a bar chart of the periodisation of villa abandonment, a very good idea, but one which the sample size renders statistically meaningless. When one considers the thirty-nine sites, thirteen are from Italy; four from Spain and one from Portugal; nine from France with two from Belgium and one from Luxembourg, together roughly constituting Gaul; five are from Germany and one from Switzerland; three from England. This distribution in no way reflects the overall incidence of villas, let alone of villas with relevant evidence, across the study area. The three sites selected in England: Fishbourne (West Sussex), Folkstone (*sic*) (Kent), Minster-in-Thanet (Kent) (only Fishbourne really figures) are eccentric to the point of perversity.

The obvious recourse would have been a series of regional case studies in areas with good evidence for villas and their fates. Such selection would introduce an element of bias, but this would be offset by the much larger numbers involved and the regions could be chosen across the whole geographical area to 'compare and contrast', since Munro lays emphasis on how regional variation is a huge factor in her study area. There are now several synthetic volumes covering regions of the West that could be used. For Italy, Angelo

Castorao Barba's 2020 book[4] on the subject may have appeared too late to be taken into account here, but it gives an extensive treatment of sites and a discussion of the subject which any further regional study could take as a point of departure. The project on Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi has now led to detailed studies of the environs,[5] but these publications though referred to here were probably too recent to have been taken into detailed consideration. Alexandra Chavarría's 2007 treatment of the end of villas in Spain[6] would be a foundational work, along with many more recent regional studies there (Andalucía? Catalonia? the meseta? Portugal?). South-west Gaul would be an excellent study area, benefiting from Catherine Balmelle's treatment of the major regional group of villas[7] along with François Réchin's work[8] and Marie-Geneviève Colin's thesis on the Christianisation of the region, which includes the archaeological evidence for villas and churches, all of these pre-2010.[9] For Britain one can point to the compendium of villas in the five volumes of the "Roman Mosaics of Britain".[10] The comprehensive bibliographies of all these could be used to undertake structured site-by-site surveys looking for 'productive' activities at all the villas in these regions along with dating evidence and possible destinations for the materials recovered. Undoubtedly and frustratingly many of the villa sites will return a negative but it is to be hoped that enough would return usable information.

4 A. Castrorao Barba: La fine delle ville romane in Italia tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo (III–VIII secolo). Bari 2020 (Munera 49).

5 M. Cavalieri/F. Sacchi/C. Sfameni (eds.): La Villa dopo la Villa. Trasformazione di un sistema insediativo ed economico in Italia centro-settentrionale tra tarda Antichità e Medioevo. 2 vols. Louvain-la-Neuve 2020–2022 (Collection Fervet opus 7/9).

6 A. Chavarría Arnau: El final de las *villae* en *Hispania* (siglos IV–VII D.C.). Turnhout 2007 (Bibliothèque de l'Antiquité tardive 7).

7 C. Balmelle: Les demeures aristocratiques d'Aquitaine. Société et culture de l'Antiquité tardive dans le Sud-Ouest de la Gaule. Bordeaux/Paris 2001 (Aquitania. Supplément 10).

8 F. Réchin (ed.): Nouveaux regards sur les *villae* d'Aquitaine. Bâtiments de vie et d'exploitation, domaines et posterités médiévales. Actes de la Table-Ronde de Pau, 24–25 novembre 2000. Pau 2006 (Archéologie des Pyrénées Occidentales et des Landes. Hors série 2).

9 M.-G. Colin: Christianisation et peuplement des campagnes entre Garonne et Pyrénées, IVe–Xe siècles. Carcassonne 2008 (Archéologie du Midi Médiéval. Supplément 5).

10 S. R. Cosh/D. S. Neal: Roman Mosaics of Britain. 5 vols. London 2002–2024.

Moreover, negatives, individually and collectively, have their own epistemological contribution to make. Likewise, destination sites might be identified, particularly in areas with detailed knowledge of the fabric of churches of the second half of the first millennium. Thus we might get a usable picture of practices in particular regions and how these practices varied across regions and thus how discussions of their significance may also have varied across the West.

There could perhaps also be a more generalising model of a range of processes occurring once villas were disused. Some were additive, the intrusion into villa spaces of more ephemeral structures along with installations such as hearths, ovens and pits, frequently overlying or cutting into earlier features such as mosaic floors. Others were subtractive, such as the removal of items suitable for reuse elsewhere, be it fixtures and fittings or else building materials, either as the villa was abandoned or sometimes much later, what archaeologists often refer to as 'robbing', including wall foundations. There was also the collapse of the structures of the villa, generally starting with the roofs, allowing the progressive degradation of the fabric, at the end of which the former villa was an uninhabitable ruin. These need not be sequential, different processes might be occurring in different areas of a former villa at the same or different dates. But as noted above, some 99+% of late Roman villas in the West ended up with nothing visible above ground, so cumulatively these processes recycled villas effectively out of existence.

This leads onto another reservation, questions of sequence and chronology. The approach taken here, whilst perfectly understandable, does tend to concentrate on specific events or phases at the villas cited, which leads to a sort of chronological flattening of the possible range of processes rather than exhibiting their variability across a villa complex and across time. An individual villa might be dismantled and its materials removed in several episodes over centuries. The chronology of these episodes does remain a major hurdle, given the relative paucity and problems of dating evidence across this period. Moreover, with the ephemeral nature of much post-villa occupation and the short-lived nature of the exploitation of villa carcases, useful quantities of datable material rarely get incorporated into the archaeology. This tends to be particularly true of episodes such as the robbing of wall foundations. It may be possible to demonstrate the relative chronology of the phases of degradation and removal of a villa, but absolute dating of such phases can be much more difficult. Some villas of course continued to be

exploited for their materials long after the chronological range of this work. These considerations are not as fully developed here as might be wished.

The concentration on Italian sites and exegetic frameworks has already been noted. It of course means that most of the vast area included in this book gets treatment ranging from the scant to the non-existent. Some Italian sites such as Aiano-Torraccia di Chiusi, Faragola and San Giovanni di Ruoti are of the first importance, but the same could be said for a considerable number of sites elsewhere. This concentration also means that approaches and analyses developed in the circumstances of Italy predominate, especially ideas such as that recycling was carried out by a skilled workforce (pp. 172, 194) rather than representing opportunistic scavenging over time, which tends to be the impression (rightly or wrongly) in other areas of the West. Qualms over the rather modernist cost/benefit-driven framework for recycling have already been noted above.

Bringing villas into the developing debates over reuse/recycling/upcycling/repurposing, which has tended to focus on urban sites, is the valuable contribution of this book. It also warns archaeologists and others to take account of the totality of recyclable materials and how they might be used, in part as a corrective against the focus on *spolia*, which can have a certain art-historical slant. Another contribution is the attempt to devise a set of common frameworks and vocabulary for these processes, usable or refinable by excavators and researchers across a wide geographical and temporal areas. Such excavators and researchers will find in here much that is useful to think about for their particular projects. But there is a sense that the book remains at a rather generalising level, proposing frameworks or models but not really testing them by getting 'down and dirty' through a detailed application of the general principles to structured surveys rather than just to a restricted number of disparate case studies. Such a structured approach, had it been adopted, might well have produced a much more solid methodological foundation and interpretative superstructure and thus made this book considerably more valuable.

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