James Dodd

# Uncertain Destruction?
## Establishing a Methodology for Assessing Destruction Horizons in the Northwestern Provinces of the Roman Empire


## Abstract

Destruction horizons are a common part of the archaeological record and site biographies are punctuated by catastrophic events across all periods, which in many cases, result in settlement failure. These levels present significant issues when trying to develop broad settlement trends. This is a major problem in understanding the rural trajectories of Roman Britannia, Gallia Belgica and Germania Inferior, where poorly understood pulses of destruction have been teleologically projected to construct narratives of violent barbarian raiding and invasion. This paper addresses this by presenting a clear methodology for assessing destruction horizons in Roman Northwestern Europe. It examines the current state of research on the topic and builds a categorisation for certainty grading of the data as well as examining the typologies of destruction present in the archaeological record. To achieve this, it will apply the system to a test-case of destructive events at villa complexes.



## Keywords

Northwestern Europe / Roman period / destruction horizons / settlement archaeology / villa landscape


Human activity at rural settlements in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire was punctuated at various intervals by destruction, demolition and building collapse and reconstruction. These diverse and often overlapping processes are archaeologically represented by a wide variety of evidence: burnt stones, charcoal fragments, refuse layers, collapse debris and ash deposits are all present. These contexts represent an intensely complex group comprising a series of interlinked spatial and temporal processes, often tied into catastrophising language and imagery[1]. These archaeological phenomena, referred to *couches d'incendies*, *Zerstörungshorizonte* and *Brandlagen* and their myriad variants are ill-defined and often grouped together as destruction horizons: a »wastebasket group« of different types of activity that includes fire destruction, demolition and natural weathering or collapse[2]. They are a common element to the stratigraphy of Roman structures and where they have been encountered, they provide clear *coupures* within the developmental sequences of buildings and settlements across the rural landscape.

1 Lucas 2008; Hardin 2010; Driessen 2013a; 2013b, 12-13; González-Ruibal 2013, 37-40. 44-46; cf. Cunningham/Driessen 2017 for overviews of the wider literature.

2 The concept of a »wastebasket group« is taken from the ecological and zoological group *wastebasket taxon*, groups of organisms either linked by superficial characteristics or united in that they do not fit into other taxonomic classifications - see Gould 1985; Plotnick/Wagner 2006 for discussions of this.

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Despite their ubiquitous presence, there has been very limited study of what these horizons represent archaeologically within Roman archaeology. The study of destruction levels has generally been drawn from periods and regions where limited written sources have not provided a historicising bias, forcing more engagement with complex archaeological phenomenon. This has resulted in advanced theoretical models developing for New World, indigenous archaeologies and European prehistory[3].

Scholarship in the Roman period has instead been hamstrung by a »invisible hand« of two specific destruction/demolition events: the entry of Pompeii into the archaeological record in AD 79 and the army-conducted demolition and withdrawal from Inchtuthil legionary fortress (Perthshire/GB) in the late 1st century AD. Both these events have biased our thinking on the processes of destruction at Roman sites[4]. Furthermore, a historicising agenda has attempted to tie destructions to historically identified events. Groups of destructions, especially in Northwestern Europe, have been repeatedly coupled with the historical sources and have been used to mark socio-economic crisis and external invasion, emphasising destruction as the failure of Roman settlement[5]. The second half of the 3rd century and the 350s stand out as notable examples of this narrative construction. The confident and widespread use of destruction levels in the scholarship stands at odds with the complex, contradictory and poorly understood stratigraphy of these horizons: no two contexts are the same and there has been little research into ways of organising and managing the data.

To explore some of the problematic issues surrounding destruction, this paper examines the evidence across Britannia, Gallia Belgica and the German provinces. It builds on recent work in the field to develop a methodology for dealing with the archaeological evidence of destruction levels[6]. A clear spatial reference system for assessing both future and legacy data and a new set of criteria to assess the certainty of destruction events are needed. It will apply these classification systems for different forms of identified destruction levels and approach the data in an empirical, evidence-based way. It will apply the method to a proxy group of data across the northwestern provinces and demonstrate the validity of the system for identifying types of destruction and biases within the selection. Villa complexes between the 2nd and 5th centuries will be used to explore this. Villas, despite problems with the interpretation of the term, represent a coherent dataset as they are well-researched and have a wide footprint in all geographical regions[7]. This will allow forward movement when analysing the scale, spread and nature of destruction horizons as a group. Importantly, the paper will not analyse the causes of destruction, as these can be the result of a wide variety of events: raiding destruction, knocked-over oil lamps, lightning strikes, cooking accidents – the list is endless, but instead, the study will engage with the evidence itself. Conclusions on the reasons for this are widespread throughout the literature and this paper intends to provide a more empirical way of examining the data[8].

## The Northwestern Provinces between the 2nd and 5th Centuries

Roman Northwestern Europe comprised the island of Britannia and the mainland zone of Gallia Belgica and the German provinces (**fig. 1**). The administrative development of this area shifted repeatedly between the late 2nd and 5th centuries[9]. Larger provincial units were the norm in the 2nd century with a trend towards subdivision beginning in the early 3rd century, when Britannia was subdivided into two. The three early continental provinces, Gallia Lugdunensis, Gallia Belgica, and Germania Inferior followed and by the middle of the 4th century, some ten provinces and several higher-level dioceses administered the region[10].

The countryside was highly diverse, with belts of fertile loess and marl soils, upland zones and coastal wetlands. In the majority of regions, human occupation was dominated by the widespread adoption of villas as a means of rural production and social dis-

**3** Stevanović 1997, 362-385; Canti/Linford 2000; the papers in Gheorghiu 2002; Stanton/Magnoni 2008; Fontijn et al. 2013; Alperson-Afil 2012; Amadio et al. 2023, 75-77.

**4** Schiffer 1985; Pitts/St. Joseph 1985, 279-280; Shirley 2000, 156-160.

**5** Witschel 2011, 35; 2020; Henrich 2025, 15-18.

**6** Kreimerman 2017; Dodd 2023.

**7** Agache 1978; Van Ossel 1992; Henrich 2006; Brulet 2008; Roymans/Derks 2011a; Seiler 2015.

**8** van Es 1981, 51-54; Wightman 1985, 191-219; Heeren 2015, 290-294; Roymans/Heeren 2022, 136-138 to name a few studies examining the causation.

**9** Bogaers 1972.

**10** Dornier 1982; Wightman 1985, 202-203; White 2013, 587 fig. 3; fig. 3.2 for Britain; Christol 2021 for the continental chronologies.

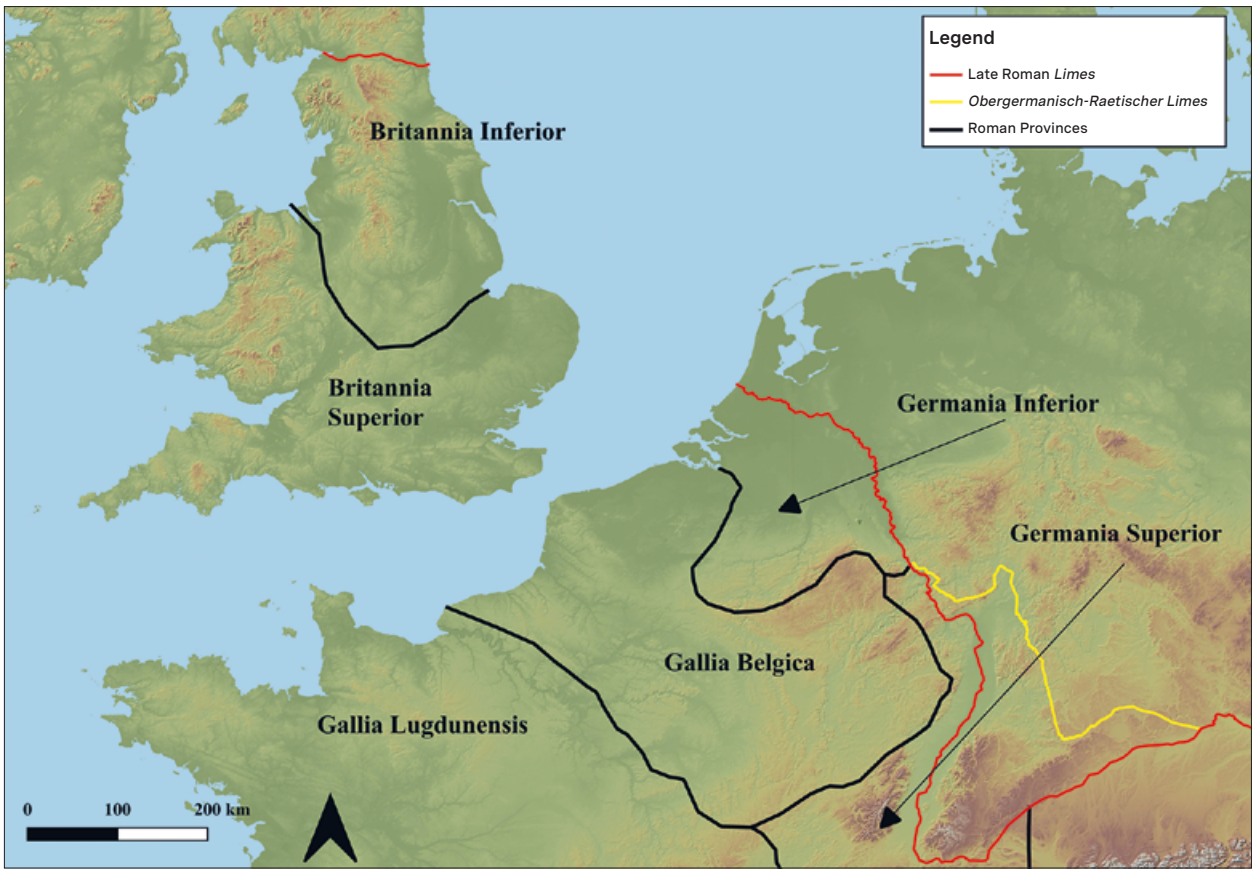


**Fig. 1** The region under study: Roman Northwestern Europe, provincial boundaries depicted during the mid-3rd cent. AD. – (Map J. Dodd).

play – so-called villa landscapes[11]. These were concentrated in the fertile soils of the loess belt, stretching from the Paris Basin through to the Rhine[12]. South of this, a second villa zone existed along the Mosel network and the Eifel-Hunsrück massif[13]. In Britannia, the villa landscapes were overwhelmingly located in the south and east of the island, with dense concentrations in the Chilterns and Cotswolds[14]. Between these zones, indigenous traditions continued along the Menapian *civitas*, the Dutch river area and northern England, which was primarily a landscape of military installations and Iron Age continuity[15]. This landscape has been very well researched with a series of important regional syntheses[16].

The villa network developed during the Early Roman period, eventually colonising much of the primary farmland, and to some extent, had penetrated other marginal landscapes on the coast and in the mountains by the end of the 2nd century[17]. This system supplemented a hierarchy of larger urban centres and secondary settlements[18]. Between the 230s and the 320s, this landscape experienced a range of radical shifts; with Britannia and northern Gaul taking different trajectories. In northern Gaul, and to a lesser extent, the south-east of England, the landscape experienced a series of systematic breakdowns. The »non-villa landscapes« of the Pas-de-Calais, Flanders, and the Dutch coast had begun to shrink from the late 2nd century onwards, perhaps having reached their economic carrying capacity and the northern sectors were widely abandoned between 230 and 250. This is marked by a scatter of fire destructions[19]. These depopulation pulses accelerated in the second half of the 3rd century.

**11** Roymans/Derks 2011b, 2-3; Habermehl 2013, 10-15.

**12** Agache/Bréart 1975; Agache 1978; Gaitzsch 2011; Jeneson 2011; the papers in Reddé 2017; 2019.

**13** Henrich 2006; 2010, 158; Krier/Henrich 2011; Seiler 2015.

**14** Taylor 2007; Smith et al. 2016.

**15** Henrich 2006; Taylor 2007, 71-72; Vos 2009; De Clercq 2011; Roymans et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2016.

**16** Henrich 2006; Heeren 2009; Vos 2009; Roymans/Derks 2011a; Habermehl 2013; Seiler 2015; Reddé 2017; 2019; Brüggler et al. 2017; Henig et al. 2023 to name a few recent studies.

**17** Clotuche 2009; Haselgrove 2011; Habermehl 2013.

**18** Smith 1987; Petit/Mangin 1994; Coquet et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2016.

**19** Heeren 2009, 49-74; Vos 2009, 89-99; Heeren 2015; Van Thienen 2016, 120 fig. 1; de Bruin 2019, 213-216; Roymans/Heeren 2022, 136 fig. 2; Vanhoutte 2023, 37-39.

This destruction and depopulation coincided with a period of upheaval – political instability and violence played an important role in northern Gaul. A slow withdrawal from the *Agri Decumates* and increased usurpation and internal conflict have been noted, particularly from the 230s to the 270s, although the impact and scale of this is debatable[20]. Major raiding was also noted in the historical sources in 259/260, 270 and 274/275[21]. Two regionalising regimes, the Gallic Empire and the »British Empire« controlled parts of the region in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries[22]. They can be seen as both a consequence and contributor towards regional instability[23]. Generally, this picture does not exist in Britannia. Instead, we see the abandonment of the military *vici* and the reshaping of larger rural centres[24]. The depopulation pulses did not necessarily effect Britannia, and most villa complexes seem to have entered a period of long-term expansion. New processing and storage elements and clear evidence of capital investment in new non-functional features are widely known from the late 3rd century onwards[25]. This shift, rapidly undertaken through upgraded facilities, is suggestive of a province experiencing an economic boom and can be explained by the early development of Britain as a surplus grain producer for the army[26].

This continued into the 4th century, when the British villa landscape was at its most productive and opulent[27]. In northern Gaul however, the villa system had received a significant shock and struggled to regain widespread productivity, although the early 4th century remained relatively peaceful, partly due to the new military footprint[28]. This began to experience difficulties in the mid-4th century. Imperial interventions were required in Britain in the second half of the 4th century, notably during the Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 and there is evidence of a slow disintegration of villa life in some parts of the island[29]. In northern Gaul, another major series of conflicts involving the Franks erupted in the 350s, severely affecting the surviving rural landscapes. Despite a second period of restored stability and fortifications under Valentinian, the socio-economic makeup of the region had been significantly disrupted[30]. Britain slowly drifted out of the Roman orbit in the 5th century, following the usurpation of Constantine III. Meanwhile, northern Gaul was slowly outsourced to *foederati* groups of Franks, although it is clear that the Middle Rhine remained manned until the mid-5th century[31]. The region eventually formed the core of the nascent Frankish kingdom[32].

## Defining Destruction

The first step to establishing a methodology for dealing with the evidence is a clear definition of the term. Destruction, demolition and abandonment are three interlinked words repeatedly cited in the biographies of Roman structures[33]. These terms have a series of important but ill-defined considerations in Roman archaeology and to escape these, conceptual frameworks have been taken from other fields[34]. Previous approaches have tended to conflate **destruction** and **demolition** as the same phenomenon – instead, I would argue that although the archaeological processes can be similar, demolition theoretically implies the deliberate and planned clearance, recycling and reuse of building material rather than a catastrophic event[35]. These issues are often merged with **abandonment**, which itself is a problematic and non-linear process by which a site falls out of permanent usage[36]. **Building collapse** is an archaeological manifestation of destruction, demolition and early site formation processes and can go hand

**20** Drinkwater 1987, 21; Reuter 2007, 81-86; Heeren 2016; Scherer 2020, 16; see Demougeot 1969; 1979 for the traditional chronologies; for a wider view see Witschel 1999.

**21** Demougeot 1969, 86-97; Witschel 1999, 347-349; Heeren 2015, 272; 2016. - Aur. Vict. 3.3; SHA - Probus 13.5-8.

**22** Drinkwater 1987; Casey 1977.

**23** König 1981; Drinkwater 1987 for major studies of the Gallic Empire.

**24** Arbuthnot 2014; Smith et al. 2016, 37-40. 404-416.

**25** Scott 2000; Dark 2004, 285-286; Heeren 2018, 143-144.

**26** Wigg-Wolf 1991; Heeren 2018; de la Bedoyére 1999; Amm. Marc. 18.3.2.

**27** Rivet 1969, 201-203; Scott 2000, 168-170; Gerrard 2013, 136-140.

**28** Brulet 1990; 2017.

**29** Gerrard 2013, 19-26; Dodd 2021a, chapter 3.

**30** Wightman 1985, 243-266; Wigg-Wolf 1991; 2016.

**31** Roymans/Heeren 2015, 557-558; 2022; Heising 2023.

**32** Dierkens/Périn 2003.

**33** Keevil 1998; Gerrard 2008; Dodd 2023.

**34** Schiffer 1987, 89-90; Kreimerman 2017, 176-178.

**35** For a discussion, see Gerrard 2008, 177; wider studies of recycling and demolition include Howell 2000; Flutsch/Hauser 2006; Munro 2012; 2024; Fleming 2016.

**36** Scarborough 1989, 415; Schiffer 1987, 40-44. 207-212; Cameron/Tomka 1993; Stanton/Magnoni 2008, 6-9; Cimadomo et al. 2020.


**Fig. 2** An example of a recently identified destruction level. A burnt debris layer excavated in a stone and wattle and daub structure on the periphery of the theatre-sanctuary complex of Blicquy-Ville d'Anderlecht (prov. Hainaut/BE) in 2024. – (Photo J. Dodd, with permission of CRAN, UCLouvain).

in hand with other developments[37]. This includes both collapse through fire destruction and structural failure as well as longer-term processes of ruination, for example, the well-known façade collapse from Meonstoke-Shavards Farm (Hampshire/GB)[38]. Many buildings stood for long periods, and were not the product of catastrophic events, but rather fell into ruin through poor or non-existent maintenance, weather damage or simply time and decay[39].

Destruction then can be initially defined as a singular moment that changes an area, building or site through accidental or unanticipated means in a short period of time. On a basic level, it represents a state-movement from reversible to irreversible and implies a shift through a catastrophic event[40]. This state-movement was examined and developed by Michael Schiffer in the 1980s. He identified two key phases to the process[41]. Firstly, **the abandonment process**, the actions of the occupants leaving a site. This is identified through refuse material, especially easily portable or high-status goods. Coins, high-status objects or easily portable goods suggest that the on-site population left in a hurry and that abandonment was not a planned process[42]. This includes what might be deemed as »emergency hoarding« in structures – high-value material buried in a rush prior during the abandonment phase. This is well-illustrated by the large hoard found in the destruction layer of Building 5 at Goeblingen-Miécher (Kt. Capellen/LU) with a *terminus post quem* of the reign of Probus[43]. Secondly, **the destructive process** – the actions of the destroyer, be they human or natural, should be visible through the presence of fire damage: blackened stone, charcoal, ash layers and damaged or burnt artefacts can all be indicative of a destructive horizon[44]. This can be difficult to establish spatially, but similar layers outside cooking or industrial zones, or in a Roman context, hypocaust flues can correlate to possible conflagrations[45]. The evidence for destructive activity at Roman sites varies wildly; everything from clear burnt layers with carbonised wood to *terres noires*/dark earth deposits have been claimed as destruction horizons and there is limited standardisation of the evidence (**fig. 2**)[46]. Certainty can be reinforced by skeletons, which suggest rapid events with fatal consequences, for example the two individuals recovered from a 4$^{th}$-century destruction level at Jülich-Kirchberg-Auf dem Steinacker/Weisweiler 112 (Kr. Düren/DE)[47]. Although it must be said that these present their own unique issues within a rural context[48]. The presence of other skeletal material raises further issues, for example at

**37** Keevil 1998, 33.

**38** King/Potter 1990.

**39** Keevil 1998; Gerrard 2008; Gerrard/Seddon 2022, 160-162.

**40** Lucas 2008; Snead 2016, 134-136; Dodd 2023, 551.

**41** Schiffer 1987, 89-90; Kreimerman 2017, 176.

**42** Schiffer 1985; 1987, 89-90; LaMotte/Schiffer 1999, 23-25.

**43** Weiler 1988; van Heesch 2020 for a wider study.

**44** Tringham 2013, 89-90; Harrison 2013; Dodd 2023.

**45** Schiffer 1987, 89; Kreimerman 2017, 176.

**46** Braat 1953, 53; Matthys 1973, 14-15; Raepsaet 1974, 4; cf. Henrich 2025, 15-17.

**47** Becker/Päffgen 2003.

**48** Scherer 2020, 94-101 for the *Obergermanische Limes*; Dodd 2021b for villa contexts.

Maillen-Arche/Fond de l'Hordia (prov. Namur/BE), where a bovid skeleton was recorded in the destruction/collapse debris in the cellar of the villa, a family of animals not known for their occupation of cellars[49].

These two different processes can either happen in tandem or at some temporal distance and link into the wider problems in assessing abandonment[50]. Although burnt layers should be fairly evident in a section, misidentifications are widespread[51]. Partial excavation, limited understanding of the stratigraphic method as well as a whole range of recording differences and historical biases can affect the data pattern for these types of sites. To effectively manage these issues and assess the evidence we currently have, a practical set of criteria are needed for destruction levels at villa complexes. Instead of basing this on clear stratigraphic finds of refuse or burnt layers, the dataset was rooted in the interpretation of excavators and reports so that **all villa complexes where a destruction level was identified were included**. This naturally varies enormously, so a series of criteria were used, requiring the use of a series of words, phrases or descriptions around destruction, and its language variants, in order to be included in the dataset. This allows for an analysis of the legacy interpretation of destruction horizons rather than a set of stratigraphic criteria that are often not present or described in detail.

## Acts of Destruction in the Northwest

Archaeologically, we are overrun with evidence for destructive events at villa complexes in the northwestern provinces. As early as the late 1970s, destructions, particularly in the late 3rd century, were being examined in greater detail[52]. In general, these events have been teleologically linked to depopulation, barbarian raiding and a perceived decline. Given the period of excavation, we are often relying on chronologies and ideas rooted in a historicising tradition[53].

Destructive events are present throughout the Roman West during all periods and in all site types – for example the 1st-century burnt layers from Nijmegen (prov. Gelderland/NL) – however, from the 2nd century onwards, these appear to be more coherent in the archaeological record[54]. A pulse of late 2nd-century destruction levels has been noted at villa complexes. Traditionally, this was tied to the fallout from historically attested Chauci raiding in the 160s and 170s on the continent, and several sites, including the villa at Meerssen-Onderste Herkenberg (prov. Limburg/NL), were presumed to have been affected by these raids[55]. Although this was not identified in Britannia, some evidence for destruction events was noted, either ascribed to accidental fire damage (the villa at Norton Disney [Lincolnshire/GB]) or barbarian raiding (the town of Corbridge [Northumberland/GB])[56].

Accelerating from the 240s, we see an upswing in references to destruction events, especially in the continental loess belt. The regions north of the *Via Belgica* experienced some settlement destruction, notably at the non-villa sites of Oosterhout (prov. North Brabant/NL) and Antwerp-Mortsel (BE), which was strongly linked to an intense pulse of abandonment[57]. Further south, the situation is significantly more complex – destruction levels are widespread through Belgium, western Germany and pulses were noted across Picardy, Le Grand-Est and Rhineland-Palatinate, especially from the 250s onwards[58]. This was coupled with the widespread abandonment at villa complexes: some regions experienced losses of over 90 %[59]. The transformation of villa complexes also played a larger role in continued activity at sites further south, although destructive activity and periods of abandonment remain important factors[60]. In Britannia, a clustering of destruction levels dated to the 3rd century have not materialised. Some events are known, for example at Fishbourne (West Sussex/GB), where a large fire gutted the building between 260 and 290 and raiding was identified as a possible culprit[61]. Despite isolated examples, mainly

**49** Lefert 2003, 180.

**50** Cameron/Tomka 1993; Munro 2012; 2024 within a Roman context.

**51** Hiddink 2022, 327 for the example of Voerendaal-Ten Hove (prov. Limburg/NL); Schücker 2006 for Alzey (Lkr. Alzey-Worms/DE); see Harrison 2013 for a forensic approach.

**52** Wightman 1970, 162-163; 1978; 1981.

**53** Cf. Dodd 2019; 2023; Heeren 2015; Henrich 2025, esp. 15-17.

**54** Willems/van Enckevort 2009, 71-72 for Nijmegen.

**55** Habets 1871, 384-385; Holwerda/Goossens 1907, 16-17; Vanhoutte 2023, 166-167 for the broader context.

**56** Oswald 1937; McCluskey 2022.

**57** Roymans/Heeren 2022, 136 fig. 2.

**58** Seiler 2015; Dodd 2023.

**59** Gechter/Kunow 1986; Lenz 1999; Van Thienen 2016; Dodd 2021a, 91-92 fig. 4.21; for related numismatic and ceramic studies, see Schulzki 2001; King 2013.

**60** Van Ossel 1992; Giljohann et al. 2017, 138; Bernigaud et al. 2017, 285-286.

**61** Cunliffe 1971, 192-193.

along the coasts of Kent and Sussex, there is limited evidence of a coherent group of identified destruction levels.

The period between the 230s and the Tetrarchy has been couched in terms of a wider 3rd-century crisis[62]. Destruction levels, particularly in the north-western provinces, are an important part of this narrative. Horizons have repeatedly been identified at villa complexes, urban centres and agglomerations, and have been used to tell a story of unrest, raiding barbarians and violent upheaval[63]. Developing from the »decline and fall« framework first laid out by Edward Gibbon, the narrative of a 3rd-century crisis appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries[64]. This was partly driven by the historical sources, which painted a dark picture of barbarians rampaging through the provinces[65]. As archaeological excavations uncovered black »destruction« layers at numerous sites, both rural and military, and as chrono-typologies were developed, these horizons began to be dated in accordance with the historical evidence of these 3rd-century incursions[66]. This interpretation of a *Limesfall* – the collapse of the frontier under raiding pressure – was widely adopted and remained a key part of interpretation into the late 20th century[67]. Historically, this was assumed to be the result of a series of catastrophic raids, beginning with the *Alemannensturm* that swept over the *Agri Decumates* in the 230s, and this was applied along the whole *Limes*[68]. We know that this is a more complex picture and that the evidence of a *Limesfall* on the Lower Rhine is a phantom[69]. These emotive descriptions of the 3rd century remain powerful images and the period has gained a series of epithets: *la tourmente*, *Germaneneinfall*, *Katastrophenjahre*, *Frankensturm* to name a few.

A second burst of destruction activity has been noted for the mid-4th century, affecting areas that had not previously been covered, for example, the Moselle region[70]. This period, also historically referred to as a *Frankensturm*, was associated with the usurpation of Magnentius and the raiding by Alemannic and Frankish groups across the Rhine[71]. Although there is evidence that Constantius II campaigned in the region, several fortifications and villas appear to have been destroyed during this period, including Braives (prov. Liège/BE), Alzey (Lkr. Alzey-Worms/DE) and Saarbrücken (DE)[72]. This period was marked by important shifts in the coin supply and a second pulse of abandonment and naturally, destruction horizons have been identified with this upheaval[73]. Further destruction horizons are spread across the 4th and early 5th centuries; however, we have limited evidence for clustering, and these temporally smeared examples have generally fallen into two groups – 4th-century »accidental« destructions and 5th-century horizons associated with barbarian destructions, regardless of date[74].

The 4th-century picture in Britannia is far less clear. There are few signs of abandonment or destruction until the very end of the 4th century. Instead, we have a low-level background rate of destruction throughout the period, spiking in the late 4th century. Numerous destructions occurred throughout this period, but there has been limited discussion about what they represent, partly as Britain was experiencing something of an economic boom at the time[75]. The majority of identified destruction in Britain has been dated to the late 4th or 5th centuries as part of the wider collapse of the Roman structures. This has traditionally been associated with the end of the provincial infrastructure, something that does not necessarily fully explore or describe the issue, as demolition, destruction and building collapse have often been conflated together in site reports[76].

**62** Strobel 1993; Witschel 1999; 2004; Esmonde Cleary 2013, chapter 1.

**63** Plumier/Hanut 2010; Krier 2011; Petit/Santoro 2016, 249; Clotuche et al. 2017; Brulet 2017; Kasprzyk 2017; 2019.

**64** Gibbon 1776-1789; Blanchet 1900, 299-318; Grenier 1906, 119-121; Homo 1913; von Petrikovits 1938.

**65** For example, the 4th-cent. *Historia Augusta*, see SHA.

**66** Habets 1871, 384-385; Joerres 1886, 92-93; Mommsen 1894, 150-152; Holwerda/Goossens 1907, 16.

**67** Mommsen 1894, 150-152; Koethe 1942; van Es 1981, 51-54.

**68** Heeren 2016; Scherer 2020, 4-5.

**69** Schönberger 1969, 175-177; Heeren 2016; Scherer 2020, 12-22.

**70** Seiler 2015 for examples; Dodd 2023, 555 fig. 5.

**71** Wigg-Wolf 1991.

**72** Klein 1925 for the example of Saarbrücken; Demougeot 1979, 86-97 for the historical chronology.

**73** Wigg-Wolf 1991; 2016.

**74** For example, Wasserbillig/Langsur-an der Fréien (Kt. Grevenmacher/LU), Krier/Wagner 1983, 275-276.

**75** Gerrard 2013, 118-155.

**76** Gerrard 2008, 177.

| certainty level | description | example | provability |
|---|---|---|---|
| level A | clear evidence for destruction - fire or burnt levels, collapse debris | Dinnington Farm (Somerset/GB) | modern descriptions<br>photos<br>sections<br>plans<br>scientific analyses |
| level B | evidence for fire damage - burnt stones, collapse debris, clear burnt debris | Champ de Saint-Éloi (prov. Hanaut/BE) | modern descriptions<br>photos<br>sections<br>plans |
| level C | moderate evidence for fire damage - burnt stones, collapse debris | Jette-Bosstraat (Brussels/BE) | descriptions<br>sections |
| level D | fire destruction and/or collapse debris | Meerssen-Onderste Herkenberg (prov. Limburg/NL) | descriptions |
| level E | assumption based on abandonment/ historic sources | Basse-Wavre-L'Hosté (prov. Walloon Brabant/BE) | not provable |

**Tab. 1** Certainty grading for rural destruction horizons in the Roman West. – (Table J. Dodd).

## Methodology

Given the problematic definition of destruction and the wide variety of historical biases and types of evidence, it is necessary to develop a clear way of assessing the data. To achieve this, two things are important – the certainty of the archaeological evidence and the spatial spread of the destruction level. Both these groups have significant issues, but by attempting to analyse them in an empirical way, we can focus on understanding what exactly these levels represent.

### Certainty

The certainty of our identification of destruction levels is a first issue. We are, naturally, relying on subjective descriptions and interpretations by archaeologists in the field. This means that our primary evidence for what and where a destruction level was found is subject to a wide variety of factors, ranging from soil and weather conditions through to theoretical biases and assumptions. This includes everything from early antiquarian excavations to modern methods and analysis.

In order to rank the evidence, a series of grades was developed to categorise it by group (**tab. 1**). Due to the diverse nature of the evidence, a series of proof requirements was needed. Not every destruction level can be taken as equally certain, and broadly, the older the evidence, the more likely the stratigraphy is questionable. Evidence ranges from descriptions and plans to sections, photos and modern scientific analysis. To measure this, five levels of certainty (A–E) were developed to assess the archaeological bias, ranging from assumptions to high-quality investigations. This clear grade system allows us to assess the level of trust we can put into the existing data, based on the published sources. Importantly, it places sites such as Neerharen-Rekem-Het Kamp (prov. Limburg/BE), where a destruction horizon was identified in the late 19th century and not described, as well as Dinnington Farm (Somerset/GB), where photos, planning and scientific studies took place from the 1980s onwards, within a single scaled system[77].

### Evidence Type

With an established grading of certainty, the evidence base can be examined and broken down into different types of destructive evidence (**tab. 2**). Destruction levels at villas are widespread, vary vastly in type and are highly stratigraphically complex. To examine these spatially, six different types of destruction have been identified. This ranges from the complete destruction of sites to the destruction of single rooms and cellars. It acts as the first step in a more forensic study of the spread of destructive or fire-damaged material[78].

**77** Van Neuss/Bamps 1888, 332-333; King 2023, 227-229 esp. fig. 13.6.

**78** Building on the work of Harrison 2013.

| destruction type | description | example | on-site evidence at example | reference for fire destruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **type 1:** complete destruction | **all buildings burnt**, evidence of multiple collapses and destructive events of outside zones | Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse-Warfée-Dessus les Tréats/ So l'Bosket (prov. Liège/BE) | charcoal levels, burnt wood, spread of material from the building; noted collapse debris | Destexhe 1971-1973 |
| **type 2:** multiple buildings | **several buildings burnt**, evidence of multiple collapses and destructive events in multiple structures | Treignes-Les Bruyères (prov. Namur/BE) | burnt plaster and charcoal were recorded in Buildings A and B | Doyen 1981; 1985 |
| **type 3:** single building | **single building burnt**, evidence of fire damage or destruction in a single structure | Dinnington Farm (Somerset/GB) | heavy charcoal layer - burnt grain and charcoal, followed by a roof collapse and fire debris layer | King 2023 |
| **type 4:** limited to a single room/ cellar | fire damage or destruction in a **single room or cellar**; limited to one room, including collapse debris | Wavre-Champ de Templiers (prov. Walloon Brabant/BE) | a charcoal layer with a roof collapse debris horizon was recovered from the cellar | Nyns 1981 |
| **type 5:** sporadic destruction | limited and poorly identified fire damage/collapse debris across a site with **limited pattern of survival** | Valkenburg-Heihof (prov. Limburg/NL) | a spread of material identified as fire damage, including black soil and charcoal noted | Holwerda/ Goossens 1907 |
| **type 6:** unidentified destructions | **no evidence of destruction**: assumed due to abandonment; limited archaeological evidence of fire damage/collapse debris | Basse-Wavre-L'Hosté (prov. Walloon Brabant/BE) | no clear identified damage, assumption based on historical sources | Dens/Poils 1905 |

**Tab. 2** Types of destruction in rural settlements in the Roman West. – (Table J. Dodd).

**Table 2** includes two categories of more complex evidence. Sporadic destruction is evidence for destruction that is neither localised nor clear, for example the *brandsporen* noted in and around the villa of Valkenburg-Heihof (prov. Limburg/NL) during excavations in the early 20th century[79]. Unidentified destruction – where a destruction is inferred based on the historic sources. A good example of this is Basse-Wavre-L'Hosté (prov. Walloon Brabant/BE), where a late 19th-century excavation identified, based on coinage and ceramic evidence, an abandonment phase in the late 3rd century and associated this with an undated, undescribed and possibly non-existent destruction level[80].

This classification system relies strongly on the certainty of the evidence (**tab. 1**). Naturally, partial excavation, decisions regarding trenches and excavation zones, site formation processes as well as human error can all affect the knowledge base for a given destruction horizon. Some sites may in fact have different morphologies to those recorded in excavation reports; destruction identified across a building could simply be the result of the excavation of a single room and extrapolated to an entire structure. This means that a close examination of the excavated zones, coupled with careful use of the uncertainty metrics and destruction typologies, is required to develop a profile of the presence of these horizons in villa complexes.

Developing this assessment is the first step in understanding the spatial processes behind fire destruction. Although the archaeological evidence does not always tell the complete story – establishing categorisations of destructive events allows us to build a clearer picture of the type of spatial evidence we are dealing with. Equally, it establishes the different types of activities associated with this, from the complete destruction and evacuation of sites to minor events such as a single building, or even the partial destruction and rebuilding of a room.

**79** Holwerda/Goossens 1907, esp. 16 and pl. IV; Goossens et al. 1908, 43.

**80** Dens/Poils 1905, 324; Severs 1980, 118-119.

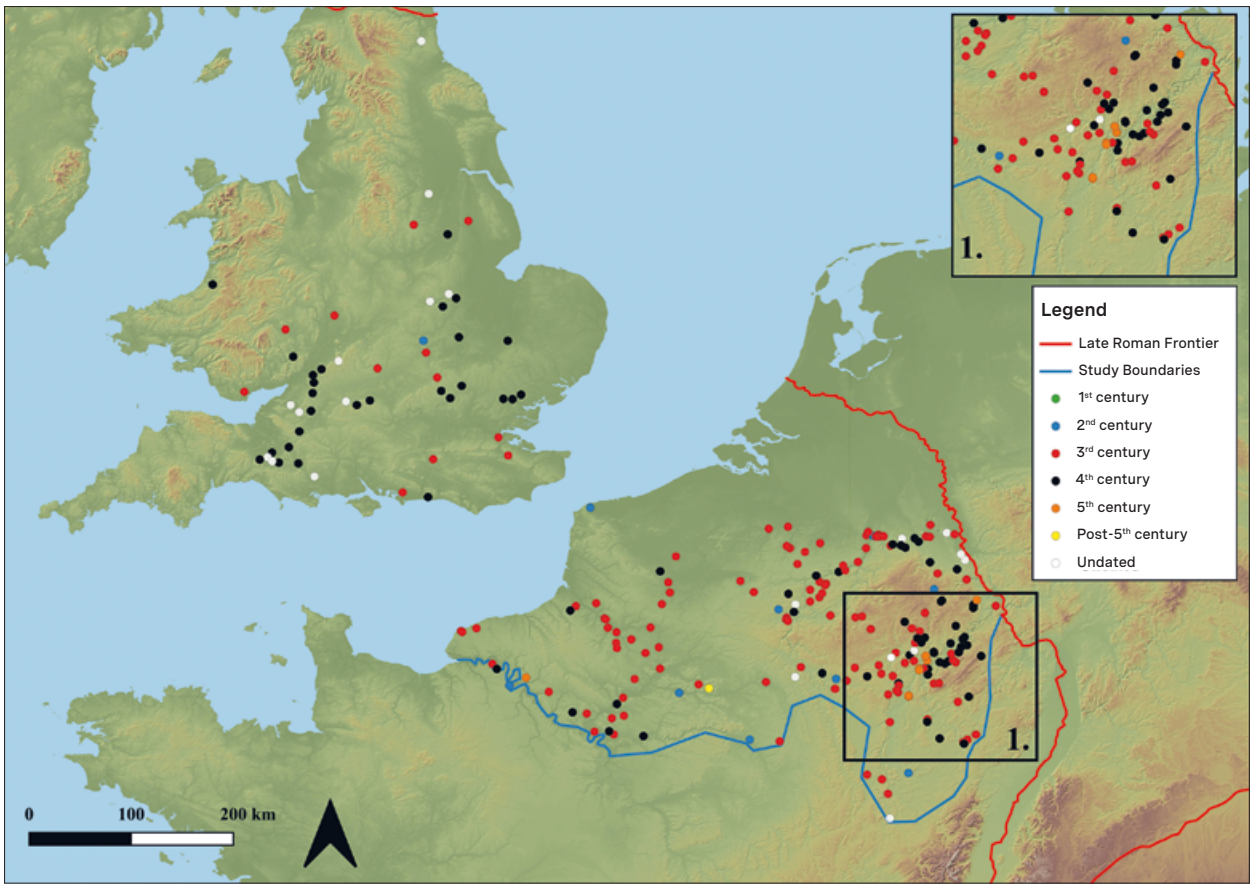


**Fig. 3** Spatial spread of known destruction horizons at villa complexes across the northwestern provinces between the 3rd and 5th cent. broken down into temporal blocks of one century (n = 268). – (Map J. Dodd).

### The Selected Dataset

To test the veracity of this system, a dataset comprising 268 identifications of destruction activity spread across 237 villa complexes (**fig. 3**) was used. This disparity is explained by some sites experiencing multiple destruction events, for example at Carignan-Maugré (dép. Moselle/FR)[81]. The record holder may be Norton Disney (Lincolnshire/GB), which experienced five destructive events of varying grades between the 1st and late 4th centuries[82]. This dataset is spread across the six countries that make up the northwestern provinces. The term villa has a complex and problematic legacy and is deeply embedded into archaeological thinking; however, it is currently indispensable[83]. For the purposes of this paper, a simple morphological definition has been used: rural stone structures with evidence for non-functional monumentalisation.

## Results

### Types of Destruction

The evidence from the villa landscape points towards a wide variety of different destruction morphologies in the northwestern provinces. Type 3 (single building; see **tab. 2**) destructions are the most common form and include everything from evidence of small-scale fires that have destroyed single ancillary structures (Aspelt-op der Stae, Building 2 [Kt. Esch/LU]) to the destruction of main buildings (Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse-Warfée-Dessus les Tréats/So l'Bosket [prov. Liège/BE])[84]. These types of destruction are

**81** Gaber 1981, 102-105.

**82** Oswald 1937.

**83** Hingley 1989; Roymans/Derks 2011a; Habermehl 2013; Seiler 2015; Dodd 2021a.

**84** Destexhe 1971-1973, 77; Dövener 2002, 43.

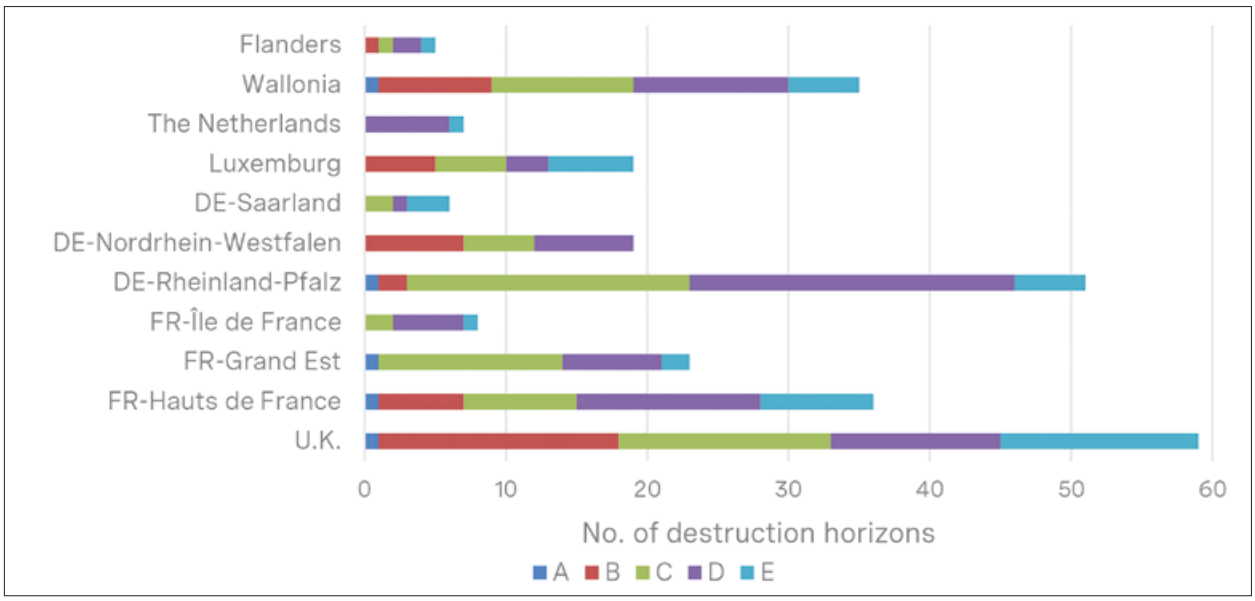


**Fig. 4** Morphology of destruction horizons at villa complexes, broken down by country (n = 268). – (Graphics J. Dodd).

present across all regions and represent what could be deemed »accidental« destruction – sites that were not deliberately destroyed as a whole, but rather the result of singular incidents. In some cases, this has seen rebuilding at the site, for example at Walferdingen-Helmsingen (Kt. Luxemburg/LU), where activity continued after a 4th-century destruction, whilst in other cases, destructions have marked the end of archaeologically visible activity at sites (Moersdorf-Sartsdorf level II [Kt. Echternacht/LU])[85]. This links to type 4 (single room/cellar), which is also indicative of a single building burning. However, it perhaps represents partial building destruction; regardless, the same phenomenon – the destruction or damage of a single structure – can be identified, despite problems of interpretation, for example the articulated bovine in the cellar of Maillen-Arche/Fond de l'Hordia[86].

It is noticeable that the current dataset is poorly represented in large-scale destructions at sites. Very few of the examined villas showed evidence of type 1 (complete) or type 2 (multiple building) destructions. **Figure 4** does not suggest that pulses of destruction comprised widespread uniform destructions of entire sites. Instead, the picture is highly mixed – we regularly see evidence for the destruction of single buildings, but this does not suggest the radical reordering or widescale destruction of sites, but rather singular accidents. Only a few standout cases demonstrate such radically reworking of a site – Reinheim-Heidenhübel level II (Saarpfalz-Kreis/DE) is a rare example[87]. The complex was gutted by a mid-4th century fire, with the main buildings and the annexe structures all destroyed. Post-fire activity was limited, with coinage and occupation debris in the west wing of the main building until the end of the 4th century. The complete destruction of a site – Reinheim comprised at least 14 buildings – requires large amounts of manpower for burning, debris removal, infilling or dismantling[88]. This level of organisation would have been beyond small groups of raiders or even semi-organised rural groups, and would therefore have relied on large-scale labour, such as that provided by the army or large landowners. This draws into question many of the assumptions we have on the causes of destruction.

Despite this high number of type 3 destructions, a large number of type 5 and 6 destructions (sporadic and unidentified) have been noted, comprising 40 % of the total number of identified horizons. This inevitably represents the extreme variability and unreliability in the archaeological record. In many cases, this group has limited descriptions and has primarily been identified through the historicising tradition, with limited descriptions and recording. These examples are present across the region and range from assumptions (Basse-Wavre-L'Hosté, where a destruction seems to be assumed based on the historical sources) to incoherent descriptions (Norton Disney Level V, where a destruction level was noted but not

**85** Krier 2010, 83-85; 2019.

**86** Lefert 2003, 180.

**87** Sărăţeanu-Müller 2000; 2011.

**88** Shirley 2000, 158-161.

described). This is supported by the similarly vague type 5 (sporadic; for example, Valkenburg-Heihof, where sporadic black patches across the site were interpreted as a burn level), which reinforces the presence of poorly understood destruction levels within the dataset, highlighting the need for a re-examination at many of these sites.

### Certainty Grading

Type 5 and 6 destructions represent a good step into the certainty issues surrounding identified destruction levels in the western provinces. Both groups form part of a series of destructions where evidence is lacking and, in this way, they are indicative of most evidence presented in this article – lower quality is the norm, with over 80 % graded at level C or lower. Examples of destruction levels, complete with high-quality drawings, photos and analysis, are severely lacking, with only 5 noted in level A and a further 46 in level B. This naturally presents issues with the data we have for making conclusions about the scope, range and level of destruction in the dataset – limiting our certainty in the interpretation of destructive events at most sites. This pattern leaves the evidence we do have contradictory and confusing.

On a national level, higher-quality destruction level identifications correlate with zones where villas have been more commonly excavated in recent decades. North Rhine-Westphalia, northern France, the UK and Wallonia account for the bulk of level A and B sites. Villas are regularly encountered in fieldwork and bar Wallonia, all have benefited from the developer-led archaeology boom and the explosion of data that this has caused. Wallonia has benefitted from a more centralised approach, which has allowed the re-examination of older complexes and the investigation of destruction levels noted in the 19th century (**fig. 5**). This approach has allowed for the confirmation or rejection of older identifications of destructions and benefitted the wider pattern. In other regions, for example the Netherlands, the excavation on villa complexes has been very limited after the Second World War, and consequently, we have a poor picture of the destruction horizons noted during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This has impeded understanding the role of destruction in the Dutch loess belt due to a lack of photos, descriptive evidence or modern recording. A good example of this is the villa at Voerendaal-Ten Hove (prov. Limburg/NL). Excavated in the 1890s, 1929, 1947–1950 and again in 1984–1987, the site demonstrates changing facets of our understanding of destruction levels[89]. Wouter Braat's excavations in the 1940s identified what he believed to be destruction levels in both the main building and the *horreum*, comprising dark earth and ash layers; however, these were not identified during the re-excavation in the 1980s, and have not been found since[90]. The charred grain and wood, later recovered from Building 405 may suggest a fire of sorts, but this could range from the small-scale disposal of waste to a conflagration. No evidence was recorded from the main building during later work. Voerendaal is indicative of the wider problem of uncertainty plaguing our understanding of destruction levels across the western provinces.

## Conclusions

Making sense of the evidence for destructive events in the northwestern provinces is difficult, complex, and, as it currently stands, unrewarding. What is abundantly clear is that the current evidence is not strong enough to make any conclusions about the scope, direction or scale of the destruction horizons present in the northwestern provinces. The biases, certainty issues and chronological issues make it very difficult to build coherent patterns, and the limited amount of high-quality data does not point towards the sorts of conclusions made in previous studies[91]. The current dataset is certainly not robust enough to point fingers at culprits for any of this activity.

Our confusing understanding of destruction horizons has been somewhat clarified by the close analysis of archaeological descriptions. The data presented in this article illustrates just how problematic these issues are. Everything from single room/cellar destructions to large-scale destructions have been cited to reinforce the historical narrative, despite a patchy and poorly understood evidence base. Moving beyond this is now necessary and the development of categories and classifications for assessing

**89** Hiddink 2022, 327-328 for the modern summary of this.

**90** Braat 1953, 53; he defined a series of red burnt clay horizons and tile collapse or rubble as *brandlagen* and *brandsporen*.

**91** For example, Wightman 1981; Van Ossel 1992, 91-93.

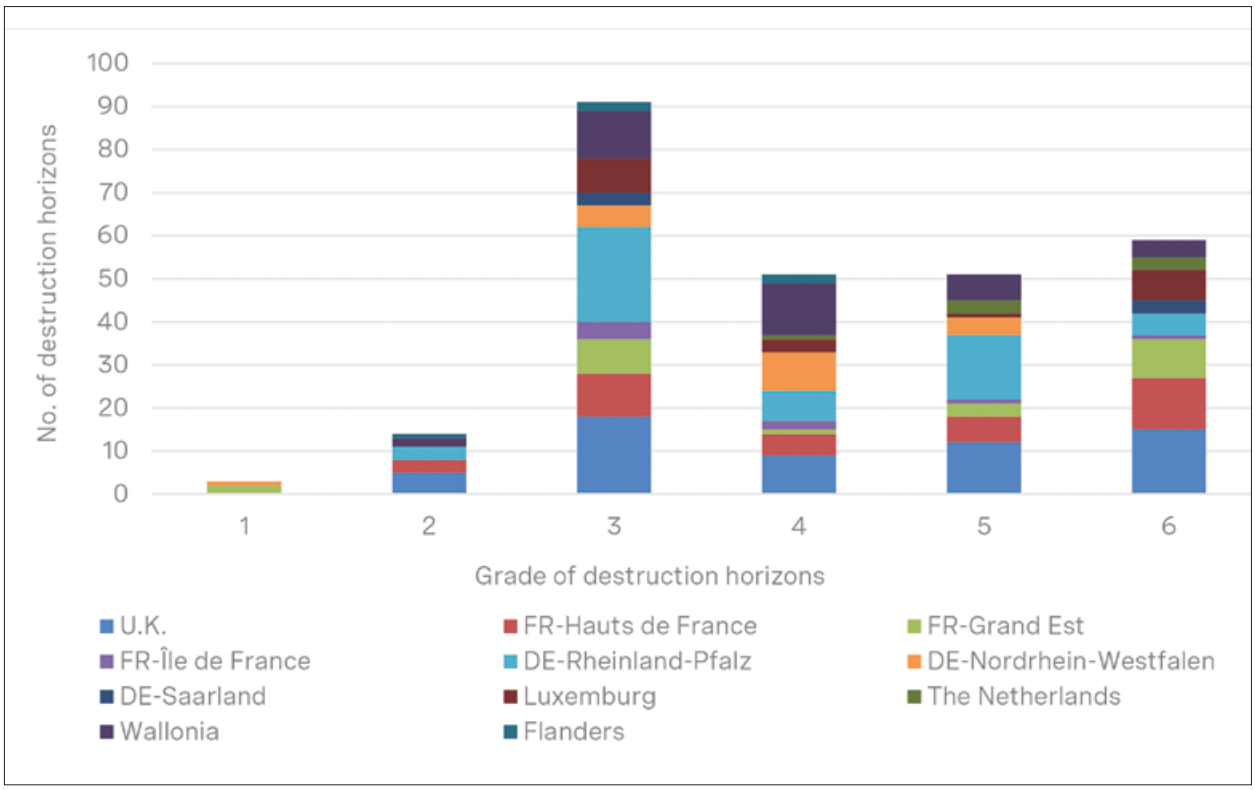


**Fig. 5** Certainty grading of fire destruction levels at villa complexes, broken down by country (n = 268). – (Graphics J. Dodd).

the evidence is a good starting step, however, several recommendations for the future can be made:

The most important forward movement is the development of a **procedure for approaching destruction levels**. Currently, there is no »manual« for dealing with these horizons, and policies widely differ across regions and archaeological traditions. Recent work on kiln structures has demonstrated that excavation protocols can pay off in understanding both the activity at sites as well as providing a template for intra-site comparisons[92]. Providing a similar system for destruction horizons could really allow for the development of more forensic techniques when approaching how and why a building burnt down[93].

Where possible, **small-scale re-evaluations** should be considered a priority. Clarifying certainties is an important part of establishing a more coherent dataset, and invasive fieldwork is the only effective way to do this. The work conducted in the Belgian Hesbaye-Condroz is a good example of this – the small-scale excavation of previously excavated villa sites has both confirmed and disproved the existence of destruction levels at several settlements. Similar policies in other regions, although naturally reliant on funding, could help us to understand the sequence of destruction levels.

**Coherent publication of sites**. Perhaps the most important recommendation is that a large number of sites are poorly published, despite having ample archival material[94]. Bringing this corpus to publication would provide a large amount of new data, both to clarify certainty levels at sites, but also to refine the morphology of known destruction levels.

Destruction is a fundamental part of the archaeological record, especially in the northwestern provinces, and this paper has begun to shift our understanding of the topic forward. Adopting a more empirically grounded approach, rather than relying on assumptions and theory, will enable us to draw clear conclusions on settlement destruction across the Roman period. This will allow us to assess whether periods of assumed destruction, such as the second half of the 3rd century, are rooted in the evidence base. A great deal of future work is needed on this problematic and confusing topic.

**92** Willems/Favennec 2023.

**93** Harrison 2013.

**94** For example, the many sites in the *Rheinische Braunkohlerevier*, Gaitzsch 2011.

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# Zusammenfassung
Résumé

**Unsichere Zerstörung? Eine Methodik zur Bewertung von Zerstörungshorizonten in den nordwestlichen Provinzen des Römischen Reiches**

Zerstörungshorizonte kommen häufig in archäologischen Befunden vor. Die Biografien der Fundstellen sind in allen Epochen von katastrophalen Ereignissen geprägt, die in vielen Fällen das Ende der Besiedlung bedeuteten. Diese Horizonte werfen erhebliche Probleme auf, wenn man versucht, allgemeine Siedlungstrends zu entwickeln. Dies ist ein großes Problem für das Verständnis der ländlichen Entwicklung im römischen Britannia, in Gallia Belgica und Germania Inferior, wo unzureichend verstandene Zerstörungsimpulse teleologisch interpretiert wurden, um Erzählungen von gewalttätigen barbarischen Überfällen und Invasionen zu konstruieren. Der vorliegende Beitrag stellt eine klare Methodik zur Bewertung von Zerstörungshorizonten im römischen Nordwesteuropa vor. Er untersucht den aktuellen Forschungsstand zu diesem Thema, erstellt eine Kategorisierung zur sicheren Einstufung der Daten und analysiert die in den archäologischen Aufzeichnungen vorhandenen Typologien von Zerstörungen. Zu diesem Zweck wird das System an einem Testfall von Zerstörungsereignissen in Villenkomplexen angewendet.

**Une destruction incertaine? Établir une méthodologie pour évaluer les horizons de destruction dans les provinces du nord-ouest de l'Empire romain**

Les couches des incendie font partie intégrante du registre archéologique et les biographies des sites sont ponctuées d'événements catastrophiques à travers toutes les périodes, qui dans de nombreux cas, entraînent l'échec de la colonisation. Ces niveaux posent des problèmes importants lorsqu'il s'agit d'élaborer des tendances générales en matière de peuplement. Il s'agit d'un problème majeur pour comprendre les trajectoires rurales de la Britannia, Gallia Belgica et Germania Inferior, où des impulsions de destruction mal comprises ont été téléologiquement projetées pour construire des récits de raids et d'invasions barbares violents. Cet article aborde cette question en présentant une méthodologie claire pour évaluer les horizons de destruction dans l'Europe romaine du Nord-Ouest. Il examine l'état actuel de la recherche sur le sujet et établit une catégorisation pour classer les données avec certitude, tout en examinant les typologies de destruction présentes dans les archives archéologiques. Pour ce faire, il appliquera le système à un cas test d'événements destructeurs dans des complexes de villas.

# Schlüsselwörter
Mots-clés

Nordwesteuropa / Römerzeit / Zerstörungshorizonte / Siedlungsarchäologie / Villenlandschaft
Europe du Nord-Ouest / période romaine / horizons de destruction / archéologie de l'habitat / paysage de villas