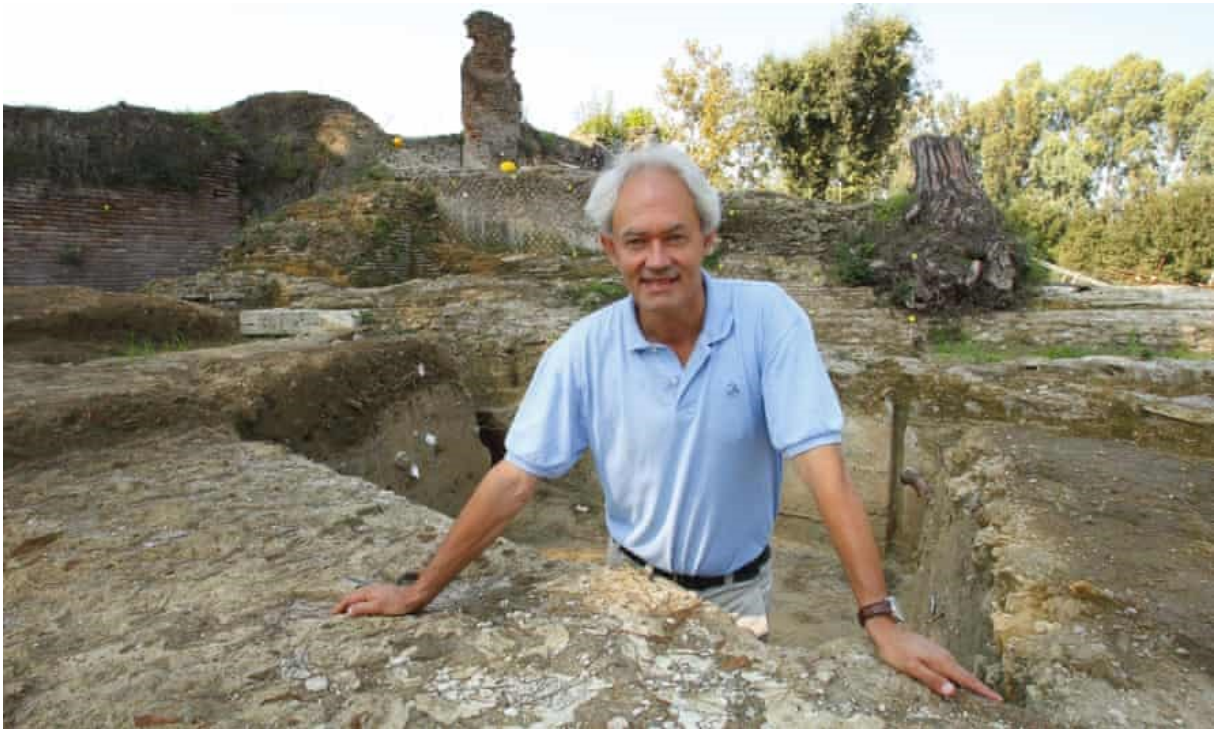


Simon Keay obituary

Archaeologist who specialised in the Roman empire, focusing on ports and commerce in Italy and Spain

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Simon Keay at the site of Portus in Rome. He was one of the first archaeologists to apply pioneering geophysical surveys. Photograph: Chris Ison/PA

By the 1st century AD, Rome had a population of about a million people, far more than could be fed from local sources, so was dependent on supplies from across its Mediterranean-wide empire. However, its access to the sea was limited as the Tiber mouth at Ostia could accommodate only small ships. Cargoes were thus shipped to the Bay of Naples and taken overland or by smaller boats to Rome.

A hungry population threatened political instability, but it was not until the AD 40s that the Emperor Claudius initiated the construction of Portus on the coast just north of Ostia, with huge concrete moles enclosing a 69-hectare (170-acre) anchorage with a lighthouse at its mouth.

Portus was extended in the early second century by the Emperor Trajan, who cut a 39-hectare hexagonal basin in the adjacent coast. In modern times, due to being on private land, these massive structures were not properly explored and Portus remained peripheral to our understanding of the Roman empire.

This was changed by the archaeologist Simon Keay, who has died aged 66 after suffering from motor neurone disease.

Simon was one of the first archaeologists to apply pioneering geophysical surveys (using detection techniques that allow you to “see below the soil” without disturbing the surface) on a large scale in the Mediterranean world, first in Spain, and then jointly with me in Italy, at Falerii Novi, Lazio, in 1997. It was this work that led the Italian authorities to invite us to undertake the first large-scale geophysical survey of Portus the following year.

The survey revealed the sheer scale of Roman economic activity at the site – warehouses covering more than 145,000 sq metres, a series of 30 metre-wide ship canals, as well as an aqueduct, cemeteries and public buildings. With this knowledge, Simon took on the excavations of the site.



The hexagonal basin at Portus from the air. Photograph: Simon Keay/Portus project

Directing a big international team, and deploying state-of-the-art methods of analysis, he discovered an amphitheatre and massive ship sheds, and explored the Palazzo Imperiale at the heart of the port. This model of contemporary archaeological practice illustrated the complex and sophisticated infrastructure on which ancient Rome relied, and transformed understanding of Portus’s importance.

Simon’s Italian work had followed on from 20 years of influential research on Roman Spain. He was among the first non-Spanish archaeologists to work in Spain after the death of Franco (from 1978) and was held in very high regard there. His doctoral work on the late Roman economy (which included a fundamental classification of amphorae, two-handled storage jars) established his profile, after which he went on to publish the first modern synthesis of Roman Spain, in 1988.

He co-directed key excavations on the Roman villa at Vilauba (1978-84), in Girona, Catalonia (which first identified its Visigothic phase), and the Roman town at Peñaflor, near Seville (1987-92), closely linked to ancient Rome’s olive oil export industry.

However, his most pioneering work came in the series of large-scale surveys. Having met as students, and periodically worked together, in 1985 we were invited to conduct a survey of the hinterland of the Roman provincial capital at Tarraco (now Tarragona), where the Catalonian government was leading major new excavations.

This led to the first systematic field survey in Spain and produced remarkable evidence for the density of Roman rural settlement and its changing patterns through time.

Recognising the potential of geophysical surveys for examining large sites, Simon co-directed, from 1991 to 1993, a project that mapped the city of Italica, the birthplace of the emperor Trajan, near Seville, revealing a variety of previously unknown buildings. This was later followed with an innovative study using Geographical Information Systems (a computer-based system for analysing maps) to better understand the networking of the dense concentration of Roman urban centres in southern Spain (2000-08).



A reconstruction of the shipsheds at Portus. Illustration: Portus project

Born in London, to Lorelei (nee Shiel) and Anthony Keay, a company director, Simon attended Downside school, in Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset, before going to the University of London in 1974 to study archaeology. He stayed there to do his PhD, completed in 1983.

In 1985 he was appointed lecturer in archaeology at the University of Southampton, rising to become professor by 1997. He stayed at the university until retirement in 2020, while also serving as director of archaeology at the British School at Rome for a decade from 2006. During this time, alongside the Portus excavations, Simon led a major EU-funded research project gathering comparative evidence from Roman ports across the whole of the Mediterranean. His publications of this research, along with the final report of his excavations, which he was completing at the time of his death, will be central to all future accounts of the Roman world.

Throughout his work, Simon ensured that the everyday objects found were the subject of careful and systematic study, so his project publications remain as key works of reference. He was also

a generous promotor of younger colleagues, always involving them as co-authors. This gave energy to his fieldwork projects, which, combined with his sharp – and often irreverent – sense of humour, ensured that field archaeology with him was always enormous fun.

In 1986 he married Nina Insane, a homeopath. She and their two sons, James and Leo, survive him.

Simon James Keay, archaeologist, born 21 May 1954; died 7 April 2021