

THE MAGDALEN CROSSING-POINT:  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY,  
4200BC—1066 AD

Thomas Matthews Boehmer

sweet city lulled by ancient streams

C.S. Lewis, 'Oxford'

Our history runs down our rivers,

Down our rivers to the sea.

Reminds us of the things that matter:

Home and hearth and history.

Frank Turner, 'Rivers'

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## Introduction



**Figure 1: Satellite image of the present day setting of the Magdalen School site. The Cherwell splits twice here, once around the Spit (under Magdalen Bridge), and the second time around the School Playing Fields, forming two eyots.<sup>1</sup>**

This essay sets out to investigate what the pre-1100 AD archaeological record of the Magdalen College School floodplain site reveals about Oxford and Oxfordshire's position as an early area of trade and of other forms of exchange. It probes a particular intersection of topography and early history to show the extent to which the site has functioned across time as both barrier and thoroughfare. Throughout, diverse archival and other records of the current alluvial site of Magdalen College School will be analysed in order to find out more about its ancient and early modern archaeology, and its place in the early historical record of the city and the county. The period of investigation leads from Neolithic or Stone Age times to the Early Middle Ages.

The present-day Magdalen College School site is quite diverse geographically. It includes the watery, isolated eyot of the Spit that stands alone between two branches of the Cherwell and the school field, and makes up part of the Cherwell River floodplain where it flows into the larger Thames. The actual school buildings all stand on the edge of a gravel terrace that overlooks the Cherwell from a relatively high and dry position. Nearby is Magdalen Bridge, which has served for many centuries to carry the city's population into and out of the town on to the road to London. The bridge also forms a link from

<sup>1</sup> Map of the present-day Magdalen College School site (<https://maps.google.co.uk/>)

the city centre to east Oxford. Standing on MCS grounds next to the bustling, modern urban Plain, it is easy to forget that the school's floodplain and ford site have been used as a significant crossing-point for much of history.

The MCS site presents an interesting case study of how archaeology has been overlain or disregarded over the course of time. The disregard has in part grown out of the nature of the floodplain site itself, which can be taken as a test case for the fact that the signs of history and early history are erased as geography shifts. The Cherwell's ever-shifting channels have, it is true, erased or covered many archaeological remains in the area. Yet, although the record here is scanty, there is more evidence and more developed analysis for the rest of Oxford and Oxfordshire. Parallels that can be developed with these other sites can help us infer a great deal about the MCS site.

The archival resources for the project, though not extensive, include detailed maps of the Magdalen Bridge area from 1644 to the present day, which allow us to develop an understanding of what might have existed in the earlier periods. They also include archaeological reports from building works carried out from the 1930s to the present day. Of some further help are the results of the geophysical survey of the Spit and of the MCS field carried out by myself and Paula Levick of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education – Archaeology, on 26 October 2011, and these results are further developed and supplemented by the studies listed in the bibliography.

As will be shown, the site testifies to the paramount importance of rivers in history, something which justifies a brief comment at this point. Rivers across time encouraged settlement because they were a means of transport and communication, which were essential for trade. However, this was not the only important aspect of rivers. They were also often linked to spiritual or otherworldly concerns. Many waterways, such as the nearby Thames, signified domains of crossing to other worlds and were used as places or channels where offerings could be made to the Gods. At the same time, rivers could also be a hindrance to development and expansion. The MCS site is located on a ford where people could pass from one side to the other with relative safety. Although Oxford has many fords, because of its geographical situation, the MCS ford is especially interesting, since it is here that one of the last islands or eyots of the Cherwell remains.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of the relatively scant archaeological evidence found at the MCS site, it could be argued that the site has seen very limited activity throughout history. Paradoxically, given this, my study puts forward the view that the site presents an at times typical profile of what is known about Oxford's archaeology, but also suggests, importantly, that alternative archaeological narratives and historical readings can be developed through a careful assessment of the evidence that has emerged. This essay will reveal that Magdalen's important crossing point in fact has much to tell us about the everyday settlement and fluid movement of human beings around one of the early fords of Oxford and, therefore, through the major thoroughfares of Oxfordshire.

### Topography

As suggested, Oxford's topographical situation in respect of the Thames waterways, affected the site's archaeology through history. During the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, there was a 'seasonally low' water table which is evidenced by the fact that some sites from the Bronze Age 'extend below the

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<sup>2</sup> I suggest that this is due to Oxford's relative lack of industrialisation which meant that the Cherwell was not dredged and straightened in the ways that rivers in industrialised cities were.

present permanent water table'.<sup>3</sup> This would mean that at the MCS site it would have been much easier to pass across the river than it may be in the present day. During the Iron Age there would have been an increase in the water table of 'at least 0.80m'. This will have made the ford less usable, and indeed much of the present-day centre of Oxford was covered in water during the wet seasons.<sup>4</sup>

Through the late Roman to Anglo-Saxon periods the water table seems to have slowly dropped in accordance with the increase in human activity and 'consolidation of the channel banks'. This would have allowed a greater use of the area on both sides of the River Cherwell, and this trend was continued into the post-Conquest period which saw the renewed 'reclamation of much land' throughout what is present-day Oxford.<sup>5</sup> The ford's usage would have been adapted to these changes and activities. The braided stream system encountered at the school site is a remainder of what would have been a constant feature throughout Oxford's history; that is, small islands or eyots surrounded by the water. The adaptation of the site however would not only have to do with its river location; it also had to do with wider geography, as can be seen in Figure 2 (below). The site occupies an alluvial position, situated prominently between the different gravel terraces. Indeed it is clear from inspection of Figure 2 that the crossing point site is the easiest, most open way to pass from the second gravel terrace into Oxford proper. This knowledge (of constantly shifting land) must be borne in mind when considering the situation of the site and its usage through the periods outlined below, from early history to the mediaeval.

### Questions of finds

In this essay the word 'finds' will be defined as referring to all artefacts of an historical nature that are found at sites where there is known to have been human influence. Most of the objects of real archaeological importance found at the school site have been accidentally discovered or excavated during expansion. However, it is important to acknowledge, accidental discovery due to human activity and building work can introduce a bias into the study of these archaeological finds, as this throws up what can seem to be more finds at a certain point, relative to sites where less activity has occurred. Added to this, as the site is based on a floodplain, and is open to the influence of the river system, there is the difficulty that many potential finds will have been lost or completely covered over across time.

To view the site's position as objectively as possible I have taken examples from both sides of the River Cherwell, and have supplemented these with archaeological work from the city centre and east Oxford. The finds recounted in academic works have been supported by the evidence given in the Oxfordshire Heritage Environment Record, and this has allowed a more detailed picture to be developed of the site's position. Throughout, as in any archaeological study, the researcher is dealing with relatively scanty evidence, from which however an historically grounded narrative must be drawn.

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<sup>3</sup> Ed. Anne Dodd, *The Archaeology of the gravel terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames* (Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2011), pg. 176

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 79

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 81

## Chapter I

### The Neolithic and Bronze Ages

#### 4200-700 BC

The sparse amount of evidence that affects any evaluation of the Magdalen College School floodplain site because of the shifting nature of the water-systems begins in the Neolithic and the Bronze Ages period. (The sparseness was reconfirmed by my geophysical survey of the site in October 2011). Yet it is also in these periods that evidence of early human activity becomes observable throughout Oxfordshire. Building on the limited evidence we have for this district and its surrounding localities, we can draw a loose picture of the crossing point as it became important for communication between other drier sites at this time. The typical features and movements that the site encounters in these periods will be reflected in other periods as well.

Although the Neolithic and Bronze Ages are famous for their technological advances, especially in the areas of agriculture and metal-working, settlement was still favoured on lighter gravelly soils because of easier ploughing opportunities. Present-day Oxford city centre physically exists between various gravel terraces, and it is here that there is the most evidence for human activity. As Henig and Booth point out: 'These gravel terraces...provided a free-draining covering to much of the underlying clay vales, which proved particularly attractive to prehistoric settlers'.<sup>6</sup> As we can see from Figure 2, the MCS site, too, is positioned between two important gravel terraces, making it a point of communication between various settlements located on these slight hill crests during both periods.

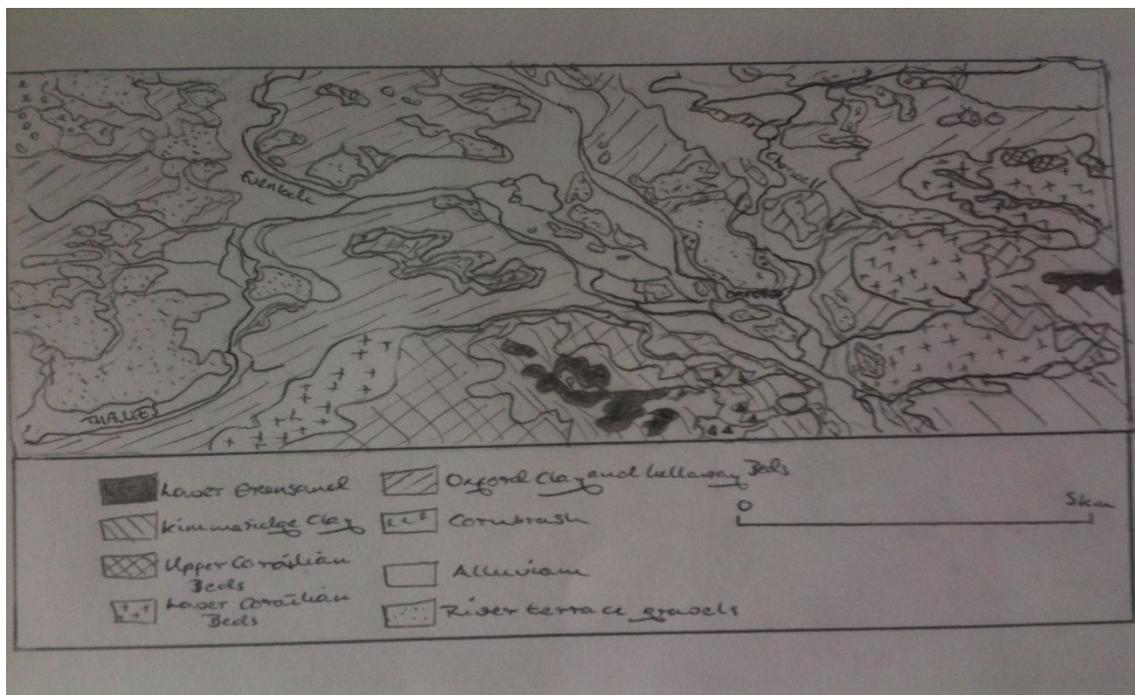


Figure 2: A map showing the geological features of the area around Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Henig and Paul Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Sutton Publishing, 2000) , pg. 3

In the Neolithic period there was great importance given to the Barrow Hills around Abingdon to the south of Oxford. This range of hills, now ploughed flat, once contained some of the most complex monuments in the whole of the British Isles, according to Pryor. This sacred area was deliberately made into a significant place, by restricting access to the site, and by hiding the religious enclosure from view by the close positioning of the barrows. As Pryor attests, a 'pilgrimage to the Barrow Hills would have been a very moving, and probably physically exhausting, experience.' For Neolithic peoples, 'deep within [the barrows] resided the actual physical remains of the heroes of family and tribal people...and it must have been a truly awe-inspiring experience to pass close to such powerful forces'.<sup>7</sup>

Pryor's comprehensive study of the earliest movements of the Britons dwells on the most outstanding points and objects that signal different developments in Britain, and not on the kinds of local developments and activities relevant to this study. If we took Pryor's reading as our single authority, Oxfordshire would be dominated by the Barrow Hills and little else would appear to have occurred. However, we cannot let it be forgotten that there also a ritual site at Dorchester which included a cursus or 'long enclosure', and a henge. This, too, was a striking ritual site. As Dodd writes, cursus monuments appear to allow people to pass along them so that they can view the different linked ritual sites in certain religious areas. What is most relevant to the MCS site is when, Dodd also observes, there is a 'close relationship between...cursus monuments and water courses'.<sup>8</sup> For Pryor, our crossing point would be just another small ford in the region, and would not lead anywhere in particular; whereas, as Dodd's study begins to suggest, there may be a greater religious significance attached to the area.

New evidence in a study by Beckley and Radford has further revealed that in the current grounds of Keble College a henge monument was located. This seems to have dominated its particular gravel terrace, the Summertown-Radley spread. It seems to have been a huge structure: 'the curvature of the ditch suggests a feature of 150m in diameter', and its 'charcoal spread... indicate[s] that the monument dates from around 2290-2130 BC'.<sup>9</sup> Henges were usually 'large circular enclosures defined by a bank and... an internal ditch'. They were places where the community gathered to share certain rituals which may have been connected to the 'celestial alignment' of these structures.<sup>10</sup> This henge was part of a greater religious landscape that included sites in the University Parks and Port Meadow, which also included several barrows. Although there is little evidence for settlement, permanent or otherwise, in the period, a picture can be developed of this area of Oxfordshire being dominated by important religious structures. The MCS crossing point could have linked these important sites around the city centre with other sites in the district, and with places elsewhere in the countryside. Beckley and Radford also suggest that 'gatherings took place progressively from one monument to another as cult members or larger communities moved between [different ritual sites]...perhaps as part of a ritual cycle or pilgrimage'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the MCS crossing point could have formed part of a ritual route to the henge at Keble College for, as Pryor says: 'rivers are frequently found near prehistoric religious and ceremonial sites...they acted as a neutral barrier zone between major tribal or cultural territories, within which different rules applied to those of the regions on either

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Pryor, *Britain BC*, pg. 213

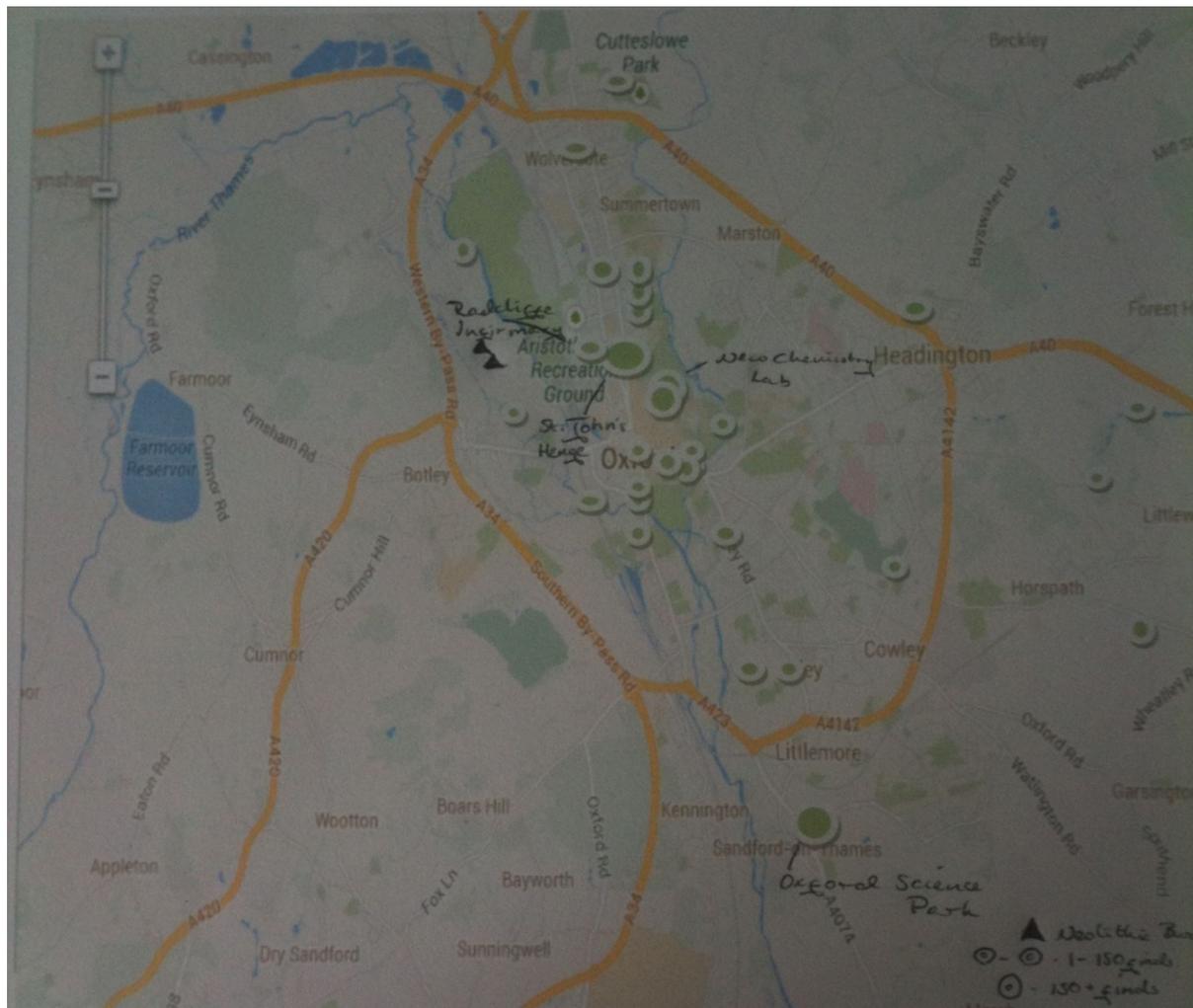
<sup>8</sup> Anne Dodd, ed. *The Archaeology of the Gravel Terraces of the Upper and Middle Thames* (Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2011), pg. 298

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Beckley and David Radford, 'Oxford Archaeological Plan: Resource Assessment 2011- Neolithic to Bronze Age' (consultation.oxford.gov.uk/.../-/...), pg. 13. Accessed 14/3/12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 301

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 302

side.<sup>12</sup> This is backed up by Bradley, who states that Neolithic ceremonial monuments were built in places which had already fulfilled an important role in an older pattern of communication'.<sup>13</sup> The MCS site was joined, in this reading, to the ritual landscape because it may have been known to the builders of the Oxford religious sites as an easy place of crossing and contact. As we can see from Figure 3, with a concentration of finds around the city centre, there could have been a ritual landscape based in what is now the city connected to tribal lands on the other side of the crossing point. The ford therefore marked a transition point; perhaps even, with its water, a divide between religious and social domains.



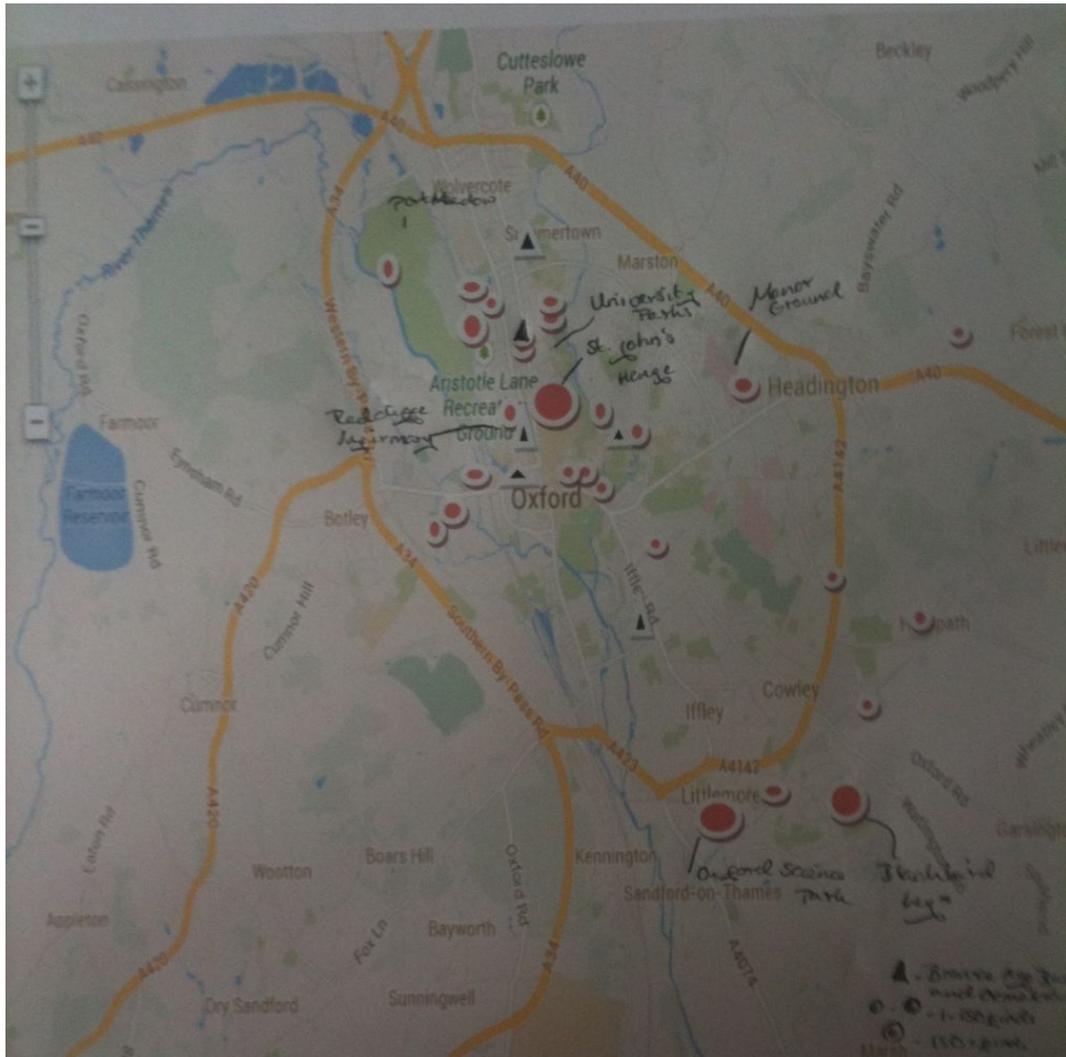
**Figure 3: Map showing Neolithic finds around Oxford City (green circles).**

The Neolithic faded into the Bronze Age around 2500-1800 BC, as the use of bronze metal-working became more prevalent throughout Britain. However, many of the Neolithic religious sites seem to continue to have been used or reused in the Bronze Age. Dodd goes as far to say that ‘during the early Bronze Age...it is clear that a substantial ritual focus developed at Oxford’ because of the patterns of

<sup>12</sup> Pryor, *Britain BC*, pg. 213

<sup>13</sup> Richard Bradley, *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge World Archaeology, 2007), pg. 37

religious activity revealed in the cropmarks of the University Park in the 'hot summer of 1976'.<sup>14</sup> Although, as we have seen, there was significant religious activity in this area before, we can speculate that communities may have started to develop new spiritual techniques and devotional practices in this period. These were the same people returning, as their ancestors had done, to the same places; the only difference was that they had begun to work in bronze and possibly hold slightly different ceremonies. In the early transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age that Stonehenge was given its iconic shape and structure, suggesting that a relatively sophisticated community was putting its opulence on show for the rest of the world as a religious site.

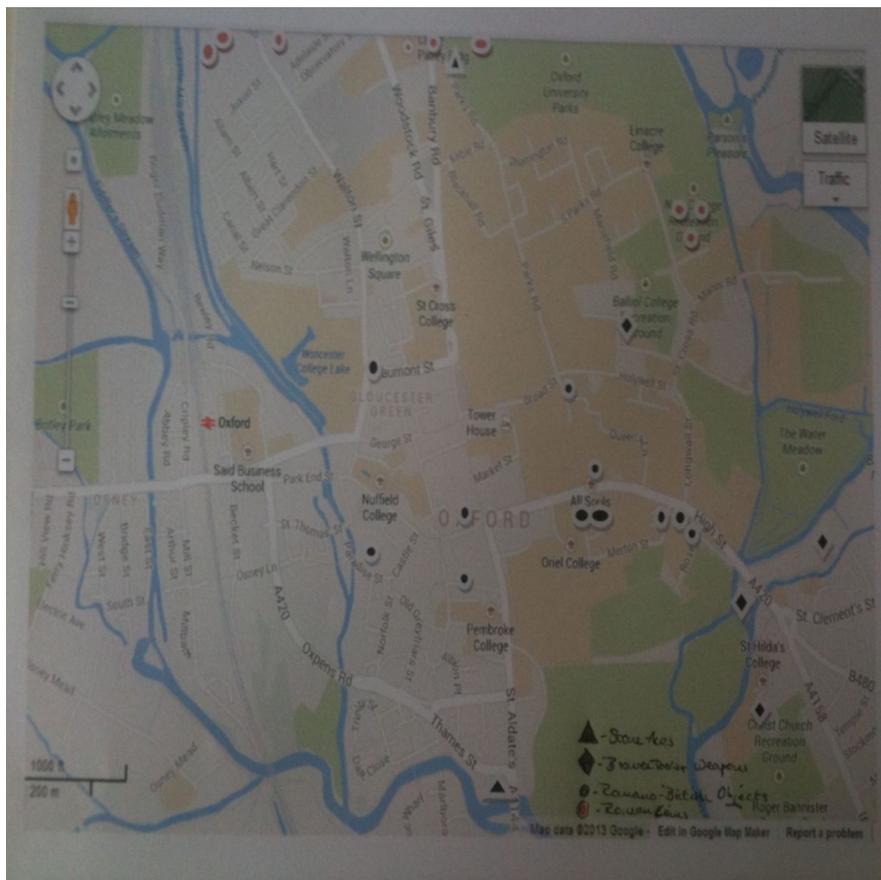


**Figure 4: Map displaying the continued use of Oxford City during the Bronze Age (red circles).**

Nineteenth-century finds of bronze objects (the accounts give us no more detail on what these objects actually were), in the ford area allow us to use the Magdalen College School site to help point to related shifting Bronze Age ritual practices in the Oxford region. This is attested by two maps, from Beckley, and Henig, both showing the finds planted firmly in the middle of the channel (Figures 4 and 5). The use of the Oxford landscape is also reflected in several later Beaker burials, in Port Meadow and with numerous other examples of Bronze Age activity in and around the henge of Keble College

<sup>14</sup> Ed. Anne Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pg. 9

(Beaker burials were burials where a certain type of later Bronze Age 'beaker' pottery was placed with the body). The MCS bronze objects, from the ford area, indicate in particular the crossing point's value in this Bronze Age, and suggest that the crossing point began to be used in accordance with the rest of the religious sites. The public dumping of important objects in water at this time - that holy element - is widely recorded, showing religious piety as well as community wealth. People had the materials and time to perform these rituals-possibly at lunar or eclipse events. The fact that the Spit is an island could further support the view that such activity took place at the MCS site. As Mark Parker Pearson observes, 'islands' could have been separate and independent tribal territories, and the crossing points to them would provide a natural spot for displays to do with political and social competition'.<sup>15</sup> The site could be seen as a boundary on the edge of a supernatural domain and possibly also of another tribe's area. This is reinforced by the richness of the bronze objects committed to the water (many other objects could have been lost to the river's movement over time).



**Figure 5: A map showing the find of bronze objects at the MCS site (lower right-hand side of the picture).**

However, as the site does not yield other evidence for this being the case, it could equally have been just a simple ford leading towards the present city centre. At Yarnton, a few miles from Oxford, a 'stone and wooden roadway' over the river has been discovered.<sup>16</sup> If the same tribal grouping in this area existed around the MCS site, they could have constructed the same kind of pathway. The finds made could have been chance losses, without real significance. The lack of evidence for a roadway could be due to the constant use of this ford over time, and the many dredging operations that were carried out here during the nineteenth century. There is some evidence for these bronze objects having

<sup>15</sup> Pryor, *Britain BC* (Harper Perennial, 2004), pg. 286

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 299

little religious significance from two hoards of bronze tools and weapons found in Leopold Street, Cowley Road and Burgesses' Meadow, which is situated alongside Port Meadow. E. Leeds, in a lecture given in 1916, believed that these were the 'contents of the wallet of a travelling smith', perhaps even from the wallet of the 'same person'. In the light of Leeds' reading, the Magdalen crossing hoard could be another accidental or deliberate setting down of bronze by a common trader, possibly travelling on the 'roadway' leading across the river.<sup>17</sup> Then again, the use of Oxford as a religious space, and the beginning of a class system in the Bronze Age, would have allowed those who had control over the bronze mines and trade routes to commit certain valuable objects to the waters, as possibly at the MCS site. The Beaker burials in Port Meadow point to a newly divided society where communal burials or structures (the Dorchester cursus and the St. John henge for example), were neglected and individuals demonstrated their wealth through private burials. Social and political competition began, it can be surmised, to become a regular feature of life, and our ford would have been a prime space for these ritual observances to have occurred.

However, the site suggests Oxfordshire's importance even during its earliest occupation. One can envisage a band of Neolithic worshippers crossing the ford, in this period, perhaps heading for the religious sanctuary at Keble College. Then, in the Bronze Age, the site was further developed, not only as a crossing point, but also for the sacred quality of its 'islands', as well as a place where public wealth could be flaunted in religious ceremony or funereal practices. In these long periods Oxfordshire became an area that was fully linked with its ritual landscape, one where there were, seemingly, divisions between ritual and everyday domains, sometimes marked by water courses.

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<sup>17</sup> E. Thurlow Leeds, 'Two Bronze Age hoards from Oxford', 23 March 1916 paper, *Society of Antiquaries Proceedings* XXVIII,,pp. 147-153. My thanks to Dr Jane Harrison for pointing out this article to me.

## Chapter II

### The Iron Age 700 BC-43 AD and the Roman Occupation 43- C.410 AD

The absence of evidence for the use of the Magdalen crossing as a settlement, and not simply as a waterway with religious connotations, that is apparent in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (as reconfirmed by my geophysical survey of the MCS floodplain site), does not persist when we inspect the Iron Age's impact on this location. For this period we *do* have evidence for a possible settlement, and for some building development, which suggests that at this time the flow of peoples and goods across the river went along with some domestic occupation.

During one of the many investigations that have been undertaken by Oxford Archaeology over the past decades, due to the steady growth of the Magdalen College School site, 'two Iron Age postholes' were discovered, dateable due to the finding, also, of items of 'Iron Age pottery'. Postholes are the areas left in the ground where a wooden post once stood. The Oxford Archaeology report comments that it is 'unlikely that the post holes were isolated features'.<sup>18</sup> It can be surmised, therefore, that the site was in use, most probably as a small farming community or way-station, in this period. Yet, though the report is helpful for putting forward the view that the school's location makes it an 'ideal settlement site' for early peoples, the archaeological results are very limited in their detail; not even a specific dating of the Iron Age pottery is given. As this period stretches over seven hundred years, the results are, on balance, not that revealing.

Even so, despite the lack of detail in the Oxford Archaeological report, it is possible to deduce from the evidence we have, that, with the arrival of the Iron Age, the site was used and viewed in several different ways. The ritualistic part of the site did not diminish for, as Francis Pryor argues, 'water and wet places played a very important part in Iron Age religion'. But these uses could have been adapted with the changing interest in the site.<sup>19</sup> A great amount of weaponry and precious goods were deposited in the River Thames by Iron Age peoples, which were turned up by later dredging. So, at this time, we have not just a ritual or religious route or site, but a possible small farming settlement taking advantage of the good alluvial soil. This, on a route that may have already been well known to the peoples of that area and their ancestors because of its possible religious connotations. A farming settlement suggests itself because we have no evidence for any larger or more specialised activities at this site. Indeed, it is probable that the people who lived on the site were little different from those who had gone before, and their views had not changed. However, in 800-550 BC, with the implosion of the bronze industry and trade, society did have to adapt to a new medium and develop new social structures, though scholarly opinion is divided as to whether former elites broke down or changed their shape, and therefore how and when the postholes and pottery might have been used.

This scholarly debate has centred on the timing of this shift; hillforts have proved to be a useful example when considering the disappearance of the former elite sites. Barry Cunliffe, points out that, as bronze trade with the Mediterranean states broke down, there was a neglect of old 'elite settlements'.<sup>20</sup> In explanation of the appearance of the hillfort (the 'dominant domestic architecture') in the period, Cunliffe suggests that in the British Isles the modified 'elite' of the latter part of the Bronze Age used their new-found power through the use of iron, and the greater authority that arose

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<sup>18</sup> [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/catalogue-adsdata-arch-841-1-dissemination-pdf-oxfordar1-71488\\_1.pdf](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/catalogue-adsdata-arch-841-1-dissemination-pdf-oxfordar1-71488_1.pdf), pg 17. Accessed 14/7/12.

<sup>19</sup> Francis Pryor, *Britain BC* (Harper Perennial, 2004), pg. 336

<sup>20</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Britain* (B.T. Batsford Ltd/English Heritage London, 1995), pg. 32

from this, to develop their centres of power.<sup>21</sup> In his view, the ‘elite’s’ power was now based on the ‘enhanced value of corn as a commodity for social control’, with the evidence coming from the large number of storage pits, which often stored grain, found in the hillforts.<sup>22</sup> Yet although Cunliffe’s ideas represented a significant breakthrough in the perception of the Iron Age, they do not always chime with evidence from the hillforts or other settlements themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Against Cunliffe, Creighton suggests that for the most part ‘evidence for a hierarchy of buildings within [a hillfort] is absent’.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, there seems to be a lack of ‘significant difference between hillfort and non-hillfort sites in anything other than sheer size’. In terms of the evidence for Oxfordshire, I fall in with the idea propagated by Creighton that the ‘elite’ in this region in the Early to Middle Iron Ages was either small or non-existent. Peoples who made up the society were largely unchanged from the Bronze Age. In this reading, society could still have been largely based on the same egalitarian lines as in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. The MCS post-holes could then have marked the foundations of a relatively ordinary farming settlement. In the Early to Middle Iron Ages they could point to a patchwork of largely equal settlements that grouped together alongside the hillforts of the Ridgeway, including Uffington Castle. That does not mean however that there were no defended sites in the Oxford region. Indeed, recent evidence from Rose Hill points to the fact that there was some protected focus here. The ‘ditch’ features around Rose Hill are suggestive of the ‘characteristic elements of an early Iron Age box framed earth and timber rampart’.<sup>25</sup> As the Rose Hill site is one of the few, in this region, which stands on an outcrop overlooking the confluence of two rivers, and moreover as there does not seem to be any hillfort between the course of the Cherwell and the Thames, we can speculate that there was some kind of sheltered settlement here. To this defended site, we can suggest, the owners of the building at the Magdalen College School site would have come, either to hand over tribute or to participate in community activities.

Though much of this is speculation, the evidence does suggest that, as Henig and Booth put it, ‘Iron Age Oxfordshire was a land of small and largely self-sufficient farms and hamlets, though these are often part of larger kinship groups acting in concert within larger settlements’.<sup>26</sup> The ‘farm’ at the site could also have been linked to the rest of the region by a network of tracks and semi-roads that connected the different settlements and prominent geographical features, although no evidence for roadways remains.

As to the dating of the Iron Age pottery and the post holes: that they link to the Early to mid-Iron Age is probably the most feasible reading. The Middle to Late Iron Age transition was one of marked upheaval and change. Creighton largely puts this down to the re-introduction of gold into Britain, which allowed certain alliances to be built up following the trade in this highly valued good. However, gold was not the only commodity entering Britain; there was also some infiltration of other luxury goods from the Roman Empire. The Roman world was a vast consumer of raw materials and commodities, and, Britain was a land abundant in many types of metals as well as being a place where slaves could be acquired. It became a key nodal point for Roman trade. In Britain, the vast

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pg. 39

<sup>22</sup> John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pg. 5

<sup>23</sup> In fact, it is almost as if his ‘celtic elite’ have been influenced by the actions of the later Roman officials - to control the ‘mob’ is to control the corn supply.

<sup>24</sup> John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pg. 9

<sup>25</sup> Ruth Beckley and David Radford, ‘Oxford Archaeological Plan: Resource Assessment 2011: The Iron Age’ (webpage), pg. 11. Accessed 22/6/12.

<sup>26</sup> Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire* (Sutton Publishing, 2000), pg. 32

technological and material superiority of the Romans was seen by some as preferable to their current lifestyle, and therefore was more sought after.

As the demand for raw materials from the Roman world grew (especially after Caesar's two invasions in 55 and 54 BC), a certain class of local warlords emerged 'aggressively engaged in the procurement of slaves'. These warlords cemented their bands' allegiances with gold torcs and coins. They built large 'oppida' (or settlements) in the valleys, like that at the Dyke Hills in Oxfordshire, and may have caused a large-scale abandonment of hillforts. The oppida may also have arisen because of the 'increased importance' of 'riverine trade'—a view which suggests a new use of the river as a vehicle for waterborne communication and trade.<sup>27</sup> Yet, whatever the reason for the introduction of oppida, eventually these warlords began to form their own distinctive states which produced, amongst other things, sophisticated pottery designs. This emergence of states can be fully tracked by Roman accounts of Britain. When Caesar invaded, there were no large states or eminent leaders. But when Claudius occupied what is now England less than one hundred years later, he took over a markedly different land.<sup>28</sup> Late Iron Age Britain therefore is distinguished by its larger settlements, tribal identities and important kings. Following this theory of transition, the MCS settlement, if it was based in the Late Iron Age, could have been expected to yield a greater number of 'better' finds (though these may of course have been removed or destroyed in the later exploitation of the site). Yet, as it does not, an earlier Iron Age dating for the postholes is suggested by me.

As this indicates, the crossing point site can be seen to map changing social structures and interactions in the British Iron Age. The continuing equality of the Early to Middle Iron Age is suggested by the relatively modest 'farm' or settlement, with its two post holes, whereas the transition to a divided society that developed through increased contact with Rome is not reflected. The floodplain site was probably first taken for use, in the earlier period, as a potential settlement. At the same time, the crossing point continued in its use as a barrier, as well as a thoroughfare for some waterborne trade. Increasingly it was seen not only as a divide between the domains of the material and the spiritual but one between two distinct societies; the more so as, in the later Iron Age, state formation became key. The crossing point and floodplain are likely to have been a boundary between different groupings, or a dividing line separating two or more powers. Henig and Booth make clear that the 'Cherwell is the only major tributary of the Thames without a defended focus. Unlike the other rivers, the Cherwell has long been seen as a boundary between tribal territories', in this case between the 'Dobunni and Catuvellanni'.<sup>29</sup> The island of the Spit may have been a neutral place between the two sides because of its significance as a religious place, separated from the increasing militaristic and class dominated world by its two streams of water.

As their role in the tumultuous events of the Late Iron Age suggested, the Romans' part in the development of the economic importance and industrial significance of Britain in general, and Oxfordshire in particular, in this period is crucial. The Romans, as a conquering power, brought a new culture to Britain, and implemented profound social and cultural changes. Rome viewed Britain as a land beyond the sea in which generals and governors could win prestige for themselves. With this added attention, London replaced Colchester as Britain's principal town, Hadrian's Wall dominated the north, large settlements became the norm, and the production of pottery and raw material boomed. Henig and Booth observe that 'Oxfordshire was in no way a territorial unit in the Roman empire'. Oxford and Oxfordshire were divided between the particularly new civitates of Verulamium,

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<sup>27</sup> Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pg. 24

<sup>28</sup> John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pg. 21

<sup>29</sup> Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pg. 27

Silchester and Corinium (present day St.Albans, Silchester and Cirencester).<sup>30</sup> Yet, despite the existence of the proximate market towns of Dorchester and Alchester, ‘administration...was focused outside the county’, suggesting ‘that [Oxfordshire] condensed itself to something of a cultural backwater’.<sup>31</sup>

However, Henig and Booth’s view is limited in some respects because Oxfordshire, although not a major cultural heartland of Roman Britain, remained a fertile area with an abundance of river valleys. The more built-up areas of Roman Britain needed certain materials like wool and pottery to carry on functioning: all of these were, as they acknowledge, produced in Oxfordshire.<sup>32</sup> Its importance as a supply area of this kind becomes apparent with the ‘estates’ that developed at North Leigh and Ditchley and the impressive villa at Chedworth, coupled with the later usage of Dorchester-on-Thames as the ‘site of the first West Saxon bishopric’. These various developments point to some recognition of Oxfordshire as an important area, one which the Saxon barbarians, who followed the Romans, also recognized.

The pottery industry in the area gives further insight into the impacts that the Romans had on Oxfordshire, and again sheds some light on the uses of the MCS site. Oxfordshire Romano-British pottery was renowned throughout Roman Britain, and may have been traded on an international scale. As we can see from Figure 6 below, the pottery kilns seem to have been largely located around Oxford, with significant sites at Rose Hill, Lower Farm, and Sandford. These kilns most probably employed many people and needed a great amount of raw materials, not only from local, but also regional, suppliers: ‘the iron-free white clay...was only obtainable from the vicinity of Shotover Hill’.<sup>33</sup> This important industry created a need for transport around the region, and, as there were no major Roman roads in the Oxford area, a large number of local roads grew up. At the MCS site, as we will see from Figure 6, (disregarding its slight ambiguity as to where the road actually lay), a possible local trackway joined Frilford - the major local temple complex site - to the road leading from Alchester to Dorchester. Such a road linked the Oxford pottery industry in with these sites. We can therefore speculate that the MCS site developed more as a place of communication than as a border in this period. Indeed, it may have seen a high volume of movement, because of the great amount of traffic, moving up from Frilford via the Oxford potteries.

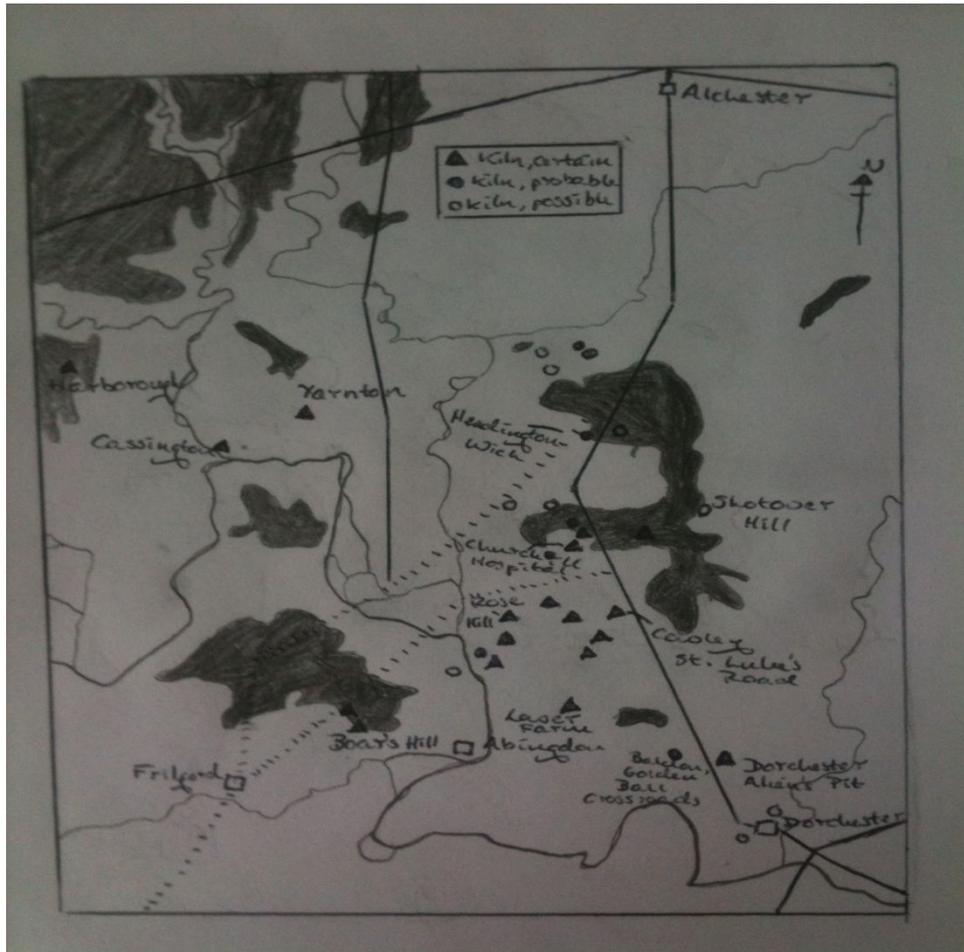
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<sup>30</sup> Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pg. 34

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 35-40

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 40

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pgs. 220 and 395



**Figure 6: Map of the location of pottery kilns in the Oxford area with known and possible routes of roads drawn in.**

In respect of the Roman period, therefore, and as is re-confirmed by my geophysical survey, the site yields no signs of settlement, first because there had probably been no major settlement here in the Late Iron Age, and then because the Romans generally chose not to build on often dangerous and unstable flood plains. However, its importance as an area of communication was re-established with the neutralisation of the opposing states of the Late Iron Age, even though, as stated above, there was still administrative division between the different civitates. In another excavation of the site before the building of the new science block in the 1950s, Romano-British pottery was found mixed in with one of the earthworks of the Civil War.<sup>34</sup> Again the finds are unfortunately difficult to establish a date for. However, these finds do back up Henig and Booth's statement that 'pottery has always been one of the clearest indicators of trade in Roman Britain because of its relative indestructibility'.<sup>35</sup> We can surmise that though there was little major Roman 'metropolitan' activity in the area, there was Romano-British presence and movement ('Roman' because again the makeup of society did not change drastically). The crossing point could have been used as a ford for the transport of goods, mainly pottery, from the Oxford kilns. It may have also come with a related 'river crossing shrine' as at 'Bablock Hythe', which could signify a continuing religious usage. There is no concrete evidence for this, however.

<sup>34</sup> <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archsearch/record.jsf?titleId=1799854> Accessed 10/6/12.

<sup>35</sup> Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, pg. 41

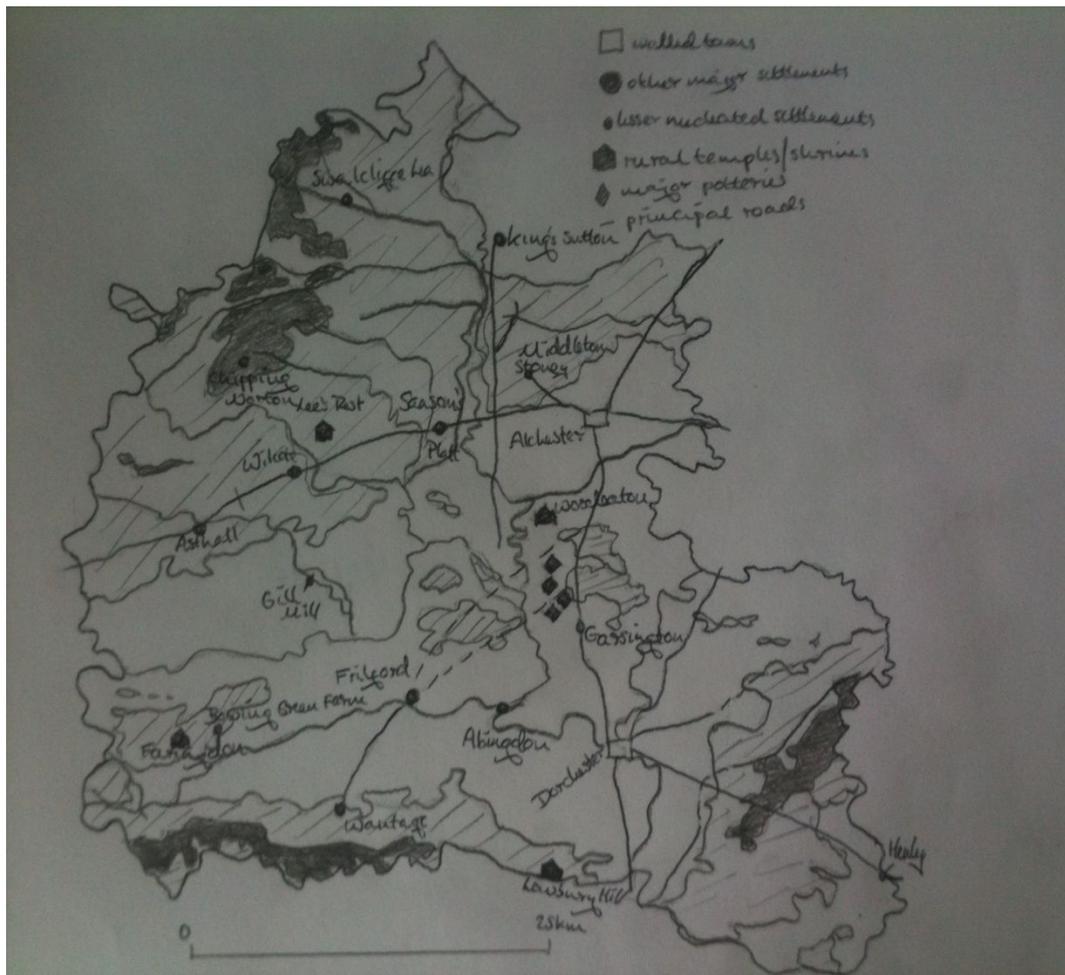


Figure 7: Map of the main landmarks in Oxfordshire during the Roman occupation.

Though it would be wrong to grant Oxfordshire anything more than a relatively undistinguished place in the Roman world, it was however part of that busy wider universe, and an essential cog in the domination of the Britons by the Romans.<sup>36</sup> In particular, it was a place from which resources could be obtained to drive this new culture. Our crossing point can therefore be seen as significant in so far as it was a place which permitted the transport of these goods from their site of manufacture to markets elsewhere. During the Iron Age and into the Roman period, the MCS crossing point and floodplain site were by no means became disused. Rather they were adapted to the different ways and lifestyles of the cultures that took them over.

<sup>36</sup> Though we must remember that the present-day county boundary is an artificial and modern construction and bears no continuity of the Roman administrative divisions.

### Chapter III

#### The Anglo-Saxon Age, c.410-1066 AD

As has been discussed, contrary to common belief, Oxford was an area of some occupation and of exchange using water systems, from a very early stage. The Anglo-Saxon period saw what might be called the official founding of Oxford, and this gave an importance to the MCS site that had not been considered up to this point.

Society may initially have continued as it had during the occupation, with the Romano-British kilns providing material for the surrounding countryside and settlements, by using routes such as at the MCS ford. It is important to note that even before the Romans had 'left', however, Roman culture in Britain had already been declining. According to Robin Fleming, around the official Roman withdrawal in 383AD, 'the pottery industry began to exhibit signs of strain ...and within a single generation of 400 AD pottery became a lost art'.<sup>37</sup> There was no longer any industry controlled by a state or national entity. This troubled 'broken' Britain lay open to the raids of both the barbarian raiders to the north and also sea-borne invaders. These invaders included Jutes, Frisians and most importantly the Saxons who, first arriving in the c.400 AD, were eventually to 'conquer' the whole of England.

With the arrival of the Saxons the British landscape, including that around Oxford, was renamed and adapted to suit the needs and language of the newcomers. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, 'Saxon settlement is to be found all along the Upper Thames gravel terraces'.<sup>38</sup> However, the Saxons may initially have passed by the future site of Oxford and chosen Dorchester as their base, where they were employed by the Romano-British authorities, possibly as *foederati*-mercenaries (that is, mercenaries brought in for protection against the increased warlordism in the countryside due to the removal of Roman authority).

After a gap in the archaeological record for the MCS site from 300 to 400, which complements the fact that Britain in this period became more inward-looking and its society fragile, the Saxons appear to have fully established themselves in the Oxford region around the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. During the same excavations in which the Iron Age artefacts were found, 'two small sherds of probable Anglo-Saxon pottery' were discovered. These two finds in the 'same context...may be significant in hinting that there was some Anglo-Saxon activity nearby'. This, coupled with the dating of the pots, 'c.450-850', suggests that there was Early Saxon movement in a region which was at first dominated by the 'Gewisse' and then the 'Mercians'.<sup>39</sup> But this is not the only evidence from Oxford for Early Saxon movement and settlement. There were also sparse finds in Osney and Dean Court Farm; there may have even been another 'early Saxon crossing' at St. Aldates, in the vicinity of Folly Bridge.<sup>40</sup> Then again, we must take into account the breadth of the dating of the Anglo-Saxon pottery found at the MCS site. The pots might not actually come from this early period and this suggests a continuing lack of use of the MCS site as a place of occupation and even of cross-river movement. Even so, we cannot completely discount the Oxford area as a place of occupation at this time. There

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<sup>37</sup> Robin Fleming, *Britain after Rome* (Penguin Books, 2011) pg. 27

<sup>38</sup> Ed. Anne Dodd, *Oxford before the University* (Oxford Archaeological Unit, 2003) pg. 12

<sup>39</sup> [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/arch-841-1-dissemination-pdf-oxfordar1-71488\\_1.pdf](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/adsdata/arch-841-1-dissemination-pdf-oxfordar1-71488_1.pdf), pg 12. Accessed 14/6/12.

<sup>40</sup> ed. Anne Dodd, *Oxford before the University*, pg. 12

must have been some Saxon presence in the area to warrant the later founding of Frideswide's ministry. I would suggest that the Early Saxon activity at the MCS site was much like that of the Early to Middle Iron Age. Scattered farms took advantage of the good soil for farming and the shifting river system for protection.

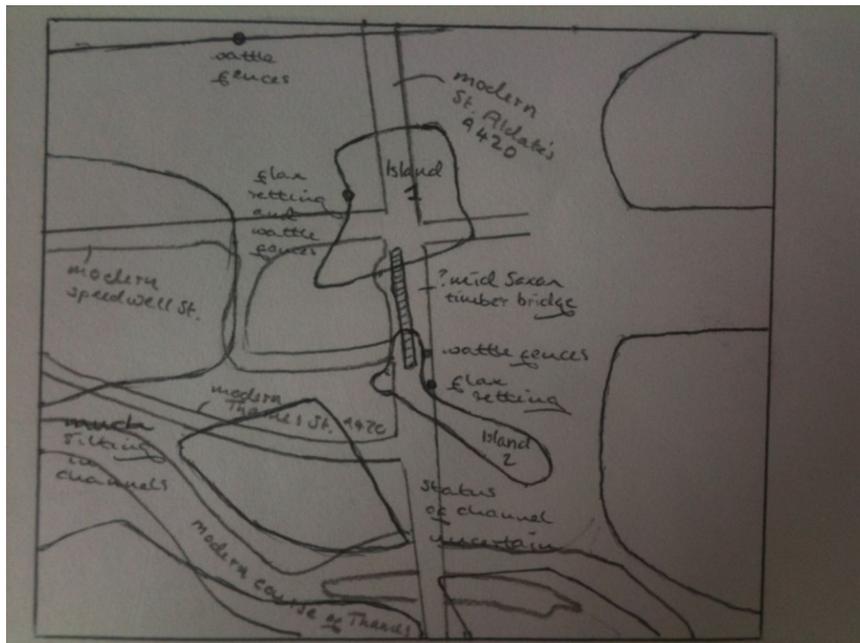
It is the Middle Saxon period that is significant for the instatement of Oxford as a more important place of settlement. This phase saw an 'onset of renewed alluviation' which introduced a chain of islands where the centre of Oxford now stands (see Figure 8). This age also witnessed the founding in c.727 of Frideswide's Minster: in Rathbone's words, 'a monastery... founded by a Saxon Princess—Frideswide'.<sup>41</sup> Although there was a 'royal estate ...at Headington', this was the first major settlement at the site of 'Oxenford', a site located between the Thames and the Cherwell. About ten years later, a settlement was developed 'outside the gate of her [Frideswide's] monastery'. This reference to an Early Mercian royal settlement at Headington chimes with the fact that there was some Early Saxon activity in this region, though it doesn't give evidence for the placement of Frideswide's minster. The myth of Oxford's foundation, and the importance of Frideswide in it, is aptly put by Dodd as 'a long, if muddled, tradition'. Blair argues that 'the Frideswide legend may preserve a garbled memory of genuine people, places and events', because it links in with 'the foundation of a whole series of minsters along the Thames and its tributaries during the later 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries'.<sup>42</sup> Oxford itself may or may not have had a minster, although a recently discovered cemetery near Christ Church Cathedral backs up Blair's argument. The Oxford site could have been developed even further as a 'Mercian bridgehead fortress during the latter part of the reign of King Offa', because of the 'development of military obligations in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries'. This shows how the wider Oxford site was becoming important, in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons, as a point where an emerging kingdom might centre its control. It is key to note that, possibly because of Oxford's growing status; the rulers of Wessex had by the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century 'established their authority over the area'.<sup>43</sup> This also reveals the continuing importance of Oxford as a point of defence or division from the Iron Age onwards, placed as it was between the Mercian and West Saxon spheres of control.

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Rathbone, *A Chronological Dictionary of Dates* (Minerva Press, London, 1998), pg. 1

<sup>42</sup> ed. Anne Dodd *Oxford before the University*, pg. 17

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, pgs. 18-19



**Figure 8: Map showing the mid-Saxon era island system in central Oxford overlaying the modern day street plan in the St. Aldates' area.**

However, this speculation does not get us much further in establishing the relevance of the MCS floodplain site in this phase of Oxford's history. The same two sherds of pottery may have come from this middle period, something which could help explain the new-found interest in the Oxford area, perhaps due to the foundation of a settlement based on some kind of religious institution. Then again, the broad dates attributed to the two pieces of pottery mean that we cannot fully credit the argument that the MCS site was once again used, as it had been in the Iron Age. The possible building of the mid-Saxon era timber bridge in Central Oxford (Figure 8), could point to the fact of the Saxons arriving in the area in this period, their intention being to tame the waters of the Thames and its tributaries in order to establish proper routes for trade and a continuation of settlement in a progressively more united Thames valley. Even if there was not an established bridge at the MCS site (only some evidence of timber piles have been found at the site in central Oxford), one of the later routes into and out of Oxford *did* come through here, and the later Viking bridge's origins may have rested upon the remains of a bridge on this spot (see below). The Saxons, we can observe, began to adapt Oxford for their own ends at this time. Even though there is no concrete evidence for any marked traffic on the site, there is nothing to diminish an overriding sense of Oxford's increasingly more important position in the mid to late Saxon period.

From around c.900 Oxford began to enjoy royal patronage and became more and more significant as a place of trade, largely due to the introduction of Oxford to the rest of England as a burh as expressed in the Burghal Hidage of King Edward the Elder. Burhs were 'places of varying kinds that had been supplied with fortifications in order to serve as defended places against the Vikings for the surrounding countryside'. This follows on from its first mention in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the

year 911-912.<sup>44</sup> The Chronicle records the major events (battles and councils) of the Anglo-Saxon Age but not the steady build-up of settlement. An earlier reference to Oxford, therefore, would not be expected. This burh status suggests that Oxford's position as a place of defence was not only being recognised, but that it had become the foremost point in its district: as Rutherford states, 'Dorchester was suspended by Oxford ... [because of] the decay of the Roman road from Silchester to Alchester and to the growth of a new route from Southampton to the midlands via Oxford'.<sup>45</sup> Oxford was also becoming a place affiliated to the wider political world, 'attributable to its central position and good communications, it became a meeting-place for the 'Witan', the council; indeed, several councils were held here from the reign of Cnut to Harold 'Harefoot'.<sup>46</sup>

However this does not mean that the MCS crossing-point site had any major role to play in the new importance of the burh as it continued to lie outside the town's boundaries, as shown in Figure 9. Nonetheless, the Cherwell crossing was significant because it lay on the direct road to London, which at the time was being established as the principal settlement of England. The kings and their entourages may even have swept up the road through the MCS site, crossing a possible temporary bridge on their way to the east gate not far away. The common merchant would also have crossed here. Oxford did not only trade with London but it also had 'access to a wider range of pottery from northern France, Belgium and the Rhineland, as well as whetstones from Norway'.<sup>47</sup>

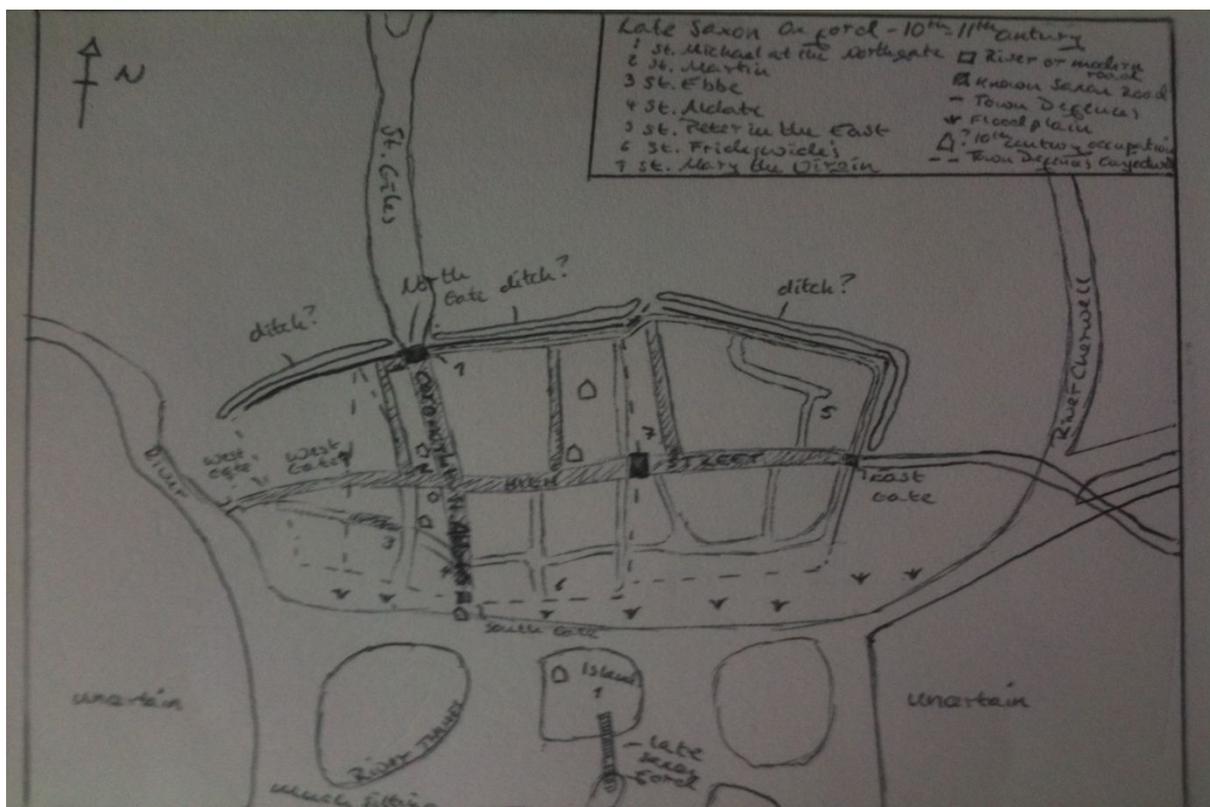


Figure 9: A map illustrating the expansion of Oxford—on the edge of the floodplain, during the 10<sup>th</sup> century and showing the Oxford-London road.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pg. 19

<sup>45</sup> K. Rutherford, *Britons and Saxons: The Chiltern Region 400-700* (Phillimore & Co., Chichester, 1982) pg. 23

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Fasnacht, *History of the City of Oxford* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1954) pg. 15

<sup>47</sup> Robin Fleming, *Britain after Rome*, pg. 250

The expanded Anglo-Saxon Oxford was a protected walled place where merchants and royalty resided, and ordinary workers laboured in Oxford's growing new industries (particularly coin-making and tanning).<sup>48</sup> This position is suggested by the find, during dredging in 1884, of 'a well preserved Umbo or boss of an Anglo-Saxon shield', discovered along with 'an iron spear-head', which points to the militarisation of Oxford burh, and the possible presence of a garrison guarding the all-important crossing to London. These finds could also be associated with a royal entourage, for the 'spear head' was of a 'much more elaborate make' than other spears of the time, which may reflect that Oxford was becoming a place of kings. At the same time it must not be forgotten that the population of ordinary inhabitants, too, would have been increasing in size.<sup>49</sup> The origins of the later extra-mural settlement of St. Clements might also date from this point, though no evidence has arisen to support this.

In the later Saxon period, therefore, the various developments that Oxford experienced were virtually all reflected in continuing importance of the MCS site: royal patronage, political position, increasing communication and exchange, and the importance of the town on a major through-fare to London, as reflected by the 1884 dredging finds. Even with our relatively limited evidence, re-confirmed by my geophysical survey of the site, we are able to chart the rise and expansion of Oxford by the river-dwelling Saxons and to see how their predominantly commercial lives overrode the religious significance of the crossing-point. Despite Oxford's connection to founding of St Frideswide, it was only later, in 1120, that the church of St. Clements was established right next to the site.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pg. 42

<sup>49</sup> [oxoniensia.org/volumes/1950/seaby.pdf](http://oxoniensia.org/volumes/1950/seaby.pdf), pg.6

## Chapter IV

### The Viking Age c.900 AD-c.1000 AD

There is evidence that, in 1009, one of the members of the Danish Army of Swein Forkbeard scouted out the Cherwell crossing, where Magdalen Bridge currently stands, so as to obtain a more direct route for the army into Oxford. The scout was killed in action. His comrades, having burnt Oxford to the ground, came across his body the next day. They buried him on the MCS island, so his soul could ascend to Valhalla from this place of victory. But his formal burial also staked the Vikings' control of this vital crossing point on the road to London.

This was how John Blair and Barbara E. Crawford interpreted a scattering of finds that had come to light in 1886 underneath the Magdalen Bridge.<sup>50</sup> They speculated that a Viking warrior had been either buried here or despoiled by his enemies. His 'prick-spur' they identified as an Anglo-Scandinavian piece which had been 'securely stratified in a mid-11<sup>th</sup>- century Winchester House'. Blair and Crawford further linked the Magdalen Bridge finds with another burial, from Velds in Jutland, which held stirrups dating from 1000.

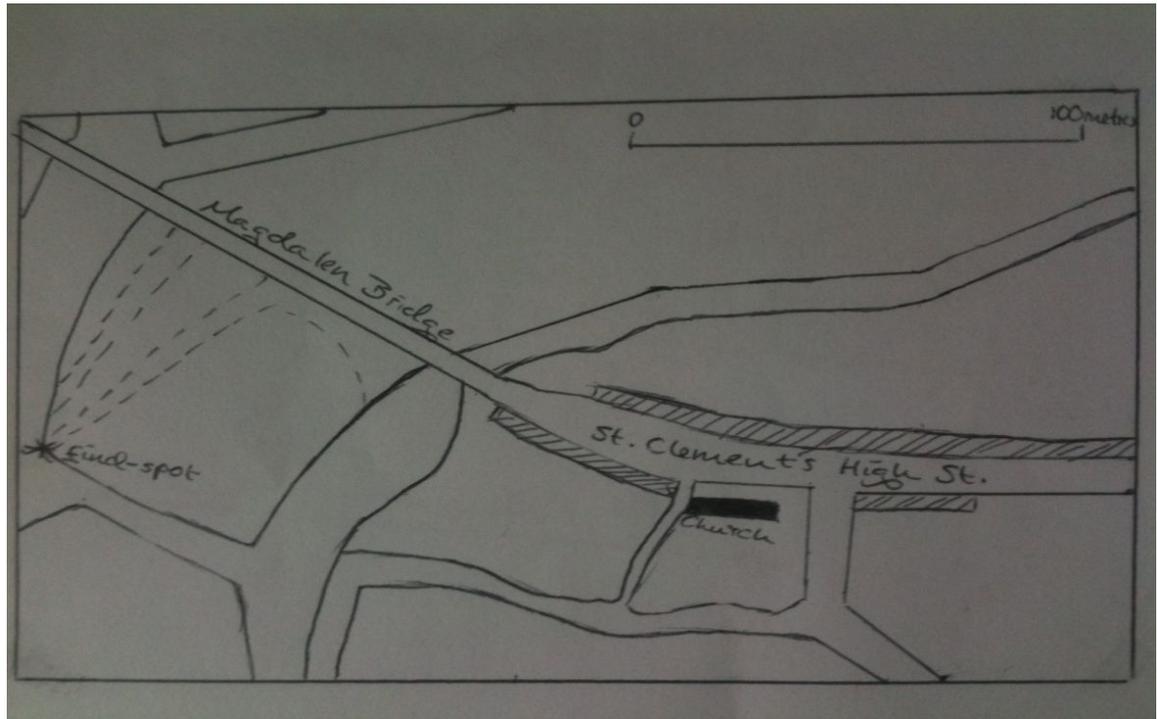
Blair and Crawford's reading was imaginative, and threw light on the significance of the site for the Vikings during their period of occupation. However, from the moment their controversial paper appeared in *Oxeniensia*, it was attacked by other historians of the period, for basing its claims on too little evidence. Richards, in his work *Viking Age England*, stressed that more recent evidence from Skerne (Humberside), which included a large amount of metal work and bones, had been 'closely associated with the oak piles of a bridge abutment or jetty', and therefore that the Oxford finds related to an early Viking bridge construction.<sup>51</sup> In this alternative reading, the finds made in 1886 would not be those of a Viking raider, but rather related to a more domestic settlement of Vikings living over the crossing point in the St. Clements area. Richards' valuable point, which I will pick up later, is that the finds suggest the marker of a boundary between the Danish and Saxon sections of Oxford.

As we have discovered for other periods, and as re-confirmed by my geophysics, there is a paucity of evidence relating to when the Magdalen Bridge crossing point was in use. The mixture of bones and metal work finds which Blair and Crawford wrote up, was dredged from the river bank by a party of workmen who were widening the channel around the Spit. They were sold to the Ashmolean Museum, but the bones were subsequently lost. Blair asserts however that they largely consisted of thigh bones which would nicely link them to the stirrups that were also part of the find. However, these spurs and other bits of the metalwork were not diagnostic (linked together), and are therefore more closely attributable to a hoard or boundary marker than a burial. The top of the Viking skeleton seems never to have come to light, and hence it seems unlikely that it ever existed because, if this was a burial, all of the bones and metalwork would have been found together.

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<sup>50</sup> John Blair and Barbara E. Crawford, 'A Late Viking Burial at Magdalen Bridge, Oxford?' *Oxeniensia* (1952), pgs. 135-9

<sup>51</sup> Julian D. Richards, *Viking Age England* (English Heritage, 1991), pg.116



**Figure 10: Sketch map showing the 'burial site' in the St. Clement's area.**

As the debate over Blair and Crawford's arguments shows, the archaeology of an unstable, shifting area such as a floodplain, is always open to difficulties of interpretation. We must again remember that this part of the Oxford floodplain will have been exposed to rising waters many times over the past millennium. So the Viking remains could have been drawn downstream by the waters of the Cherwell during the almost 900 years since they were deposited in the MCS grounds. Moreover, the soil type is alluvium- a typical rich flood type which blankets features, and makes archaeological surveys more difficult.<sup>52</sup> Blair and Crawford dismiss the idea of the finds washing downstream as they weren't found on the river bottom. However, they could have been covered by alluvium. As this suggests, the Viking finds, relatively detailed as they are, once again only give us a snapshot, tantalising as it may be, of what was happening at this point on the site.

Varieties of sources, not only from accidental finds, are needed to make more concrete suggestions regarding the nature of settlement in the area at this period. Here, modern geophysical surveys, based on the methods and techniques of physics, can often be of use. The properties of earth materials allow inference about those materials to be made from measurements of physical fields and therefore highlight features in the ground, including burial chambers. In October 2011 a geophysical survey was carried out on the Spit, led by archaeologist Paula Levick, assisted by myself. Our objective was to see if Blair and Crawford's ideas might point to a greater Dane era burial or settlement area. The results were negatively conclusive: there was nothing to be found. Anything that there might have been was long ago blanketed by the alluvial soils of the floodplain. This doesn't mean there was

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<sup>52</sup> Alluvium is a soil type that is usually found on floodplain sites due to the sedimentation caused by river flooding. Its covering nature means that it often blocks geophysical surveys by blanketing.

nothing there at some point, but rather that it was either completely covered over or destroyed by the river's changing course.

As my reading of Blair and Crawford and the conclusions of the geophysical survey suggest, the two 1950s archaeologists wrongly raised the importance of Oxford and England's status as places of extraordinary historical interest by imagining a late Viking burial in this land (as evoked in my opening). That said, the end of their essay, which examines local Viking influences in the MCS area, could shed some light. The area of Magdalen College School lies within the parish of St. Clement's, the earliest name of which, according to Blair and Crawford, relates to the Anglo-Saxon *brycg-gesett*, meaning bridge settlement. This would support Richards' suggestions about boundary marking. Blair and Crawford further suggest that the local dedication to St. Clement, a saint commonly affiliated to the Danes, points to a Danish and also Christian settlement located just over bridge on the Spit.<sup>53</sup>

What can be ascertained, therefore, is that Danes were living in the St. Clement's area at around the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century. Frank Stenton's *Anglo-Saxon England* references the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which points to the death of Gunhild, Swein Forkbeard's sister, in the St. Brice Day massacres at Oxford in 1002. These were ordered by King Ethelred the Unready, as he feared being killed by the Danes living in England. In Oxford, according to a charter drawn up by Ethelred, the Danes led by Gunhild fled into St. Frideswide's church for shelter before it was burnt down around them.<sup>54</sup> However, archaeology of the city has revealed no burning layer, even around the site of St. Frideswide's, which would suggest burning across a wider terrain. There may have been no significant burning in the town, suggesting that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* at this point is flying overly patriotic colours. Conversely, again, however, a recent find in the grounds of St John's College does give some evidence for a slaughter. A mass grave of butchered non-military males was found within the Keble College Neolithic cursus (religious thoroughfare), which indicates that innocent farmers and traders of the Danish settlements were killed as part of the St. Brice Day massacre.<sup>55</sup>

The evidence we have (textual and archaeological) therefore points to a mainly Christian community of Danes living on the outskirts of Oxford who felt that their Christianity might redeem them in the eyes of their fellow Christian Saxons. That the Danes built their 'bridge settlements' near to existing Saxon ones is known throughout England, according to Michael Wood in his *The Story of England*. He uses the example of Westerby (West-farm) near Kibworth which has a Viking root, *vesterbyr*.<sup>56</sup> Although our 'bridge settlement' has no Viking root for its name, it could signify a crossing point between the new immigrants and the old, properly separated by a river. This can be further backed up by the St. Clement's church dedication, St. Clement being the patron saint of seafarers (and possibly other forms of water-borne communication). The lack of late Saxon finds on the MCS site points to little Saxon influence here, however, and the paucity of evidence relating to the Viking's presence doesn't make the idea of two settlements separated by a river concrete either. But, as we have no other evidence for Vikings around Oxford, their bridging point at the site (as put forward by Richards) can be taken as a sign denoting their presence on the edge of the then town.<sup>57</sup> This presence perhaps encouraged Oxford to surrender as quickly as it did in face of Swein's army in 1009 (although it didn't save Oxford from being burnt down).

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<sup>53</sup> Blair and Crawford, 'A Late Viking Burial at Magdalen Bridge, Oxford?', pgs. 135-143

<sup>54</sup> Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pg. 380

<sup>55</sup> Verbal report on 2010 diggings by supervisor Dr Jane Harrison.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Wood, *The Story of England* (London, Penguin Books, 2010), pg. 90

<sup>57</sup> Richards, *Viking Age England*, p. 116

To propose a different reading again, rather than looking for settlement in the area, we might look for evidence of the movement of people, for example, Danes, over the crossing point. We might also see the movement of people and their goods mirrored in the constant shifting of the river over the ages. The importance of this place as a crossing point is signified by the possible Danish bridge and illustrates Oxford's strong strategic position, being placed on one of the main arteries of the Thames. Goods from Oxford in this period have come up all over the Thames valley, which signifies how the Viking presence did not diminish the importance of Oxford's position. They seem even to have enhanced it with their new quarter in the St. Clement's area, especially as the Danes, although foreigners, were often affiliated with trade, which boosted Oxford's income. As Richards puts it: in the Viking era 'parts of the town tended to trade with certain [outlying] areas, or displayed cultural preferences'.<sup>58</sup> Oxford as seen by MCS's few Viking pieces was not held back by the new divisions in its society but continued to develop and, despite the burning, became an even more significant area of trade.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Richards, *Viking Age England*, p. 90

<sup>59</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 383

### Conclusion: After the Norman Conquest

The early Norman period, for which we have the most concrete literary evidence for the use and occupation of the Magdalen crossing-point site, forms an indicative and appropriate phase on which to bring this archaeological study to a close.

With the coming of William I, the Anglo-Saxon nobles were turned off their land and their tenants had to face the new future of being ruled over by a foreign people. As far as Oxfordshire is concerned, John Blair goes so far as say that: 'It would be foolish to pretend that 1066 was anything other than disastrous for the people' of the county, which probably suffered a reduction in trade and royal interest. The town of Oxford (and hence the importance of our site) may have even contracted: in the Domesday Book it is described as 'seemingly half in ruins'.<sup>60</sup>

Yet the picture was not completely bleak for all of Oxford's inhabitants. After all, the Domesday Book only grants us a sketchy snap-shot of English society. Moreover, as the investigation of the MCS site has suggested throughout, dramatic changes in history bring interesting new developments and equally interesting residues. Though the Saxon aristocracy had been displaced and the new Norman land owners were taking over the top rung of society, higher class tenants like 'Wulfig the fisherman' and 'Reginald the archer' in the area were able to keep hold of their estates.<sup>61</sup> Other less well-off Saxons may initially have been badly affected by the diminishment of Oxford's position and destruction of its trade—as Blair states, 'Oxford was left to retreat from the political limelight into obscurity'—but within a few years this markedly changed.

Robert D'Oili, one of William I's most trusted marshals, was made governor of Oxford soon after the Norman Conquest and he set the failing city to rights. Oxford's Castle is regarded as the work of D'Oili, and, although it caused hardship and terror when it was first planted, literally on top of some of Oxford's earlier structures, it won recognition for the town.<sup>62</sup> The introduction of sharp class differences in the period meant that a city's position relied on the patronage of either a king or noble. In Oxford's case this was once again D'Oili, who also began to construct bridges and roads to expand Oxford's communication network. His most renowned work was the building of the 'Grandpont', a landing site not far from what is now Folly Bridge. At the MCS site, he is credited with building the first permanent bridge structure 'known as Pettypont', which stood until 1772. The new structure not only began integrating the population of the 'bridge-settlement' of St. Clements with the main town, but also opened up better communications on the 'all important' road from London to Oxford.<sup>63</sup>

From this point on, Oxford began to boom and expand hugely. It regained the prestige that it had had in the Saxon period. The population had not substantially changed, but their circumstances had improved. As Blair points out, 'all of the ten moneyers who struck coins in Oxford during the reign of William I and William II ... had Anglo-Saxon names'. The 'great new stone [bridge] with a fortified gate and drawbridge' built over the Cherwell at the crossing point, also marked the new stability of the kingdom.<sup>64</sup> The greater numbers of its churches, too, reflected an increase in prestige. The fact that Henry I built his dwelling just outside the city walls, the Palace of Beaumont in which the Kings

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<sup>60</sup> John Blair, *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire* (Allan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994) pg. 171

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous [chronicler c.1085], *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*, ed. Ann Williams et al. (London, Penguin Books, 2002) pgs. 422-441

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Fasnacht, *History of the City of Oxford* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1954) pg. 23

<sup>63</sup> Fasnacht, *History of the City of Oxford* pg. 24

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 24

Richard I and John were born, also suggests a re-animation of royal interest.<sup>65</sup> By 1180 there are also the first signs of an active academic community.<sup>66</sup> Once again, changes at our crossing-point site, in this case primarily the building of the bridge, can be seen as a barometer of the town of Oxford's position in relation to wider British and European history.

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Throughout this study, though evidence has sometimes been limited, as the geophysics shows, finds from the Magdalen College floodplain site have registered the different cultural and political impositions to which England in general, and Oxfordshire in particular, was subject from the Neolithic times into the Norman period. Although the MCS site is not Oxford's only crossing point—and not the actual 'oxen-ford'—its floodplain geography, and its position on important thoroughfares going east, have given revealing indications of the peoples that used and settled in the area from earliest times. Whether barrier or bridge, religious cursus or commercial passageway, the crossing point and its affiliated floodplain site give a unique opportunity to investigate how different societies interacted with the sifting changes through time of a cross-section of the Cherwell River, its banks and islands. Across history and into the present-day, specific local interactions at this point give clear reflections of broader regional and national change.

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<sup>65</sup> Fasnacht, *History of the City of Oxford* pg. 25-8

<sup>66</sup> John Blair, *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire* (Allan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994) pg. 183

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