

The documentary analysis, Watermead Country Park, Leicestershire (Accession no. A57.1996)

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The finding of an early Saxon structure, interpreted as a bridge or jetty, adds to the few physical remains of Saxon bridges or causeways in England, recently surveyed by Brooks (2002). The causeway linking the island of Mersea in Essex to the mainland has been dated to the 690s by dendrochronology (Crummy et al. 1982). A bridge at Cromwell (Notts.) discovered in 1882 has been newly dated by the same method to the 690's (Salisbury 1995). In addition, a timber and clay causeway leading to the river at Oxford has been suggested as late 8th or early 9th century on the basis of C14 dates, though it may have led to afford rather than a river bridge (Durham et al. 1984). From a later period the earliest phase of the excavated abutments at London bridge have been dated to c.987-1032 (Watson et al. 2001). In Ireland, a bridge across the Shannon, discovered by divers in 1994, has been dated by dendrochronology to AD 804. It lies close to the important early monastic centre of Clonmacnoise (O'Sullivan and Boland 2002). These finds reflect partly the growth of professional archaeological units but also the growing interest in studying the archaeology of rivers.

The Watermead bridge is difficult to place in social or political context given the lack of documentation and the imprecision of its dating. The area appears to have lain within Middle Anglia to judge from Leicester housing the bishop of that sub-region. This territory or conglomeration of territories appears to have been subsumed by the mid seventh-century within the kingdom of Mercia. Unfortunately the expansion of Mercia is poorly documented (Brooks 1989; Yorke 1990). The Soar valley was certainly well settled as the cemetery evidence shows, though the concentration of cemeteries around Leicester, may be merely a reflection of suburban expansion (Courtney 1998, 11-4; Leics SMR data). The evidence from Northamptonshire where the ceramic evidence allows reconstruction of settlement patterns points to the dominance of dispersed farmsteads or small hamlets in the early and middle Saxon period (Parry 1994). Later royal villas such as Melton Mowbray and Higham Ferrers may have their origins in early Saxon tribal centres but their early history is obscure. Watermead does not appear close to any other place which later evidence might suggest as an early political or ecclesiastical centre. To the west of the river Ratby and Rothley were undoubtedly the most important late Saxon estate centres but their date of origin is totally uncertain.

The bridge lies about 5 Kms to the north of Leicester's walls. There is archaeological evidence for early settlement within the walls and it probably became the intermittent seat of a Middle Anglian bishop from around 690 (Bailey 1980). There is uncertainty on whether it was in any sense a central place before this date. However, it is a possible that an early Saxon political focus lay close by to the former Roman *civitas capital* rather than within its walls. It may be significant that the bridge lies only about 3 Kms east of what is likely to have been the edge of extensive woodland in the Saxon period, represented later by Charnwood and Leicester Forests (Fox and Russell 1948; Squires 1981; Courtney 2003). This was no doubt a valuable resource for

timber, firewood, hunting and grazing. The Charnwood Forest area is also believed to been the centre of a major pottery industry in the early Saxon period whose products reached Southampton and the Humber (Williams and Vince 1997).

A minimalist view would be to see the bridge as merely giving access to land in between the river braids. Rivers were valuable resources providing fish, fowl, reeds, grazing and winter hay. Indeed, in the 13th and 14th centuries meadow was often valued at three times the worth of arable in extent. On the other hand one might expect such a braided river to be easily fordable in summer. This strengthens the case for it crossing the river in its entirety and having a more significant function whether economic or military. It is uncertain whether bridges in this period were the product of initiatives by local communities but especially given the dispersed nature of the settlement it seems more likely that a wider authority whether tribal, princely or even the Mercian crown was involved. The duty of bridge maintenance was a duty imposed on all land from at least 749 but could well have earlier origins (Brooks 2002, 14-6). The lack of any obvious repairs at Watermead parallels the Clonmacnoise bridge and suggests both had relatively short lives. This has led to the suggestion that Clonmacnoise bridge lying on an important and turbulent frontier may have been constructed for a single military campaign (O'Sullivan and Boland 2002). The lack of a precise date, and the historical obscurity of 'Outer Mercia' in this period, suggest that the function of the Watermead bridge is likely to remain unclear. However, the new interest in riverine archaeology will undoubtedly produce more parallels in decades to come.

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