CHAPTER 8

Aquatic Archaeologies

A world perceived through the paddle[1]

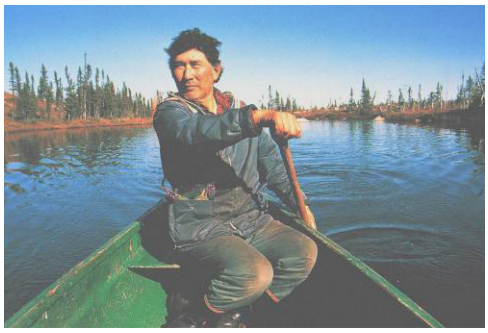
This thesis is concerned with small-scale settlements, field systems and trackways – the world perceived through feet and through hooves (q.v. Ingold 2004). But the land was not the only medium for movement – the many rivers draining through the region would have been vital for longer-distance communication, especially the Trent, Idle and Don. The distribution of Iron Age Scored Ware pottery strongly suggests that it was moved along rivers (Elsdon 1992a), in exchange networks that might also have included salt, querns, glass beads and fine metalwork (Knight and Howard 2004b: 87). For many 'hydraulic communities' (q.v. Evans 1997a), water and movement along it would have been crucial to concepts of place and identity. Although watercourses such as the Don and Idle might have defined emerging territories, they were not physical barriers but rather vital arteries connecting people and places. Such aquatic archaeologies and fluid movements are worthy of closer examination.

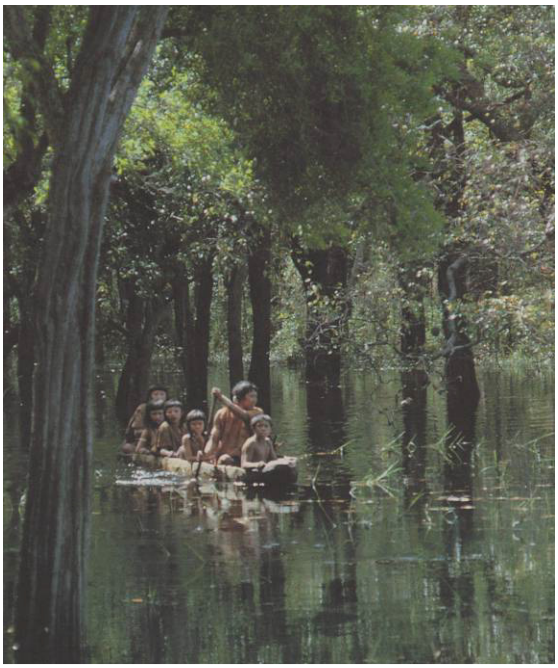
Palaeo-environmental studies show that these aquatic environments were very dynamic and diverse (Knight and Howard 2004: 80). Major river channels would have shifted across floodplains within people's lifetimes, incorporating different temporal rhythms. At one temporal level they were traditional routeways used repeatedly, at another they were constantly changing as banks collapsed, loops were cut through into straighter channels and oxbows created, and sandbars and mud flats formed. Prior to extensive post-medieval drainage there were a myriad of smaller channels shifting and reforming every year, with creeks, becks, reed beds, backwater swamps and flooded carr woods. Seasonality would have been crucial – some areas that flooded during winter would have been impassable during lower water levels of summer when rocks, submerged tree trunks and sandbars were hazards. Water and rivers may have been attributed agency and intent, sometimes even malice.



Figure 8.01. (top left). *Waterfowl and reeds at Fairburn Ings, W. Yorks. (Source: author).* **Fig. 8.02. (top right).** *Cattle and waterfowl at a mere on the River Aire floodplain, W. Yorks. (Source: author).* **Fig. 8.03. (below).** *The River Trent near Carlton-on-Trent, Notts. (Source: author).*

These were very different phenomenologies to land-based journeys – the rush or gurgle of water, the creak of wood and leather, the muted splashes of paddles and the muscular rhythms of paddling, the sudden slaps of beavers and the calls of otters, cranes and bitterns. Although many people in communities next to rivers and carrs may have been able to use boats along their local stretches of waterway, awareness of currents, whirlpools, and sandbars further along watercourses might have been limited to fewer people. Again, this could have been knowledge accumulated through embodied experiences and informal learning 'at the paddle's edge' from an early age (e.g. Fig. 8.09). As in many contemporary and historically-recorded small-scale societies around the world, there may have been 'riverfolk' who specialised in longer-distance movements, acting as traders, fishers, go-betweens and carriers of news and information. Their social and political status might have been more neutral than others, allowing them to move greater distances between different communities.





Being-in-the-world, and Being-on-the-river. **(clockwise, from top left). Figure 8.04.** *Washing sheep using a coracle, Carmarthenshire, 1960. (Source: Ward 1991: 74).* **Fig. 8.05.** *Karawari riverside village, Papua New Guinea. (Source: www.galenfrysinger.com).* **Fig. 8.06.** *Women and children in a boat in Mali, West Africa. (Source: www.farm3.static.flickr.com).* **Fig. 8.07.** *Chacobo family in flooded forest, Bolivia. (Source: Scott-McNab 1994: 152).* **Fig. 8.08.** *Building an Amazonian dugout canoe. (Source: Scott-McNab 1994: 143).* **Fig. 8.09.** *Karawari boys in a dugout canoe, New Guinea. (Source: galenfrysinger.com).* **Fig. 8.10.** *Cree hunter in a canoe, Canada. (Source: Alexander and Alexander1996: 74).*

Sinking feelings

Across northern England, there have been finds of Bronze Age and Iron Age boats at Ferriby, Hasholme, Scotter, Appleby and Brigg in Lincolnshire and Humberside, at Clifton and Holme Pierrepont in Nottinghamshire, and at Argosy Washolme, Aston-upon-Trent in Derbyshire (Garton, Elliott and Salisbury 2001; MacCormick et al. 1968; McGrail 1981, 1987, 1990; Millett and McGrail 1987; Phillips 1941; Wright 1990; Wright et al. 2001). Many of the dugout canoes (often rather derogatively termed logboats) were large, well-made vessels. The stern of the Hasholme dugout canoe had carved oculi motifs, and there may have been carvings on the bows of the Brigg and one of the Holme Pierrepont dugouts (McGrail 1987; Millett 1999). These craft took great skill and time to produce, and might have had considerable status. The Hasholme dugout was made from an oak tree around 800 years old when it was felled, and which had stood at least 10 metres high before it had branched – a tree of considerable size. This would have been a significant landmark in the landscape, and may have been imbued with notions of ancestry and associations with the place from which it was derived. There may have been many smaller, lightweight craft similar to historical coracles made out of animal skins, for which no evidence has survived.

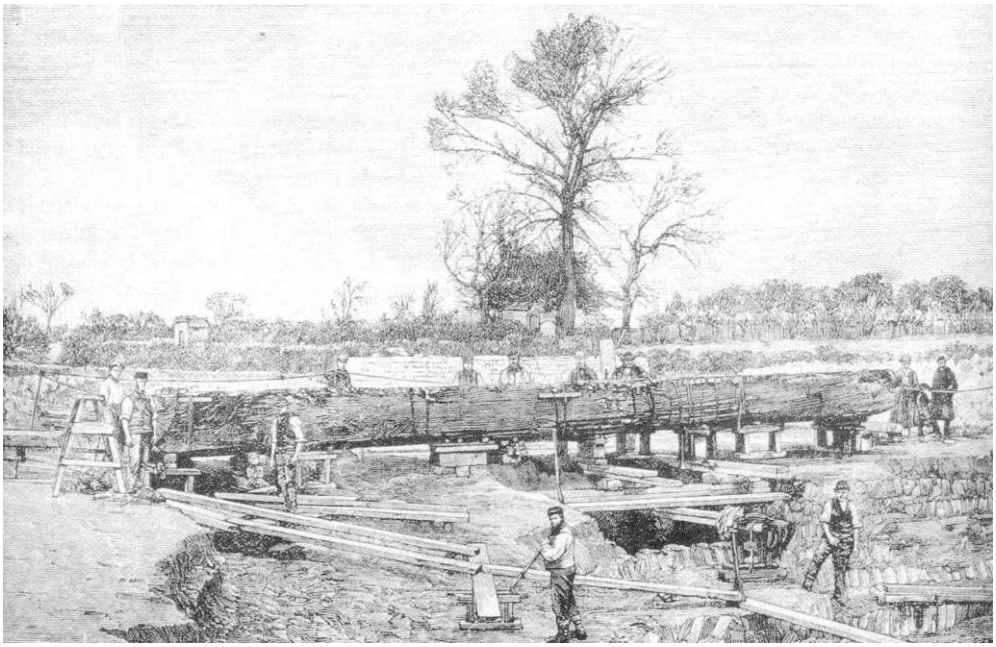


Figure 8.11. *The impressive size of the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age Brigg dugout, from an illustration of 1888. (Source: Van de Noort 2000: 166).*

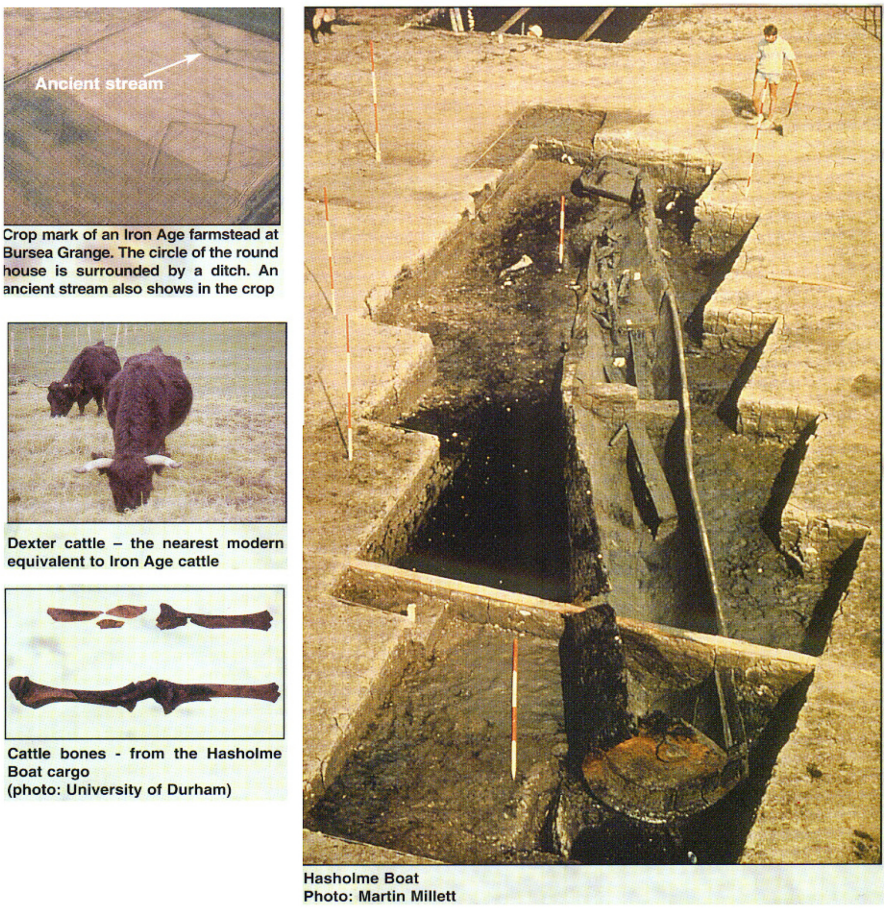


Figure 8.12. *The Hasholme boat as excavated (right). It was full of joints of cattle meat (lower left), in addition to remains of other animals. (Source: Halkon 1999: 9).*

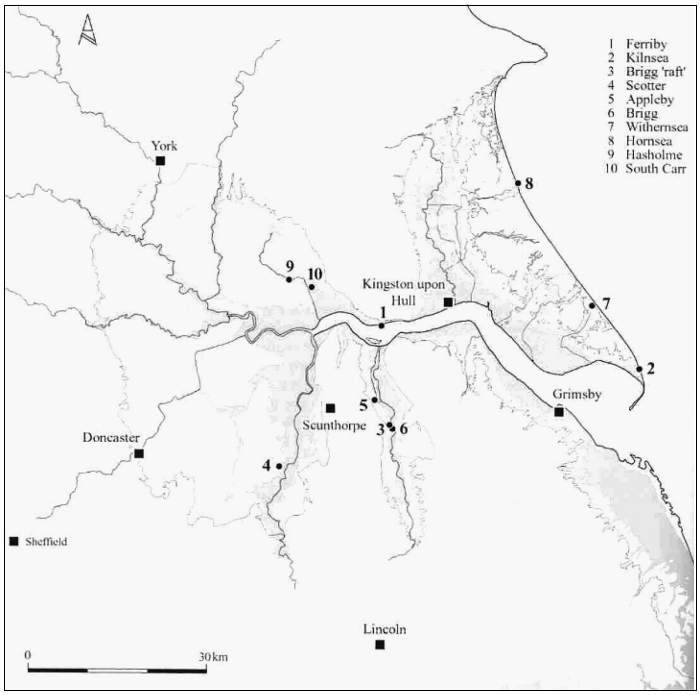


Figure 8.13. *Finds of late prehistoric plank boats and dugouts from the Humberhead Levels. (Source: Van de Noort 2004).*

The loss of these boats is normally attributed to accidental sinking. However, there is contextual evidence that the Hasholme vessel and perhaps one of the Holme Pierrepont examples were deliberately sunk, either through 'decommissioning' rites, or as votive offerings (Ransley 2002: 39-40). The Hasholme dugout contained a 'cargo' of animal remains from cattle, sheep, horse and deer, the vast majority from fully fleshed joints of cattle meat in addition to a complete sheep's head (Stallibrass 1987: 141-143). The dugout was found in the River Foulness, close to a known Iron Age and Romano-British settlement (Millett and McGrail 1987: 70), and seems to have 'foundered' in what was actually fairly shallow water.

> It simply does not seem likely that such a large boat, probably of some social importance, should have been unintentionally deposited complete with valuable 'cargo' in such a relatively accessible and unlikely backwater…If this boat was indeed deposited deliberately, so were the joints of meats, the animal parts and the timber. Indeed, such a hypothesis moves inextricably towards the conclusion that this may well have been a ritual act… (Ransley 2002: 39-40).

At Holme Pierrepont on the River Trent, three dugout canoes were found underneath gravel deposits 4.5m thick, and two were entangled with waterlogged oaks (MacCormick et al. 1968: 16-17). A large morticed beam recovered may have been part of a bridge or causeway. Boat 1 was radiocarbon dated to 410 BC-AD 60 (Musty and MacCormick 1973: 276), although this was from the sapwood and may overestimate the age (Knight and Howard 2004: 82). One of the boats was associated with a finely made wooden cart or carriage wheel dated to the later first millennium BC (Stead 1996: 79). In addition to a nearby Iron Age and Romano-British settlement (Guilbert, Fearn and Woodhouse 1994), timber piling has been identified in the same locale, and two early Iron Age swords were recovered from the Trent nearby, perhaps indicating the locale was used for placed deposits (Cowen 1967; Scurfield 1997: 35).

The context of the three dugouts suggested to the excavator that 'they had been overwhelmed by flooding and came to rest only where further passage downstream was blocked by tree trunks' (MacCormick et al. 1968: 26). Although their final resting place is indicative of a flood-created 'log jam', this need not have been a single event, and there are still questions about how the boats got there, and why the

one was so closely associated with a wheel. Were they just swept away during a flood, along with nearby disused timbers and a wheel, or were they lost whilst transporting these artefacts? Or were they deliberately set adrift carrying these objects? The dugout with the wheel had a longitudinal split in its stern, and attempts had been made to repair it – perhaps this particular vessel at least was being deliberately decommissioned. The association of the boat and wheel may be significant – not only may both be metaphors of journeys and travel, but the wheel symbol might have been associated with sun or sky gods (Green 1997: 41-47). Miniature metal wheels have been found in late Iron Age or Romano-British hoards in Britain, and were portrayed on some antefixes and metal fittings. Interestingly, a lathe-turned wooden disc was part of a series of placed deposits in the large waterhole at the centre of the Hoveringham Romano-British enclosure (Elliott and Knight 1998: 30; Chadwick 2004a: 98). This has resonances with the discovery of a wooden wheel-like object beside a pool or well at Milton Keynes (Williams and Hart 1990).

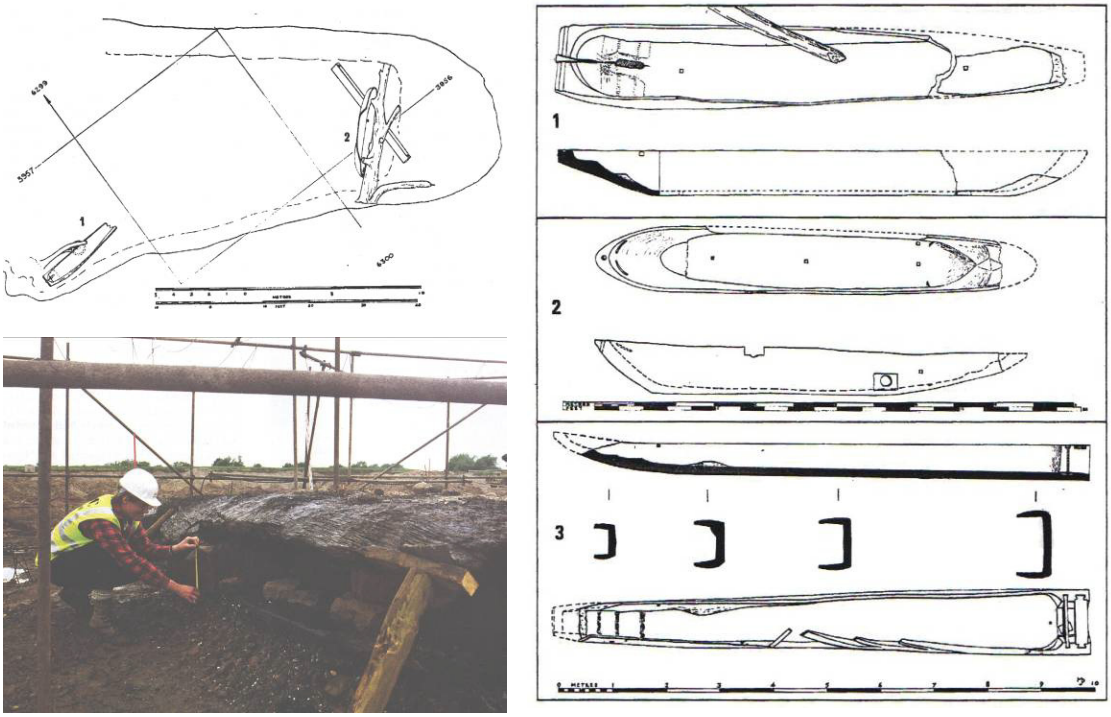


Figure 8.14. *(top left). The context of the Holme Pierrepont boat finds (Source: MacCormick 1968: 17).* **Fig. 8.15. (right).** *Plans and sections of the three canoes recovered. (Source: MacCormick 1968: 20).* **Fig. 8.16. (bottom left).** *Middle to late Bronze Age dugout found at Argosy Washolme, Aston-upon-Trent, Derbyshire, containing a 'cargo' of sandstone blocks. (Source: Knight and Howard 2004a: 58).*

Figure 8.17. *The Roos Carr animal-headed boat and figurines. One figure is now ^{14}C dated to 606-509 BC. They were found by workmen cutting a drainage ditch during the nineteenth century. (Source: © Hull Museum).*

Such watery depositional practices may have also included the Roos Carr early or middle Iron Age yew wood figurines from the Humber wetlands near Hull (Coles 1990, 1993) (Fig. 8.17), standing on a stylised boat. There is also an intriguing nineteenth century reference to a "statue of oak, black as ebony...carved in the habit of a Roman Warrior..." found in peat in between Misson and Haxey around the Isle of Axholme near Doncaster (Coles 1993: 19; Peck 1815: 8). A decorated late Iron Age shield boss was recovered from the River Trent at Redhill near its confluence with the River Soar (Watkin et al. 1976). Dryland contexts in the vicinity have produced Iron Age and Romano-British metalwork, and a temple may have been located there (Elsdon 1983; and see Chapter 11). At Fiskerton in Lincolnshire, Iron Age and Romano-British weapons and tools, jewellery, pottery and human and animal bones were all deposited from a timber causeway into a palaeochannel of the River Witham over an extremely long period of time (Field and Parker Pearson 2003). Two dugouts were recently been found at Fiskerton beside the timber causeway, and these may have been placed deposits – one containing animal remains was deliberately 'staked' down into river silts (J. Rylatt pers. comm.). These practices may have represented beliefs in water as a mysterious, ever-changing and liminal substance, an entrance to other worlds or different realms of being (Chadwick 2004c: 53).

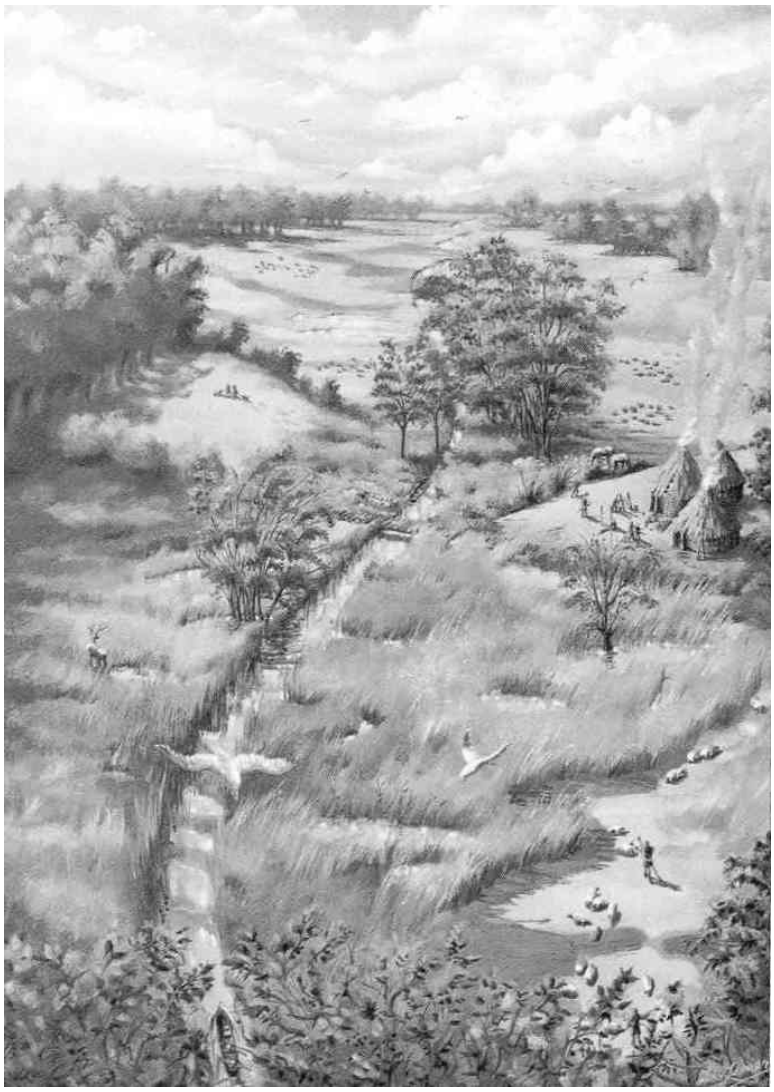


Figure 8.18. *Reconstruction of the landscape context of the Brigg boat in the Ancholme valley around 1000 BC. Settlements located by alder carr woodland at the edge of the Humberhead Levels were probably situated within very similar environments during the Iron Age too. (Source: Van de Noort 2000: 170).*

Several excavated settlements such as Topham Farm, Sykehouse and Balby Carr were situated on the edges of wetlands and carr woodland that was semi-flooded during the winter months (Roberts 2003; Rose 2003; Rose and Roberts 2006). At such locales, more specialised practices may have included the summer grazing of livestock. These people were not simply eking out a miserable existence in marginal areas, but as outlined in Chapter 7 had very sophisticated understandings of these dynamic landscapes involving networks of social contacts, and seasonal exploitation and journeys (q.v. Brown 2002; Evans 1987; Evans and Hodder 2004; Willis 1997b).

Figure 8.19. *Cropmark of the possible fortlet at Scaftworth, Notts., on the floodplain of the River Idle opposite modern Bawtry. (Source: Van de Noort et al. 1997: 410).*

Figure 8.20. *Another possible Roman fort recently identified as a subrectangular cropmark near Kirk Sandall on the floodplain of the River Don north of Doncaster, S. Yorks., SE 6042 0669. (Source: © SYAS).*

Roman riverine routes

Excavations at Redcliff on the River Humber in East Yorkshire have recovered Claudian period Roman fine and coarse wares and Gallo-Belgic pottery (Creighton 1990; Crowther, Willis and Creighton 1989), suggesting that it functioned as a 'port of trade' prior to the Roman conquest of the north (Willis 1996: 194). During and after the Roman conquest, rivers assumed even greater importance as communication and supply routes. Centres such as Castleford and Doncaster developed not just as crossing places but also as internal ports, and some Roman goods such as lava querns from Germany would probably have been brought directly upriver via these trade routes. There may have been other ports at Bawtry, Redhill and Carlton Mill (Palfreyman and Ebbins 2003; Whimster 1983), though much more work is needed to resolve these matters in the future. Recent finds near Bentley Ings suggest a possible later Roman port between the original site of the Doncaster fort and vicus, and a possible site recently identified at Kirk Sandall (Deegan 2007; P. Robinson pers. comm.). The Roman forts at Sandtoft, Roall and possible forts at Scaftworth, Carlton Mill and Kirk Sandall might not only have been guarding road bridges and fords across rivers, but may also have prevented raiders coming upstream during the troubled fourth century (Bartlett and Riley 1958; Bewley and MacLeod 1993; Samuels and Buckland 1978).

In addition to their increased use as transport and trade conduits, the possible temples at Castleford, Bawtry and Redhill illustrate the continuing symbolic significance of rivers during the Romano-British period (see Chapter 11). At such places, existing indigenous beliefs may have been adopted and/or reworked and reinterpreted.

Notes

1. I am extremely grateful to Jesse Ransley for her illuminating discussion of these topics, and for this wonderful phrase (q.v. Ingold 2004).