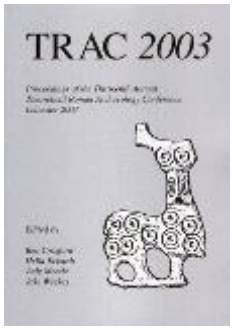

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Prehistoric landscapes of the Ouse Valley and their use in the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period

Judy Meade

Introduction

This paper examines the interaction of Late Iron Age and early Romano-British populations with earlier landscapes and monuments. During the last decade or so, the subjects of memory and of forgetting have become prominent in archaeology and in other disciplines (for example, Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Forty and Küchler 1999) and at the same time there has been increasing interest in the role which prehistoric monuments might have played in later periods. These topics, together with that of ritual landscapes, are closely bound up with the construction of identity (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 14–16). All are relevant to my research on the Middle and Upper Ouse Valley in Late Iron Age and early Romano-British times, which examines aspects of identity in this transitional period, particularly as revealed in burial, ritual and religion, and the symbolic use of the landscape.

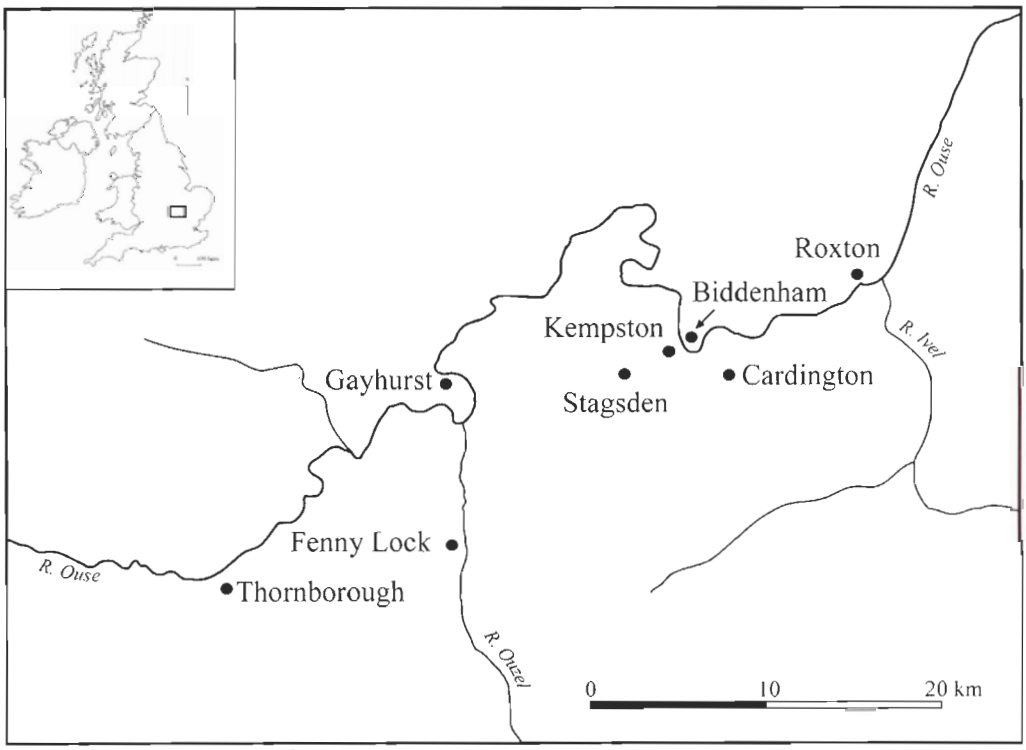

Figure 1: Sites mentioned in the text

The concepts regarding the treatment of earlier monuments and landscapes which were developed in prehistoric and medieval archaeology (for example, Bradley 2002; Hingley 1996; Williams 1997) can be tested using the more closely dated, and richer, data from the period and location of my study. There are other reasons for applying these theories to this area: first, cropmarks, some of which clearly show later interaction with prehistoric monuments, constitute a major part of the data obtained during this research, and second, there has recently been a study of the sacred prehistoric landscapes in the area. This part of the Ouse Valley, located between the River Nene, the Cotswold foothills, the Greensand Ridge and the Fen lowlands, was relatively unknown archaeologically until recently, when development in Milton Keynes and around Bedford took place. Investigations have revealed a great deal of later prehistoric and Romano-British activity, and furthermore, that from the Neolithic period onwards, there were ceremonial complexes along the middle and lower parts of the valley. These complexes included cursus monuments, long mortuary enclosures, round barrows and pit alignments (Malim 2000: 57).

This paper is based on information obtained from the Sites and Monuments Records of the five authorities concerned (Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire). Although aerial photographs have been particularly important, excavation reports and fieldwalking surveys have also been used.

Categories of interaction

Although *reuse* has generally been employed as the 'umbrella' term for this subject, this paper will refer instead to *interaction*, which encompasses a wider range of responses to the past. The research on interaction with earlier monuments and landscapes which has so far been carried out has been undertaken according to the *contexts* in which this activity took place. Thus Dark (1993) looked at barrows, megaliths, and henges. Although there were many Bronze Age barrows in this part of the Ouse Valley, and one or two possible henges, no megalithic monuments are known. Williams, on the other hand, investigated shrines and temples, artefacts and hoards, and burials (Williams 1998a). As such, consideration has been restricted to certain types of interaction on particular site types. No hoards or temples associated with earlier monuments have so far been identified in this area, although burials and ritual activity have been observed, as shown in the following case studies. Furthermore, employing these contexts as categories of interaction would ignore some of those in which interaction has been observed during this research. Therefore, this paper will instead focus on the *types* of interaction which took place.

Studies of interaction with earlier monuments have examined both their reuse (for example, Williams 1998b), and continuity in ritual use (Bradley 1987). However, research in the area of this study has identified two further types of interaction. Therefore, the following categories have been selected for this paper:

(a) Disregard: where older monuments or burial sites have been cut into, or destroyed, for example, by later ploughing, trackways, or enclosure systems.

(b) Continuity: where the same activity can be shown to have taken place more or less continuously on, or in close vicinity to, a site.

(c) Respect: where prehistoric monuments were apparently respected, that is, left untouched, or even protected in some way.

(d) Reuse: where earlier symbolic sites have been reused in a later period, whether for the same activity or for a different one.

For each of these categories of interaction case studies can be found in the Ouse valley (see below) and their critical discussion will be employed to assess how useful these categories really are to our understanding of the region in the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period.

Possible reasons for interaction with earlier monuments

As the examples will demonstrate, the treatment of earlier monuments by later populations was diverse. The motivations for this activity could have been either symbolic or functional, or a combination of both.

(1) Symbolic reasons

Symbolic reasons could include the following, several of which could be related to the construction of personal or community identity:

- religious veneration
- respect for the dead
- superstition, and fear of the dead, of ancient monuments, or of the unknown; these subjects have been addressed for the Romano-British period by Dark (1993) and for the Anglo-Saxon period by Semple (1998)
- the fact that monuments were thought to give some magical protection; perhaps their original purpose was forgotten, and it was no longer realised that they were burial mounds (Vermeulen and Bourgeois 2000: 158)
- ritual resistance to Roman domination by native groups (Williams 1998a: 77)
- legitimation of the elite by demonstrating links with past traditions and supernatural entities (Bradley 1987)
- ancestral cults
- reclaiming territorial rights.

The last two categories, particularly that of ancestral cults, have been criticised by Whitley (2002), who stated that ancestors have been too frequently invoked by archaeologists as a universal explanation for the re-use or re-interpretation of monuments (*ibid.*: 122).

(2) Functional reasons

It should not be forgotten that functional reasons for interaction were just as likely, for example:

- monuments were frequently constructed on lighter, gravelly soils in valley bottoms, which would have been easier to dig than the heavier clay soils elsewhere
- using a barrow mound, or ring ditch, for deposits (burials, hoards) could save time and effort spent digging, and would also render a burial site more visible, and act as a marker
- if barrow fields were still seen as sacred areas, there was a good likelihood that the burial would be left alone
- monuments may have been used to define boundaries and land ownership (Petts 1998: 89)
- new populations might have respected similar sites to earlier groups for purely topographic reasons: for example, river confluences could have been held sacred across several different periods (Malim 2000: 86). This might apply to the case study of Roxton (see below).

Even if sacred sites were left undisturbed, that alone is not evidence of respect: it would have been easier to plough round a mound, or to use it as pastureland instead. Similarly, because of their location on easily cultivated land, close to water supplies from the river, it would be surprising if there were to have been no later occupation alongside many monuments.

Case studies

It is important to examine specific contexts and sites when applying theory to new and emerging field data, and this will be undertaken by means of the following case studies. Although many other examples of possible interaction have been observed in the Middle and Upper Ouse area, these have been selected because reliable, and in most cases, up-to-date, evidence is available.

(a) Disregard

Cardington causewayed enclosure, which lies some three kilometres to the east of Bedford, and one kilometre to the south of the current course of the Ouse, is one case where disregard is the most likely form of interaction to have occurred. The monument dates from the middle Neolithic period and was partly excavated in 1951. Evidence from recent aerial photographs and fieldwalking reveals a dense complex of Late Iron Age and Romano-British activity across the enclosure (Simco 1984: 100). The extent to which these populations were aware of this monument is uncertain: it now lies on a small gravel island between two streams, but the course of those streams has moved over time, and alluviation, as well as ploughing, could have obliterated all traces of it by later prehistory (Oswald 2001: 143). Whether or not this was the case, the later occupation ignores the boundary of the enclosure. The monument is only one kilometre distant from the Cardington ceremonial complex (Malim 2000: 75), although its relationship to that is unclear.

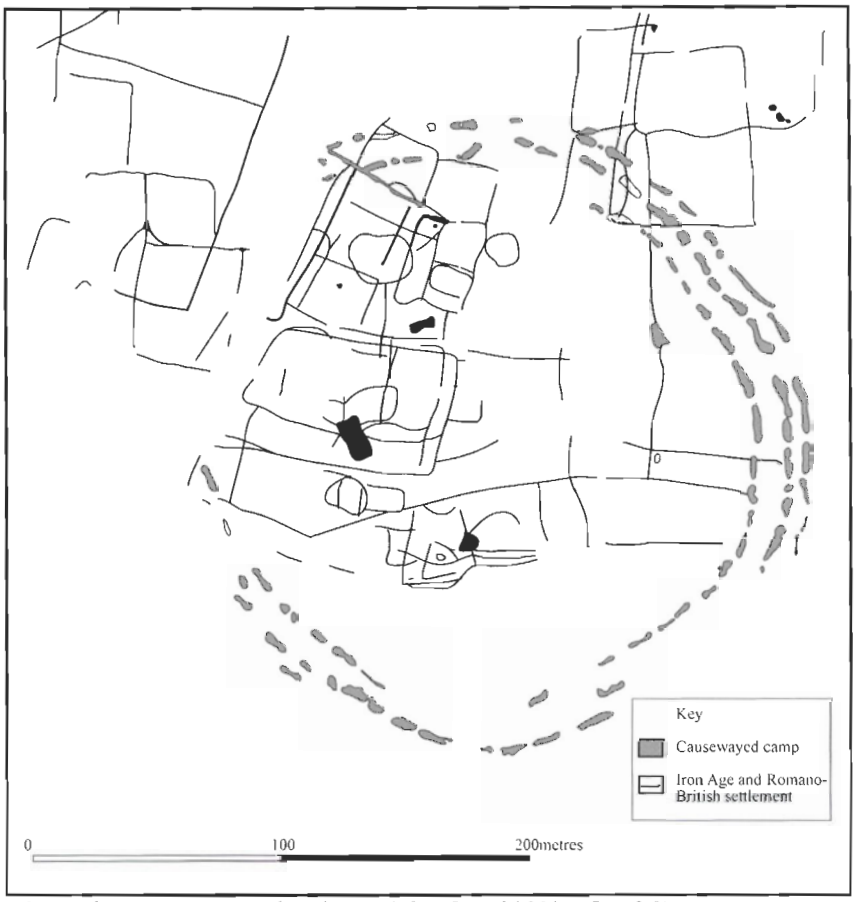

Figure 2: Cardington causewayed enclosure (after Oswald 2001: Fig. 8.9)

A ring ditch, probably the remnants of a round barrow, at Biddenham near Bedford, provides a second example of disregard. Aerial photographs show that enclosures and a double-ditched trackway, which appear to be of Late Iron Age or Romano-British date, overlie the ring ditch. Although no other evidence was found in the area of the cropmarks, a Romano-British well was excavated nearby in the nineteenth century. The high status finds from the well were attributed to the existence in the vicinity of a settlement of some wealth (Simco 1984: 98). At least three other ring ditches, which are undisturbed, have been identified nearby. Again, it is not known whether any of these barrows would have been visible in antiquity.

In both the Biddenham and the Cardington examples, it appears that, for whatever reason, these monuments had lost any special meaning which they might once have possessed.

(b) Continuity

It is difficult to prove continuity of use, for precise dating of the evidence is required, and this is all too often absent, especially when working with aerial photographs. However, a possible

example of continuity of burial in the Ouse area comes from Kempston, which lies a few kilometres to the west of Bedford. Because of its considerable size (twenty hectares), regularly planned trackways and rectangular ditched enclosures, it has been suggested that this settlement could have been a planned large village or a small town (Bedfordshire County Archaeological Service 2000: 7). This site also shows long-lived settlement continuity, from the Bronze Age to Saxon period.

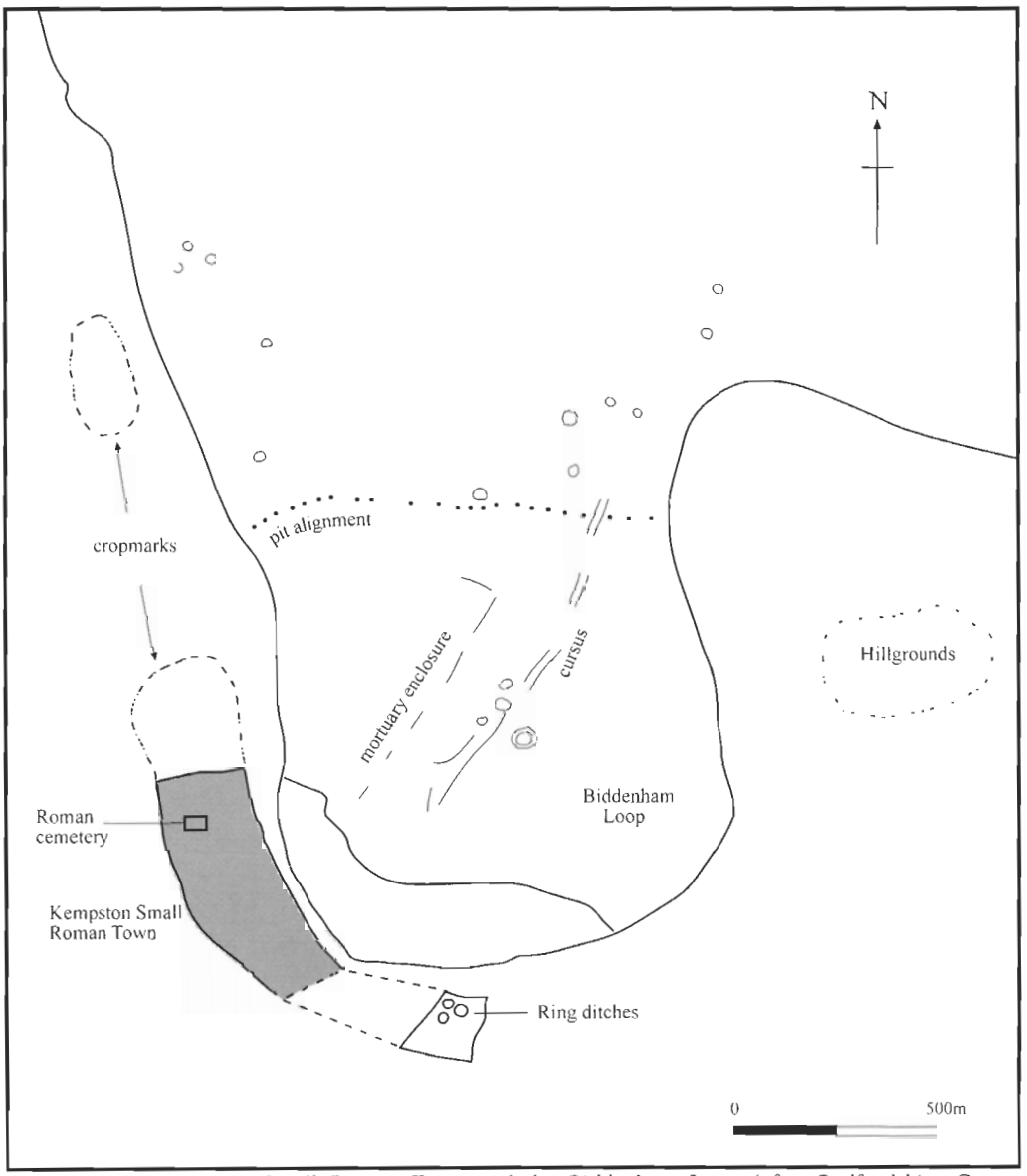

Figure 3: Kempston Small Roman Town and the Biddenham Loop (after Bedfordshire County Archaeological Service 2000: Fig. 1, and Malim 2000: Fig. 8.6)

The main focus of the Romano-British town lies around the modern village of Kempston Church End, but settlement and burial occurred here from the middle Iron Age, if not earlier. From the late first century AD, dispersed burials took place in enclosures associated with domestic activity, and in the mid third century, a formal cemetery was established, which was used until the late fourth century, and contained ninety-four burials. Nearby a polygonal building, with adjacent pits for ritual deposits, was constructed at the same time as the cemetery, which might have been used for funerary rites. A seventh century cemetery was also located here (Dawson, in prep.).

The Roman settlement appears to have extended at least five hundred metres to the south, to an area near the river where three Bronze Age ring ditches, in association with Iron Age activity, have recently been excavated (Luke and Edmundson 2000: 1). Further to the east, at Hillgrounds, there was another settlement focus. Bedfordshire Sites and Monuments Records note that in the mid-nineteenth century, there were reports that early Iron Age material, and a 'Belgic' cemetery in the form of 23 vessels 'in a circle', possibly placed round a Bronze Age barrow, were discovered here. A later Roman cemetery with nine burials was also found (Dawson 1992: 7), and an adjacent Saxon cemetery is one of the most extensive yet known, consisting of 300 burials dating from the early fifth century (Kennett 1986).

Although one of these reports is of antiquarian origin, the majority of the information comes from recent excavations. There is therefore sufficient evidence to suggest that the area of Kempston was occupied and used for burial from at least the early Iron Age until Saxon times. It is to be expected that burial would continue alongside settlement in advantageous locations in the landscape, and in fact it has been argued that most temples or burial sites in Roman Britain were related more to contemporary settlements or routes than to earlier monuments or sacred sites (Williams 1998a: 76). However, it has also been suggested that the presence of an earlier sacred site may have had an influence on the siting of small Roman towns (Loveday 1999: 60). In this context, it is significant that across the River Ouse, and only some five hundred metres from Kempston, lay the 'Biddenham Loop' ritual complex (Malim 2000: 80). This appears to have comprised ring ditches, a possible hengiform monument and a long mortuary enclosure, as well as a pit alignment which cut off the loop of the river to the south. Although the complex was not respected by Late Iron Age and Romano-British settlement and trackways, some of its elements may well have still been visible in that period, and certainly could have been known via oral tradition.

(c) Respect

Fenny Lock is a site adjacent to a tributary of the Ouse, two kilometres to the north of the Roman town of Magiovinium, and just to the east of Watling Street. Recent excavation here has revealed Iron Age and Romano-British settlement (Ford and Taylor 2001). In the middle to late Iron Age, a pit alignment, in association with contemporary occupation, was constructed on the eastern part of the site. In the late pre-Roman Iron Age, occupation appears to have moved to the north of this site, but in the early Roman period activity moved back to this area. Two ditches were dug, one parallel to the pit alignment, and another which bent round to follow the course of the alignment itself. These boundaries appear to have been maintained throughout the period of Romano-British occupation. Although the pit alignment was ephemeral, and was not redug, the boundary was respected. Since the pits were shallow, and would have presented no problem to fill in – indeed would probably have quickly been filled by natural means – deliberate observance is likely.

A second example of possible respect comes from the village of Stagsden, to the west of Bedford, and some five kilometres from the River Ouse. In the 1990s, excavation before the construction of a bypass revealed the late Iron Age burial of an infant. Some years later, probably in the early first century AD, this was isolated by ditches. A century or so later, three stone alignments were constructed which appear to have been intended to enclose the burial (Dawson 2000b: 132). This burial is of particular interest. It was of a new born baby, and lay in a large oval pit, above a carefully deposited new born foal. The burial was accompanied by a number of vessels, some of which had been deliberately drilled, suggesting ritual use. Its unusual nature, and the fact that the grave was apparently venerated for several centuries, suggests that the child could have come from a particularly respected part of the community.

Both of these case studies illustrate community and/or family memory, as indicated by deliberate respect of the site. However, in neither case is it possible to discern whether or not this respect was due to *fear* of the consequences of tampering with these locations, rather than any wish to honour what had happened in the past.

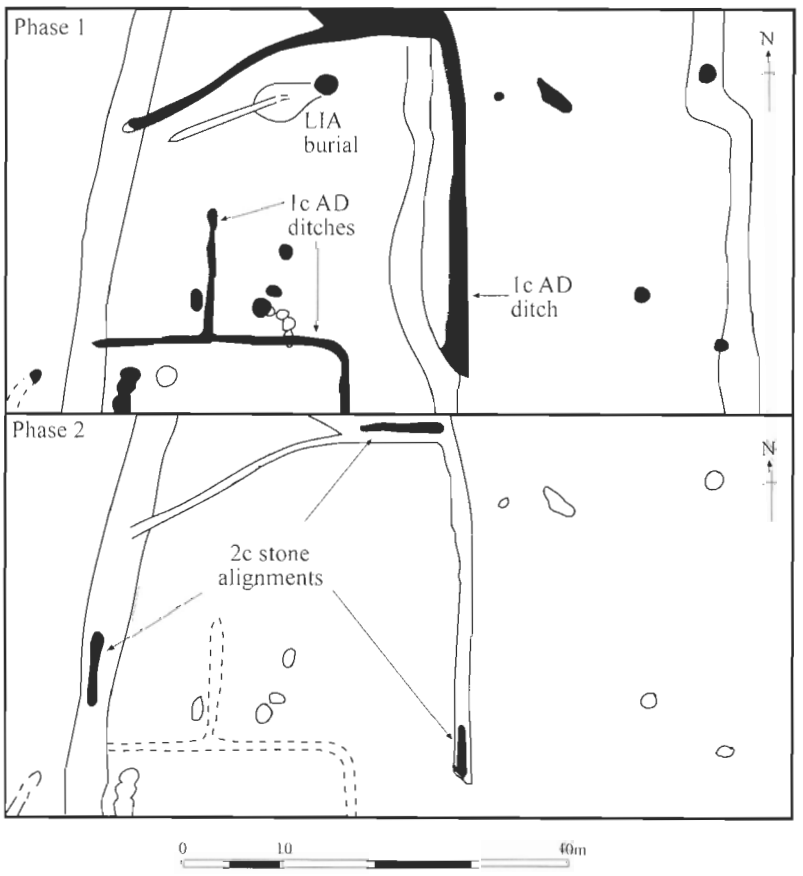

Figure 4: Stagsden (after Dawson 2000b: Fig. 18)

(d) Reuse

Reuse is more easily demonstrated than continuity, for there is no restriction on the period of time elapsing between phases of use. An example of this category comes from Roxton, on the north bank of the Ouse near its confluence with the Ivel. This site was originally identified by cropmarks which showed rectilinear enclosures and five ring ditches. Excavation revealed activity from Neolithic times onwards, beginning with a timber mortuary structure. From the early Iron Age ploughing began to destroy the earlier, Bronze Age, barrow cemetery, and by the late Iron Age there was a network of enclosures which did not respect the barrows.

Although this suggests that the symbolic importance of the ancient burial ground was lost, there is also an indication of continued, or revived, respect. In the first century BC, a 'defensive' palisade ditch was dug, which appears to protect the barrow field from arable land encroaching from the east, but could also have acted as a territorial boundary (Taylor and Woodward 1983: 14). The ditch may have had ritual significance for it was found to contain large amounts of Late Pre-Roman Iron Age pottery and cattle bones. The latter were marked with red ochre, and it is thought that ceremonial feasting may have taken place here (*ibid.*: 10). The ditch was out of use by the beginning of the second century.

There is also tentative evidence for ritual use of the site in the Romano-British period. The remains of two pipeclay Venus figurines, which may have been votive offerings, were found nearby. It is therefore possible that there was a shrine in the vicinity, which is possible at this location due to the junction of two rivers *(ibid.*: 20). Less speculatively, the ditch of one of the barrows was reused for burial by Romano-British inhabitants. An inhumation, and a cremation probably dating to the second or third century, indicate that some of the mounds' ditches were still visible, as indeed they might also have been in the Saxon period, when a burial was placed in the ditch of another barrow (Taylor and Woodward 1985: 82). It therefore appears that the Late Iron Age and Romano-British populations either remained aware of the past significance of the site at Roxton, or had constructed their own new ritual interpretations around it.

Another example of burial reuse comes from Gayhurst, just south of the Ouse, where a small dispersed Bronze Age round barrow cemetery was excavated in 1998. The area also contained a length of pit alignment and three small Iron Age enclosures. The most interesting barrow, which was double ditched, survived as a low earthwork. The central grave pit, some five feet deep, contained a succession of five Bronze Age burials – two inhumations and three cremations – the dating of which indicated a lengthy sequence of use. The outer ditch appears to have been built later as the mound was enlarged, and two cremations were placed just beyond this ditch, one in a collared urn and therefore also Bronze Age. The inner ditch contained a huge collection of cattle bones, perhaps joints of meat rather than whole animals, which seem to have been placed on the rim of the mound.

More relevant to this paper is the presence between the two ditches of five later inhumations. Because one of these was a decapitation burial, this at least is likely to date to the later Romano-British period (Chapman *et al.* 1999: 20). While the Roxton barrows had been ploughed out by Roman times (although the ditches may have been visible), the Gayhurst barrow was still extant. Therefore, in this case it is even more likely that the later burials were made here deliberately, whether for ease of location, or perhaps because of a wish to associate with the past.

Concluding comments

These case studies represent a small sample of the interaction with earlier monuments and landscapes which has been observed in this survey of the Middle and Upper Ouse Valley, but some conclusions can already be drawn. Continuity, even in the context of accurately dated Late Iron Age or Romano-British sites, is difficult to prove. In fact, even in the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age, settlement in some locations in the Ouse Valley was probably cyclical rather than permanent, due in part to the rising water table until about the end of the first century AD (Dawson 2000a: 114, 122). Even if true continuity can be established, there is no way of knowing whether this was due to functional or symbolic reasons, although both could of course been involved. Continuity therefore does not represent a particularly useful category of analysis.

The case studies of respect appear to be more securely founded, particularly that of Stagsden, where the protection of the grave seems unlikely to be coincidental. It should be noted, however, that this case involves memories within one culture and perhaps even one family rather than memories of more distant pasts. Meanwhile, the Romano-British or later burials at Gayhurst are incontrovertible proof of reuse, and the evidence for later ceremonial activity at Roxton is also compelling. Despite this, distinguishing between the preservation of some form of 'original' memory and the re-interpretation of old and conspicuous monuments remains much more difficult.

Disregard, the remaining category of interaction, would be better subdivided into disrespect and ignorance. Although ignorance of the past cannot be observed in the archaeological record, disrespect is potentially more likely to be archaeologically visible. Thus, while it seems likely that, because of environmental change and the passage of time, later populations were ignorant of the Cardington causewayed enclosure on which they lived and farmed, this was not necessarily so in the case of the Biddenham ring ditch. This monument might have been visible at the time, either in the form of a round barrow, or perhaps merely its ditch. If this were to have been so, and later field systems were proven by excavation to have impinged upon the ring ditch, deliberate disrespect, or even destruction, could have been a possibility. In this case, the intention could have been to forget, and expunge obsolete or unacceptable associations with, the past (Forty and Küchler 1999: xii).

It therefore appears that although continuity, as a category of interaction with past landscapes and monuments, is of little use, the remaining three categories, respect, reuse, and disregard, are valuable interpretative frameworks in which to view such activity. Future work on the subject could include testing these concepts on the other possible examples which this research has already identified in the Ouse area. Further investigation of ring ditches, usually all that remains of round barrows in this part of Britain, could be particularly profitable. Where excavation or cropmarks suggest that ring ditches were deliberately avoided by later field systems or settlements, an inspection of old maps, documents, or photographs might reveal whether round barrows had been extant until recently, and therefore also in antiquity. In such cases respect, whether deliberate or coincidental, could be confirmed.

These case studies reveal the diversity of Late Iron Age and Romano-British interaction with earlier landscapes and monuments, even within the relatively small area which has been examined here. While this research has yielded many more examples of disregard than of respect, no doubt partly due to the need to expand settlement areas and agriculture, it does seem that there are examples of both individual and group respect and reuse in places which

had had symbolic importance in the past. Therefore ancient monuments and landscapes are clearly factors which need to be taken into account in the Late Iron Age and Romano-British period.

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