

# Focus or Frontier? The Significance of Estuaries in the Landscape of Southern Britain

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## Abstract

As major physical features of our landscape, and the location of some of our major ports and cities, it is easy to assume that estuaries have always been of great significance to our island nation. The examination of case studies in the east and west of Britain suggests, however, that estuaries were only important in certain socio-economic and political spheres, and that, particularly for the lower levels of society, they often presented a barrier to contact. The significance of estuaries also changed over time as the nature of economic interaction and political structures evolved.

## Introduction

In our island nation, with its long maritime history, it is easy to assume that our coastlines and estuaries have always been of fundamental importance in shaping the development of society. When the author moved down to the South West in the 1990s, he was struck by the large number of images shown at the start of the local BBC news programme 'Spotlight' that related to coastal matters – a fisherman, a lifeboat, a lighthouse and a fish market – that far outnumbered the land-based activities depicted. This reflects how – in the minds of many – the landscape and society of the South West are characterised by their association with the sea. But has this always been the case?

The South West's coastline is very varied in its character, with high rocky cliffs to the north and west, and a series of estuaries penetrating deep inland to the south and east. There is, therefore, a crucial contrast between places where access to the coast is relatively easy, most notably where rivers join the sea in the form of estuaries, and those areas where land and sea are divided by steep, inaccessible cliffs. Today, estuaries are the setting for large numbers

of settlements with often specialised functions, including major international ports, fishing villages, seaside resorts and small harbours. Many of these are, however, recent additions to our coastal landscapes (Figure 1; and see Fox 2001; and this volume), which raises the question of just how significant estuaries have been in the past: were they focal points in the landscape that linked land and sea, or were they actually barriers to communication that formed the boundaries between spheres of social interaction? This essay does not profess to provide a simple answer – it is very much the floating of ideas at the start of a programme of research – but it will hopefully stimulate some thoughts through examining how society interacts with the physical environment at a number of different levels, including those of political structures and territorial administration, trade and the commercial economy, and daily subsistence and local exchange.

## The kingdoms of East Anglia and the East Saxons

### *The English shires*

The earliest formal record of territorial structures in medieval England is the Domesday survey of 1086, which records a country divided into shires (Darby 1977, fig. 1). It is immediately apparent that in coastal districts two types of landform account for most county boundaries: estuaries and watersheds (Phythian-Adams 1993). In the South West, for example, the river Tamar divided Cornwall from Devon, while the uplands of the Blackdown Hills and Exmoor marked the boundaries between Devon, Somerset, and Dorset. In the South East and eastern England, the Thames divided Kent from Essex, the Stour marked the boundary between Essex and Suffolk, while the Waveney divided Suffolk from Norfolk (Figure 2a). The coasts of Essex and Suffolk are heavily indented with estuaries and so it is not surprising that one was chosen as the county boundary, but what is of interest here is that the Stour only appears to have acquired any administrative significance when these two shires were created: before then it appears to have been the valley of the river Gipping, to the north, and the Orwell estuary into which it flows, that were of far greater importance as a political boundary. It is, therefore, the landscape significance of this valley and estuary that will form the first case study of this article.

### *The Middle Saxon kingdoms*

These shires crystallised around the tenth century as the authority of the English state grew, but in the earlier medieval period the political geography of southern and eastern Britain may have been more fluid. The eighth-century Tribal Hidage gives us an indication of the major kingdoms and folk groups that existed at that time, but little indication of where their boundaries lay (Hill 1981, 76–7). Studies of material culture, however, can shed some light on the possible spheres of political and economic influence. Early-eighth-century 'Series B' *sceattas* are probably of East Saxon origin, although their distribution

extends from northern Kent through East Anglia, and as far north as modern Yorkshire. There is a marked concentration of findspots on either side of the Thames estuary, which is also seen in the late-seventh-century 'Series A' *sceattas* produced in Kent, and this serves to demonstrate the significance of the estuary as a focus for trade and exchange (Metcalf 1993, 85–93, 94–105). Eighth-century 'Series S' *sceattas* were also probably the royal coinage of the East Saxons, produced as an expression of independence from their political overlords in Mercia: coins of Mercia were copied but the king's head was replaced by a sphinx, perhaps recalling the past classical glories of Colchester (Metcalf 1993, 21; Rippon 1996a, 117; Morris 2005, figs 9.5–9.6). Their occurrence is, however, largely restricted to modern Essex, Hertfordshire and London, a distribution that is almost mutually exclusive to that of Ipswich Ware, whose widespread use was restricted to Middle and East Anglia (Figure 2b; Blinkhorn 1999). Crucially, the distribution of Ipswich Ware does not cover the whole of Suffolk, but is largely restricted to the area north and east of the Orwell estuary and Gipping valley (and the Lark to the north-west), giving us our first hint that the Stour was of no great significance at that time (although Ipswich Ware is found in south-west Suffolk and Essex, it is in far smaller amounts than in the rest of East Anglia).

*The significance of the Orwell estuary and the Gipping and Lark valleys*

Other categories of material culture, alongside an analysis of the physical fabric of the countryside (the patterns of settlements and field systems) suggest that the Orwell estuary and Gipping valley, as opposed to the Stour, were of great cultural significance until the late first millennium AD (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>1</sup> To the north of this line the later medieval landscape was characterised by significant areas of open field that may have been created around the tenth century, in contrast to that to the south, where enclosures that always appear to have been held in severalty predominate – the 'block' field systems whose distribution has been mapped by Martin (in press; Martin and Satchell forthcoming). Portable material culture confirms the significance of this cultural boundary. The distribution of ninth-century silver wire strap-ends, for example, lies almost wholly to the north-east of this line (Thomas 1996), a distribution that is also seen in 'Series Q I–III' *sceattas* and Ipswich Ware pottery (West 1998; Blinkhorn 1999). It is surely also significant that the Middle Saxon emporium at Ipswich lay at the head of the Orwell estuary, on the south-western boundary of East Anglia, while two other 'productive' (trading?) sites – Coddenham and Barham – lie on the eastern side of the Gipping valley just upstream (Figure 2b; Blackburn 2003, 22; Newman 2003).

There are signs that this Orwell–Gipping–Lark line was of considerable antiquity. To the north and east of these valleys there are large numbers of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, in contrast to the area to the south-west, where the lower density of such cemeteries matches that in central and northern Essex. The boundary appears to have been remarkably sharp: on the Shotley peninsula, between the Orwell and Stour estuaries, not a single early Saxon



cemetery has been found, despite the recovery of large amounts of metalwork of other periods via extensive fieldwalking and metal-detecting (Figure 3d; Laverton 2001). To the east of the Orwell, in contrast, there are numerous cemeteries of this date, including those at Sutton Hoo and Snape, whose character has led some to suggest that they were the burial grounds of East Saxon kings (Parker Pearson *et al.* 1993; and see Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001, 264–5). This view has not received widespread support, but regardless of whether they are East Saxon or East Anglian, their significance in the context of this paper lies in the fact that the peripheral location of both cemeteries is paralleled by the grave of royal status recently found at Prittlewell in south-east Essex (Figure 3d; MoLAS 2004): all are at the margins of a kingdom, and overlook major estuaries that would have been important points of entry for outsiders.

In the Roman period the landscape of central/southern Suffolk, with its relatively high density of villas, similarly appears to have had more in common with northern and central Essex than the rest of East Anglia, even though other indicators of relative wealth and Romanisation – such as the distribution of hoards and pottery kilns – were relatively evenly distributed across the whole region (Figure 3c; Going 1996; Plouviez 1988; 1999). It has been argued that the slow pace of Romanisation within the Icenian polity was the result of confiscations and repression that followed the Boudiccan revolt of AD 60, although an alternative view is that it reflected a greater and deep-rooted conservatism

FIGURE 1.  
Aerial view of Weston-super-Mare, in North Somerset, looking south-east towards the Mendip Hills. Seaside resorts such as this are a relatively recent addition to our landscape and, until the nineteenth century, Weston was a small coastal fishing community that was part of an inland estate (note the directional ‘west-tun’ place-name).

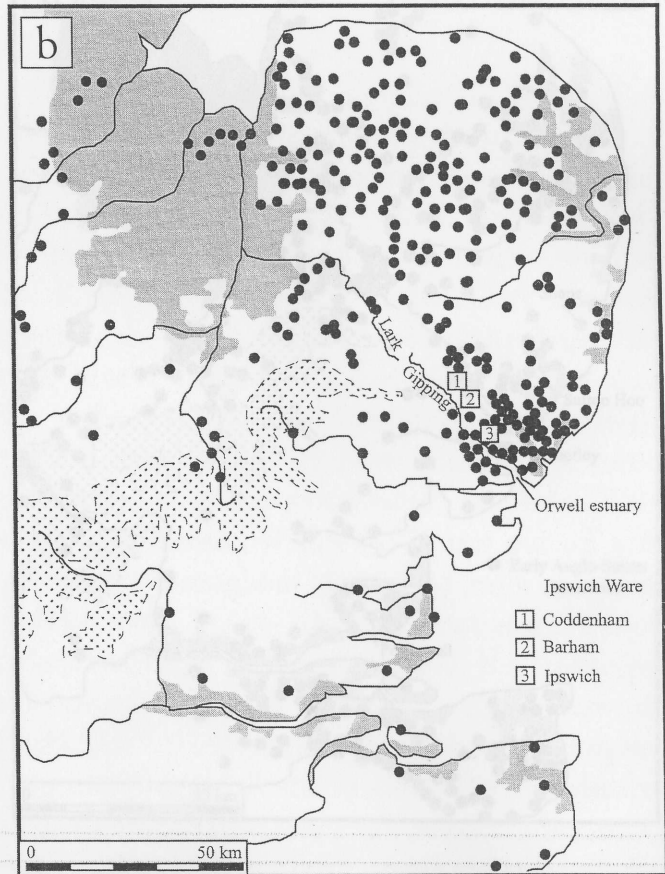
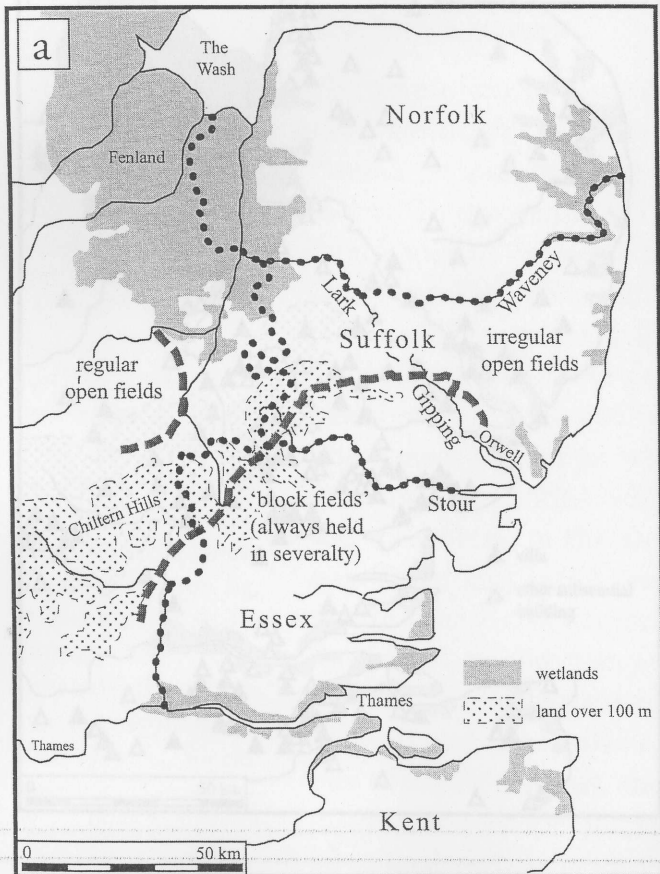
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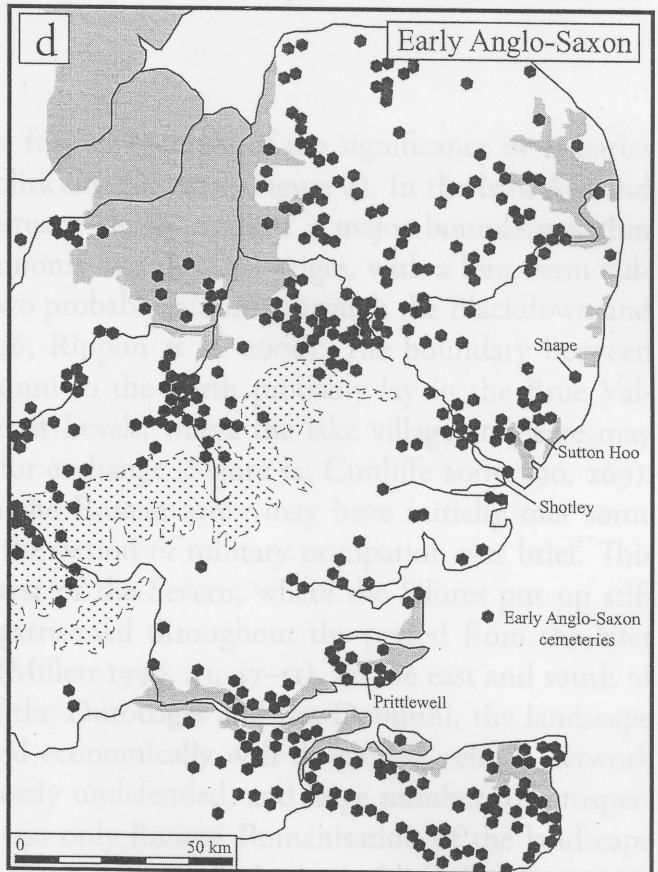
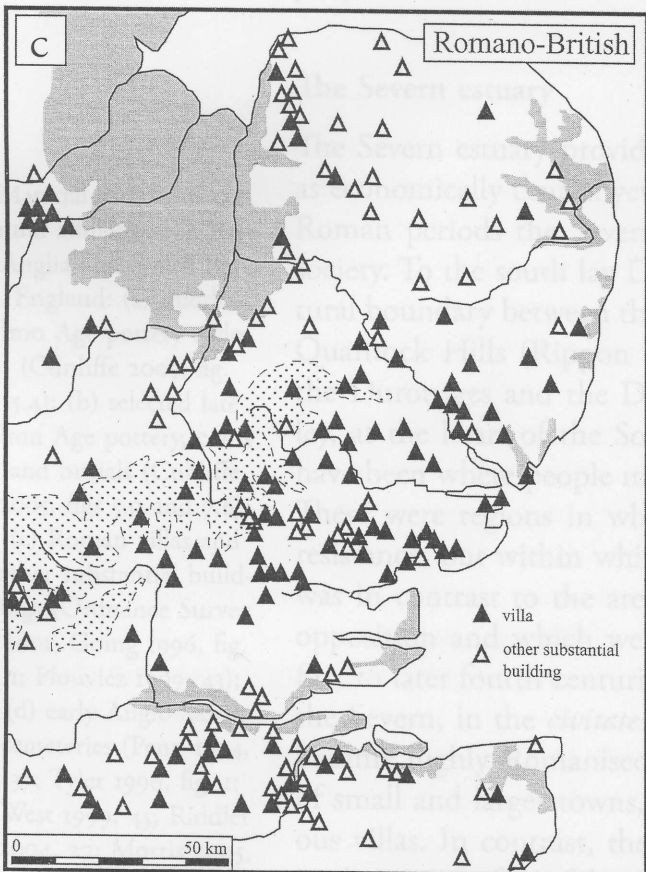
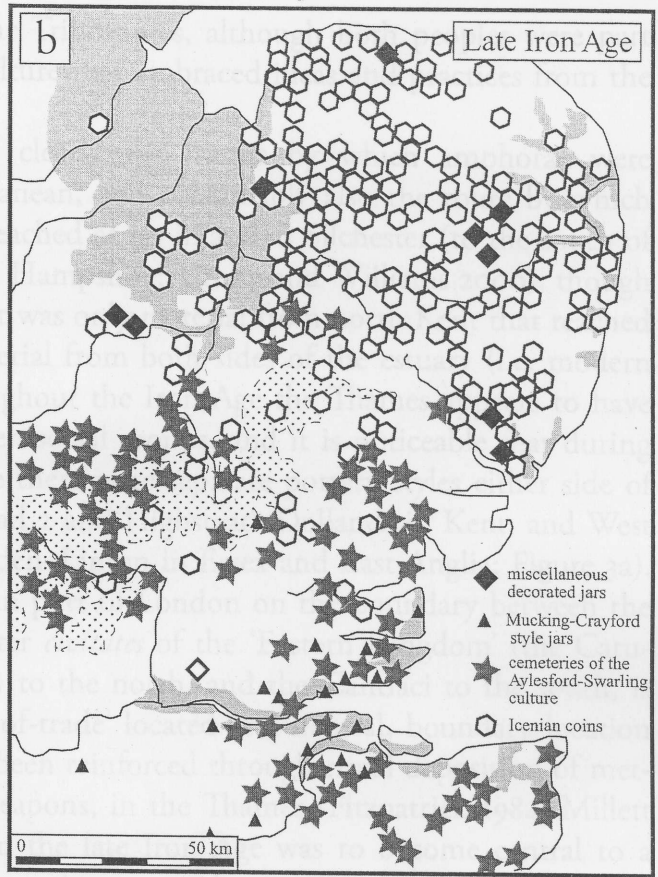
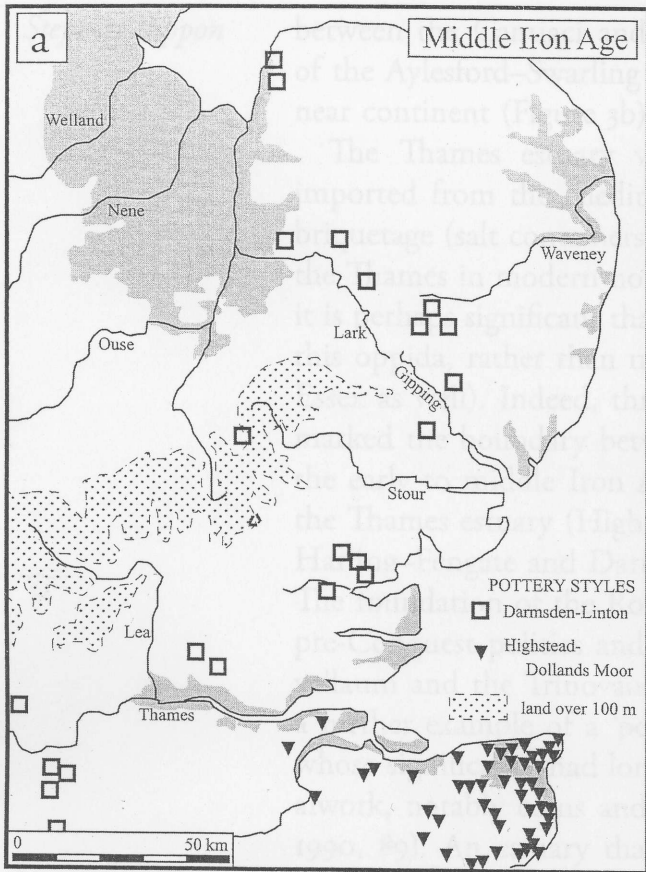
in society, and a reluctance to adopt the trappings of Roman culture that was already evident before the Conquest (e.g. Millett 1990, 100–1; Pitts and Perring 2006). During the late Iron Age it similarly appears to have been the Orwell estuary and Gipping and Lark valleys that marked the significant cultural boundary, with Icenian coins and horse trappings to the north-east, and coins, cremation cemeteries and imported amphorae typical of ‘Aylesford–Swarling’ culture and the ‘Eastern Kingdom’ of the Catuvellaunian and Trinovantian polities of Cunobelinus and Tasciovanus occurring to the south-west (Figure 3b; Plouviez 1988, fig. 9; Cunliffe 2005, 150–65; Pitts and Perring 2006, 193).

*The Thames*

The location of the middle Saxon emporium of Ipswich at the head of the Orwell estuary, into which the River Gipping flows, illustrates the paradox of our estuaries in terms of the interaction between society and the landscape: they are focal points, particularly welcoming to outsiders as sheltered landing places, but are also convenient political frontiers. This paradox is also seen with the Thames. As such a major estuary, the Thames will always have formed a significant physical, and therefore psychological, barrier and so not surprisingly was used as a political frontier, marking the boundary between the *civitas* of the Cantiaci, and the early medieval kingdom and later shire of Kent to the south, and the Trinovantes, East Saxon kingdom and shire of Essex to the north. In the late Iron Age it was presumably also the boundary

FIGURE 2. Aspects of the East Anglian landscape in the later first millennium AD: (a) the shires of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, with the major types of field system (after Martin in press; forthcoming); (b) the distribution of Ipswich Ware, which concentrates to the north-east of the Orwell estuary and Gipping/Lark valleys (Blinkhorn 1999, fig 2; Suffolk Historic Environment Record).





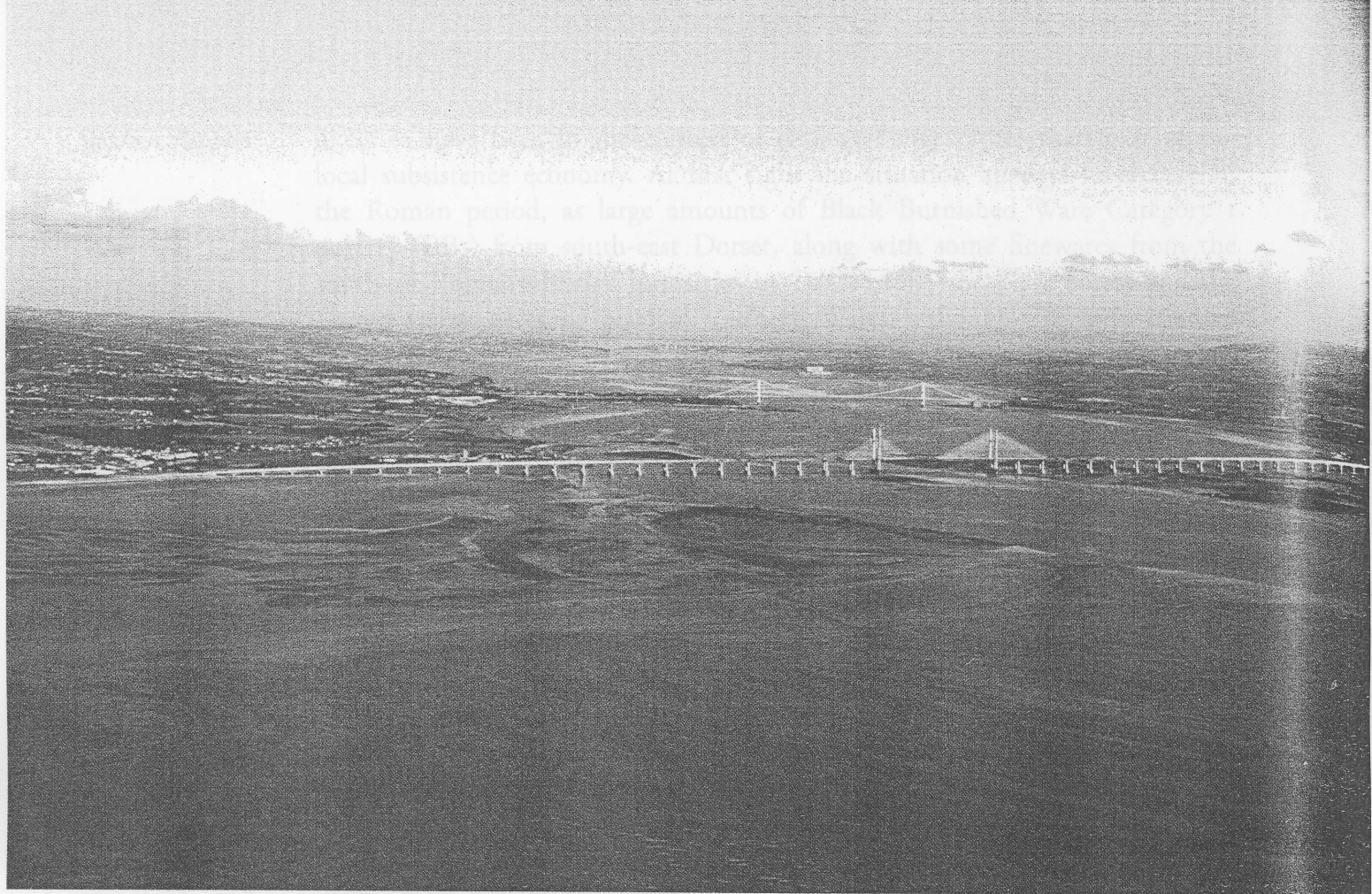
between the Cantiaci and the Trinovantes, although both peoples were part of the Aylesford–Swarling culture that embraced ideas and practices from the near continent (Figure 3b).

The Thames estuary was clearly the means by which amphorae were imported from the Mediterranean, and presumably also the route by which briquetage (salt containers) reached as far inland as Silchester (to the south of the Thames in modern north Hampshire: Timby and Williams 2000), though it is perhaps significant that it was only material from north Kent that reached this oppida, rather than material from both sides of the estuary (i.e. modern Essex as well). Indeed, throughout the Iron Age the Thames appears to have marked the boundary between social groups, and it is noticeable that during the early to middle Iron Age there were separate pottery styles either side of the Thames estuary (Highstead 2 and Highstead–Dollands in Kent, and West Harling–Fengate and Darmsden–Linton in Essex and East Anglia: Figure 3a). The foundation of the Roman port of London on the boundary between the pre-Conquest polities and later *civitates* of the 'Eastern Kingdom' (the Catuvellauni and the Trinovantes) to the north, and the Cantiaci to the south, is a further example of a 'port-of-trade' located at a neutral, boundary location whose significance had long been reinforced through ritual deposition of metalwork, notably coins and weapons, in the Thames (Fitzpatrick 1984; Millett 1990, 89). An estuary that in the late Iron Age was to become central to a people's interaction with the continent was also a political boundary.

### The Severn estuary

The Severn estuary provides a further example of the significance of estuaries as economically central yet politically marginal (Figure 4). In the Iron Age and Roman periods the Severn estuary clearly marked a major boundary within society. To the south lay Dumnonia and the Durotriges, with a long-term cultural boundary between the two probably running through the Blackdown and Quantock Hills (Rippon 2006; Rippon *et al.* 2006). The boundary between the Durotriges and the Dobunni to the north probably lay in the Brue Valley, at the heart of the Somerset Levels, where the lake village at Meare may have been where people met for exchange (Figure 5a; Cunliffe 2005, 190, 269). These were regions in which the Roman army may have initially met some resistance, but within which the period of military occupation was brief. This was in contrast to the area west of the Severn, where the Silures put up stiff opposition and which were garrisoned throughout the period from the later first to later fourth centuries (Millett 1990, 43, 47–51). To the east and south of the Severn, in the *civitates* of the Durotriges and the Dobunni, the landscape became highly Romanised and economically well developed, with a network of small and larger towns, mostly undefended, and large numbers of prosperous villas. In contrast, there was only limited Romanisation of the landscape in the *civitas* of the Silures: a small *civitas* capital was established at Caerwent, associated with a handful of small villas in its immediate hinterland and the

FIGURE 3. Material indices of cultural affiliations in East Anglia and South East England: (a) middle Iron Age pottery styles (Cunliffe 2005, fig. 5.4); (b) selected late Iron Age pottery, coins and burials (Cunliffe 2005, figs 5.9 and 7.6); (c) Roman villas and other substantial buildings (Ordnance Survey 2001; Going 1996, fig. 1; Plouviez 1999, 43); (d) early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (Penn 1994, 37; Tyler 1996, fig. 1; West 1999, 45; Riddler 2004, 27; Morris 2005, fig. 9.39).



nearby extra-mural settlement outside the legionary fortress at Caerleon, but beyond that area the countryside remained relatively unRomanised (compared to the regions east of the Severn) (Figure 6). While some farmsteads adopted some aspects of Roman architectural style, notably the rectilinear villa plans and aisled buildings (e.g. Jarrett and Wrathmell 1981; Robinson 1988a), there are very few mosaic pavements beyond Caerwent and its immediate hinterland, and just one Romano-Celtic temple at Lydney on the banks of the Severn, north-east of Caerwent towards Gloucester (Robinson 1988b; Jones and Mattingly 1990, 288–9; Millett 1990, figs 48, 72, 85 and 89).

#### *Iron Age and Romano-British trading patterns around the Severn estuary*

That the Severn estuary was a boundary between different societies should not be surprising, as it represents a major barrier to communication: with a huge tidal range (14 m), vast areas of mudflats are exposed at low tide, and the waters can be fast-flowing and treacherous as the tides rise and fall (Figure 4). In the middle Iron Age pottery styles either side of the estuary were different (Figure 5a), though upstream of Gloucester the Croft Ambrey–Bredon Hill style occurs across both sides of the Severn Valley (Cunliffe 2005, fig. 5.5). In the late Iron Age coins of the Dobunni similarly straddle the easy-to-cross valley, whereas the open estuary divided the Durotriges from the Silures (Figure 5b; Cunliffe 2005, figs 8.3 and 8.10). Some trade or exchange across the estuary at this time is suggested by the presence of South-Western Decorated Ware in southern Wales (Cunliffe 2005, fig. 5.7), though this is

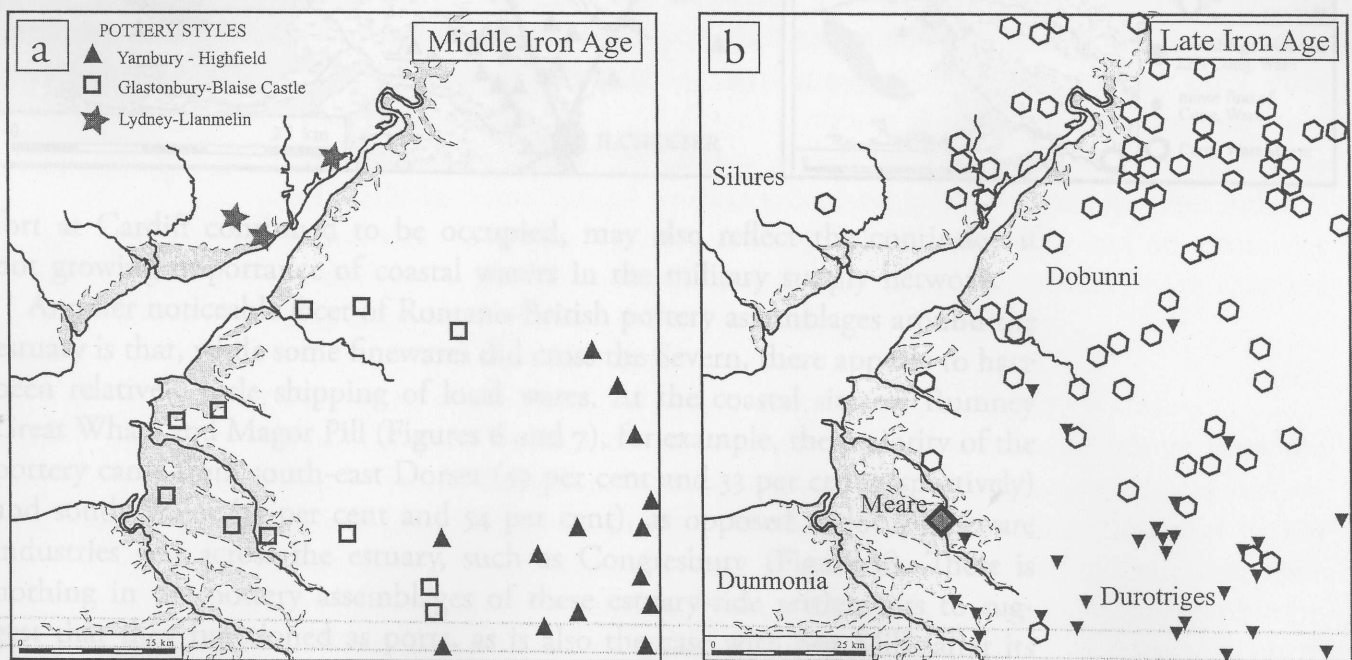
FIGURE 4.  
The outer Severn estuary, looking north-east towards the two Severn Bridges. The huge tidal range of this estuary (14 m) reveals vast areas of sand and mud at low tide that are virtually impassable, while strong currents as the waters rise and fall mean that more robust vessels are required than would have been used to navigate the inland rivers that join it.

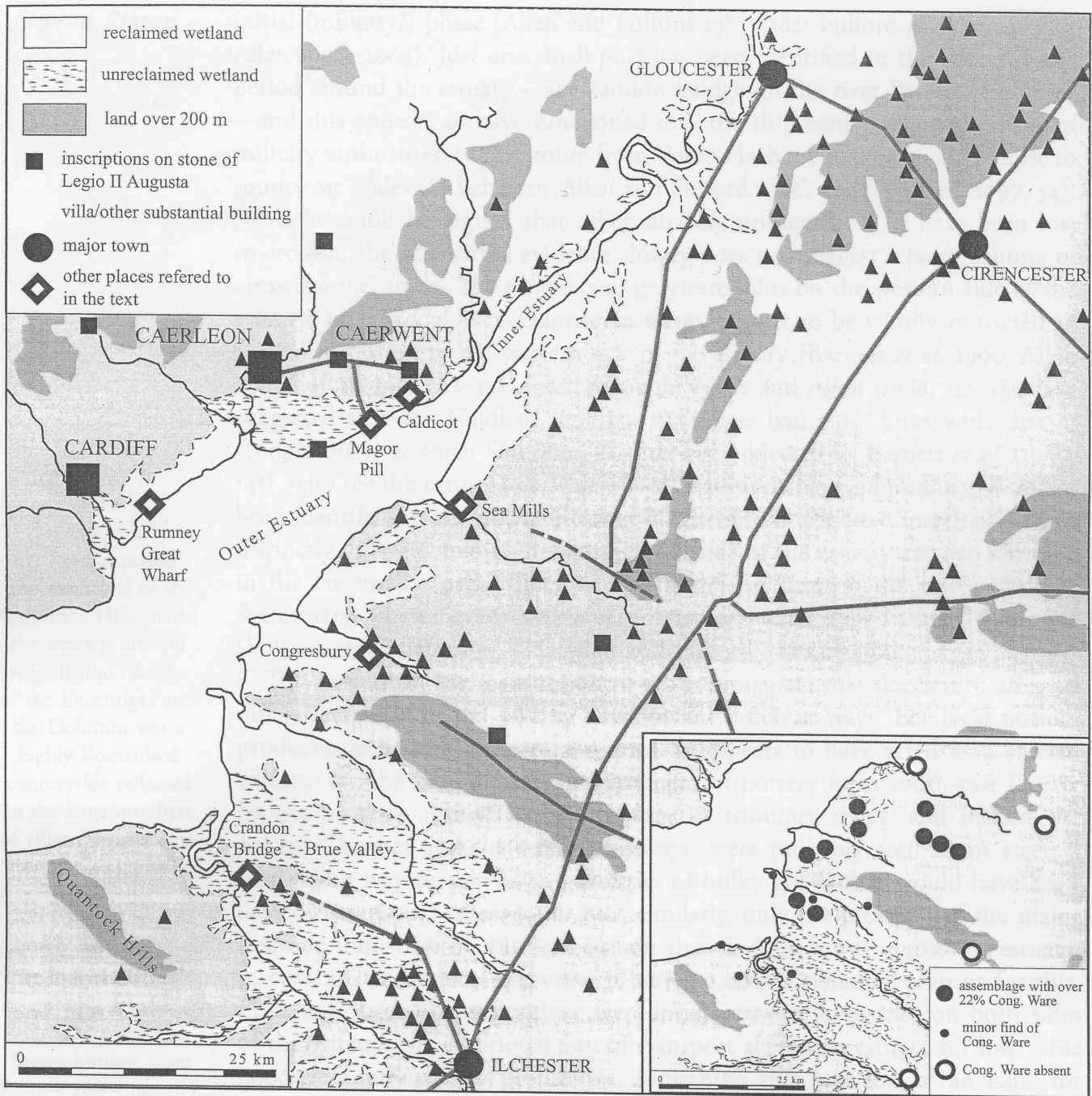
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likely to have been in the context of elite exchange rather than part of the local subsistence economy. At first sight the situation appears to change in the Roman period, as large amounts of Black Burnished Ware Category 1 pottery (BB1) from south-east Dorset, along with some finewares from the southern Romano-British industries in Oxfordshire, the New Forest and the Severn valley, certainly reached southern Wales, although this cross-channel trade would have meant travelling across the wide outer estuary, rather than going with the ebb and flow of the tides (Allen and Fulford 1996; Tyers 1996). Crucially, however, and as the relative lack of Romanisation in the landscape of the Silurian *civitas* suggests, there is little evidence that the Severn estuary was a hive of economic activity. The large amounts of BB1 pottery from south-east Dorset appear to have been imported in part within the context of procurement by the Roman military authorities based at Caerleon in south-east Wales and as far north as the garrisons at Chester and the northern frontiers (Allen and Fulford 1996). It is intriguing to speculate that this supply network may have involved the well-preserved Roman boat at Barlands Farm, near Caerleon, where 68 per cent of the pottery assemblage was BB1 (Nayling and McGrail 2004, 75). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that considerable use was made of coastal transport in Roman Britain, in addition to the well-known cross-Channel trade. In eastern Britain, for example, pottery and coal were clearly shipped up and down the coast (Williams 1977; Gillam and Greene 1981; Smith 1997), and it is noticeable how all of the 'shore forts' are located beside sheltered estuaries (Pearson 2002a, 104–21), often in relatively remote locations. Several studies have shown how stone used to construct these forts must have been transported a considerable distance by river and around the coast (Allen and Fulford 1999; Pearson 1999; 2002b; 2003; Allen *et al.* 2001; Allen *et al.* 2003). The shift in location of the legionary fortress at Usk to Caerleon, and Caerleon's abandonment while the

FIGURE 5. Material indices of cultural affiliations around the Severn estuary: (a) middle Iron Age pottery styles (Cunliffe 2005, fig. 5.5); (b) late Iron Age coinage (the Silures did not mint their own coins) (Cunliffe 2005, figs 8.3 and 8.10).





fort at Cardiff continued to be occupied, may also reflect the continued if not growing importance of coastal waters in the military supply network.

Another noticeable facet of Romano-British pottery assemblages around the estuary is that, while some finewares did cross the Severn, there appears to have been relatively little shipping of local wares. At the coastal sites of Rumney Great Wharf and Magor Pill (Figures 6 and 7), for example, the majority of the pottery came from south-east Dorset (59 per cent and 33 per cent respectively) and south Wales (33 per cent and 54 per cent), as opposed to local greyware industries just across the estuary, such as Congresbury (Figure 6). There is nothing in the pottery assemblages of these estuary-side settlements to suggest that they functioned as ports, as is also the case with Sea Mills after its

initial (military?) phase (Allen and Fulford 1987, 282; Fulford *et al.* 1994, 194; Allen 1998; 2003). Just one small port has been identified in the later Roman period around the estuary – at Crandon Bridge on the river Parrett (Figure 6) – and this appears to have functioned as a transshipment port on the Roman military authorities' supply route from Poole Harbour in south-east Dorset to south-east Wales via Ilchester (Allen and Fulford 1996; 2004; Rippon 1997, 54). While it could be argued that other sites lay unidentified, or have been lost to erosion, the artefactual evidence simply does not suggest a large volume of cross-channel trade. The products of greyware kilns on the western side of the estuary, such as Caldicot–Llanedeyrn wares, appear to be wholly restricted in their distribution to the western side of the estuary (Barnett *et al.* 1990; Allen and Fulford 1992, 82–123), and although Vyner and Allen (1988, 112–18) have suggested that the Caldicot industry may have had close links with that at Congresbury, in north Somerset, this has been rejected by Barnett *et al.* (1990, 141), who see the former as a wholly local tradition. No Congresbury Ware has been identified to the north and west of the Severn (Figure 6 inset), and these distinctly different trading networks either side of the estuary are also reflected in the far smaller proportions of BB1 found on sites on the eastern side of the estuary, where Severn Valley Ware and Gloucester Type Fabric 5 dominate (Fulford and Allen 1992, 186; Allen and Fulford 1996, fig. 14).

This pattern in the distribution of pottery suggests that the Severn affected different aspects of the trading economy in different ways. For local pottery producers and traders the mighty estuary appears to have acted as a barrier, whereas for the long-distance procurement of pottery from south-east Dorset by the military authorities, the Severn, its tributary rivers, and indeed the Bristol Channel and the western seaways, were probably seen as an asset: a convenient way to ship large quantities of bulky goods that would have been costly to transport across land. It is, similarly, only the products of the major fineware industries of southern Britain that find their way across the estuary, in contrast to the local greywares. There are several potential reasons for this. First, and most obviously, there were local greyware industries on both sides of the estuary: the additional cost of transport across the estuary for low-value goods was presumably prohibitive, something that was less of an issue for the trade in higher-priced finewares, and even less relevant for the military authorities. The same estuary presented different problems and opportunities to different sectors of society. There are also signs that this may have changed over time.

#### *Moving up a gear: medieval trading patterns around the Severn estuary*

Unfortunately, the lack of surviving early medieval material culture from the South West of Britain makes it impossible to carry out the same sort of analysis as was presented above for East Anglia and Essex, but it is clear that by the later medieval period the network of rivers on both sides of the estuary was used extensively for transport. This is reflected, for example, in the distribution of Ham Green Ware, produced near Bristol beside the Avon estuary in north

FIGURE 6.

The Severn estuary in the Roman period. The watershed of the Quantock Hills marks the western limit of what in the *civitates* of the Durotriges and the Dobunni was a highly Romanised countryside reflected in the large numbers of villas. The distribution of Congresbury Ware (inset) reflects the very localised trading networks of such greyware industries, which do not appear to have extended across the Severn estuary (after Rippon 2007, fig. 5.7).



Somerset; this extends across Somerset, Gloucestershire and south Wales (and even as far as south-east Ireland: McCarthy and Brooks 1988, fig. 37). The significance of water transport around the Severn in the later medieval period is also reflected in the way that many rivers within the Somerset Levels were canalised (Rippon in press). The narrow width of these canals – up to just 4 m – however, meant that goods had to be transhipped on to larger vessels in order to continue the journey out into the estuary, and one such transhipment port is documented at Rooksbridge on the river Axe. In c.1400, for example, a sea-going vessel foundered there (*Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous* VII, no. 163), while, in 1500, St John's church in Glastonbury used two boats to ship some seats from Bristol to Rooksbridge, where they were transferred to thirteen smaller vessels which sailed to Glastonbury via Meare down a canal now known as the Pilrow Cut (Daniel 1895). Historical sources show that in the medieval and early modern period the Severn was ringed with a series of ports, both large and small, and there must have been a considerable amount of shipping both in and out of, and across, the estuary (Robinson 1970; Rippon 1996b, 94). This difference in the degree of trade around the estuary has been confirmed archaeologically at Magor Pill, where the medieval (twelfth- to thirteenth-century) pottery assemblage from this documented port (then called 'Abergwaitha') was from far more diverse locations compared to that from the Roman period: even the iron ore in the medieval Magor Pill boat appears to have been shipped across the estuary from the Bristol–Mendip area (Allen 2003). While in the medieval period the Severn estuary appears to have been

FIGURE 7. Magor Pill, on the Caldicot Level. The Romano-British pottery assemblage from this coastal settlement suggests that there was little cross-channel trade other than the transhipment of BB1 pottery from south-east Dorset to supply the military establishment in south-east Wales. In the medieval period, in contrast, it was one of numerous small landing places around the Severn estuary that are suggestive of far greater use of the Severn estuary for local communication.

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a hive of activity and a great facilitator of trade, in the Roman period it was a body of water that was probably crossed by relatively few.

### Conclusions

A number of studies have stressed the links between peoples living around Europe's Atlantic coast (e.g. Cunliffe 2001), and there has undoubtedly been sea-borne exchange, trade and movement of people (and ideas) that made use of estuaries from prehistory through to the present day. This article, however, has tried to focus on the significance of estuaries, and their associated river valleys, for the local communities living around them. The ideas presented above are just some preliminary thoughts, but it would appear that from late prehistory through to modern times estuaries present a paradox in the ways in which society interacts with its environment: they have been both focal locations and barriers/frontiers at different times and at the same time. Unfortunately we do not always have comparable data sets for the east and west of Britain – the early medieval period being particularly problematic in the west – but it appears that estuaries impacted upon past economies at different levels. At the level of regional and international trade and exchange estuaries are central to a region for at least three reasons: until the advent of modern overland transport networks they provided an easy means of sea-borne communication; they provided sheltered locations for shipping and so welcomed visitors from outside the region; and because they often acted as political frontiers (boundaries) their banks offered neutral locations for trade and exchange (foci for interaction). At the level of local, day-to-day, trade and exchange, however, estuaries represented a barrier, as the social and economic value of many goods did not outweigh the costs of transshipment. The relationship between estuaries and society could also change over time: the Orwell estuary and Gipping–Lark valleys, for example, appear to have been significant from the late Iron Age through to the middle Saxon period and it was only around the tenth century that the Stour, further south, was chosen as the boundary between the shires of Essex and Suffolk. The Thames also appears to have changed from a boundary location in the Iron Age to a focus of the economic landscape in the Roman period, while the economic importance of the Severn for local trade appears to have increased significantly from the Roman to the medieval period. Estuaries have, therefore, played a vital role in the development of our landscape, but this role has been both spatially and temporally complex.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Fulford and the anonymous referee for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

## Notes

1. Material culture and historic landscape character clearly shows that the north-west corner of modern Essex, lying to the west of the chalk uplands that form a continuation of the Chiltern Hills, clearly lay within a 'middle anglian' region that for a short time in the seventh century was a separate kingdom (Hines 1999).

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