THE SEVERN: BARRIER OR HIGHWAY?

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How much of a barrier was the river Severn? Tracing its role from pre-history, we know that the territory of the Iron Age Dobunni corresponded roughly with modern Gloucestershire and southern Worcestershire. In other words it extended on both sides of the Severn and the river was neither a boundary nor a barrier at that time.¹

In AD 43 the Romans landed on the east coast, bent on conquest. Three or four years later they reached the Severn at Bristol and Gloucester.² There they seem to have paused for two or three years. For the Romans, it seems, the river represented not so much a barrier as a convenient place at which to stop, a convenient frontier marker while they gained time to pacify the tribes they had already overcome. The Fosse Way, primarily intended for the rapid movement of troops, was constructed on a south-west/north-east line, coming at one point some thirty miles or so east of Gloucester. This suggests the consolidation of what may have been intended to be a permanent frontier.

However the continued defiance of the British leader Caractacus perhaps provoked the invaders into renewed offensive action. He had been driven out of his power base on the east coast, and, having made a fighting retreat across the island, had withdrawn over the Severn into the

¹ John Peddie, *Conquest: The Roman Invasion of Britain*, 2nd edn, Stroud, Glos, 2005, 21. For a map of the Severn Basin, see the Frontispiece to this volume.

territory of the *Silures* in South Wales. Here he continued to inspire armed resistance, and it was perhaps a succession of raids across the Bristol Channel that tried Roman patience too far. Perhaps too the realization that there was gold in Wales aroused their cupidity. One of the main centres of Silurian power was near present-day Chepstow. So an amphibious assault below Gloucester would have been a better option than fording the river at or above Gloucester and having a twoday march through thick forest. The invading army may have included a contingent of Batavians who were specialists in river crossings. Just where they effected the crossing is still a matter of conjecture. But cross the Severn they did, and eventually captured Caractacus after a battle which is currently thought to have been fought at Caersws, just a few miles from Gregynog, where the 2008 *Laamon* Conference was held.

Roman domination of the island lasted roughly three hundred-and-fifty years. Then, with the withdrawal of the army, Anglo-Saxon immigrants, who were already established on the east and south coasts were able to move inland and occupy more territory. They were supported by fresh arrivals from across the North Sea, whose movements were now unrestricted by a Roman navy.

But the takeover was not organized under a unified command as the Roman invasion had been. A hundred-and-eighty-odd years elapsed between the Roman withdrawal and the battle at Dyrham, north of Bristol, which gave the newcomers control of the eastern bank of the Severn. It is not known if, or for how long, they paused before crossing the river. There is a settlement some five miles west of Areley Kings, and thus west of the river, named *Pensax*, a Celtic name indicating *The Hill of*

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3 Ibid., 126-28.
4 Ibid., 164.
5 Ibid., 165-66.
9 Ibid., 105-10.