Exploring late Iron Age settlement in Britain and the near Continent: Reading Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and examining the significance of landscape, place, and water in settlement studies

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**INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines ways of considering landscapes, settlements, and significant places in the late Iron Age and the development of Roman urbanism in North-West Europe. It is divided into two related parts: firstly an historiographical section analysing an important example of how early studies, and the social contexts in which they were written, have been hugely influential in setting research agenda which remain strong in archaeological research; and secondly a study of archaeological settlement evidence demonstrating how we can interpret the data in different ways. The first section will look at the thought and work of the ancient historian Edward Gibbon (1737–94) whilst the second will examine new perspectives that are now emerging from detailed landscape studies focused on the later Iron Age.

Edward Gibbon’s six-volume work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published between 1776 and 1788 and was quickly established as a major work. It became influential on studies not only of the later Roman period, playing a significant part in the formulation of attitudes towards the later Empire, but the Roman Empire as a whole. The text has, however, now been criticized for its emphasis on decline (e.g., Hingley and Rogers forthcoming; McKitterick and Quinault eds. 1997; Porter 1988) and there is now more caution in using terms such as decline in studies of the later Roman period (e.g. Lavan ed. 2001; Rogers 2005; Wickham 2005).

What has not been acknowledged so much, however, is the way in which Gibbon’s work covered the rise and growth of the Roman Empire, including pre-existing settlement patterns in Britain and the near Continent. His descriptions of this period were mainly used as a tool for establishing what he saw as the greatness of conquest and the ‘Golden Age’, setting the scene for its decline. This paper will explore the ways in which Gibbon conceptualized and described pre-Roman settlement in Western Europe and the contribution that this has played in the research tradition of late Iron Age settlement in this area. Also important is the social context in which Gibbon was writing and how this will have contributed a major part to the
formulation of his attitudes. As a British historian, Gibbon’s work has had a great impact amongst British scholars, but Gibbon has also been influential in mainland Europe.

Of course, it is not only Gibbon that has had an impact on archaeological work and the development of research traditions, both of the decline of the Roman Empire and its growth (work by Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) and Camille Jullian (1859–1933) is also discussed below), but his work has been highly prominent and deserves attention. Focusing on Gibbon will demonstrate the potential of analysing past work in moving subjects forward. Recent years have seen a rise in important work on the historiography of Roman and prehistoric archaeology and the formation of tradition especially in Britain (e.g., Dyson 2006; Hingley 2000; Todd 2004) but also in France (e.g. Goudineau 1998) and other countries. Here, acknowledging the complexities in the research traditions of late Iron Age settlement and urbanization after the conquest will highlight the necessity to reconsider the way in which these sites have been studied and conceptualized.

BACKGROUND TO GIBBON’S LIFE

There are numerous accounts of Edward Gibbon’s life including his own Memoirs (1966) (e.g., Burrow 1985; Low 1937; Porter 1988). Gibbon was born into a relatively privileged background in south London, his father being able to assume the life of a gentleman because of the wealth made by his own father in business. This wealth allowed Gibbon to attend a school that taught Latin and Greek and then, at 15 years, Magdalen College, Oxford. From an early age Gibbon expressed considerable interest in Roman history and this was strengthened by his trip to Italy on the Grand Tour but, as Pocock (1999, 276–7) has remarked, this consisted of a voyage “through the history of taste” seeing and constructing ancient Rome and Italy through eighteenth century eyes. Through his upbringing, Gibbon appreciated the British aristocratic system, writing of the “superior prerogative of birth” (Gibbon 1994, vol. I, 188)1 and the validity of Empire and the civilization and order that it brought. He became a member of parliament himself and belonged to a number of exclusive London clubs (Gibbon 1966, 155–6; Brownley 1976, 21). His inherited wealth allowed him to amass a large library, held in his house in Bentinck Street, London, and devote his time to writing. Like the classical texts Gibbon drew upon to write his work, The Decline and Fall itself soon became an essential part of the education that was given to people of a similar privileged background to his own.

1 The references from The Decline and Fall are taken from the 1994 edited version of the work by David Womersley, published by Penguin in three volumes each containing two of Gibbon’s original volumes. The volume and page numbers in the text refer to the way in which Gibbon’s six volumes appear in this 1994 edition.
Gibbon was writing in a period in which the interest in history and historical works, especially of the Roman Empire, was growing; the number of published historical works rose considerably (McKitterick 1997, 164). History was hugely fashionable (Ghosh 1997, 277) and as a statement in Horace Walpole’s (1717–97) letter to the poet William Mason (1725–97) suggests – “there is just appeared a truly classic work” (W. Lewis ed. vol. 28, 1955, 243) – Gibbon’s first volume was an immediate success and hailed a masterpiece. From that point Gibbon became known as ‘the Historian of the Roman Empire’ (Pocock 1999, 292). The text remained hugely popular and influential, and perhaps arguably even more so, into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The image of Rome played an important part in the nineteenth and early twentieth century social consciousness (Vance 1997); people were also aware of the fate of the Roman Empire through Gibbon and wished to avoid a similar course of events for the British Empire. The popularity and success of Gibbon’s work was partly through his writing style and the language of his descriptions of Roman grandeur and magnificence, but this was also combined with the lessons that could be learnt from his graphic depictions of decline. Another lesson of Empire, however, was in the conquering and transformation of land which Gibbon also described and provided images for his readers.

The antiquarians of Gibbon’s day, and earlier, were working in a largely similar social context as Gibbon which would also have influenced their interpretations of the archaeology. This intellectual atmosphere of the eighteenth century, to be examined below, would have had a considerable impact upon Gibbon. It seems that there was a number of studies, attitudes, and transformations at this time which came together and paved the way for nineteenth and twentieth century developments, including archaeology.

**Gibbon’s attitude towards pre-Roman settlement**

Gibbon not only researched books but was interested in the surviving remains of Roman structures especially in Rome itself. These remains were important in formulating his ideas, as one of the famous passages from his *Memoirs* states: “I can never forget nor express the strong emotions which agitated my mind as I first approached and entered the eternal City” (Gibbon 1966, 134). Originally, he had intended to write a book solely on the “decay of the city” rather than the Empire as a whole (ibid, 136); he describes how he began to “collect the substance of my Roman decay” (ibid, 146). Gibbon also knew the works of English antiquarians, including Whitaker, Gale, Stukeley, Camden, Dugdale, and Horsley (Womersley 1994, xii), and he drew upon and commented on their writings. For understanding Britain under the Empire he refered to “our own antiquarians, Camden and
Horsley” (vol. I, 33, note 8) and especially valued Camden stating that he was “the British Strabo” and “the father of our antiquities” (vol. II, 997, note 109; vol. III, 22, note 11). In his study of Roman roads he refers to the itineraries of “Gale and Stukeley for Britain, and M. d’Anville for Gaul and Italy” (vol. I, 77, note 85). Gibbon was especially interested in the antiquarian work carried out within towns and sections of his work are devoted to Rome which he thought reflected the Empire as a whole. He envisaged and described the decline of the Roman Empire through the physical destruction of its public buildings and monuments. For Gibbon, the public buildings and cities – interpreted through the ‘enlightened’ mindset – were what represented the Empire’s greatness and civilization. He not only uses this to emphasise decline in the later Roman period but also the benefits of romanization in the conquest period in areas such as Britain, Gaul, and Germany.

Antiquarian work indicates some limited early knowledge of pre-Roman places in Britain by this time. William Camden’s (1551–1623) and John Speed’s (1542–1629) work, for instance, linked some names mentioned within the classical texts with those found on pre-Roman coinage (Hingley 2006, 333), and John Horsley’s Britannia Romana (1974 [1732]) demonstrates awareness of sites of pre-Roman Britain. At this early date, pre-Roman peoples were being identified with known places and monuments in the landscape (Hingley 2006, 333) which Gibbon would have been able to draw upon for his understanding of the pre-Roman West. These places were identified at a period in time when the ways of understanding and interpreting landscape and urbanism in society were changing, in turn, influencing attitudes towards place and space in the pre-Roman and Roman periods. This influence has survived in some form to this day.

That Gibbon considered pre-Roman settlement in inferior terms to Roman towns is represented by his statement that with conquest “(T)he spirit of improvement had passed the Alps, and been felt even in the woods of Britain, which were gradually cleared away to open a free space for convenient and elegant habitations. York was the seat of government; London was already enriched by commerce; and Bath was celebrated for the salutary effects of the medicinal waters” (vol. I, 75), clearly applying modern views of the towns onto the past. For details on pre-Roman settlement Gibbon drew heavily on Caesar’s De Bello Gallico. He wrote that “(W)e can only suppose them to have been rude fortifications, constructed in the centre of woods, and designed to secure the women, children and cattle, whilst the warriors of the tribe marched out to repel a sudden invasion”. Caesar’s writing refers in a number of occasions to the importance of woodland for indigenous meetings, activities and settlement. He recorded that the Suebi sent “their children and all their stuff to the woods” (B Gall. IV.19) and the “Menapii had all hidden in their densest forests” (IV.38). He also wrote that “the Britons call it a stronghold when they have fortified a thick-set woodland with rampart
Gibbon also used woods as a method of emphasizing the savagery and danger of the indigenous peoples. Attacks from barbarians came from woods as a contrast from the civilization of walled towns and forts: “The crafty barbarians, who had lined the woods, suddenly attacked the legions” (vol. I, 308–9). Other phrases reflecting this are: “the savage warriors of Scythia issued from their forests” (vol. III, 121), “a crowd of naked savages rushed from the woods” (vol. III, 281); “the secret paths of the woods” (vol. II, 1066), “dark recesses of the woods” (vol. II, 1077) and the “thick and gloomy woods” (vol. II, 124). The term “woods and morasses” occurs repeatedly throughout the work as a means of emphasizing barbarity compared with Roman civilization. Woodland clearance and the drainage of marshland by the Romans, as in his own time, were regarded by Gibbon as acts of improvement, civilization, and rationalization.

Commenting on later times, for instance, Gibbon wrote that in Germany the “immense woods have been gradually cleared” and the “morasses have been drained” (vol. I, 232). It “is the happy consequence of the progress of arts and agriculture” that instead of “some rude villages, thinly scattered among its woods and morasses, Germany produced a list of two thousand three hundred walled towns” (vol. III, 512). A highly influential German historian of the Roman Empire was Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) whose most well known work is the three-volume History of Rome (Römische Geschichte) covering the Republic, published between 1854 and 1856, and then The Provinces of the Roman Empire from Caesar to Diocletian (Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian) which appeared in 1885. Elements of Mommsen’s writing were influenced by Gibbon, describing the benefits of Roman conquest and the unifying nature of imperialism. With clear resonances of Gibbon, on pre-Roman settlement in northern Europe he wrote that the “population during war sought protection in the morasses and forests rather than behind their walls, and beyond the Thames the primitive defence of the wooden abatis altogether took the place of towns” (1866, 218). Mommsen himself was influential on the views of a number of historians including Francis Haverfield (1860–1919) in Britain and Camille Jullian (1859–1933) in France who studied in Berlin under Mommsen (Goudineau 1998, 9–10; Hingley 2005, 35).

Like Mommsen, Jullian took the Romanist viewpoint in his early work including the first three parts of his eight-volume Histoire de la Gaule published between 1907 and 1921. Jullian attended the École Normale Supérieure in Paris at the age of 18 and received his doctorate at 24 in 1883 at the Sorbonne (Goudineau 1998, 8). This route of education undoubtedly encouraged traditional perspectives and approaches towards the Roman conquest of France and pre-Roman settlement. Indeed, his earlier book Vercingétorix (1900) was
written predominantly from a Romanist perspective and he originally considered writing a
history of Rome, rather than Gaul (Goudineau 1998, 9, 21; King 2001, 120). Jullian knew the
Greek and Roman texts well but unlike Gibbon he did not put so much emphasis on structural
remains and antiquarian studies. Jullian’s work has been very influential in France although it
is now receiving critical analysis and it is recognized that his writing privileged certain
themes and periods (Goudineau 1998, 31).

The later volumes of *Histoire de la Gaule* were not so strongly biased towards Roman
civilization as the earlier ones (King 2001, 120), although the ways in which pre-Roman
settlements are described does in many ways remain similar to Mommsen and Gibbon. In
volume V, for example, he wrote that the “Empire était l’apothéose de le ville”\(^2\) emphasizing
the civilization that Roman towns brought and this was accompanied in volumes II and V
with descriptions of the transformations of “marécages et forêts” (marshes and forests) around
towns (vol. II, 260–3; vol. V, 177–80) comparable to Gibbon’s writing on woods and
morasses. He also states that the marshes and forests would have been good defences (vol. V,
261)\(^3\) and that they would have been more prominent in northern France; a result of this being
that the north of France was considered less civilised than the south: “les grandes villes
étaient plus rares au nord”.\(^4\) Jullian does, however, acknowledge the sacred nature of some
wooded areas (e.g., vol. II, 155), as is mentioned in some classical texts such as Lucan (also
used by Gibbon),\(^5\) but not of wetlands.

Gibbon continued to use the imagery of woodland and marsh in his work to illustrate the
“decline” of the West after Rome: “Gaul was again overspread with woods” (vol. III, 481)
and in Britain “an ample space of wood and morass was resigned to the vague dominion of
nature” and areas returned to their primitive state of a “savage and solitary forest” (vol. III,
502–3). Jullian, who refers to Gibbon’s work (vol. VII, 3), also writes of “La Gaule en ruine”,
the “ruine des campagnes”, and that “peu à peu la forêt se rapprochait” (vol. VII, 16–7).
Describing decline in such terms as encroaching woods and the loss of order in the
countryside, as Gibbon, Jullian, and others did, will have influenced attitudes not only of the
later Roman period settlement but also the pre-conquest period and led to assumptions about
the way in which these places were experienced, valued, and understood.

\(^2\) The Empire was the pinnacle of the town.

\(^3\) As in the case of marshes, “les forêts présentaient les mêmes avantages militaires” (vol. V, 261).

\(^4\) The large towns were rarer in the north.

\(^5\) In the *Pharsalia* (III.399–432), Lucan provides a well known description of a sacred grove in the
vicinity of Marseilles.
Although Gibbon referred mainly to classical texts in his work, then, he was writing at a time of increasing rationalization and commoditization of land which would have influenced his interpretations. These changes contributed towards the modern concept of ‘landscape’ which has been powerful in the way in which attempts to understand oppida, other contemporary sites, and their settings have been approached. Gibbon was working amidst a growing empiricist understanding of the environment. It is not the purpose of this paper to go into detail on the origins of the term and understanding of ‘landscape’, and there is considerable writing on this subject (e.g. Brück 2007; Cosgrove 1984; Johnson 2007), but it can be seen in part as being a product of the eighteenth century ideology of improvement and other social changes. The Dutch painting tradition introduced the term landschap into English; painting the land, contributing towards such terms as ‘picturesque’, objectified and distanced it, separating people from it (Bevan 1997, 181). Landscape also formed a significant parts in changing attitudes to economic aspects of life. Like painting, antiquarianism was one of a range of pursuits dominated by the aristocracy during the eighteenth century (along with travelling, gardening and drawing) which influenced and created perceptions of landscape (Brück 2007, 244). Antiquarianism, and then archaeology with its interest in the context of finds through excavation, were part of the process of the modernization and rationalization of land (Lemaire 1997, 16; Schnapp 1996, 179–219).

Also emerging were concepts of environmental and economic marginality for areas that were deemed too unsuitable for exploitation and were considered to be backward and uncivilized. Civilization was brought to areas through exploitation and drainage of the land, as in the case of the Fenland in eastern England, where large-scale drainage began in the post-medieval period (Darby 1973; cf. Rogers 2007). Comparisons with the Fenland have also been made with contemporary overseas land reclamation in the colonies (Evans 1997, 117). Through land clearance, drainage and exploitation, Western concepts of ‘landscape’ were implanted onto other parts of the world. Gibbon’s awareness of this is reflected in works held in his library including William Douglass’ A Summary of the first planting, progressive improvements and present state of the British settlements in America published in 1760; America “must preserve the manners of Europe” (Gibbon vol. III, 514).

Mommsen also suggests that most of the provincial land possessed by the Romans was governed in the same way as “English possessions in the earliest time in America” (1866, 214). Similar attitudes are clearly reflected in Gibbon’s writings on the Roman colonization in the West and influenced his descriptions of pre-Roman settlement and his negative view towards wetlands and woods. Gibbon’s writing, amongst other influences, came to play a significant part in the formulation of ideas and direction of approaches in the study of late
Iron Age *oppida* and contemporary settlement, via the perspective emphasizing economic priorities and hierarchy/dominance in considerations of their location, organization and function. Moving away from the narrative of colonial conquest and economic prioritization, it is necessary to be reminded that in the Iron Age people would have had an entirely different concept of time and being which impacts on studies of their inhabited world.

**RETHINKING LATE IRON AGE LANDSCAPE AND SETTLEMENT**

This second part of the paper provides an example of how we might interpret settlement and landscape in the late Iron Age differently, looking especially at *oppida*. The term ‘*oppidum*’ used in the context of describing settlement types in the late Iron Age of Britain and the near Continent originates from Caesar’s *De Bello Gallico*. He uses the term, Latin for ‘town’, to describe the sites that he saw in Gaul which might imply that he needed a word that would be understood by his readership in Rome. It is unlikely, however, that we have anything more than only a very basic understanding of these sites and, in turn, the process of urbanization in the Roman period. This section will reconsider late pre-Roman sites in France, and some in Britain, looking especially at their relationship with Roman urbanism. It might appear here that Roman towns are being used to interpret Iron Age settlement patterns (as was perhaps the case in Gibbon’s work) but the opposite is intended. Analysis shows that some Roman towns are preceded by *oppida* whilst others have evidence for pre-Roman activity without the monumental earthworks of *oppida*. Looking at the meanings attached to their landscape setting, however, this analysis will suggest that the significance of many of these places need not have related to their monumentality or apparent proto-urban appearance.

Where *oppida* have been identified in France and elsewhere in Continental Europe, through monumental earthworks, they have predominantly been interpreted in defensive terms, acting as refuges and storage places, and in economic terms being centres of production and exchange. Roymans (1990, 202), for example, wrote that “the size of the entire settlement corresponds primarily to its defensive function, while the size of its permanently inhabited area corresponds to its economic one”. Fichtl devotes a large part of *La Ville Celtique* (2005) to the defences of *oppida*, and the evidence for craft production within them, whilst Collis’ (1975) *Defended Sites of the Late La Tène*, as the title suggests, puts an emphasis on the defensive nature and function of sites. Woolf (1993, 223), moreover, draws attention to the fact that the title of many of the works on *oppida* explicitly state the interpretation that they are urban, making the assumption that we understand both the nature of sites in the pre-

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6 These works include Audouze and Büchsenschütz (1991), Collis (1984), Cunliffe and Rowley (1976), Wells (1984), and also Fichtl (2005). Woolf (1998) did look more at the social aspects of *oppida*. 
conquest period and the nature of Roman urbanism. This attitude has had the effect of simplifying our understanding of these sites in terms of their location, activity within them and the way in which they were experienced. Even the ‘defences’ of many oppida seem to have been far too impracticable for defence to have been their only or most important purpose and other functions are also likely (Haselgrove 2007, 511). They also affirmed identities and were significant aspects of the experience of the ‘landscape’.

Useful examples of the reanalysis of our understanding of sites and their settings include Aitchison’s (1993) examination of the Dorsey in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, an earthwork enclosure lying near the Dorsey River. The earthworks enclose a large area of marshland which contains very little evidence for occupation or activity. Traditionally seen as a military installation it may instead have functioned as some kind of sacred enclosure with the marshland being deliberately defined in this way (Aitchison 1993), this landscape feature forming an essential component of the site. Haselgrove and Millett’s (1997) reanalysis of pre-Roman Verulamium, next to the River Ver, also puts an emphasis on the setting of the earthworks here. They suggest that the enclosure in the valley floor with remains of metalworking was a deliberate decision to locate the industrial activity, and probably also political and religious events, here because of the religious associations of both the marshy area and the metalworking itself. Actions were taken and experiences encountered that did not relate to what would be regarded as rational and practical today.

Willis’ (1997) study of the settlement pattern of the East Midlands in Britain reminds us that the monumentality of settlements may have been less important that their negotiation with ‘natural’ features in the landscape. Here, watery features were often integral parts of the settlements which did not have large earthworks. Roman towns were placed within meaning-laden landscapes and became a part of them (cf. Creighton 2006; Rogers 2008). Towns were also landscape events where phenomenological aspects were just as important and meaningful as they were with pre-Roman settlement (Willis 2007a). Town walls for instance, as with oppida earthworks, undoubtedly had values beyond their functional use (cf. Woolf 2006).

Some work on the Continental oppida is now beginning to explore them as meaningful space including evidence of sanctuaries (e.g., Fichtl et al. 2000; Kaenel 2006). The Titelberg (Luxembourg), for example, seems to have had zones of different activities with a sanctuary site in the centre, with its prominent position suggesting that it was an important part of the site (Metzler et al. 2006). Other examples with sanctuaries as apparent foci are Martberg, Wallendorf, and Mont Beuvray. Evidence for sanctuaries with pre-Roman origins near to Roman towns might suggest that there were a number of closely related foci in the pre-Roman

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7 Also see Rogers 2008.
landscape, one of which was then perhaps taken by the town. At Bayeux, settlement at the site of the Roman town seems to have begun in the Augustan period but excavations have discovered traces of a pre-Roman religious sanctuary on the site of the Saint-Vigor hill to the east of the town (Bedon 1999, 178) indicating that this landscape was already in use and ritualized, within which the Roman town will have become part. Sanctuaries need not be the only way in which the religious meaning of sites is reflected; religious symbolism will also have been attached to natural features and wider landscape settings. Roymans’ (2004; 2007) recent work on the site of Kassel/Lith and its watery setting, for instance, demonstrates a move away from a predominant defensive and economic interpretation of sites more common in his earlier work (1990).

In France, Roman towns were not only associated with ‘oppida’ but also placed in locations with traces apparently of other forms of settlement. In some cases even towns that seem to have been founded in unoccupied landscapes may actually have been placed on already significantly defined land.8 It is necessary to consider the symbolism that the wider landscape might have held. ‘Natural’ places could be as significant and meaningful within landscapes as ‘man-made’ features, while culture and nature may not always have been consciously distinguished (e.g., Bradley 2000; Insoll 2007): “natural places have an archaeology because they acquired a significance in the minds of people in the past” (Bradley 2000, 35).

One factor concerning the location of many of the sites, and the meanings attached to them, is their watery contexts. Gibbon, had he made a study of this, is likely to have interpreted it through the necessity for landscape improvement with drainage and land reclamation. It is unlikely, however, that given the significance, especially in religious belief, that seems to have been attached to water and watery contexts in prehistoric Western Europe (Derks 1998; Green 1986, 166; Webster 1995, 449–51) that these sites would not have been considered solely in rational and practical terms. The watery context seems to have been important not only for oppida but also other types of site (Figure 1). The significance of water within the landscape, and to settlement in pre-Roman France, is indicated by the large number of references to rivers and water in Gaul in the classical sources. Diodorus Siculus describes the rivers (Diod. Sic. V.25.3–4) whilst Caesar refers to their defensive benefits around settlements.

Bourges (Avaricum), for example, had great “natural strength, for it was surrounded by river and marsh” (B Gall. VII.15) whilst around Paris (Lutetia) there was a “continuous expanse of marsh which flowed into the Seine and formed a significant obstruction over the whole area” (VII.57) and at Besançon (Vesontio; Walter and Barçon 2004) the “river Doubs practically

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surrounds the entire town” (B Gall. I.38). Strabo emphasizes Lyon’s (Lugdunum) location where “the Avar and the Rhodanus mingle with one another” (IV.1.11), suggesting it was significant. Eleven towns in Gallia Belgica, thirteen in Gallia Lugdunensis, and ten in Gallia Aquitania were located at the confluence of rivers whilst some were within the meanders of rivers, such as Cahors, Périgueux, Soissons, and Besançon and some in marshy locations including Dax, Sens, and Amiens. There were, of course, also elevated sites that became Roman civitas-capitalis such as Langres and Metz in Gallia Belgica but, even here, rivers played an important role in the landscape and the ramparts at Metz enclosed areas of marshland; hilltop sites are likely to have had significances beyond their defensive function.

At a number of sites that became Roman towns there is evidence for pre-Roman oppida but in no cases are their nature, function and interaction with the wider landscape fully understood. The Roman town at Rheims, for example, in Gallia Belgica was located on the site of one of the largest oppida in France, Durocortorum, which had two ramparts with the inner one enclosing 90 hectares and the outer enclosing 550 hectares (Berthelot et al. 1994; Bedon 1999; Neiss 2005). It was situated between the River Vesle and two streams that have now disappeared and whilst some structures and streets have been identified inside the oppidum, it seems doubtful that the whole of the enclosed area would have been occupied. This ‘landscape’ element, enclosing large open spaces, and its watery context, suggests that there was more meaning attached to it than a settlement site in modern terms.

The town at Soissons in Gallia Belgica was preceded by the oppidum of Pommiers, a large promontory cut off by a massive bank and ditch enclosing around 40 hectares, which in turn followed the oppidum at Villeneuve-St.-Germain, a low-lying site which was enclosed by a meander of the River Aisne and associated with floodable areas (Brun et al. 2000; Haselgrove 1996, 149). It now seems, however, that none of the sites were wholly abandoned. Coins, brooches and other material indicate that the chronologies of Pommiers and Villeneuve-St.-Germain overlap; both sites, at least periodically, were being used at the same time (Haselgrove 1996, 151). Pommiers also remained in some kind of use during the Roman period (Knight 2001, 77–8). It may be possible to consider all three locations as places within a ‘complex’ of sites that retained long-term significance and meaning. They may also have been used as periodic religious and meeting places before the decision was made to make a more permanent move (Haselgrove 2007, 509). Settlement and landscape use was far more complex than linear studies of Roman urbanization often allow.

Bibracte (Mont Beuvray) is another important example. This oppidum was situated on the promontory of the Autonois hills overlooking the flood plain of the River Arroux where there was waterlogged ground and the possibility of flooding (Rebourg 1998). It is in this floodplain that there was a sanctuary complex including the ‘Temple of Janus’ which
probably had pre-Roman origins. A theatre and another temple have also been identified here by aerial photography and it seems to be surrounded by an enclosure ditch (Frezouls 1997, 158; Rebourg 1998, 158–60). The oppidum continued to attract activity in the Roman period despite the Roman town being located at Autun 27 kilometres away and suggests that this site remained part of a wider meaning-laden landscape.

Collis et al. (2000) have also emphasized the need to acknowledge the importance of the large non-defended sites as part of the settlement pattern. Amiens is perhaps a good example of the problematic use of the term oppidum for only large earthwork sites since Caesar refers to an oppidum here (B Gall. V.24; V.47; V.53), and that the council of Gauls met here (V.24), but so far no earthworks have been identified. If Caesar can be taken at his word it would suggest that this place was special without much monumentality. The site, including the later Roman town, was located in a marshy area and at a crossing point and confluence of the Rivers Somme and Selle. It seems that this was a special site of meeting, interaction, ceremony and ritual that was fully integrated into its landscape setting. Another example is Sens in Gallia Lugdunensis which was located in a low-lying marshy area next to the River Yonne (Perrugot 1996) and although there does not seem to have been an ‘oppidum’ here there are traces of pre-conquest activity. Sites require further study in terms of pre-Roman activity and the meanings attached to them.

In Britain there is a complexity in the late pre-Roman settlement record that is often overlooked because of the preoccupation with the practical functions and nature of oppida. This is examined in more detail in Rogers (2008) which sought to explore the oppida and other forms of settlement in terms of their significance as places, their landscape setting and the way in which Roman urbanism interacted with them. In Britain, oppida tend to be divided into ‘enclosed oppida’ like the Continental sites and ‘territorial oppida’ which appear to embrace much larger areas without continuous earthworks (Haselgrove 1999, 121; Haselgrove and Moore 2007, 6). In both cases, the earthworks have generally been interpreted in defensive terms and their watery contexts were practical elements of their location.

Sites examined in this way include Verulamium (St Albans) (cf. Niblett 2005; Thompson 2005) and Camulodunum (Colchester) (Crummy 1997; Hawkes and Hull 1947; cf. Willis 2007b, 121–2)9 with their earthworks spanning large areas. These were associated with watery settings and foci of activity including metalworking and coin production. The religious significance and magical nature attached to metalworking and the minting of coinage in prehistory (Budd and Taylor 1995; Haselgrove and Wigg-Wolf 2005, 12; Hingley 1997)

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9 The names Verlamion and Camulodunon are often used to distinguish the Iron Age period settlements from the Roman towns, and are based largely on Iron Age coinage, although the exact names and spellings are still uncertain (Potter 2002, 21).
would also have contributed to the special nature of these sites, integrated with the religiously-imbued watery setting as studied by Haselgrove and Millett (1997, 284).

Potentially, however, key late Iron Age sites lacked earthworks (cf. Rogers 2008): at Lincoln, which lay near the River Witham, evidence for pre-fortress and *colonia* activity includes traces of structures on what would have been an island within a large natural body of water there known as the Brayford Pool (Figure 2; Darling and Jones 1988) and there are suggestions that there may also have been activity beneath the *colonia* itself (Jones and Stocker 2003, 28–30), much of which would have been lost through its construction. A triple linear bank and ditch system to the north of the later town (ibid, 30–1) appears to lead to the site and was possibly even designed to direct movement to this religiously-imbued location.

Other apparent concentrations of pre-Roman activity in watery and marshy areas include at Cirencester (Moore 2006; Reece 2003), Exeter (Fox 1952), and Leicester (Cooper and Buckley 2003) and suggest that these sites may not have been considered in inferior terms to *oppida* and may have played an important part in the creation of the settlement pattern in the Roman period. The location of the fortress and subsequent *colonia* at Lincoln, for instance could even have been a deliberate attempt to control a sacred place here which was considered a threat (cf. Brooks 2006; Millett 1990).

Roman London is another important example (see Rogers 2008), it being located next to the Thames and divided by the Walbrook stream, both of which appear to have been used for the religious deposition of objects in prehistory (Bradley and Gordon 1988; Merrifield 1983, 9). Evidence for Iron Age occupation in the area is still slight although traces have been identified on islands within the Thames at Southwark (Beard and Cowan 1988). Holder and Jamieson’s study (2003) has demonstrated the extent of loss of early levels in London due to truncation. Regardless of the extent of Iron Age occupation here, however, the site could well have been an important meeting and religious place at this time.

It is important, then, for *oppida* and contemporary sites to be studied in more theoretically rigorous ways, acknowledging the differences in which the landscape would have been conceptualized and the meanings attached to certain places. In a number of cases this significance may have survived through memories and myths making ‘place histories’. These ‘commemorative places’ (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, 5) would have gathered people, experiences, histories, and thoughts (Casey 1996, 14) and remained culturally charged (Creighton 2006) despite new elements being brought to the sites through the foundation of Roman towns.
CONCLUSIONS

This paper took the form of two separate but interlinked parts. The first section used Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to highlight the complex nature in which the research tradition of pre-Roman settlement has been formed. Gibbon’s description of watery and wooded areas relating to pre-conquest settlement in negative terms was written in a period where ‘economic improvement’ was a dominant social concept, changing understandings of landscape forever, and where the colonial exploitation of land and peoples was at its height. His attitude towards urbanism and landscape in his own day influenced his understanding of the Roman period as well as colouring his interpretation of the classical sources. What makes Gibbon’s work in its social context especially important is that it has had such a prominent position in academic study and has gone on to influence attitudes and approaches towards the past into the present day. The same social context has led to the situation whereby what archaeologists tend to see as ‘facts’ and ‘practical considerations’ concerning place and landscape are mostly modern, Western-derived assumptions (Johnson 2007, 129).

Authors such as Theodor Mommsen and Camille Jullian were also influential in the research tradition but there are also influences from Gibbon in their work. The context in which these influential works were written has had an impact on our study of Iron Age and Roman settlement patterns including our understanding of late Iron Age *oppida* and their relationship with less monumental contemporary sites. The second part of the paper discussed an example of how with detailed archaeological data and theoretical analysis, we can explore ways in which settlement, landscape, and place might be approached in different ways. This in turn has led to more sophisticated understandings of the process of urbanization after the Roman conquest. Gibbon’s work is a good reflection of the way in which people thought about place and space in the eighteenth century and how this has influenced historical and archaeological studies since. As the second part demonstrates, however, there are more rigorous ways in which the available settlement evidence can be studied to raise new perspectives on place and landscape in the late Iron Age and Roman periods.

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