

## **Crossing Sabrina: archaeology, history, and the bridges of the River Severn**

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### **Abstract**

Bridge-building, as an instrument of statecraft and as a signifier of statehood, was important to the English kingdom of Mercia as early as the mid-eighth century AD. But contemporary historical sources rarely disclose where bridges were actually built, and for the River Severn and its tributaries, locationally-specific documentary evidence is only available from the late eleventh century on, surviving fabric only from even later than that. Until very recently, archaeological evidence has been elusive and has been able to make little contribution either to the question of the origins of these crossings, or of their development, maintenance and replacement in the later medieval and early Modern centuries. While the bridges of the pre-Conquest period remain in many respects obscure, it is becoming clear that the early Anglo-Norman state was at least as conscious of the power of the bridge as its Mercian predecessor had been.

This paper reviews the state of archaeological research on the bridges of the River Severn and its tributaries, from the Roman period to the early Modern, and sets this in the context of work in other river-systems of western England, notably the Bristol Avon, the Wye and the Upper Thames. The bridges examined are mostly located in urban areas, and this has had a direct impact on the archaeological record and on the occurrence of exposed historic fabric. In some instances, bridge structures have remained beyond archaeological reach but associated works inland have been susceptible to investigation. The paper also reports on two newly-discovered medieval bridge sites in the rural area above Ironbridge and examines new methods of archaeological prospection for the detection and initial assessment of historic bridge fabric in physical environments, both rural and urban, where access is difficult.