

ASPECTS OF THE USE OF WATER IN THE ROMAN WORLD

HENIG (M.), LUNDOCK (J.) (edd.) *Water in the Roman World. Engineering, Trade, Religion and Daily Life.* (Roman Archaeology 91.) Pp. vi + 204, b/w & colour figs, b/w & colour ill., b/w & colour maps. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2022. Paper, £38. ISBN: 978-1-80327-300-6. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24001112

In the past three decades a lot of research has been done on water management in the ancient world, not only by archaeologists and historians, but also by engineers with a keen interest in the past. As a result, large-scale waterworks such as dams, aqueducts and aqueduct bridges, (inverted) siphons and urban sewage systems have been extensively studied. Likewise, the inner-urban water distribution in Greek and Roman cities, fountains and nymphaea, public and private baths, and questions about hygiene and health have gained a prominent place in many scholarly discussions about these cities and living conditions in general. The vast majority of this research, however, deals with evidence from the ancient Mediterranean. Moreover, many subjects remain under- or even unexplored, as the papers collected in this important volume show. Starting from the notion that the *materiality* of water offers a useful prism to look at aspects related to the use, perception and symbolic values of water, the editors bring together nine highly interesting contributions on a variety of themes. While mostly focusing on the peripheries of the Roman Empire, all contributions present innovative ideas and approaches, or propose exciting new interpretations for well-studied sites such as Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) in Roman Britain.

The volume opens with a short introduction by one of the editors, Lundock, explaining its purpose ('Water and Why Materiality Matters in Roman Studies'). The relation between materiality and value assignment is at the heart of Lundock's research interests. He argues that water is 'an unescapable necessity for all human civilisations and by attempting to understand how a given culture conceptualised this material we can begin to have insight into large part of the lived experience of those who are so remote and yet so very similar to ourselves' (p. 2).

F. Ugolini, in 'Iconography of the Lighthouse in Roman Antiquity: Symbolism, Identity and Power Across the Mediterranean', bases his ideas on five case studies representing Portus and possibly Alexandria in mosaics, on a sarcophagus and on the well-known Torlonia relief. More than discussing the iconography alone, Ugolini stresses the importance of the role of lighthouses in controlling the waters, thus underlining Rome's dominion over the seas and trade routes over water.

Control and connectivity are also central themes in the next chapter by S. Heeren and M. Driessen ('Roman Offensive Planning: Shaping the Lower Rhine Waterscape'). After a brief but comprehensive outline of the land- and waterscape in the Lower Rhine delta some two thousand years ago, the authors present an explanation for the large-scale water management measures in the Netherlands in the early Roman period. They combine the latest archaeological results with all historical and geographical data available and argue in a convincing way that at least some of these measures were taken for the transportation of troops and material over water. The Corbulo canal, for instance, connecting the Rhine and the Meuse rivers, made safer transportation possible because the risky North Sea could be avoided. Moreover, this kind of infrastructure, here and elsewhere in the Rhine delta, should be regarded as part of a sophisticated military planning scheme, shortly before the conquest of Britain.

E. Cousins, in ‘“Springs Sumptuously Equipped”: Meanings of Water at Bath’, analyses the meaning and use of water in the sanctuary at Bath (*Aquae Sulis*). She carefully deconstructs the widespread idea that the sanctuary at Bath was visited in antiquity because of the presumed healing powers of the thermal waters. This mistaken idea can be related to the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Bath, by that time a Spa resort. Antiquarians of those days uncritically projected the spa function of their own time back to antiquity, with the tenacious idea of Bath as an ancient curative centre as a result. In what follows Cousins presents a careful analysis of the material evidence, resulting in an attractive alternative interpretation, i.e. the sanctuary as a place for ritual closure or ritual relinquishment.

The complex in Bath is also discussed by J. Amphærus and Henig in ‘If Swimming Was Not A Serious Activity for the Greeks and Romans, They Would Not Have Had Swimming Pools’. This title is a statement and summary of their research at once, but with their detailed and nuanced line of argumentation the authors successfully substantiate the claim. They make use of a wide range of material and written sources, carefully contextualised and combined only if and where possible. Moreover, as they remind us, the activity of swimming was self-evident for many inhabitants of the ancient world and hence not widely mentioned, depicted or discussed in our sources. As a consequence, the lack of evidence is no evidence of lack here.

The next chapter, ‘The Social Lives of Wells in Roman Britain and Beyond’ by J. Gerrard, deals with the life cycles of wells. Gerrard offers a highly stimulating analysis of the construction, use and abandonment of wells. After elucidating the big efforts that had to be made by people to construct a well, the location and use of water wells are discussed, with the help of ethnographical evidence from other parts of the world. A well can be regarded, in the words of Gerrard, as ‘an arena for a variety of social interactions’ (p. 89), since many people would gather there to draw water. Different scenarios for the phase(s) of a well’s abandonment conclude this excellent chapter.

P. Coombe, in ‘Aspects of the Iconography of River Gods in Roman Britain’, discusses the iconography of sculpted river gods in Roman Britain, of which only a small corpus is known. This small corpus, however, combined with examples from the Roman empire, allows for interesting observations on the meaning of personifications of rivers. Coombe sees water deities as a powerful aspect of Roman domination and ‘personifications of the river acting as shorthand for a geographical area of people living alongside that body of water’ (p. 120).

The chapter by P. Walton and H. Eckardt, ‘What Lies Beneath? Interpreting the Romano-British Assemblage from the River Tees at Piercebridge, County Durham’, discusses a puzzling riverine deposit in England. A careful analysis of the objects (most of them precious) and coins (mostly *denarii*), the apparent connections with Mars and Mercury and the location of the deposition site reveal possible motivations for these deposits, dating to the second and early third centuries CE. Much of the material can be qualified as military, ritually deposited by soldiers on their way to the northern frontier or upon their safe return. Moreover, a ritual conclusion of military service, by offering part of one’s equipment or coins, is another possible scenario to consider. Here again, rivers are characterised as both physical boundaries and liminal zones.

Liminality also plays an important role in A. Irvin’s chapter, ‘Water and Liminality in Pre-Roman Gaul’, in which the author stresses the significance of cult communities, tied through ritual to certain places within Gaul. The long-term perspective corroborates this view. Irvin interprets ritual water depositions as important connections between individuals, communities and places, even more so because orthopraxy was crucial. He presents his analysis as an interpretation ‘beyond the standard central-place model common within the

Mediterranean world' (p. 144). This model is attractive because it helps to explain how and why water depositions stress the link between communities and locations. Moreover, it allows for a better understanding of how the heterarchical Celtic elites balanced internal power relations.

In 'Worship of the Nymphs at *Aquae Iasae* (Roman Pannonia Superior): Cognition, Ritual, and Sacred Space' B. Misić analyses how the sanctuary and sacred objects at *Aquae Iasae* in today's Croatia were perceived by soldiers and other visitors to the shrine. The excavations of the site started in 1953, but the majority of the finds were published only recently, enabling Misić to examine the material evidence in order to reconstruct the range of ritual activities connected to the worship of the Nymphs venerated here. Combining theories and concepts from cognitive science and ritual studies with the topography, architecture, inscriptions and finds of *Aquae Iasae*, she unfolds the possible scenarios of how the shrine was used and perceived over time in a both fascinating and convincing way. It is only a pity that no illustrations were included, even more so because the site is not widely known. However, the text is crystal-clear, and Misić's results inspire us to think along these lines for other sanctuaries as well.

The volume ends with a reflection written by editor Henig, who also provides a general overview of water-related research and thus the wider context of the volume's contributions ('An Empire Written on Water: A Personal View'). Henig's impressive knowledge of Roman Britain and its material culture finds a prominent place in his text and makes it even more worthwhile to read.

Both editors express the hope in their respective contributions that this collection of papers will inspire future research. After having read this stimulating volume, and while still reflecting on many of the new ideas and fresh perspectives offered here, I am more than hopeful: I am convinced it will.

Radboud Universiteit

NATHALIE DE HAAN
nathalie.dehaan@ru.nl