
First published: http://www.sehepunkte.de/2020/02/31869.html

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).
Dylan Kelby Rogers: Water Culture in Roman Society

Anyone who has ever stood at the piers of Pont du Gard near Nîmes, or followed the course of more than 100 km of aqueduct through the countryside of the Eifel to Cologne, will not doubt the significance of water culture in the Roman world. This useful but vague term needs to be clarified. Rogers, author of this slim and concise book (87 pages of text and 32 pages of bibliography), defines his subject as "the set of water-related practices that both express and shape a society's perception of its place within the natural order, in relation to foreign societies, and concerning its own constituent participants." (4) The table of contents elucidates his understanding and approach.

The introduction is followed by a brief chapter (4-10) on Roman literary sources which offer views on water (Vitruvius' *De architectura*, Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*, Pliny's *History Naturalis*, Frontinus' *De aquaeductu urbis Romae*).

Ch. 3, "Roman Water Management: Administration, Distribution and Legal Regulations", focuses on Rome, the establishment of the *cura riparum et alvei Tiberis et cloacarum urbis* and of course, Frontinus' invaluable treatise *De aquaeductu*. The bulk of the evidence, however, is surveyed in the fourth and longest chapter (19-61), "Categories of Water Usage: Archaeological Evidence". A dense overview of scholarship surveys the contributions of important research communities on ancient water systems (Deutsche Wasserhistorische Gesellschaft, Frontinus Gesellschaft) and draws attention to recent collaborative projects, online resources and the journal *Water History*, illustrating the proliferation of water studies beyond epochs, borders and disciplines in the last decades. No less dense are the eight pages on aqueducts and water supply systems in the Roman world. The spectacular architectural achievements in Rome and in the empire have always attracted antiquarian and scholarly attention. Recently, not only have new research foci developed in aqueduct studies, but elaborate approaches to supply and distribution systems have also emerged: The aqueducts of Cologne and Nîmes received fundamental studies (Grewe 1986, Fabre et al. 2000) as did the recently explored Gadara/Dekapolis aqueduct (Qanat Fir'aun) of more than 150 km, with the longest known tunnel of classical antiquity (106 km) (missed by Rogers; see M. Döring, *Wasser für die Dekapolis* (Schriften der Deutschen Wasserhistorischen Gesellschaft, Band 12), Siegburg 2016). New insights in engineering and technology greatly increase our understanding of water supply systems.

The sections on baths (31-39) and on drainage and sanitation (39-46) again show how much archaeology promotes our understanding of these basic features of the Roman lifestyle in recent decades. Rogers duly refers to important comprehensive works in the field (Fagan 1999, Yegül 2010) and meticulously surveys later specialised studies, tracing the
development of the Roman bath and its dissemination in the empire with a welcome focus on the technological innovations involved. Drainage systems and toilets in particular have received a great deal of attention recently, and it is here that the issue of Roman cultural practices equally comes into focus. Rogers refers to fascinating discussions (Koloski-Ostrow 2015) on Roman latrines and hygiene, the latter of which would be very modest indeed by modern standards, and this raises questions about Roman sensory experience, etc.

The sections on water displays (46-56) clearly profit from Rogers's own research, his dissertation on "Water-Display and Meaning in the High Roman Empire" (2015, University of Virginia). He discusses the terminology and typology of fountains, the ostentatious use of water and its use as means of munificence and as a status symbol, referring to dense recent bibliography. He notes that current research trends focus on wider-reaching contexts, less explored urban situations, social considerations and aesthetic aspects. In three pages, he deals with post-Roman water culture, focusing again on aqueducts and fountains. Then he turns to hydrological power (56-61) and enters, with the diffusion of pumps and watermills, the world of Roman economy and technology. A very short chapter on empire-wide trends and phenomena (59-61) remains too general to be useful. His final chapter on water culture and its implications (63-85), attempts a more comprehensive look, with subsections on power (and status), aesthetics, water as spectacle, and cultural experience of water (incl. religion and landscape).

This last chapter illustrates the problem of a brief guide in an extremely diverse research field. To cover as many aspects as possible and still to follow a problem-oriented path, Rogers finds it more and more necessary to rely on the arguments of selected recent monographs. Still, including a wide range of literature in his notes, he is a very reliable guide to research. His understanding of water culture, however, privileges the aspects of aesthetic and social visibility, of pleasure and power. Practicalities and technology are less well covered: rather little attention is given to the abundant evidence in Pompeii (the bibliography offers some compensation).

Rogers has too little to say about the beginnings, the sources and the driving forces of Roman water culture - in fact, the Republic hardly exists for him. The existence and impact of earlier developments and technologies e.g. in the Greek world (tunnels, dams, irrigation etc.) is largely ignored. Only with regard to the diffusion of the Roman bath does he consider other designs and their possible influence. Indeed, what he understands as Roman water culture is by and large the water culture of the Roman empire. He takes Pausanias and Aristides with their descriptions of polis infrastructure as evidence for the Roman city, only to pose the question of empire-wide trends in water-consumption here (61). But neither aqueducts nor public baths were Roman inventions. The enormous tunnel of the 'Roman' Gadara/Dekapolis aqueduct was constructed with qanat-technology and combined water systems of different periods. Like so much in the Roman empire, its water culture represents a hybrid of traditions and inspirations.
A closer look at developments in late antiquity contributes to a better understanding of the full range and meaning of water culture in antiquity and shifts the question of Roman water culture away from aesthetic and status preferences and to a more balanced overall picture. In the Negev, the development of a highly sophisticated irrigation system enabled an unparalleled expansion of land use and population increase. In Nîmes and its hinterland, in North Africa, in the Decapolis and elsewhere, the neglect and ultimate breakdown of the elaborate water installations resulted in a drastic economic, agricultural and social decline. The transformation of the late Roman world resulted from many forces and factors: the management of water resources can be counted among them. However, it would be grossly unfair to overemphasize this or other possible points of criticism: Rogers has, in less than a hundred pages, provided us with an excellent introduction to a subject, which indeed is, to use his words (86), "an important avenue of investigation for understanding better the other cultural, social, political and economic aspects of Roman life".