

# **Water in the Roman World**

Engineering, Trade, Religion and Daily Life

Edited by

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Front cover image designed by Jon Fort.

Back cover image: The Pont du Gard near Nimes, oblique view (Photo: Tony King).

See p.184, Fig.3 for direct view.

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## Preface

This volume surveys a range of themes concerned with the Roman engagement with water, embracing theoretical, religious and practical aspects. Topics covered include trade and harbours, canals and wells, as well as swimming pools and bathing establishments. The papers draw on archaeological, art-historical, literary and epigraphic evidence. Some aspects are covered in some detail, though others such as sea-power and merchant shipping and indeed aqueducts which have indeed been well studied in the past receive less detailed treatment here. The place of the Sea as well as rivers in Roman thought and literature is a vast topic in itself. In any case there will always be more to say about the relationship of Greeks and Romans to their watery environment. As far as we know this is the first selection of papers to survey this theme as a whole and it is our fervent hope it will stimulate further research in future.

Martin Henig

Jason Lundock

# Water and Why Materiality Matters in Roman Studies

Jason Lundock

## Introduction: motivation and purpose of this volume

This volume is the result of a conundrum I experienced during my doctoral research into copper alloy vessels in Roman Britain some years ago. During this time, I developed the theory that copper alloy as a material (and, by extension, copper alloy vessels) had a cultural association with cleanliness and purification;<sup>1</sup> particularly in their use for ritual hand washing and ablutions.<sup>2</sup> This line of thought caused me to wonder about the cultural and psychological aspects associated with ritual ablutions and water more widely in the Roman world. Unfortunately, at the time I was unable to find a collection of material focused on theories regarding water in the Roman world; thus, the inception of this volume. Little did I know, at the time, quite how large of a rabbit hole I was diving into (or, perhaps, a ritual spring or a cenote would be a better metaphor).

To put into context why I am of the opinion that such a volume will be of value to the wider community of archaeological and cultural theorists, perhaps it would be of use to make a short case for the value of materiality studies within the field of ancient research. Materiality is, in short, the study of how particular materials (silk, silver, plastic, cheese; what have you) are grouped together and valued within a particular culture system. Value may include many things from practical utility to economic exchange, gender association, class orientation, ritual significance and beyond; it is the association which is networked within a societal system to a particular material. For example, among the Netsilik Inuit of North America, materials are grouped into four broad categories: snow, skin, stone and bone. These materials are utilised for specific practical applications, but are also gendered as the tasks associated with each material is seen to be within the realm of a particular gender group within the society; for instance, stone is seen as a cooking material and feminine, whereas bone (being gendered masculine) is used for spears and harpoon points.<sup>3</sup>

This observation of the relation between materiality and value assignment stayed with me throughout my collegiate studies and formed a foundation for my doctoral and continuing research into the use and perception of copper alloys in the ancient world. As my research has developed, I have become interested in how these common symbols and associations are related to the basic mechanics of our brain networks and if research in this avenue could lead to predictive models we could develop to help interpret ancient data.<sup>4</sup> I have also been inspired by the theories of Carl Jung regarding the collective subconscious, which proposes

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas 2002

<sup>2</sup> Lundock 2015

<sup>3</sup> Balikci 1970, 3-19

<sup>4</sup> Hawrylycz *et al.* 2015, 3-16; Sporns 2015, 90-99

that our brains are likely to develop similar interpretations of our world based on our collective experience as a species with shared ancestry and evolutionary development.<sup>5</sup>

### **Water as material and symbol**

The relation between water and human societies is often complex and nuanced, as it is both a bringer of life and health as well as a perilous danger. One aspect of water which is often visualised across cultures is its liminal value, a place of transition from one state to another. This may be seen in its aspects as a purifying agent as well as its place in separating the living world from the underworld or spirit world; the River Styx being perhaps the most famous example of such from Classical antiquity, but the danger of water and its value of liminality is arguably also at the core of the *Odyssey*, as Odysseus seeks his way home through the mysterious travails of the unknown seas.<sup>6</sup> This perception of water as a liminal space is also a factor in Mayan ritual belief, with cenotes being places of ritual devotion and aquatic depositions of offerings.<sup>7</sup> This perception of water as a liminal space between flesh and spirit extends to materials which appear like water, such as jade,<sup>8</sup> as well as to animals that move between land and water such as jaguars.<sup>9</sup> This aspect of liminality with water is approached from a Gallo-Roman perspective in Aaron Irvin's article and in a northern Romano-British context in Phillipa Walton's contribution to this volume.

This liminal value of water is as much a connection as a division. In a postindustrial world with trains and automobiles, it is easy for us to view land as the great connector and water as a more challenging terrain. However, water transport was by far the most cost effective and safest means of transportation in the ancient world; comparisons with known shipping prices in pre-Industrial England suggest that land travel was nearly five times as expensive as river travel and between twenty two and twenty eight times as expensive as sea travel.<sup>10</sup> In fact, when lecturing on ancient geography, I like to invite the students to shift their perspectives on the maps in order to see the blue areas as areas of connection and green areas as vast areas of separation.

Across human cultures, water is both a connector and separator; a source of life and fertility as well as a danger of unknown depths. It is both a purifier and a putrefying agent. It is a source of wonder, comfort and fear. Most of all, it 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 a large part of the lived experience of those who are so remote and yet so very similar to ourselves. Papers which address some of these aspects specifically in this volume include the contributions of James Gerrard, Blanka Mistic and Eleri Cousins.

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<sup>5</sup> Jung 1933

<sup>6</sup> Beaulieu 2016, 21-89

<sup>7</sup> Miller and Taube 2020, 58

<sup>8</sup> Miller and Taube 2020, 101-102

<sup>9</sup> Evans 2013, 167; Miller and Taube 2020, 103-104

<sup>10</sup> Greene 1990, 40

### **Some personal observations on water**

As I type this, it is an early morning near Ocala, Florida and a light rain is falling outside of the window; few more fitting moments or places could be wished for to inspire some personal reflections on water and its impact on the human psyche (central Florida is popularly called 'the swamp' for a reason). I grew up in Florida, with water ever present; in fact, as a slightly embarrassing sidenote, as a child I would sit on my parents' porch and watch the rain for hours, crying when it ended.

The ocean, in particular, is often regarded with inspiration. Few, indeed, are those who can watch a sunrise or sunset over a calm sea and not have an emotional response. It is a place of inspiration and fear; one needs only to watch its waves, swim in its currents or dive in its depths to feel its size and wonder. The importance of the oceans to our symbolic thought is so evident as to be beyond the need of footnoting; I will simply advise the reader to look up any number of songs or films in which the seas play a fundamental role.

Waters may often have a sense of primordial wonder and reality, as being the beginning of all things. Particular myths of the origin of the world from primordial waters which come immediately to mind include those told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, the origin myth of the Yoruba people of western Africa and any one of several myths of ancient Egypt.

Rain also is a source of wonder, comfort and fear. Living and growing up on a farm in the Caribbean, it is evident for me the necessity and also danger of waters from the sky; a year with too much rain and storms is only matched for its destructiveness by a year with too few rains and storms. The dependence we have on water and the rains makes one humbled to their efforts to harness the natural world and reminds one of how much they depend on that which is outside of themselves and their control.

As I am completing some final edits, I have just returned from Tulum in Quintana Roo, Mexico; the location of a Mayan ritual site on the coast of the Caribbean Sea as well as uncounted cenotes of practical and ritual significance for millennia of peoples.<sup>11</sup> This has been another experience which has both humbled me and inspired me by the common wonder and symbolic meaning that humans across time and geographic regions connect with water.

I am hoping these personal reflections offer perspective on why, as a human, I find this to be a self-reflective investigation worth examining and why I hope that the work of the researchers contributing to this volume will be of value and inspiration to the minds of its readers.

### **Suggestions for future research**

It is hoped that this volume will be of consequence beyond only its own material, but will help to inspire future research in the area of focused materiality studies. Psychologically and sociologically, materials are grouped, valued and utilised based upon the elemental or

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<sup>11</sup> Martos 2006

composite material by which we, as humans, perceive them. It could be argued that this is at the base of our value judgements by which individual humans and wider societies organise themselves. Indeed, this line of research may be useful far beyond the realms of academic theory, but could be of practical application in cross-cultural studies and anthropological efforts to establish common grounds between peoples.

Materials themselves form ideas which may be compared with the concept of Jungian archetypes, the basic structures upon which we construct our understandings of the world. I realised this while undertaking research on copper alloys which led me to ideas of purification which, in turn, caused interest in the relation of dogs to purification rituals in the Near East and Europe.<sup>12</sup> By thinking about objects and material in their simplest, or symbolic, forms; one is encouraged to look for patterns within their use and perception through a society. It then becomes possible to discover systems of thought and patterns of behavior which can lead to the development of theories offering potential illumination to both the conscious and subconscious structuring of societies through their ritual and mundane practices.

It is my hope that more research will be conducted in our field on materials themselves and the symbolic networks they form within the construction of societies and their value systems.

### **Acknowledgements and appreciation**

The researchers whose contributions compose this volume I became aware of principally through two different conference series: the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) series and The Imperialism and Identities on the Edges of the Roman World series. The organisers of conferences like these do a wonderful service to our research and build spaces for the exchange and development of ideas. I am hoping that these series, and small to medium conferences in general, recover after the Covid shut down and continue to be a place of growth and exchange of research into the ancient world and materiality. It goes without saying that I would like to thank each of the contributors to this volume, especially for indulging me and offering me patience during the publication process. I would like to thank Jonathan Fort for his beautiful cover illustration and for working with me to make it into what I had envisioned. I have had many colleagues, friends and mentors who have helped my thoughts develop during the formation of this volume and some of them include: Andrew Birley, Kaja Stemberger Flegar, Matthew Mandich, Sam Moorhead, Brad Owens, John Pearce, David Reutter, Justin Richardson, Darrell Rohl, Michelle Sivilich Damien, Jessica Socorro, Jay Thompson, David Walsh, Will Wooton and Justin Yoo. I would like to thank my parents, Margaret and Rodney Lundock, for their constant support and being indulgent when I will go on tangents about my research. Most of all, I would like to thank Martin Henig, whose help and guidance has not only been an inspiration to me but was also instrumental in the completion of this volume and made it into something much better than it would have been without his efforts.

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<sup>12</sup> Irvin and Lundock 2021



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