

Conflicts over Water Management and Water Rights from the End of Antiquity to Industrialisation

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Conflicts over Water Management and Water Rights from the End of Antiquity to Industrialisation *An Introduction*

MICHELE CAMPOPIANO / GERRIT JASPER SCHENK

Summary: The introduction defines the purpose of the volume, and locates the essays collected here in the different historiographical traditions of disaster studies as well as water management studies. The introduction reviews the different heuristic concepts that have been developed in these historiographical traditions. It analyses how the individual contributions included in the volume engage in dialogue with certain fundamental questions relating to these fields of study.

JEL-Codes: B25, N01, N53, N55

This volume considers the topic of conflicts over water management and water rights from the end of antiquity to industrialization.¹ Recently, the history of water management has become a popular research topic for historians, archaeologists, and cultural anthropologists. The explosion of interest in what has come to be called *Disaster Studies* has recently contributed to an increased focus on the history of water resources.² However, recent trends in this field have shown how reflection on catastrophic events cannot be separated from the study of the social and institutional aspects through which a

- 1 The volume is based on contributions of the 2nd International Symposium, UNESCO Welterbe Kloster Lorsch, 2nd-4th September 2019, on “Contesting Water Management and Water Rights. From the End of Antiquity to Industrialization”, organized by Michele Campopiano and Gerrit Jasper Schenk, see the complete programme here: www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-90680 (accessed 7.4.2023). The conference was the result of a fellowship for experienced researchers of Michele Campopiano at the TU Darmstadt funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. The editors would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for its substantial financial support of this publication.
- 2 To name just a few recent works on disasters: Asperen/Jensen (2023); Viceconte/Schiano/Cecere (2023); Riede/Sheets (2020); Bavel et al. (2020); Schenk (2017); on water-related disasters see e.g. Asperen/Eekhout/Jensen (2021); on related water history see e.g. Jensen (2024); Andermann/Schenk (2020), Chiarenza/Haug/Müller (2020); Huber-Rebenich/Rohr/Stolz (2017).



society manages its relationship with the environment.³ While technical problems such as the use of material infrastructures are often placed at the center of these considerations, and the relationship between social organization and water management is more frequently discussed in academic publications, questions of water rights and their relationship with forms of landholding have been addressed less frequently by historians.

An important contribution, particularly in Germany, to broadening the scope of water research was made by infrastructure studies.⁴ Infrastructures are not only material infrastructures. We understand infrastructure as the collective medium of subsistence that interposes itself between people and nature. This includes material phenomena as well as socio-cultural practices and cognitive processes. It is not only wealth or technology that have an impact on the environment as factors of human action but above all infrastructures. By studying them, we can understand how society is more or less vulnerable to environmental risks and responds to them. Infrastructures change throughout history: these changes are often linked to the balance of power among different social and political groups. However, as Gerrit Schenk has shown, the construction of infrastructures cannot only be understood as an expression or sign of a particular social configuration of power.⁵ Infrastructures also influence this power configuration. Here, the question arises as to what connection exists between certain social structures and specific infrastructures. For centuries, humans shaped landscapes, resulting in diverse 'cultural landscapes'. This book addresses these questions for the period between c. 600 when the organizational forms of the last ancient empires underwent profound changes as a result of internal and external shocks and Islamic expansion transformed much of Africa, Asia, and Europe, and the 19th century when industrialization and technological progress swept the world.

Infrastructures and societies, as well as the landscapes they form, are the result of slow and long-lasting processes, resulting from complex interactions of natural and social factors. The complex interconnection between hydrology, geology, and society makes it necessary to look at processes across long timespans so that this volume takes a *longue durée* perspective. For this reason, conventional epochal boundaries between antiquity and the beginning of industrialisation do not play a decisive role (and the volume is, therefore, not structured accordingly).

The question of the nature and characteristics of the relationship between social structure, water management, political and legal demands, economic use, and the development of riverscapes is certainly not new but has changed significantly over the last hundred years. The famous study of the Rhine by the French *Annales* historian Lucien

3 See e.g. Hohensinner (2020); Campopiano (2018); Campopiano (2017); Schenk (2012a); Labbé (2011).

4 Förster/Bauch (2015); Reden/Wieland (2015); Engels/Schenk (2015); Schenk/Eifert (2018); Engels (2018).

5 Schenk (2010); Schenk (2012); Schenk (2020).



Febvre in 1935 demystified widespread myths and analysed the river function as a hinge between two nations with a focus on the political and economic history of this waterway in the Rhineland.⁶ Marc Cioc's 2022 'eco-biography' of the Rhine, on the other hand, built on suggestions from US environmental historiography to understand rivers as 'organic machines'.⁷ Besides humans as the main actors, Cioc included geomorphological and hydrological factors in his narrative of the recent history of Europe's second-longest river. In Britain, questions related to economic history played a decisive role for a long time, as the controversy over the competing uses of watercourses, in particular as transport routes or as an energy source (mill construction), has shown since the late 1980s.⁸ There as well as (for example) for the watercourses in Brandenburg⁹ it was shown that neither the complex interaction of natural and social factors nor the conflicts of use between boatmen, millers, fishermen and farmers can be reduced to schematic formulas, but rather produced a wide variety of configurations depending on time and space, each of which shaped landscape and society in a unique way.

Case studies on specific river systems or regional studies on certain sections of rivers are therefore an adequate research strategy to be able to analyse qualitatively, and sometimes even quantitatively, the complex interconnection of individual factors, and to determine their spatial impact. The studies of the 'Viennese School' of environmental history on the Danube are exemplary for an approach that includes environmental history, but is not limited to it.¹⁰ More recently, individual river sections, smaller rivers or even streams have finally been addressed in this broader environmental-historical perspective.¹¹ In this context, different concepts were developed to adequately analyse and describe, methodologically, and conceptually, the mutual shaping of the natural environment and human society. However, Karl August Wittfogel's notion of a 'hydraulic empire', which was much discussed at the time, which draws a connection between (despotic 'oriental') ruling structures and large-scale water regulation, no longer plays a role, or at best just a foil for contrast, in the mostly socio-ecologically based concepts discussed in the history of water management, as in Tilman Frasch's contribution presented below.¹²

6 Demangeon/Febvre (1935), see Vanoncini (2019).

7 Cioc (2002); White (1995).

8 Starting with Edwards (1987), continued between (inter alia) John Langdon and James Frederick Edwards, see e. g. Langdon (1993), Langdon (2000), Edwards/Hindle (1993), Jones (2000). The controversy came to a certain end in an anthology in 2007, see Blair (2007) and Schenk/Eifert (2018), pp. 83 f.

9 Bütow (2015).

10 On the Vienna School of environmental history see Winiwarter/Knoll (2007), pp. 127–130. As examples: Haidvogel et al. (2013); Hohensinner et al. (2013); Schmid/Haidvogel (2008); Schmid/Winiwarter (2010); Sonnlechner/Hohensinner/Haidvogel (2013); Winiwarter/Schmid/Dressel (2013).

11 See Suttor (2006) on a part of the Moselle; Schenk (2018) on the small Ill river in Alsace; on the brook Strunde near Cologne see Meyer-Schlenkrich (2022).

12 See the contribution of Tilman Frasch; on Wittfogel's theory see Obertreis et al. (2016).



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... schon zu Ende?

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