

H-Net Reviews

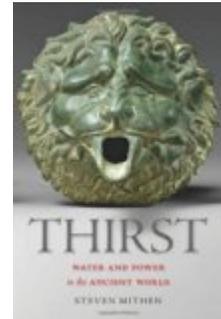
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Mithen. *Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. Illustrations, maps. 384 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06693-9.

Reviewed by Pau Valdés Matías

Published on H-War (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Water is one of the most important and basic resources for human survival. Its gathering, distribution, and control have been a continuous process, in more or less intensity, in all civilizations. However, its past management rarely has been considered as something useful for the present. As Steven Mithen highlights, the study of past water systems has focused on learning about ancient practices in hydraulic engineering with the aim of framing current methods or establishing the relationship between water and power. One of the best examples of this tendency is Karl A. Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (1957). However, past water systems have never been approached as a way of analyzing the long-term effects and impact of diverse forms of hydraulic engineering. This is one of the main goals and most original aspects of Mithen's work.

Keeping this goal in mind, Mithen aims to present the water problem of the ancient world to a broad audience from a diachronic perspective. Thus we find a narrative with plenty of fragments in which the author relates details of his journey from one place to another or his personal impressions. This approach does not affect the book's exactitude; on the contrary, the author understands the problems firsthand through his direction of a research project in the Jordan Valley, "Water, Life and Civilization," with the University of Reading. He also edited a monograph that has received high praises.[1] The book under review includes a series of illustrations, maps, and photographs of the featured places, adding a visual component to the work. The excellent maps are especially useful, considering the representations of the hydraulic works, whose description is often difficult to understand and locate correctly.

Mithen takes us on a tour through several civilizations of different ages and areas. After a short introduction, he begins his review in the Middle East, with chapters 2 and 3 focusing, respectively, on the Levant and Sumer. Then in chapter 4 he proceeds to Greece, covering mostly the Minoan civilization. In chapter 5, he returns to the Middle East, analyzing the measures taken by the Nabataean civilization. Chapter 6 focuses on the Roman and Byzantine cases. From these chapters, Mithen jumps to less common areas: China (chapter 7); Angkor (chapter 8); and the Hohokam civilization (chapter 9). Finally, he moves to pre-Columbian civilizations: the Mayan culture in chapter 10 and the Inca in chapter 11. The book closes with a concluding chapter.

As with any scholar whose work covers such diverse regions, Mithen, as he admits and explains, can be criticized for his selections. His choices, however, offer a wide overview and avoid an overly Eurocentric perspective, introducing Western readers to lesser-known cases, such as China. Another problem acknowledged by the author is the fact that most of his cases focus on privileged classes, due to the inherent bias in the available sources. Nevertheless, the book offers a remarkable diversity of situations and problems, enriching the final result.

The main problem with this work relates to its approach. The enormous chronology presented, as well as the structure of the text, makes it difficult to analyze other aspects of water, such as its commercial and military roles. While we find many examples throughout the book, as highlighted in the case of China or Mesopotamia, the role of water is inexplicably neglected in the study of the Roman and Byzantine ages, during

which water was used in a variety of ways; rivers, for example, served as transport axes or frontiers.[2] Another example is the presence of buildings, such as the *thermae* (a facility for bathing), which was often used by the military, showing that the water problem was not solely associated with elites. It is also surprising that Mithen does not make references to water problems that could arise with the presence of an army and a water supply.

These omissions are understandable considering the broad subject that Mithen tackles. Mithen presents an overview of diverse hydraulic methods and practices in different social, political, and geographical cases, offering a general view along with various scenarios and problems for each case. This book provides a reflection on the importance of water, and specifically examines how the problem of water shortage has been addressed in diverse societies

But does Mithen achieve his initial goal of presenting a case study that could be useful for the present? The answer is yes, to a large extent, because many of the conclusions derived from the different cases are still in place. The abuse of the environment, both in the past and the present, for example, has led to a negative impact of climate on different populations, a fact that has been confirmed in the case of the Mayan civilization or the Levant. But the parallels end here, as the solutions applied in the ancient world are unviable nowadays. In the past, in most cases, the water problem was solved through mi-

gration, an impossible solution today. However, Mithen believes that all of the civilizations that he analyzes are examples of resilience, even in such “failed” cases as the Hohokam, because they lasted for centuries or even millennia. His reflections and conclusions point to lessons from which we can learn in terms of experience and ability to adapt or overcome periods of climatic uncertainty?

Notes

[1]. Steve E. Falconer, review of *Water, Life and Civilization: Climate, Environment and Society in the Jordan Valley*, by Steven Mithen, *The Holocene* 22 (2012): 827.

[2]. Concerning its role as transports axes, see Charles R. Whittaker, “Where Are the Frontiers Now?” in *The Roman Army in the East*, ed. David L. Kennedy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 25-42. For its importance as frontiers, see Edward Dabrowa, “The Rivers in the Defensive System of Roman Syria (from Augustus to Septimius Severus),” in *Roman Frontiers Studies*, ed. Groemman Van Waateringe et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Monograph, 1995), 109-115; and Martinus Johannes Nicasie, “The Borders of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century,” in *ibid.*, 455-461. For a general overview of rivers and their function within the Roman Empire, see Norman Austin and Boris Rankov, *Exploratio: Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Pau Valdés Matías. Review of Mithen, Steven, *Thirst: Water and Power in the Ancient World*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37871>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.