For many of us today, rivers are for traveling on, along, or across. They are harnessed for power and harvested for food. Their shores act as borders and boundaries. The quality, quantity, and turbulence of the water flowing in them signal the ecological impacts of various “scapes”—landscapes, urbanscapes, wildscapes, and weatherscapes. Our medieval forbears experienced rivers in similar ways. And yet, as Ellen F. Arnold vividly reveals in her fascinating new book, Medieval Riverscapes, rivers and riverscapes meant so much more to people in the past than to us today. Furthermore, environmental imagination, mentalities, and appreciation flourished long before ecocriticism scholars suggest.

Arnold draws from a variety of contemporary literary and visual sources to trace the ebb and flow of cultural meanings and memories attached to rivers across northwestern Europe (modern-day France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) between about 300 and 1000 CE. Her interest lies in how these meanings and memories both changed over time and became “entangled with time” (p. 11). In other words, rivers acted “as the ultimate semi-permeable barriers of the natural world,” enabling medieval writers to transpose onto them, and into them, their evolving hopes, fears, self-identities, and values (p. 14).

The book is organized chronologically, first, and thematically, second. Each section opens with a historical overview that sets the stage for the thematic chapters that follow. The first section focuses on late antique Gaul (ca. 200–450 CE), a time rife with change on many levels: fading imperial authority, the rise and spread of Christianity, and the emergence of a hybrid Gallo-Roman cultural identity. Chapter 1 then elucidates how urban elite poets like Ausonius of Bordeaux, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Venantius Fortunatus used rivers as both descriptors and metaphors of power, of boundaries, and of belonging. Anthropomorphized and given agency, ever-changing yet never-changing rivers mirrored these poets’ efforts to carve out new images and places for themselves in a rapidly changing world in which identity itself had become fluid.

The Merovingians (ca. 450–750 CE) take center stage in the second section. By expanding the territory under their control through military force rather than diplomacy or assimilation and tying their authority to the Christian church, the Merovingians engendered “a culture of violence and physical prowess” (p. 67). Nature seemed to be of the same mind, as the era was beset by climate...
change (late antique Little Ice Age), disease (first plague pandemic), and famine. Against a backdrop of frequent and deadly floods and drownings, chapter 2 reveals how influential authors like Gregory of Tours wrote about rivers as sites of hazard and risk, of instability and disruption. Yet rivers and their floods were also redemptive, healing, and cleansing. Many hagiographies attested to how saints enacted miracles on, in, and through water. Chapter 3 explores the many ways medieval people deliberately adapted riverscapes to suit their own commercial needs. Here there is a wealth of contemporary information about familiar river traffic, trade, and bridges, as well as quite intensive fisheries, salt production, irrigation and sanitation systems, mills, aqueducts, and, perhaps surprisingly, substantial canal projects. As Arnold notes, “Rivers were not neutral sites. They were actively contested, constructed, and integrated into the full economy, culture, and experience of medieval Europe” (p. 104). Regulations and law codes were developed to manage complicated disputes over shared resources and spaces and to delineate punishments for transgressors.

The book’s third section moves us into the Carolingian age (ca. 750–950 CE), an era marked by a deliberate return to Roman-style leadership and the creation of an early medieval state. While the Carolingians are perhaps best remembered for their religio-cultural and political renaissances, they, like the Merovingians before them, faced significant ecological crises, famines, wars, and plagues (of cattle this time). They also suffered repeated and violent Viking incursions. Arnold turns to chronicles and annals in this part of the book, noting both the opportunities and challenges these sources pose for researchers. The challenges become particularly evident in chapter 4, which focuses on how annal and chronicle writers rewrote, revised, and revisited—and even forged—the histories they inherited. As for their Gallo-Roman and Merovingian ancestors, rivers were sites of disaster and redemption, of identity making and saintly miracles. Yet the specific disasters recorded, the individual figures “remembered,” and the saints that became associated with those sites of disaster were part of deliberately selective processes that, when unpacked carefully by modern scholars, demonstrate “moments of memory, perception, and valuation [that speak to] the contexts in which river disasters were experienced and understood in the medieval world” (p. 153).

The fourth section takes us to the turn of the millennium (ca. 950–1050 CE). Central power waned and the empire dissipated into a heavily contested patchwork of localized fiefdoms that in turn dissolved many of the unifying practices enacted by the Carolingians. Rapid economic, political, religious, and cultural change followed, as did transformative environmental processes, such as forest clearance, wetland drainage, and the construction of new canals that ruptured existing river courses. Chapter 5 focuses on how river frontiers shifted in the medieval consciousness, changing, in the face of continued Viking attacks and repeated internecine warfare, from sites of identity, treaty, and assembly to sites of “fear, surprise, flight, and escape” (p. 188). As monasteries and communities were erased and rebuilt, histories were (re)written to tie them more specifically to particular riverscapes: “Rivers became emblems of the ability of some to transcend [old] political or secular identities.... Rivers could drown the past [and serve as] a potent metaphor for the wiping clean of both sin and memories” (pp. 195–96). Chapter 6 follows in a similar vein, elucidating how stories about river miracles were told, retold, and transformed in new contexts, some still existing as modern myths and wonders today. Drawing on Scott G. Bruce’s concept of “shards of stories,” Arnold demonstrates how hagiographies and other sources allow modern scholars to appreciate medieval environmental knowledge and interpretations of the natural world and to understand how they perceived “their” rivers within larger biblical contexts (p. 216).[1]
The book’s final section focuses on the post-millennial period (ca. 1050–1250 CE), when a new world was being established through the Crusades, the rapid development and spread of novel monastic orders, significant population growth, agricultural expansion and intensification, urbanization, and environmental transformation. And yet, as Arnold shows, “an air of nostalgia permeates river stories of this period” (p. 242). Chapter 7 is particularly fun, with its discussion of images of animal-fish-bird-human hybridity in contemporary ceiling panels and bestiaries that could have reflected the medieval sense of cultural hybridity and blurred identity boundaries. Such connections come through in several of the sources Arnold examines here, which, taken together, speak to the interwoven nature of past and present, human and environment.

There are a few minor hiccups in the book. While organized chronologically, the chapters’ thematic nature means that there is significant temporal overlap. This is not problematic in and of itself, since the thematic breadth of the book cannot be neatly encapsulated by time-bound eras. Yet it is sometimes unclear how examples that fall relatively far outside the stated temporal scope of each section contribute to our understanding of those eras in particular. Perhaps they are not meant to do so but instead are used to demonstrate that while individual themes came to prominence in particular epochs, they in fact flowed—much like rivers—through and across historiographically established time periods. Other glitches have more do to with the book’s production: missing pointers to images and references to color coding in black-and-white images (chapter 7); repeated text, often verbatim (especially in the early chapters); and a few trivial errors (on page 23, for example, Arnold notes that the Loire “turns east toward the coast ... emptying into the Bay of Biscay” when it obviously heads west). A wonderful map in the introduction shows only some of the rivers discussed in the book; while most of the major rivers are there, the Danube, Elbe, and Saône are conspicuously missing, and the inclusion of some of the lesser-known tributaries would have benefited readers lacking deeper geographical knowledge of the region.

These are all rather marginal quibbles about what is a deeply researched and thoroughly absorbing study of medieval riverscapes. Despite many modern scholars rejecting the idea that contemporary literary and visual sources can tell us anything useful about the medieval natural environment, Arnold has proven that we most certainly can learn quite a lot from them about the state and use of rivers and riverscapes in the long ago past that otherwise has been lost to the historical and archaeological records. The importance of riverscapes to medieval imaginations, senses of identity, and day-to-day lives sing loudly throughout this book, and they offer a song that medievalists, environmental historians, and natural world enthusiasts should all hear.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-water


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60591

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