

Water and Power in Past Societies

Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology Conference 2015

Introduction

As the effects of global warming and climate change are increasingly felt world-wide, the political ecology of water has become a major concern. Whether the problem is too much water flooding low-lying island nations or a lack of water causing drought and crop failure, water's uneven distributions and unpredictable behaviors contribute to and sometimes destabilize geopolitical inequalities. While the political ecology of water in the contemporary world has drawn much attention, water has always been an essential resource, offering possibilities for differential access and control in the ancient world as well as the modern.

The many ways in which water can be differentially controlled cannot easily be summarized. At a general level, water can be a productive resource, with good water management increasing agricultural and pastoral output. Water can be a substitute for labor, with the control of water through mills and other technologies allowing increases in production beyond what the local population could support. Water can be an ideological resource, with its potential for symbolism offering opportunities to control, display, and enjoy water as indications of power and privilege. Water can be a transportation resource, giving advantages to raiding and trading cultures with superior marine technologies and navigational skills. Water can be a health resource, creating age-, gender-, and class-related disparities between those who have consistent access to clean water and those who do not. Water can be a protective resource, creating an insulating barrier between hostile groups. Much of the time, water functions as many of these resources simultaneously.

Flowing in and out of these categories is the fact that water, by nature, can be both persistent and changeable, requiring that the specific temporality of individual water sources must be mediated by anyone hoping to use that water as a resource. Water's fluctuations may be highly predictable or totally unpredictable: dependable events like the annual Nile floods can be harnessed to exacerbate existing social inequalities, while unforeseen events like tsunamis and floods can destabilize existing inequalities or create new ones.

Conference Themes

Water and Power in Past Societies seeks to bring together theoretically-situated, data-rich studies of how water as a resource relates to the formation, maintenance, destruction, or prevention of social inequalities at both intra- and inter-group scales. In assessing how water is used as a resource, the temporality of water's behaviors over the span of the study period should be explicitly addressed, whether these behaviors result in slow change, sudden change, continuity, or some combination of the three. In an effort to promote cross-cultural comparability and discussion of the conference papers (as well as thematic consistency in the resulting conference volume), contributors are encouraged to situate their work broadly in one or more of the themes below:

Differential control of water and the production of wealth

Cognitive relationships to water and the reinforcement of inequality

Water, environment, and differential wellness

Water, communication, and safety

The (im)persistence of water and power in the *longue durée*