

BOOK REVIEW

Water Culture in Roman Society. By DYLAN KELBY ROGERS. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2018. Pp. 118. Paperback, €70.00. ISBN 978-90-04-36894-1.

This solid, if slim, work provides a broad overview of Roman interactions with water. Rogers displays his firm grasp of the evidence from ancient literary sources on water to legal regulations as well as the archaeological evidence for water usage. “Water culture” is a nebulous term, but Rogers hopes it can “bring together the various aspects and nuances of the relationship between water and Roman society” (2) in order to offer a more holistic view about water in the Roman world. It is only partially successful. For those curious about recent bibliography on *fistulae* or domestic fountains, this is a great first step for further research. Rogers is a sharp guide to the scholarship that has appeared, especially in this century, and gives a snapshot of current trends and, often, short “reviews” of the findings of some of the heavy-hitters of this topic (e.g. Fagan, Hodge, Purcell, Robinson). He synthesizes the information in a cogent and lucid manner, but the work is less successful in its analysis of the material. The brief samples of the ways that “water culture” might interact with larger issues such as aesthetics or Roman religion often lack a clear sense of what new critical insight his view of “water culture” brings to the material.

Rogers begins with the evidence found in authors such as Vitruvius, Seneca, Pliny the Elder, and Frontinus, and he notes certain areas in which they agree, although this glance at the primary evidence is rather cursory and vague. For instance, the fact that all these authors concur that some waters are healthier than others or classify waters in similar ways (9) does not seem particularly earth-shattering. One might also ask why Seneca never mentions the Tiber or aqueducts in his *Naturales Quaestiones*, whereas Pliny writes about aqueducts as the most remarkable accomplishment of Rome (*Nat.* 36.121–123). Special points of convergence between these authors may have been worth noting, such as Pliny and Seneca’s shared jeremiads against the trade in snow and ice (*Nat.* 36.1, *QNat.* 4b.13.3-11), paradoxographical elements (e.g. the ability to float in the Dead Sea)

shared between Pliny, Seneca, and Vitruvius, or even intertextual nodes joining Frontinus and Vitruvius.

Rogers then moves to legal elements in the administration and distribution of water, and does a stellar job summarizing the works of Bruun, Kehoe, Shaw, and Bannon. There is not much interpretation of the evidence *per se*, but Rogers points out that the work that has been done reveals particular distinctions between public/private and rural/urban water use, and that Rome tried to provide water to all of its inhabitants. Likewise, his coverage of current research on archaeological water features such as aqueducts, baths, toilets, and water displays is well done. He casts a wide net here and brings together material from a diverse assortment of sites. Rogers notes how scholars have been expanding their hermeneutic contexts for their investigation of this material, whether looking into the larger water supply networks, the engineering behind water distribution or larger ideas of hygiene, sensory experience and health.

The pay-off of the opening section and précis of recent scholarship should have been Roger's section on "Water Culture and Its Implications" (63-87), but this segment falters in being too vague. Merely "outlining trends in how water impacted the wider conceptions of Roman culture" (63) with categories such as "power" or "water as spectacle" does not offer enough critical scrutiny and consideration of the evidence. For instance, emperors often offered benefactions of waterworks, and such aqueducts or great fountains surely could reinforce Roman social organization, but what about moments in which such power was problematized (say, when Nero tried to dig a Corinthian canal or Claudius attempted to drain the Fucine Lake?) or emperors were posthumously denounced.¹ Rogers often considers rather obvious examples (e.g. water is used in purification in Roman religion, Imperial *thermae* are really ornate) but does not show how his view of "water culture" provides the best lens for understanding this data. For instance, the Romans themselves pointed out how water features in villas were marks of status and prestige (especially fishponds, which Rogers does not mention), but such luxury was also problematic for most of the writers who mention these fea-

¹ E.g., the idea expressed by Martial: "What could be worse than Nero, but what could be better than Nero's baths?" (7.34.4-5). Rogers does not delve into problematic examples, but prefers more clear-cut connections: "the Baths of Caracalla in Rome... was full of sculpture. Images of Hercules not only invoked a mythical figure, especially as a protector of hot springs, but also Caracalla's own connections to Hercules" (69).

tures from Cicero on.² Rogers does not weigh this critically, writing that “particularly in the visible display of water in domestic spaces, owners were able to declare their elevated status to all” (66). But how elevated is one’s status if one’s *mores* are in the gutter? Or are the complaints of moralists just sour grapes? Rogers is more successful when pointing out how certain water spectacles “combine ephemerality and permanency to create a unique style of spectacle in the Roman world” (73) and when he thinks more broadly about the relationship between water and the landscape (78–81), but throughout the final sections this reviewer wanted to see more concrete examples of the way Rogers’ view of Roman “water culture” would help to illuminate larger Roman ideas, practices, ethics and ideals.

The conclusion stresses that water can be useful for thinking about Roman identity, politics, economics, and more, which Rogers has admirably sketched throughout. Although more depth in the arguments and case studies is needed, this monograph does highlight possible avenues for further study and Rogers’ work will be valuable for scholars and students interested in connections between hydrology, archaeology and Roman society.

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² See J. Higginbotham, *Piscinae: Artificial Fishponds in Roman Italy*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 1997: 55–64.