



**WATER-  
CULTURES**  
The Water  
Cultures  
of Italy  
1500-1900



Università  
Ca' Foscari  
Venezia



THE NEW  
INSTITUTE

Centre for Environmental  
Humanities (NICHE)  
at Ca' Foscari  
University of Venice

## The Water Cultures of Europe and the Mediterranean, 1500-1900

Three-Day International Conference

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

13-15 September 2023

What would a history of society and culture look like with water placed at its core? This three-day international conference aims to shed light on **the forms of human interactions with water over time in Europe and the Mediterranean**. The intention is to explore the history of different societies, the construction of their identities and forms of self-representation, based on their changing relationships with water: the ways of controlling, using and conceiving it; the religious, symbolic and knowledge dimensions it assumes, and the forms of cultural production it leads to.

Human-water interactions offer a unique key to understanding society and culture. By 'water cultures', we mean both **material aspects** (such as hydraulic engineering or water capture techniques) and **non-material features** (symbolic responses, beliefs and practices, changing knowledge and legal structures). Fruitful comparison can be made across a wide range of different times and places. This is possible for two reasons. Firstly, because of water's vital importance to all societies; on a biological level, we need water to survive. And secondly, on a cultural level, water represents the strongest and most evident point of intersection between the history of nature and the history of humankind. 'Water is not merely a physical resource: in every cultural context it is densely encoded with social, spiritual, political and environmental meanings' (Strang 2004). Water is at the foundation of all society; as a result, its use and the meanings given it provide the key lens through which to understand any society. 'The history of water is a story of how people have drawn meanings, ideas, representations and powers from water'; a story conditioned by forces such as climate, season and geomorphology (Linton 2010).

The conference will be especially attentive to **interactions**. Thus, water, omnipresent in religion and belief, is also of central importance in the history of science, technology, medicine and commerce. Studied together, the changing science and perception of

water sheds light on shifting devotional practices; the circulation of both hydrological knowledge and personnel can help us understand urban water management strategies in particular times and places; changing attitudes to disease transmission can help explain the burgeoning trade in certain waters; human understanding of the hydraulic landscape can shed light on water and socialisation, such as disputes over rights and access.

We have opted for a broad geographical range, **Europe and the Mediterranean**, as well as an **extended chronology**, the better to perceive deep social processes and structures and to track changes and continuities, local variations and regional patterns. It makes sense to begin with the 16th century. Physicians and natural philosophers actively debated the relationship between human health and water consumption; architects, engineers and artists assumed roles requiring knowledge of the provision of waters; new vast infrastructure projects were undertaken by rulers and local communities alike, creating, in cities, functional access to water and elaborate displays, and in agricultural areas, land drainage and irrigation; and new bureaucracies and legal systems were put in place to maximise and manage water use.

A real change in water cultures—in fact a paradigm shift—only happened during the latter 19th century (Hamlin 2000). The arrival of Asiatic cholera in Europe in the 1830s, and successive epidemics, eventually brought about a shift in medical and scientific ideas about water, which for the first time became perceived as a carrier of disease. This culminated in the complete reconstruction of the hydraulic infrastructures of most of Europe's major cities by the end of the 19th century, the logical end date for the conference.

*The Water Cultures of Europe and the Mediterranean* conference aims to articulate how the history of human-water interactions, from the late Renaissance to the end of the 19th century, is a story of political authority and conflict, social hierarchy and material and economic realities, changing medical and scientific knowledge and technological expertise, and religious beliefs and practices.

We also believe that this conference comes at **an important time**. First of all, the ongoing worldwide water crisis—the fact that water ‘stress’ will only increase over time—combined with ethical concerns over the commodification of water, mean that knowledge of human-water interactions is more important than ever. The conference aims **to contribute historical awareness and sensitivity** in the vitally important area. One of the cornerstones of environmental protection in the European Union is the management and protection of water resources, including water we drink and bathe in (Eurostat 2017). It is only by ‘understanding past societal experiences to cope’ that we can gain a comprehensive perspective, ‘situating current and future hazards within long-term historical processes’ (Grau-Satorras et al. 2016).

We invite **individual paper and panel proposals** from a wide range of disciplines interested in the study of human-water interactions in the European and Mediterranean past—including social and cultural history, urban history, economic history, gender history, engineering history, architectural history, art history, literary history, environmental history, archaeology and the history of science and medicine—using a

wide range of source materials (archival, print, literary, artistic) and approaches and methodologies.

**Proposed Themes:**

1. Springs and Sources: Sacred Waters, Thermal Waters and Bottled Waters
2. The Changing Science, Medicine and Health of Water
3. Supplying the Urban and the Periurban: Large-Scale Hydrological Infrastructure and Water Management
4. The Hydraulic Landscape: Rural Water Capture, Management and Uses, Irrigation and Land Reclamation
5. The Occupations of Water: Architects, Engineers, Fountaineers, Water-Sellers, Washerwomen, Millers (etc)
6. Responses to Water Scarcity and Surplus
7. Hydropolitics: Water-related Conflicts, Jurisdictions, Institutions and Inequalities
8. Symbolic Uses and Popular Beliefs
9. The Aesthetics of Water: Leisure, Ornament and Display
10. Past Knowledge, Expertise and Technologies Applied to Present and Future Problems

**Conference keynote speakers:** **Petra van Dam** (Professor of History of Water- and Environmental History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam); **Christopher Hamlin** (Professor emeritus of History of Science, Technology and Medicine, University of Notre Dame); **Felipe Fernández-Armesto** (William P. Reynolds Professor of History, University of Notre Dame)

The conference is organised and funded as part of 'The Water Cultures of Italy, 1500-1900', PI Prof David Gentilcore, an advanced grant funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement number 833834). Travel expenses (economy class) and four nights' accommodation in Venice will be covered by the project. Accommodation will be arranged by the conference organisers, but we ask participants to make their own travel arrangements, well in advance of the conference, once their participation is assured.

Interested participants are asked to send a paper **title**, paper **abstract** (max 300 words) and **short CV** (max one page). We also invite **panel proposals**; these should include a panel title and panel topic summary (max 200 words), as well as titles, abstracts and short CVs for each of the panel participants (ideally three per session, plus chair), and should not exceed 1,000 words in all. The **deadline for all proposals is 31 January 2023**. The organisers hope to make their decisions by the beginning of March 2023.

**Address for all correspondence, including proposals:** [watercultures.conf@unive.it](mailto:watercultures.conf@unive.it)

We look forward to hearing from you!