This interesting volume is a welcome contribution to the archaeological investigation of the relationship between human society and water in the past, focusing predominantly on the theme of water management. Its case studies are wide-ranging geographically, starting in the Old World and ancient Near East and then through to the ancient and classical Mediterranean, Asia, and the Americas. This range is impressive and allows the reader to make comparisons across time and geography. Between the introduction and conclusion there are 10 chapters structured around these various periods and civilizations; the organization is largely chronological, beginning with the ancient Levant from 1.5 million years ago and ending with the Incas ca. 1200–1572 C.E.

Mithen is clearly in his element in the first main chapter (ch. 2), which examines the Levant in earlier prehistory, not only because this is the author's period of expertise but also because he has been involved in fieldwork in Wadi Faynan, Jordan, for a number of years. Mithen's insights and proposals in this chapter are perhaps the most useful part of the book, especially what he terms the “Water Revolution” (15), which can be considered alongside other generalizing terms such as the “Neolithic Revolution” and the “Urban Revolution.” There are many important points raised here, some of which could have been developed further, and I wonder whether this theme of the Water Revolution in the ancient Near East could not have been a valuable and worthwhile book in itself. Mithen discusses apparent changing attitudes toward water in the Neolithic as it was increasingly exploited, manipulated, and controlled through the construction of wells, dams, and terrace walls (35). Around the same time, or a bit later, came the invention of pottery, which Mithen links to this changing approach and attitude to water, with the desire for easier storage and transport.

Some of the archaeological themes that emerge from the succeeding chapters, including the social implications of the construction of major engineering projects and the way in which the labor was organized, are especially significant; there is considerable potential here for examining the organization of these societies. In a number of the societies, it seems likely that some kind of forced labor would have been used, while for the Hohokam in the southwestern United States, Mithen argues that the irrigation systems were constructed as part of social events that may also have included feasting and ballgames in the numerous ballcourts identified in the area (210–14).

The author only briefly refers to Wittfogel's Orientl Despotism (New Haven 1958) and the legacy of his thesis that the power held through the control of water formed a major part in hierarchical development as civilizations emerged (58–9). It would have been useful to have discussed this debate in more detail and with reference to alternative interpretations. The book does contribute usefully to other key debates relating to the various case studies in the volume. These include the concept of the hydraulic city at Angkor and its eventual demise (194–98), the collapse of the Maya civilization (248–52), the circumstances surrounding the Hohokam (213–14), and the reasons for and against the salination theory for causing the end of the Sumerian civilization (66–74).

Also of considerable importance is the discussion of the cultural and religious significance of water, including evidence of possible ritual activity connected with water, such as the strange collection of material remains associated with the early wells identified on Cyprus dating to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (34). Religion and ritual connected with water is also discussed through depictions on artwork and in textual sources relating to gods and myths. There was clearly considerable cultural and ideological significance in many of the acts of water control and management, including, for example, the attempts through history to drain Lake Kopais in Greece (88–9). In discussing some interpretations of sites and projects and their relationship with water, Mithen tends to be in favor of practical rather
than cultural or religious reasoning behind their function, meaning, and cultural significance. While many constructions had practical functions, I think it is also important to bear in mind that the divisions we tend to assume today in our interpretations between culture/nature, economic/social, and rational/irrational would not have been formulated in the same way in the past, and explanations may not be as simple or straightforward, separating the religious from the practical, as we would like. As noted, the book predominantly concerns water management systems; yet, what about the cultural and religious significance of seawater, the artificial transformation of coasts, the construction of ports and harbors, or travelling on water?

While this is a thought-provoking and entertaining work, it must be asked: for what readership is the book intended? The case studies bring a lot of disparate work from across the globe together, and, in this respect, the chapter on ancient China, for example, is especially valuable. But in so doing, the author inevitably simplifies many of the local issues for each area. For students, this book may be a useful point of access for a particular area or civilization, but for specialist scholars the volume may at times seem a bit too descriptive of spectacular monuments and remains, with little new in the treatment of the material or themes examined. At times it feels as though it may have been better to have involved the specialists that have worked on these areas and sites, who would be able to contextualize the issues and materials in a detailed way, incorporating more of the considerable literature and debate. In some cases, this could also have included the specialist knowledge of ancient historians and classicists, as in the chapter on ancient Rome and its coverage of Frontinus’ writing on aqueducts (285), on which there has been much debate. Nevertheless, in its current state, Mithen is able to offer his own voice and perspectives to these issues.

The book, at times, feels a bit too much like a travel diary with rather too many descriptions of the travel opportunities the author was able to enjoy. The diversionary discussions of present-day situations and conditions, such as the Three Gorges Dam project in China (151) and the final chapter on the current and future world situation (280–89), are also interesting, but there is a serious academic point to be made here. This concerns an issue that appears in places throughout the book, with the discussions making parallels between today’s treatment and human attitudes toward water and the assumptions that we make about the past. While in the sections on earlier prehistory, the “difference” of the past—compared with today’s assumptions about interpretation and experience—is dealt with well, the book tends to discuss the later periods as more familiar to us and less controversial; such examples include the book’s treatment of Roman aqueducts and baths (132–38), ancient Greek flushing lavatories and water pipes in the wealthy houses (93), and the Minoan flushing lavatory at the supposed palace of King Minos at Knossos (75–6). It is important that we do not fall into easy traps with some of these periods and make assumptions about the nature of everyday life and experiences in the past. The examination of social attitudes toward, and even human sensory experiences of, water can in fact be an excellent way of demonstrating these cultural differences in the past. The book is well presented and written in a very accessible style, which will bring the many issues and important discussions to a wide audience.

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