02

Rivers, Water Mythologies and Venice

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Notes

This lesson opens a window onto the complex interactions between the human and the non-human in the history of Venice from a cross-disciplinary perspective. Rivers shaped the Venetian lagoon for millennia and created many of the islands that form the Venetian archipelago. Since prehistory this area was transformed by the interactive agency of rivers, the sea and humans. In the ancient world rivers were perceived as powerful deities with a will of their own. Greek and Roman myths tell of river gods fighting human heroes, reflecting human desire for mastery over the environment.

It is impossible to write a comprehensive history of water. Its manifold shapes and elusive nature spill out of every man-made container. Most of our planet is covered in water. Oceans and seas have captured the imagination of our transient species and defined entire communities. The Mediterranean world is full of cultures and identities shaped by their relationship with water. The history of Venice is a particularly salient example. It is a cliché to say that Venice was the queen of the seas. But few visitors to this unique archipelago realize that most of the islands of Venice were not created by the sea. They are, in fact, the product of the rivers that have flowed through this area for millennia and the human interventions that have followed in their wake.

This lesson opens a window on the complex interactions between the human and the non-human from a cross-disciplinary perspective combining history, geology, mythology, classical studies and cultural anthropology.

Before delving into the Venetian rivers, I must first give a general overview of rivers in the ancient world. There is a remarkable variety of water creatures and water stories in Egyptian, Greek and Roman mythology. Today we think of rivers as passive channels conveying water from the mountains to the sea, similar to engineered pipelines/waterways. But most people in the ancient world perceived rivers as divine beings that actively shaped the world. Such was the importance of freshwater streams that one Roman commentator, named Servius Honoratus, claimed that every spring was sacred.

It is well known that the first cities and urban civilisations developed in river valleys. From China and India to Mesopotamia, rivers have been crucial to human efforts to organize larger communities. There are many reasons for this, but the main one is the amount of fresh water that rivers provide for drinking, husbandry and agriculture. They provide protection against invaders and enable waterborne vessels to connect distant areas through commerce and trade. The sheer size and scope of rivers inspired awe and religious rituals of all sorts, from rites of passage to the votive deposition of swords, coins, and other objects, including human bones.

In ancient Greece, rivers were powerful deities that could change shape. They are usually depicted as hybrid beings, combining human and animal qualities. The most common type is the man-faced bull **[fig. 1]**. Bulls were perceived as large and powerful animals in the environment of the northern Mediterranean. In Homer's Iliad, Scamander, the river of Troy, turns into a raging bull and attacks the strongest Greek hero, Achilles. Angry over the death of his partner Patroclus, Achilles goes on a rampage, killing so many Trojans that their corpses obstruct the flow of the river. In an attempt to prevent further killing and the pollution of its waters, Scamander responds with a threat to Achilles: he will cover the hero's body with sand and debris deep beneath the waves. The river's raging current rises and drives

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against Achilles, leaving him barely able to stand. The greatest of the Greek heroes of Troy then "sprang for the shore, and set off running swiftly over the plain, gripped by fear". Achilles repeatedly struggles to escape the clutch of Scamander' rolling waves, only to be saved by the divine intervention of Athena and Poseidon. Thus, in Homer's vision, the divine river is more powerful than any mortal hero.

Another important river god was Achelous, the god of the largest river in continental Greece. He is usually depicted as a hybrid with the body of a snake, the horns of a bull and a human face. There are many representations of his struggle with the hero Heracles **[fig. 2]**. The two fought over a beautiful woman, Deianeira, and Heracles won the wrestling match by breaking one of Achelous' horns. According to Sophocles, the river god eluded Heracles' grip by changing into many forms: "a rambling bull, then a twisting snake with glittering colours, then again in the shape of a man with an ox's face" (*Women of Trachis*, lines 11-12). As is often the case, Heracles' labours represent various aspects of man's struggles with the terrifying and violent aspects of the natural world. Consequently, the image of the hero driving Achelous into submission comes to signify projects that humans undertake to control a river, such as diverting its course. It is interesting to note that in one version, Achelous's horn is restored, suggesting the natural property of a river to restore its shape. The analogy has a natural equivalent, as the ancients called a river bend a 'horn'.

There are some indications that such projects took place in the ancient Veneto, the region of Venice. The Romans built several channels connecting cities and rivers. In ancient times, the Venetian lagoon was shallower because the sea level was two metres lower than today. According to the Roman author Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century CE, this marshy and amphibian environment was called the 'Seven Seas' and was navigable by boat from Ravenna to Aquileia. In most parts of the lagoon, the boundaries between sea and land were not fixed, but changed with the ebb and flow of the tides.

However, the area of Venice itself – in Roman times, before the founding of the city – was not surrounded by the sea on all sides as it is now. Pliny mentions several rivers in the area, but the most important ones were called Medoacus and Sile. The Medoacus (now the Brenta) dominated the southern part of the lagoon and the Silis (now the Sile) the northern part.

The Medoacus flowed through the Roman city of Patavium (Padua), probably as far as the Giudecca canal, which was formed by the river. It is likely that the famous Grand Canal was another branch of the river thousands of years ago. The etymology of Rialto that tourists hear today when they crowd the highest bridge in Venice is wrong. In Latin, *Rivus Altus* can mean either 'high bank' or 'deep water', and it is the latter term that proved more significant for this area in ancient times. The depth of the water was crucial for the first people to navigate the canal (now called the Grand Canal), which was originally fluvial (or riverine), not marine. The myth that Venice was founded by Roman consuls from Patavium in 421 CE is a later medieval fabrication. In reality, the Romans only used the lagoon for fishing, hunting and salt extraction. The first settlements appeared in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, well after the end of the Western Roman Empire. They were founded by migrants from the mainland in the northern part of the lagoon, on the island of Torcello, now an hour's boat ride from Venice.

Rivers flood and erode areas of land, but they also deposit sediment that creates new land over time. The medieval city of Venice was built on islands that had been created by the process of river alluviation and sedimentation over millennia of prehistory.

The history of both Venice and Ravenna is an ideal case study for the agency of rivers. Unlike most other major Italian cities, Venice cannot boast of Roman origins. But it is very interesting to find historical sources saying that Roman Ravenna was very similar to modern Venice. According to Strabo, a geographer from the first century CE: "Situated in the marshes is the great city of Ravenna, built entirely on piles,

and traversed by canals, which you cross by bridges or ferry-boats".

This natural position made Ravenna the capital of the Roman Empire during the turbulent period of migrations and invasions in the fifth century. Many visitors still go there to admire the beautiful Byzantine mosaics, but few realize that Ravenna was the equivalent of Venice in the ancient world. This is because the city is now several kilometres away from the sea. But how is this possible, when the level of the Adriatic Sea is now two metres higher than it was in ancient times? The rivers filled Ravenna's canals, carrying tons of sediment that gradually raised the land and moved the seashore up to 9 kilometres away from the city! Venice itself was in danger of suffering the same fate in the early modern period, which is why the Senate of the Republic decided to divert all the rivers away from the lagoon in the sixteenth century and continued to reengineer the waterscapes of Veneto throughout the early modern period.

The two cities thus serve as ideal case studies for the agency of rivers and the sea. The Venetian islands were created by river activity over millennia of prehistory and were partially covered by rising sea levels, which expanded the lagoon into the shape we see in Venice today. Meanwhile, Ravenna was built on islands on the edge of the sea, but was gradually filled in by river sediments and is now a smaller city inland. The two cases vividly illustrate how rivers have changed the landscape of this area and how human agency has intervened as an additional factor to channel natural forces, e.g. through river diversions.

Rivers, then, are not passive bodies of water that flow meaninglessly into the sea. They are living streams that define the environment and change history. This is a challenge to engineering dreams of total mastery over nature and its flows. This is why the ancients perceived rivers as powerful deities with a will of their own, immortalized in a mythical struggle with human heroes such as Achilles and Heracles.

Figure 1 River Laos, Greek coin, 510-500 BC, private collection

Figure 2 Greek vase, around 530BC-500BC.
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

Mandatory Reading

Vuković, K. (2022). "The Mighty Streams: Coping with Rivers in the Ancient World". *Arcadia*, 14. https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/mighty-streams-coping-rivers-ancient-world

Further Optional Readings

Bassani, M.; D'Acunto, G.; Madricardo, F. (2022). *Crossing the Water: The Venice Lagoon from Antiquity Throughout the Centuries*. Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider.

Molindari, M.; Sisci, N. (2016). *Potamikon: Sinews of Acheloios*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Salowey, C.A. (2017). "Rivers Run Through It". Hawes, G. (ed.), *Myths on the Map: The Storied Landscapes of Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 159-77.

Strang, V. (2023). *Waterbeings*. London: Reaktion Books.