

MASSIMILIANO LENZI, OLGA L. LIZZINI, PINA TOTARO, LUISA VALENTE (EDS.),
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This volume, the outcome of a conference held in Rome in 2018, brings together seventeen essays that explore the manifold roles of water in ancient, medieval, and early modern thought. The editors have arranged the contributions around five broad themes, ranging from water as a physical substance and origin of life, through navigational and metaphysical metaphors, to its place in religious imagination and poetic expression. The introduction rightly emphasises the cultural centrality of water, from its practical functions in medicine and navigation to its symbolic resonance in philosophy and theology. The breadth of traditions represented – Greco-Roman, Christian, Islamic, and Jewish – demonstrates the ambition to situate water as a cross-cultural and diachronic theme. As is often the case with conference proceedings, the quality of contributions varies, with some essays retaining the character of oral presentations. Yet, taken together, the volume offers a timely and valuable resource for scholars interested in the intersection of natural philosophy, theology, and metaphorical imagination. The richness of the collection emerges most clearly when its essays are viewed in sequence; I shall therefore offer a concise presentation of each, followed by a broader evaluation of the work as a whole.

Diana Quarantotto opens the collection with a study of Aristotle's reflections in *Phys. IV.5*, where he imagines a world composed entirely of water, drawing on Homer's image of the encircling Ocean. Water here functions as a privileged element and explanatory medium: it clarifies principles such as impenetrability, upward motion, and the relation of bodies to their environment. The metaphor extends even to the celestial sphere, which, like Homer's Ocean, remains distant and imperceptible. Quarantotto highlights the heuristic role of water in Aristotle's thought, though the concentration on a single passage inevitably narrows the scope. Comparisons with modern physics occasionally risk anachronism, but

overall the essay illustrates how water served Aristotle as a conceptual tool for explaining complex phenomena.

Gabriella Zuccolin follows with an exploration of the transmission of Aristotelian and Galenic ideas about moisture into the Islamic and Latin traditions. The balance of heat and humidity, central to humoral theory, is examined through Aristotle's notion of 'hot moisture', Galen's reflections on fevers, and Avicenna's *Canon*. Albert the Great later affirmed the significance of moisture in combination with heat for both physical and spiritual health. Zuccolin's essay consolidates well-known material, offering a clear survey of sources and debates. While its originality lies more in presentation than in argument, it provides a useful overview for readers seeking to understand the medical-philosophical discourse on moisture across cultures.

Marilyn Nicoud considers the role of hot springs in medieval thought, noting that while bathing was common in Italy during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, scholarly literature initially paid little attention to their nature. Early explanations, such as those of Michael Scot and Pietro d'Abano, attributed the phenomenon to subterranean winds. Later authors, including Gentile da Foligno and Ugo Benzi, began to assess the therapeutic value of thermal waters, culminating in Francesco Casini's *De balneis* and other contemporary writings, which offered empirical observations. Nicoud assembles a wide range of sources, though the survey character leaves certain questions unresolved, particularly why interest in hot springs intensified in the fourteenth century. The suggestion that this sudden proliferation of writings can be explained simply by the rise of 'empirical observation' seems somewhat unconvincing, since the attraction of thermal waters must also have reflected broader intellectual currents. Nonetheless, the essay provides a helpful catalogue of medieval approaches to the medical uses of water.

The transition to the early modern period is marked by Pina Totaro's study of Buffon's *Theory of the Earth* and his rejection of the view that fossils were relics of the Flood. Buffon divided the history of the earth into successive epochs, presenting a narrative of creation and transformation in which water played a foundational role. Totaro introduces readers to Buffon's position within contemporary debates, but the essay offers little sense of the broader intellectual context. References to Buffon's contemporaries are fleeting, and there is no engagement with his predecessors or with the tradition of physico-theology in which the problem of fossils and the Flood was so widely discussed. As a result, the reader is left without a clear understanding of the contours of the controversy or of Buffon's place within it. The absence of sustained contextualisation, together with the lack of reference to recent scholarship on the subject, makes the essay feel closer to a conference presentation than to a fully developed publication. Even

so, it succeeds in highlighting the complexity of early modern discussions of water, fossils, and biblical interpretation.

Massimiliano Lenzi contributes a study of Aristotle's famous comparison of the soul to a sailor on a ship in *De Anima*. He traces how Alexander of Aphrodisias resisted Platonic readings of this passage, insisting that the metaphor underscored the corporealisation of the soul, while later thinkers such as Plotinus and Porphyry reinterpreted it to emphasise the rational soul's addition to the body's natural faculties. Philoponus developed Porphyry's position further, transmitting it into the medieval tradition through Avicenna and the scholastics. Lenzi's analysis is valuable in showing the long afterlife of a single Aristotelian image. Unfortunately, the English prose is so strained that the essay becomes very difficult to follow, which significantly diminishes its accessibility to the reader.

Luisa Valente explores storms and navigation as ethical metaphors from Cicero and Seneca through Augustine and into the medieval period. The storm symbolises the passions and the unpredictability of life, while philosophy offers a way to steer clear of danger. Seneca's tripartite division of life – pleasure, contemplation, and action – was reworked by Augustine, who initially echoed the classical structure but later, as a theologian, insisted that true navigation required more than philosophical *otium*. Medieval authors such as Bede, Hrabanus Maurus, Abelard, and Alan of Lille christianised these metaphors, presenting the Church as a ship that enables believers to withstand the storms of existence. Valente's essay gathers familiar material but does so effectively, showing the continuity and transformation of ancient imagery in Christian thought.

Mirella Capozzi turns to Kant, who likened reason to a voyager across turbulent seas in search of the island of truth. The metaphor captures both the dangers of dogmatic illusions and the promise of rational progress, with Kant's imagery of mirages and the collapse of old geographies reinforcing the precariousness of philosophical navigation. Capozzi's essay is coherent and engaging, though its division into numerous short sections lends it a somewhat fragmented style. Placed after Valente, however, it forms a natural continuation of the theme of navigation, extending the metaphor into the Enlightenment.

The metaphysical dimension of water is addressed by Francesco Fronterotta, who revisits Heraclitus's dictum that 'ever newer waters flow'. He distinguishes between ontological and epistemological interpretations, arguing for the restoration of the ontological meaning whereby flux expresses the very nature of being. The essay is philologically clear and conceptually precise, though the point itself is well known, and its contribution consists chiefly in a careful restatement rather than in the development of new arguments. Riccardo Chiaradonna develops the metaphysical theme further in his analysis of Plotinus, for whom flux is conceived as a process of causal outflow. In Plotinus's system, incorporeal principles stream into matter, which reflects the forms like a mirror, while bodies

remain secondary and imperfect. Chiaradonna's essay is conceptually strong, enriching the Platonic vocabulary and showing how water imagery can illuminate the dynamics of metaphysical transmission. Olga Lizzini complements this with a survey of Arabic philosophy, focusing on Avicenna, al-Farabi, and Maimonides. She examines the doctrine of divine effusion as a continuous flow of causality, drawing on Qur'anic imagery and Neoplatonic language. Her essay synthesises familiar material, presenting purification and flow as central metaphors, and while largely descriptive, it situates Islamic and Jewish thought within the broader tradition of reflection on water as a medium of creation and metaphysical order.

The religious imagination section begins with Enrico Norelli's contribution, which examines water as a boundary and connection between divine and human spaces in Jewish and Christian apocalypses. In the *Book of Watchers*, Enoch's encounters with heavenly beings occur at Mount Hermon near the 'waters of Dan', reflecting the association of divine presence with aquatic sites. In the *Shepherd of Hermas*, revelation requires ascent and the crossing of water, while in Revelation the sea is abolished in the redeemed universe, a motif with possible political resonance given the text's association of Rome with the sea. Yet, Revelation also envisions a river of life flowing from God's throne, transforming water into the locus of perfect communion between divine and human. Norelli's essay provides a clear synthesis of these examples, underscoring the tension between water as a site of divine judgment and as a symbol of ultimate reconciliation.

Samuela Pagani focuses on the Islamic tradition, with particular attention to Fuzuli's sixteenth-century *Poem of Water* and the roots of its imagery of the Prophet as a white pearl emerging from water. The poem, composed in Baghdad, uses the repeated refrain *su* (water) to underscore the centrality of the element. Pagani situates this within a broader cosmological and mystical framework: water as the origin of creation, as divine attribute, and as symbol of purity and love. She draws on sources such as al-Shahrastānī, who described creation beginning from a precious stone dissolved into water, and on Ibn 'Arabī, for whom water represented both primordial matter and the first intellect. The essay highlights the continuity between ancient cosmological ideas and their Islamic reworking, while showing how Sufi literature transformed water into a metaphor of the heart and union with God.

Maurizio Mottolese explores hydraulic imagery in Kabbalistic discourse, where water serves as a metaphor for divine efflux and cosmic order. Drawing on the *Bahir* and later commentators, he shows how sefirot were imagined as channels or pipes through which wisdom flowed, sustaining the universe. Tribes became pipes, fulfilling the law and sustaining the cosmic network; sin was described as a rupture in the pipes, which Moses sought to repair. Figures such as Menahem ben Recanati and Joseph Gikatilla elaborated on wells, external pipes, and bad waters, using hydraulic language to describe spiritual life and temptation. Mottolese

demonstrates how the imagery of flow, seminal discharge, and irrigation structured Kabbalistic cosmology, with man envisioned as a vessel unlocking supernal sources. His essay is methodologically clear and well-illustrated, offering a strong example of how metaphors of water shaped mystical thought.

Anna Lisa Schino addresses the Flood as a metaphor of divine wrath and its rationalist critique in the works of Agostino Nifo and Gabriel Naudé. The first part of her essay revisits the failed prophecy of a universal flood in 1524 and Nifo's reflections on it, material already familiar from the scholarship of Paola Zambelli and many others. The slightly more original section concerns Naudé, who read Nifo as a model of rationality in an age allegedly prone to superstition. Schino shows how Naudé used Nifo's scepticism to argue for a measured response to apocalyptic fears. The essay gives the impression of a lightly revised conference talk, with limited contextualisation of broader European debates, but it succeeds in highlighting Naudé's role in reframing the Flood as a test case for rational critique.

The final section of the volume is devoted to poetics. Sonia Gentili considers Dante's image of the 'sea of being' and the shipwreck of Ulysses, tracing its antecedents in Gregory of Nazianzus, John of Damascus, and Thomas Aquinas, and linking it to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The essay is concise (only 9 pages, including an abstract) and still bears the imprint of its oral delivery, offering a brief survey rather than extended analysis. Hansmichael Hohenegger offers a more substantial contribution on Goethe, examining how water metaphors illuminate his reflections on art, science, and language. For Goethe, language is marked by imperfection and struggles to grasp reality fully, yet it remains a living medium through which meaning flows. This tension is expressed in images of water: on the one hand, the 'sea of falsehood' associated with alchemical discourse, and on the other, the purifying stream of poetic inspiration, which conveys the creative power of art despite the limits of expression. Hohenegger's essay is methodologically rich, drawing on multiple contexts and showing how water functions as a metaphor for the plurality of languages and modes of representation. Luciano De Fiore, by contrast, offers a wide-ranging meditation on sirens, moving from Homer to modern culture. The essay recalls well-known narratives and invokes figures such as Foucault and Lacan without sustained analysis, concluding with the suggestion that the siren symbolises trauma. The contribution is eclectic and impressionistic, standing apart from the more focused and academic studies in the volume.

Taken together, the collection illustrates both the richness and the unevenness typical of conference proceedings. Some essays, such as those by Hohenegger, Mottolese, Chiaradonna, and Capozzi, offer substantial and well-contextualised analyses, while others remain closer to the format of oral presentations. The absence of contributions with an environmental perspective is striking,

particularly given recent historiographical trends, and the chronological coverage leaves a gap between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, a period crucial for the rethinking of water and its resources in Europe. Nevertheless, the volume succeeds in presenting water as both physical necessity and inexhaustible metaphor, a theme that continues to inspire reflection across traditions and disciplines. It will serve as a valuable resource for scholars seeking to understand how one of the most fundamental elements of life has shaped philosophical, religious, and poetic imagination from antiquity to modernity.