



Book Review

Jerusalem's Hydro-History

La soif de Jérusalem
Vincent Lemire. Paris:
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Review by Robert Mazza

Jerusalem Water Works. Workers on Ras el-Ain waterworks. Slope W. of Girvat Saul.
Source: Library of Congress.

La soif de Jérusalem, by the French scholar Vincent Lemire, is a monumental work of history based on vast archival research focusing on one of the less studied aspects of the urban history of Jerusalem: water, its practical and spiritual value, distribution, conservation, and organization. Lemire studies the history of water from the early nineteenth century to 1948, treating it as a particularly revealing lens through which to examine the urban history of Jerusalem. Following a recent and successful historiographical trend, Lemire centers his investigation on the city of Jerusalem as a place composed of living creatures, and not just as a holy place, an archaeological site or an ideological battlefield, though he does not deny the existence of latent conflicts.

The author introduces a new historiographical sub-field he calls “hydro-history,” arguing that such a history of Jerusalem in the modern era can be divided into three overlapping periods. The first extends from 1840 to 1880 and covers the time in which western archaeologists and philanthropists dominated the practical and ideological organization of water. The second, from 1860 to 1910, constitutes the stage in which the various local Ottoman institutions first competed with the Europeans and then began to struggle internally for the control of water. The last period, from 1900 to 1948, is characterized by the militarization of water as a part of larger conflict. Following these distinctions *La soif de Jérusalem* is itself divided into three parts: the stage of memory, the age of the administration, and the era of the war.

In the first part, dedicated to the memory of water and its historicization, Lemire shows how the issue became a Western-Christian obsession (pp. 62-63), sparking a conflict between water as a daily necessity and its biblical and religio-historical representations. Using a number of detailed and well-documented case studies Lemire reveals how archaeologists sought to find physical evidence for biblical history through the hydro-history of the holy land and Jerusalem. Presenting the case of the aqueduct of Solomon, for example, Lemire shows how the scientific appropriation of Jerusalem, and of Palestine as a whole, paved the way for the material appropriation of the land. The Catholic vs. Protestant competition over the redefinition and discovery of the holy places brought the very issue of water and its distribution to the European capitals. The author demonstrates how in Britain the issue of Jerusalem’s water supply was a topic debated in society (p.148), suggesting a form of implicit desire to gain control over the holy land.

In the second part Lemire focuses on the Ottoman administration of water by looking first at the establishment of a “hydraulic” *waqf* by Suleiman in 1541. With this a sort of Ottoman memory of water resources was established, while also providing a crucial public service to the inhabitants of the city and to the Muslims who needed water for their ablutions. In his analyses Lemire stresses how water came to be a public and free commodity for all religious communities. Supported by strong evidence, he joins other scholars in highlighting the positive role played by water in uniting communities, rather than dividing them. In chapters 5 and 6, Lemire discusses the battle between Ottoman institutions and foreign consuls over the control of water; a matter of sovereignty for the Ottomans. This battle was won by local Ottoman institutions, and was followed by internal struggles from which the newly created municipality of Jerusalem emerged as the leading authority in control of water, which by 1890 had become a commodity in very great demand. The municipality acquired legitimacy in the eyes of Jerusalem’s residents by successfully dealing with the increased demand for water due population growth, improved hygiene, and the expansion of the city (p.293).

In the last section of the book Lemire uses a discussion of water and hydro-politics to understand the larger politics of the city and the emerging competition, later conflict, between Arabs and Zionists. The author then traces the emergence of what he calls “hydraulic Zionism,” an interesting notion of appropriation and

division meant to favor one part of the population and exclude the other. Nevertheless, these emerging divisions were halted with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the occupation of the city by the British in 1917. As soon as the British took over they began to use water-works to establish their own legitimacy. They militarized the distribution of water, postponing de facto any discussion over rights to this commodity. With the establishment of the British Mandate in 1922 water was demilitarized, and was appropriated on an ideological level by both Palestinians and Zionists. In this context Lemire shows that with the opening of the reservoir of Ras el-Ain in 1936 Jerusalem was granted a stable and sufficient supply, which made the resource a target for both Palestinians and Zionists in their larger battle over the control of Palestine.

In conclusion, Lemire claims that water has proved to be a “laboratory” for historical agency which the historian can use as both analytical tool and point of observation. He calls on historians to envision and explore the possibilities of hydro-history as a new human science. Overall this is a groundbreaking work that offers a significantly different view of the late Ottoman and early British history of Jerusalem and to an extent the whole of Palestine. The work is so thoroughly researched that at times it can be overwhelming, yet it is a must-read for all scholars in the field, and very interesting reading for those looking for new approaches to history.

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