Water in towns in North-West Europe in the early Middle Ages: an agent of urban spatial transformation (4th−12th centuries)

Conference organized by the University of Tours (France)

21-23 October 2021

UMR 7324 CITERES − Laboratoire Archéologie et Territoires

Call for papers

Towns or, rather, urban societies maintained multiple and complex relations with water in the past. In its different forms, stagnant or dynamic, water was a prerequisite for human settlement. Most towns are located on a watercourse used for various purposes (food provision, craft production, energy, defence, transport…). Medieval towns were places where water was omnipresent and this constitutes a subject of choice for researchers, as shown by the many studies published on the subject (eg Leguay 2002, Guillerme 1983). Among all the symposia organised up till now on water in the medieval period, most papers have concerned the end of the period, for which written sources are more numerous and detailed. At the same time, at conferences and in publications devoted to towns in the early Middle Ages, the role of water has not been treated in much depth (Hodges and Hobley 1988), even if there are some well-known examples from this period, such as the harbour of Dorestad (Van Es and Verwers 1980) or Douai (Louis, Demolon and Louis-Vanbauce 1990). In 2004, publication of a symposium on rivers and marshes lent new impetus to approaches to human interaction with rivers and management of wetlands, including urban examples such as Tours (Burnouf and Leveau 2004).

Starting from the premise that a variety of towns existed during the early Middle Ages (towns of Roman origin, or growing up around a monastery, a defensive site or an economic hub), we propose to assess the role of water in these towns at three progressive levels: i) that of different users within a town, ii) at the level of the town as a whole, and iii) in the creation of urban networks. Our purpose is to draw together the most recent research, highlighting this subject through archaeological discoveries as well as critical analysis of written sources.

1 – Living by water, living with water in the early medieval town

In this first section, we will start by examining the uses of water in everyday life as well as in productive contexts, laying stress on structures and facilities that served these needs at the level of people operating within urban space.

Everyday use of water

Water supply and discharge in towns provides a first theme. Access to water for everyday needs was achieved in two ways: an on-site supply (pumping or carrying water from rivers, uptake of groundwater, or collection of rainwater in cisterns) or bringing water from a more distant source (through new constructions or maintenance of antique aqueducts). Archaeological remains (wells, cisterns, water-supply systems, aqueducts) raise questions about the degree of technological know-how of early medieval societies, as well as the contribution of towns of antique origin and the extent of continued use of inherited systems. Papers might also cover hygienic aspects of water (baths), as well as its liturgical or ritual uses (baptisteries, mikvehs...).

Production using water in the urban setting

This theme involves activities of production and transformation associated with water. It will particularly focus on fisheries mentioned in Carolingian charters, and remains of fish traps and weirs consisting of wooden stakes discovered in riverbeds. Twenty years after the 'Rencontres internationales de Liessis sur la pêche en eau douce au Moyen Âge et à l'époque moderne', this will provide an opportunity to take stock of new discoveries. An important place here is envisaged for contributions on water-mills (with horizontal or vertical wheel) which were often associated with fishing activities in early medieval towns. With the development of rescue archaeology in the last twenty years, many such structures of the early Middle Ages have been excavated across Europe, and we wish to showcase here urban or suburban examples from North-West Europe. Finally, this will also be an opportunity to deal with industrial activities requiring access to water, such as tanning and cloth working, which are sometimes difficult to apprehend at this period.

Transport and crossings

The archaeology of low-water or dry channel beds has developed rapidly in the last twenty years, showing the value of these areas for studying installations linked with transportation and traffic by water (harbours, docks, quays) or crossings over it (bridges, ferries, fords). The evolution of 'waterfront archaeology' and rescue archaeology has allowed some notable excavations of harbour structures in an urban context, as at Namur in Belgium and Bordeaux and Lyon in France. In the Loire valley, several sites are still being investigated, such as the antique port of Rezé near Nantes which lasted into the early Middle Ages, or the town of Blois with its bridges

and medieval fisheries. Attention will be focused on case-studies involving the discovery of archaeological remains.

2 – Water in towns

Through this second theme, we will seek to broaden the scope by looking not so much at the archaeological remains of structures for their own sake, but rather at those structures' imprint on the urban landscape. Thanks to André Guillerme's work, we now know that the period in question witnessed the creation of surface water networks in towns that were sometimes very dense, and which resulted from two phenomena: the construction of successive defensive works, and the use of water for artisanal purposes both *intra* and *extra muros*. It was the age of 'dynamic' water which came to an end in the middle of the 14th century, to be succeeded by the age of 'stagnant' water resulting from developments in military technology which required large defensive ditches and ushered in a new era in the relationship between urban society and water. This observation prompts two different lines of enquiry: the first concerning the creation and functioning of these hydrographic systems, and the second concerning the impact of these early medieval installations on the urban fabric.

Understanding the hydrographic system through activities of the inhabitants

These 'little Venices', which are revealed to us by written sources starting in the 11th but especially from the 12th century, were the result of many centuries of infrastructure projects responding to very varied needs. We might focus our attention on identifying initial projects, their scale, their instigators, and the knowledge applied in their implementation, but also on their transformation which was never seamless. The erection of a new mill or a new tanning quarter required a fresh start that would have disrupted the existing water-management system achieved through hard-won compromise. Hence this section will seek to understand what the hydrographic network is telling us was at stake at different times in a town's history, and to reconstruct from surviving remains a 'hydraulic system' which will necessarily imply things about the approach of the creators: the choice of site according to topographical potentiality (marsh, damp zones), the availability of land for acquisition, hydrological resources, suitability for being organised to serve multiple activities (milling, fish farming, textile working…), but also with a view to defence. Even if most of the answers will certainly be of a hypothetical nature, they should nevertheless open the way to consideration of such questions as the possibility of analysing urban growth in the Middle Ages in relation to the development of hydrographical networks.

Assessing the role of water in the early Middle Ages in the urban fabric

Once having discussed the chronology and siting of hydrographic networks and the objectives of the people involved, we can focus on the role of water as a structuring

element of urban space in the long term. We would suggest reassessing the part played by the early Middle Ages in the establishment of hydrographic networks of the 'little Venices', as well as the impact of the nature of the site (marsh, paleochannels) on the form assumed by a town (morphogenesis). Is it possible to detect a chronological emphasis in different uses of the channels over time: in a defensive role, as a reach, or in wetland drainage?

3 – Water and urban networks in North-West Europe

A final level that could be debated at this symposium is that of networks of cities. Indeed, the continuity and growth of towns of antique origin, as well as the foundation of new towns, are often linked in traditional historiography with an economic flowering whose origin is still debated. In both cases, the geographical location close to water (riverbank, coastal, estuarine…) and allowing ease of water-borne transportation (whether riverine or maritime) was certainly the cause of this flowering. Thus one might ponder the role of water in these networks of towns, their origins and development, as well as that of the big players in this commerce (the great abbeys, royalty and aristocracy…) who were able to establish true inter-regional networks.

Communication or poster proposals should be submitted by 1 March 2021. Proposals should provide a title, a summary of 300 words in French or English and the institutional affiliation of the author. They must be filed on the website of the conference : eauvillehma@sciencesconf.org.

It is planed to publish the proceedings of this conference.

The registration cost will be €20. Attendance is free of charge for students but they need to register. A buffet is organised for lunch for the first two days of the symposium (€15 for attendance). On the third day, a visit of the city of Vendôme will be offered to all the participants of the symposium.

For further information, please visit the website of the conference on eauvillehma@sciencesconf.org.

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