Steven Mithen’s book *Thirst* is a light travelogue that engages with heavy-weight ideas, elucidating man’s relationship to water in the ancient and medieval world in short case studies spanning the Mediterranean to Cambodia and Peru. The author, a professor of archaeology at Reading University (in the U.K.), served as director of the highly acclaimed international “Water, Life and Civilization in the Jordan Valley” project. Mithen’s flowing prose presents a rapid history of important water technology developments, combined with succinct historiographical analyses of ongoing problems and debates in the scholarship about water and societal collapse, alongside a few novel hypotheses. The usual suspects are all here: Chinese canals, Hellenistic and Nabataean tunnels, Roman baths, Khmer temples, and Incan aqueducts are all given their due.

One recurring thread considers the relationship between water and power. Karl Wittfogel, in his book *Oriental Despotism* (1949), famously argued that centralized political authority—the so-called hydraulic state—was a prerequisite for the formation of large-scale canal irrigation systems. This hypothesis has long been recognized as overly universalistic, but it continues to find wide currency. In an excellent chapter on the Cambodian Khmer, Mithen reviews the contributions of Philippe Groslier, who characterized medieval Angkor Wat as the “hydraulic city” *par excellence*, which depended for its existence on a tripartite system of collection channels, artificial lakes, and drainage works. Over time, this system became convoluted and unable to cope with environmental change, and contributed to the weakened authority of the Khmer kings.

Mithen adduces Maya, Incan, and Arizonan examples as strong counterexamples to Wittfogel’s hydraulic hypothesis, which demonstrate how complex irrigation systems could develop organically in non-state societies, and how central political formations often imposed themselves on these pre-existing systems. In another excellent chapter, concerned with the Sumerians, Mithen reviews important scholarly debates to conclude that centralized states could endanger water management schemes, because they tended to appropriate the infrastructure of pre-existing irrigation schemes without maintaining intercommunal, tribal, or religious modes of cooperation or coordination, like water-sharing and field-fallowing methods, that held untenable changes of soil salinity or watercourse alluviation in check.

Mithen’s book is an excellent introduction to water management from a predominantly techno-historical perspective, and he points readily to the comparability of modern problems with ancient ones. Special attention is given to sclerotic societies that were unable to adapt water consumption habits to changing climatic conditions. But the author is less successful when he looks to history for contemporary solutions, arguably because our problems have no easy technological fix. Indeed, Mithen shows us that we have been using the same basic technology for millennia—dams, canals, aqueducts, and so forth. Rather like the crisis that confronted the Sumerians, modern water crises are more social and cultural than technological, and revolve around our seeming inability to balance sustainable and locally ordered water schemes with larger-scale state or corporate interests. Those with a *Thirst* for short historical meditations on these important problems could find little better introduction than Mithen’s succinct, highly readable book.

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