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The Transportation of Water in Early Western Civilizations

Water is a very valuable commodity to all humans. Since prehistoric times, groups of people have gathered around sources of water. This need for water led early civilizations to develop different methods of water transportation. These methods guided civilizations to be united in their efforts to transport water effectively. This common need created a sense of responsibility to the success of any method that was being used. In early western civilizations, water needed to be transported to areas that received little rainfall, such as ancient Mesopotamia. In this area the soil was fertile, but rainfall was too inconsistent to support farming practices. The Romans and Egyptians adapted to this dilemma by diverting water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to their fields through a system of aqueducts and canals (Wiesner et al. 2). As time passed, their methods and inventions required progressively less human exertion. As less manpower was needed, the people who had once been united by a common goal separated once again. These people used methods that were simple to use, easy to fix, and contained the water until it was needed by the people or fields.

Early methods for transporting water required a lot of physical exertion. When one looks at sketches done by Merry Weisner of early transportation techniques of water, it is apparent that as civilizations develop the methods require less physical exertion (10-11). Weisner’s sketches range from a man pulling up a bucket that is attached to a limb with a rock on the opposite end to a wheel of buckets that requires no man power to function efficiently. Transporting this necessity requires a lot of time and effort by people who could be working in the fields to produce food. As time goes on, Romans and Egyptians adopt canals and aqueducts to transport their water to the towns and fields. It is true these methods take many years to complete. For example, in Suetonius’s description of the water projects in A.D. 41-54, he described 30,000 men working to complete an aqueduct for eleven years, but once aqueducts or canals were created, little effort was needed to transport the water (Weisner et al. 13). Additionally, these systems benefitted a large group of people and the workers were responsible for the system’s and community’s success.

Another requirement for methods of transporting water was for them to be reparable by common people. Vitruvius supported the use of earthenware pipes in the Roman aqueduct system instead of lead because “if a break occurs, anybody can repair it”(12). Common citizens are given the power to aid their community or neighbor’s farms by maintaining their portion of the water system. If these water systems were made of lead or some other metal, a metal worker would have had to be called to repair the damage. This would leave a household or town without water for an extended period of time. When an aqueduct is made from clay, any citizen is able to repair damage to the system which limits the time without access to water. When canals are used, multiple parties share a system to water their crops. This can be seen in an aerial photo of a pre-Roman city in Italy (Weisner et al. 8). It shows an old system of canals that were used by the Romans. When the canals would fill with sediment from the rivers, worker would pile the sediment on the banks of the canals to protect their fields and the ones belonging to their neighbor. In a section of the Code of Hammurabi, it outlines what is to happen if a man does not keep his dike in good repair (11). This need for methods of water transportation to be easily repairable is apparent in the responsibilities tied to them.

Lastly, civilizations needed to have the ability to contain water until it is needed. Again, most of these systems were made of earthen-ware. This was partially because of its quality of being easily reparable, but also that it was common to use to “preserve the purity of water” as Vitruvius said prior to first century B.C. (12). This need for the transportation of water to be understood and maintainable by all was reinforcing the idea that the need for water unified a civilization, for Vitruvius also said that “even those who load their table with silver vessels…preserve the purity of water”(12-13). Because the water was able to be contained and controlled, a system had to be put in place to disperse the water. This led to the sense of unity to dissipate around 100 A.D., when the Commissioner of Rome required water to be granted to civilians. Because this commodity now had a price, thieves or “puncturing watermen” would tap into the water systems without a grant (14). After 100 A.D. water became another source of commerce and no longer a unifying force.

Water is a necessity of the human body, but it also acted as a unifying force in ancient western civilizations. Through building transportation systems and keeping those systems in good repair, many people were united in striving towards an easier lifestyle. With consistent access to water in their fields, homes, and towns, individuals were held responsible for their branches of the interlinked system of water. As this commodity became accepted as the norm, the unifying aspect of water transportation dissipated. When farmers and townsmen alike had to work towards a common goal of water access, they relied on each other for the system’s success. In ancient civilizations, people created a sense of responsibility in each other for maintaining their new systems. Without water, neither of the groups, townsfolk or countrymen, would have come to achieve a common goal.

Works Cited

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