

## CHAPTER 3

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# WATER

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TERJE OESTIGAARD

### 1 INTRODUCTION

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WATER in the archaeology of ritual and religion includes water as a perspective and water as empirical data. The life-giving waters in society and religion are the fresh waters in their many facets in the hydrological cycle. Water is always in a flux. The fluid matter changes qualities and capacities wherever it is, and it always takes new forms. This transformative character of water is forcefully used in ritual practices and religious constructions. Water represents the one and the many at the same time, and the plurality of ritual institutionalizations and religious perceptions puts emphasis on water's structuring principles and processes in culture and the cosmos. Water is fundamental in many ritual practices and to conceptions of the divinities and cosmos in prehistoric religions, and consequently the study of water in ritual and religion may reveal insights into both what religion *is* and how devotees perceive themselves, the divine spheres, and their own religious practices and rituals. The pervasive role of water-worlds in society and cosmos unites micro- and macrocosmos, creates life, and legitimizes social hierarchies and religious practices and beliefs. Water is a medium which links or changes totally different aspects of humanity and divinities into a coherent unit; it bridges paradoxes, transcends the different human and divine realms, allows interactions with gods, and enables the divinities to interfere with humanity. Water is a medium for everything—it has human character because we are humans; it is a social matter but also a spiritual substance and divine manifestation with immanent powers; and, still, it belongs to the realm of nature as a fluid liquid. The hydrological cycle links all places and spheres together, and water transcends the common categories by which we conceptualize the world and cosmos (Tvedt and Oestigaard 2006). The religious water-worlds, cosmologies, beliefs, and ritual practices are evident in the archaeological record, mythology, and written sources. Hence, it is necessary to identify different types of water, the particular qualities associated with each of them, and how water materializes as religious and ritual structures, practices, and beliefs.

## 2 DIVINE QUALITIES OF WATER

Water is a medium for religious and divine interaction, it has spiritual qualities, and it might be a divinity. In order to understand the religious role of water it is analytically preferable to distinguish between 'holy' and 'sacred'. 'Holiness' may refer to the divinity and what is derived from the divinity as attributes, whereas 'sacredness' points to consecrated items where it refers to 'respected or venerated objects but not the divine itself and not to persons as individuals' (Oxtoby 1987: 434). Water is not only a mediator between humans and god(s), but the element can be a divinity itself. Hence, there is a fundamental difference between 'holy water' and 'sacred water', and the Ganges in India as the Mother Goddess in Hinduism is holy water. The water used in the Christian baptism is not a divinity, but consecrated and hence sacred water. The sacred aspects of water may also include the differentiation from other waters which may enable humans to interact with divinities or cosmological spheres and as such be an entrance to the Otherworld.

Both holy and sacred waters are within the religious realm, but the qualities and internal capacities differ, and consequently, it is important to identify these various powers and properties in order to understand why and how water is used in past and present religions.

Moreover, water can attain malevolent capacities, following Gaston Bachelard, water can be cursed; evilness can put it in active form, and thus what is evil in one aspect can become evil in the whole, and evilness is no longer a quality but a substance (Bachelard 1994: 139). Clear water, on the other hand, 'is a constant temptation for a facile symbolism of purity . . . it is the one that constantly breathes new life into certain old mythological forms. It gives life back to forms by transforming them, for a form cannot transform itself . . . Water is the most perfect liquid, it is the one from which all other solutions get their fluidity' (Bachelard 1994: 134, 93). The various types of water have different qualities, which can be separated into two overall categories with regards to religious and cultural outcome: purification and in relation to a successful harvest for the people. Purification from sins and spiritual preparations for the life hereafter is in general the most common ritual use of holy or sacred waters whereas a successful harvest can be one of the main aims of human sacrifices.

## 3 RITUAL USE OF WATER AND RELIGIOUS METAPHORS

Purification rituals may take place in almost every ritual from daily to annual ceremonies, but especially in life-cycle rites with a particular emphasis on death rituals. Funeral libations and washing of the corpse are often necessary requirements as well as beverages as gifts to the deceased. Purification rituals include not only the living and the dead, but also husbandry, statues, and temples. Common in the use of holy and sacred water for purification is the belief that different types of water have various divine capabilities to transform impurity to purity and hence annihilate sins and contamination through the rituals used. Water is also used as a medium and place for divine interaction; it represents a *liminal* zone

and substance between human and gods where it is possible to transcend the earthly realm. Sacrifices have also frequently been given to holy water (the divinity itself) or to sacred water where the water is a medium enabling interaction with the cosmological spheres. Thus, the ritual uses of water may take many forms depending upon whether the water is seen as holy or sacred, and although it is difficult to trace different water rituals in the archaeological record since they do not leave any material trace as such when they are performed, there is still sufficient testimony for ritual use of water throughout history in rituals and religious metaphors.

Intensive purification rituals with water are evident from the ancient Egyptian civilization. Although it is difficult to say whether such rituals took place in the Old Kingdom, at least from the Middle and New Kingdoms the living Pharaoh was purified in numerous ceremonies (Blackman 1998: 8–10): in infancy a purification ceremony was performed which prepared the child for kingship. The ritual, which consisted of sprinkling the child with water, was not only a purification rite, but it passed on certain divine qualities and vital force to the forthcoming king. Before coronation the forthcoming king was purified in the Cool Pool and he washed his face in the waters of Nun in which the sun god washed his face. By this act he was made similar to the sun god who was asked to see him as a son. During the coronation in the ‘baptism of the pharaoh’, streams of vivifying ankh signs were poured over the pharaoh’s head (see Figure 3.1; Gardiner 1950: 3). The purification was a renewal of the rite conducted during infancy. The gods addressed the king, ‘Be pure



FIGURE 3.1 ‘Baptism of the Pharaoh’ where ablutions of ankh signs were poured, Karnak, Egypt.

together with thy *ka*, (namely) thy great dignity of King of Upper and Lower Egypt, thou living [eternally]' (Gardiner 1950: 7). Before officiating in a temple and entering the 'House of the Morning' the Pharaoh was purified with water, which also renewed life, and, finally, at the *Sed*-festival it seems that in particular the king's hands and feet were washed (Blackman 1998: 8–10). After death, purity and purification were of utmost importance before the dead Pharaoh could enter the Solar or Osirian realm. The same lustration was also repeated in the 'Opening of the mouth' ceremony whereby water was sprinkled on the statue or the mummy (Blackman 1918: 119). The life-giving power of water was essential throughout Egyptian history restoring life to Osiris whereby he was revived by being washed, and this water was holy rather than sacred because it represented the original waters from creation thus uniting the pharaoh with the cosmic origin, Nun, from where the Nile flowed.

Water and religion are inevitably connected to sin and defilement and in particular how to erase sin or how to prepare oneself for life after death. In this world, water has the capacity to reduce misfortunes and punishments in another world. This quality of holy water is perhaps the most important aspect of water irrespective of religion (Oestigaard 2005a: 13–14) and in Christianity, for instance, this finds its material expression in baptismal fonts throughout history. Apart from such obvious use of water which has continuity to the present, one may also trace purification processes in prehistoric death rituals. The body treatment normally includes two ritual processes: the initial preparation of the corpse by washing with water and then anointing the body with oils or other substances prior to the disposal of the corpse (Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008: 5). In contemporary societies the first ritual process most often involves purification rites with water (e.g. Oestigaard 2005b), but it is more difficult to trace similar practices in the past due to the absence of material remains. There are, however, indications that similar practices have taken place. In a cremation burial at Winterslow in Britain, together with a bronze razor, the remains of human eyebrow hairs from more than one individual were found, indicating that during the funeral there was some kind of purification ritual (Barrett 1994: 123). It is uncertain whether the eyebrow hairs were from the deceased or not, but at least one or several of the mourners had shaved parts of their body in the funeral rites. Whether water was used in this instance is difficult to say, but by highlighting the ornaments on Scandinavian razors, since they have been used in such rituals and found in burials, one may trace parts of the role of water in rituals and religion in the Bronze Age.

The common theme depicted on Bronze Age razors, but also in Bronze Age iconography in general, is a cosmology expressed by images of water and the sun in combination (Kaul 1998, 2000; Goldhahn 2005), and the sun and fire are interchangeable (Kaliff 2007). Fire and water are in most cultures and religions irrespective of time and place used as transformative mediums to express both complementary and contradictory ideas of humans, social relations, divine qualities, how interactions between humans and gods take place, and the creation and character of the cosmos itself. Because fire and water are both natural and cultural elements and constructions, they are forcefully used to express transformation and transcend, but also to define, cultural and religious categories (Bachelard 1968, 1988, 1990). The fluidity and ever-changing nature of both fire and water—and particularly when they are used in combination—make these elements unique. They might be perceived as opposites, but also as complementary to each other (Oestigaard 2003, 2008; see below). Both elements put emphasis on transformation and change, and the sun's

movement—often expressed with water metaphors—represents one of the two main circles in the natural world used for spinning cultural webs of significance (Geertz 1973), the other being the hydrological circle.

## 4 LIFE-GIVING WATERS

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The water in the hydrological circle includes rivers, rain, hail, lakes, floods, oases, swamps, bogs, wells, springs, rapids, waterfalls, snow, ice, and glaciers, etc., and also includes the transformation processes of evaporation, condensation, and freezing, and each of these forms and processes can be perceived as either holy or sacred. The attribution of religious qualities includes ecology because the absence and presence of life-giving waters are of utmost importance in order to understand and grasp the religious significance of water. The life-giving waters are for the welfare of the society, and water is seen as the divinity's grace unto humanity, giving prosperity and life to humans. This water is neither holy nor sacred as such, but the consequences of water enable life and human prosperity, which is a truly divine aim and prerequisite for humans to fulfil their homage to the gods. In other words, these waters are mandatory and prerequisites for humans to fulfil their cosmic purposes, so even though the waters in themselves do not have any spiritual qualities *apart from being a gift from the divinities*, it reveals the greatness of the gods. Hence, the seemingly neutral water is also incorporated into the religious realms since humans are dependent upon the divinities and cosmic premises for prosperity.

The absence rather than the presence of water is often more important and structuring in a given society or religion because it puts the emphasis on people's needs, but on the other hand, too much water at the wrong time of the year is as disastrous as too little water when it appears as prolonged rains or catastrophic floods washing away fields and settlements. This is particularly evident in ancient Egypt, which is commonly described as the 'Gift of the Nile'. The Egyptian civilization during the Pharaonic period (3000–332 BC) was dependent on the Nile, and the summer inundation created a civilization based on the annual floods. The life-giving water was essential not only for the economy, but also as a constitutive part of the ancient Egyptians' religious world view. All dynasties were dependent upon the Nile, but the fluctuations in the Nile flood created an interannual variability in the volume of water. The ancient Egyptians measured the maximum height of the yearly flood in the nilometers and recorded the levels in the royal annals. According to the Roman historian Pliny:

A rise of 16 cubits is good. If less, the irrigation is incomplete. If more, the slow subsidence of the flood obstructs cultivation: the land is soaked and the proper moment for seeding is lost. If the flood is low, the parched land does not yield a crop. In either case the Province is deeply concerned. With 12 cubits famine is the result; with 13 the country goes hungry; 14 cubits bring cheers; 15 security; and 16 the joys of prosperity. [Lindsay 1968: 14]

If the flood was too high, it caused disasters; if it was too low, it led to famines.

From the early Dynastic to the Graeco-Roman period the nilometers are found in relation to sanctuaries, particularly Osiris and Isis-Sarapis temples, and Robert A. Wild has argued convincingly that the nilometers had a religious function (Wild 1981). Isis and

Sarapis possessed divine powers and caused the annual floods to come; they normally stood above the Nile as powers superior to it. Osiris, on the other hand, regularly appears as the divine power immanent within the Nile, and particularly within the waters of the flood. The low Nile was the disappearance of the god and this was mourned, and the coming of the flood was Osiris' revitalization and restoration (Wild 1981: 68–9). An inscription on the island of Siheil dates to the Ptolemaic period, but describes a seven-year famine that occurred during the reign of Djoser. The king complains that the Nile has not risen for seven years, and he confronts Imhotep, who consulted the sacred writings. He tells him 'that there is a city in the middle of the Nile called Elephantine, which is the seat from which Ra despatches life to everyone. It is the source of life, the place from which the Nile leaps forth in its flood to impregnate the lands of Egypt' (MacQuitty 1976: 127). One of the most important nilometers was located at Elephantine (Figure 3.2), thus linking the flood to the sanctuary, Ra, and the Nile; and the arrival of the flood was a religious event within the realm of rituals aiming to control the life-giving waters.

From an ecological and religious point of view water can thus be described as *benevolent* or *malevolent*, where the former is seen as a blessing or divine gift and the latter as a curse or collective penalty for moral or ritual misconduct resulting in harvest failures, famines, and death. Malevolent waters normally occur as devastating floods, too much precipitation such as prolonged rains, the *fimbulwinter* of snow, or even the lack of rain; and unsuccessful rain-making rituals or deliberately withholding the rain is generally seen as evil or as a consequence of malevolent and malignant powers. In many parts of Africa the sun has been



FIGURE 3.2 Nilometer at Elephantine, Aswan, Egypt.

seen as the enemy of mankind who was scorching up everything because it was contradicting life (Wainwright 1938: 1), and among the Bari of the White Nile in Sudan, prolonged sunshine was seen as the work of a malevolent rain-maker ‘willing the sun’, who could be killed if rain failed (Seligman 1932: 295).

The absence of the life-giving waters often necessitates elaborate sacrifices, which in rain-making rituals may include humans. Propitiatory sacrifices are meant to avert potential disorder or favour the realization of a project or a desired state such as to secure the fertility of the fields, to avoid famine, or to obtain rain (Valeri 1985: 41). The importance in sacrifices when humans are offered to the gods is not that the gods were ‘blood-thirsty’, but that the offered humans were of value to the gods (Valeri 1985: 103). Moreover, human sacrifices cannot be performed on an individual basis, but require a benefit for the collective society (Valeri 1985: 49), and it is in this light that rain-making rituals aiming to promote fertility and preventing famines and hunger have to be seen.

In the Mesoamerican civilizations, human sacrifice was seen as a form of debt payment where humans returned cosmic energy to the gods, which the gods redistributed to humans and made them fertile (Trigger 2003: 481). Thus, ‘the [Mayan] gods receive from the people that which they provided in the first place—maize and water transformed into flesh and blood’ (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 2001: 195), and the gods continue to provide water as rains, springs, and rivers, which enable cultivation of maize and hence, the cycle of generations was continued through time and sacrifice. Hence their living descendants in Yukatan in Mexico declare, ‘Here comes the holy waters, the saint rain’ when they toil in their thirsty fields looking at the black clothes covering the sun, but it is uncertain if the ancient Maya believed that the rain was like blood and that the clouds of sacrifice contained a ‘holy spirit’ (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 2001: 207).

Human sacrifices for procuring the life-giving waters have not been limited to Africa and Mesoamerica, and this practice was also prevalent within the pagan Nordic countries. Adam of Bremen describes sacrifices in Uppsala in Sweden of both humans and animals every ninth year. Everyone was obliged to participate or send contributions to the offering and the Christians were no exception (Adam Bremensis 1993: IV, 27). According to Adam of Bremen, if there was hunger or plague, human sacrifices were a collective act made to Thor. Snorre (1995: 25) writes that in Uppsala the king Domalde was sacrificed by his chieftains after the harvest failed for the third year. Thus, propitiatory sacrifices performed to hinder malevolent or absent waters by producing the benevolent water for society’s prosperity and fertility was the king’s domain, and if he failed to procure security for his people, he could be sacrificed on behalf of society therefore creating a successful harvest through the life-giving waters. Although this life-giving water is neutral but still within the divine realm, other types of waters may have been holy and revelations of the divinities themselves.

## 5 SOUND OF WATER AND SHAMANISM

Of the known Neolithic hunter-gatherer rock-engraving sites made between 4000–500 BC in Scandinavia, 25 out of about 80 sites were intentionally related to the ‘sound of water’. In particular the engravings at Nämforsen and Laxforsen in Sweden are located at dangerous

places with physically restricted access. The oldest rock engravings at Nämforsen are found on an island in the middle of the river, directly related to the most intensive, furious, and wildest rapids. Today the sound of the Nämforsen River is tamed by a power plant, but the Laxforsen rock engravings are, however, still situated in the furious river where the original and natural sound of the river is still possible to hear, and the roaring rapids divert the attention away from the rock art (Goldhahn 2002). Goldhahn (2002) conducted measurements of the sound levels, and the closer to the engravings, the higher was the sound of water, reaching more than 110 decibels, which equals almost the sound of a starting jumbo jet at a distance of 50 m. The height of the Laxforsen waterfalls is about 5 m whereas the falls in Nämforsen are reported to have been around 17 m. The engravings were most likely made during the summer when the rapids were at their most intense, wild, and dangerous. Thus, the sound at Nämforsen probably exceeded 110 decibels, and the physical burdens on the human mind must have been even more extreme (Goldhahn 2002: 41–3).

During the winter, the river was frozen and it was possible to travel across it. The changing character of the water-world when the ice shifted to running water puts the emphasis on the water's qualities in itself. The intentional placing of the rock engravings close to the wildest and most furious rapids suggests that the images 'gained their power' from being placed in this dangerous situation (Goldhahn 2002: 44). The wild rapids in Nämforsen and Laxforsen are extreme and the sound of the water is perhaps the highest sound ever heard by the Stone Age people in this area. The cultural and religious understandings of sound levels in between 110 and 120 decibels must have been seen as a revelation of the powers of the gods and nature *par excellence* for the people who lived in an otherwise quiet environment and an animistic, religious world. The intensive sound of the river where it was at the most extreme and where the rock engravings were located are at the limit of what is possible for humans to bear physiologically and psychologically. The immanent powers of the river would have been manifested in the seasonal changes. During winters the river would have been frozen, and the silence during the winters would have been in stark contrast to the inferno during summer times. Thus, the power of water manifested itself both by sensory experiences and visualizations, and this water may have been seen as holy precisely because it revealed the most intense powers of nature.

As stated, the oldest and largest concentrations of rock engravings at Nämforsen are located next to the most vital and wild rapids, and all together there are depicted more than 1,000 images of elks with their 'life lines' (Goldhahn 2002: 43). The engravings show the skeleton with the vital, inner organs of the animals and humans depicted. The interpretations of these inner markings have been made through ethnographical analogies whereby shamans took control of the soul and spirit of the hunted prey by the use of the life line (Gjessing 1936: 140–6). The shamans used this life line to embark on journeys to other worlds and to return back to this world by the very same life line. The rock engravings may also be seen in the light of ancestral worship where the ancestors were 'attached' to the landscape and the living through sound (Nordström 1999). Goldhahn has suggested that the intensive noise of the rapids may have been a means whereby shamans achieved an altered state of consciousness or trance. Entering altered states of consciousness is not only possible by drugs, hyperventilation, or through fasting or meditation, but is also possible by sound. Hallucination can occur within a few minutes if certain senses are exposed to extremes. The loud sound of the river could have helped shamans to achieve altered states of consciousness (Goldhahn 2002: 51). Thus, this water would not have been

sacred, but holy since it revealed the powers of nature and enabled shamans to become holy or part of the divine realm.

## 6 WATER IN THE COSMOS AND WELLS OF POWERS

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Cosmologies are often perceived and depicted as transcendental water-worlds in both the lower and upper realms. These cosmic waters guarantee the life-giving waters among humans as well as facilitate interaction between the realms. The presence of water has its source in the other realms, with implications for people in this world. Floods myths are found on all continents of the world, and they are particularly important and common in the early civilizations along the great rivers such as the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus, and Yangtze (Dundes 1988). If the divinities lived in the lower realms, the water sources such as wells and bogs have been seen as entrances to the Underworld, which may explain the presence of human bog-finds. Tacitus mentions that disreputable persons were drowned, but the Gundestrup cauldron, manufactured during the second or first century BC found in Raevemose bog in Jutland, may indicate that also agricultural festivals in honour of Nerthus, where humans were sacrificed, took place in bogs (Green 2001: 114–17).

If the divinities are celestial such as the sun or the moon, the reflection of the celestial bodies in the water during day or night enables water to transfer sacrifices offered to the water to the celestial realms because the sacrifices are given to the sun or moon as they appear in the water mirror. Thus, through water, sacrifices can be given both to the lower and upper realms and as such it can be a medium and process unifying and bridging the earthly and transcendental realms. A holy river or bodies of sacred water both ends the profane and starts the divine journey, which may explain why sacrifices have been made to water throughout history; water and sun may be interchangeable (Figure 3.3), and a sacrifice to water may in fact be a sacrifice to the sun, or both, because the mirror of the sun in the water makes them the same. Wells in particular have been ascribed divine powers and seen as links between the realms, and are believed to have possessed particular qualities.

Water has been believed to have the capacity of revealing the truth. From 500 AD it seems that the Odin cult was firmly established in the Nordic regions (Hedeager 1999). In this process Odin became more powerful than the other pagan gods. In his search for knowledge and wisdom, Odin sacrificed one of his eyes in Mimir's well of wisdom. This allowed him to drink from it every day, giving him knowledge about everything, and his eye was kept in the well as a forfeit (*Edda-kvede* 1993: 12). Thus, the water was what revealed knowledge and wisdom to Odin and, even though the water was not the god in itself, it was the medium revealing the truth.

The holiness of water has also cured all kinds of sicknesses or diseases. In the Celtic religion, water had a crucial place and these perceptions were transformed and included in Christianity (Green 1986: 138). In England, water-worship was still banned into the twelfth century, but gradually the old customs and pagan aspects of water worship were hidden behind the Christian façade (Bord and Bord 1985: 19). When the Christians transformed the pagan water-beliefs, the early missionary monks included the wells in their religion (Gribben 1992: 15). The wells were believed to have various healing powers and the potential



FIGURE 3.3 The sun above the King's Valley unites with the water in the Nile, Luxor, Egypt.

to cure any kind of ailments, diseases, illnesses, or infertility (Bord and Bord 1985: 22). Thus, the outcome of the water in these wells is the same as the divine gift in the form of benevolent waters such as sufficient rains or floods, but at different levels. Whereas the latter is for the benefit of the community as a whole, the former is at a personal level enabling individual prosperity, repentance for sin, and healing.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

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Fresh water represents deep ontological relations, and the water-worlds in a society create opportunities for all kinds of constructions. The hydrological cycle links all places and spheres together, and the physical character of water combined with its role as a historical agent enables the medium to link the past with the present and the future (Tvedt 1997, 2002: 166–8). Water in ritual and religion is crucial for humans, gods, and everything that matters in between and beyond. Cosmologies are to a large extent dependent upon water, both physically and metaphorically, to create understandable constructions of the relations between humans, gods, and the Otherworldly spheres. Since water is both an element in nature and culture and constantly changing its character, but still being the same, it has

transformative capacities which no other element has. This enables water to work and express metaphorical relations and images of contents that most often transcend consciousness; the content is beyond explicit comprehension, but nevertheless real and implicitly understandable. Water has been used for purification in rituals throughout time and in many religions. Humans have been sacrificed to ensure the life-giving waters, and water has had divine qualities or been considered as entrances to realms beyond. The cultural and religious potential of using water as a means to construct the world has thus been almost unlimited.

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