



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

---

## **New Approaches to Medieval Water Studies**

**How to Cite:** Smith, J L and Howes, H 2019 Medieval Water Studies: Past, Present and Promise. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 35, pp.1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.443>

**Published:** 06 May 2019

---

### **Peer Review:**

This article has been reviewed internally as an editorial for *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

### **Copyright:**

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### **Open Access:**

*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### **Digital Preservation:**

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**NEW APPROACHES TO MEDIEVAL WATER STUDIES**

# Medieval Water Studies: Past, Present and Promise

James L. Smith<sup>1</sup> and Hetta Howes<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, IE

<sup>2</sup> City, University of London, UK

Corresponding author: James L. Smith ([jlsmith@tcd.ie](mailto:jlsmith@tcd.ie))

---

The articles in this Special Collection engage directly with the realities of water as they simultaneously explore its intellectual potential in various genres of medieval writing, from crusade chronicles to medieval romance. In this way they shed new light not only on the literature and history they explore but also on medieval conceptions of water more generally, paving the way for a new approach to medieval water studies. In assembling this Collection, it was the intention of the editors to reflect on the best next steps for the study of water in the Middle Ages. A new medieval water studies should be novel, critical, self-aware, global and above all inclusive. Water is more than a subject of academic research, a catalogue of tropes and idioms to be described. As fields such as ecocriticism, environmental history, geography, anthropology, archaeology and water governance have demonstrated, water is always entangled with a larger ecology. The articles in this Special Collection reveal a water that is a puzzle, but also a cipher for a variety of nuanced readings and inquiries. An overly instrumentalist and scientific mentality leads to water being studied as a passive and malleable resource, but this trend has also affected cultural and historical inquiry.

---

## A watery lens

The most prominent feature shared by the five articles of this *Open Library of Humanities* Special Collection is that they use the properties of water as an analytic lens for a wide variety of issues and themes within medieval studies rather than as a subject matter *per se*. As editors, we were delighted to observe further evidence of a burgeoning, diversifying and methodologically agile field of medieval water studies. Rather than an approach that is wholly, say, ecocritical, historical or culturally situated, this Special Collection sets out to provide an umbrella similar to the environmental or digital humanities in which methodologies, ideas and approaches can be shared in common for a variety of research tasks. Medieval water studies, in short, is in need of a community of practice.

This Special Collection came about because we saw glimpses of something new flashing in the water, observed when undertaking our own engagements with water (see Smith, 2018b; Howes, 2016). It was explicitly designed to make an original contribution by: a) setting the scene for new multi- and inter-disciplinary water studies through a speculative survey article from the editors; b) showcasing perspectives from authors from different backgrounds as a state-of-the-field snapshot; c) encouraging authors to speculate on the methodological challenges of their respective studies; and d) contributing to the understanding of wider environmental humanities themes emerging from the study of water in the Middle Ages. The result is a series of thoughtful articles that do not presume to study water as an exhaustible entity, but instead recognise it as a medium for humanistic enquiry across and between disciplines. They are *enabled* by water as much as *about* it, dwelling in what Manuel Castells (1989) has termed a 'space of flows'.

Water is more than a subject of academic research, a catalogue of tropes and idioms to be described. As fields such as ecocriticism, environmental history, geography, anthropology, archaeology and water governance have demonstrated, water is always entangled with a larger ecology. The articles in this collection reveal a water that is a puzzle, but also a cipher for a variety of nuanced readings and inquiries. An overly instrumentalist and scientific mentality leads to water being studied as a passive and malleable resource, but this trend has also affected cultural and historical inquiry. In

order to approach a more capacious medieval water studies, it is first necessary to follow the distinctly fluid pathways of knowing and understanding the worlds with, within, and through water. By doing so, a wide array of socio-cultural approaches become possible. Medieval water studies must move beyond singular representation, symbol, practice and historical account. By following the contours of water where it leads, meandering between disciplines, we glimpse a vision of medieval thought and culture that is more fluid, flexible and fecund.

Medieval water studies finds itself in a situation similar to that of the study of medievalisms. It is no longer possible to write a piece of work in the sub-field of medievalisms that catalogues instances of the medieval in literature, film, politics or wider popular culture without an incisive observation of how this knowledge benefits our understanding of the 'continuing process of creating the Middle Ages' outlined by Leslie J. Workman, founding editor of the seminal *Studies in Medievalism* journal (1997: 29). It is now expected that scholars turn the academic apparatus of medievalism studies to new ends, creating critical and – in many cases discourse-changing – visions of the medieval at work within the structures of modernity while simultaneously undermining received notions about the past that circulate in our media-saturated present, both knowingly and with malice. Recent years have seen a further critique of the field and its structures of entrenched exclusion, demanding self-reflection and change. We envisage a medieval water studies that similarly takes up the challenge of critical timeliness and interrogation, using a wider array of disciplines, themes, settings, cultures and contexts to comment upon a twenty-first century water imaginary desperately in need of imagination. A new and critical water studies is an exercise in academic intervention, and requires a methodological shift.

Water has become a societal challenge that defies disciplinary norms and structures, and the community of medievalists have much to contribute to a broader debate. One way in which a medieval water studies can inform medievalists about themes of interest while simultaneously looking ahead is to frame our scholarship as always already relevant to the present. As previous articles explicitly seeking to link past and present behaviour through water (e.g. Morgan and Smith, 2013; Oestigaard, 2013; Strang, 2014) have asserted, there are elements of 21<sup>st</sup>-century

water management that have much to learn from a discerning understanding of a broadly conceived medieval past. To do this, we need to move out of disciplinary ontologies and spaces into a commons for medieval water research that forms part of a shared reservoir of water knowledge. As the amalgamation and remediation of subaltern or subsumed knowledges within global water studies becomes increasingly salient, the medieval is pushed into the spotlight.

### **Beyond 'Water and'/'Water in'**

The formula of 'Water and x' and 'Water in x' has served the community of water scholars well. Everyone is happy: the author, who has a clear frame for discussion; the reader, who knows what they are reading; and the publisher, who has a catchy title that is self-evident to acquisitions librarians and scholarly buyers. The problem with this compact is that it is not only a name, but a frame. By laying the centre of attention firmly on water in/and a theme of medieval studies, we are informed that this is a novel juxtaposition. The and/in corpus is now rich and extensive, and scholars looking for future themes and studies have a firm foundation of discourse on which to build. However, a different arrangement is now possible and desirable, one that is easily understood by readers and advertises its role, but also avoids the classic in/and formulation of medieval – and wider – water studies.

It is notable that none of the five articles in this collection follow this formula. They either seek to hybridise water studies with other theoretical frameworks (Smith, 2018a), present a triptych of inseparable themes (Harwood, 2018), environ a study of socio-nature through a waterscape (Pinner, 2018), make use of water's affordances to re-articulate an argument (Kaempfer, 2018) or explore the spatial properties of a waterscape in the ordering of textual meaning (Richmond, 2018). Each of these angles is about the intersection of water *and* or *in* some aspect of medieval studies, but each places water in a wider ecology of factors shaping an argument. Other articulations of water as medium rather than message exist to guide us (Duckert, 2017; Neimanis, 2017; Smith, 2018b). As an influential volume (Chen et al., 2013) put it, it is important to think *with* water rather than just *about* water. What themes can we explore if we focus on what is understood *with* water as a medium rather than what can be approached because of thematic of physical proximity *to* water?

The usefulness of water as a theme of medieval studies is well-established, and speaking to its novelty is a rediscovery of the water wheel at this point. It has given us many invaluable studies (e.g. Classen, 2017; Clegg Hyer and Hooke, 2017; Twomey and Anlezark, 2020). How water acts within water studies, however, is an ever-expanding possibility for study. How can it provide a vision of medieval history, life, literature and society that currently eludes us? How is it a medium for a more flexible and commodious approach to the middle ages? How can we let water do what it does best: how can it question the solidity of boundaries and categories? How does it allow themes and disciplines to merge? How can we think new things with water? And finally, how can it link times, spaces, places and cultures in a mediating membrane of flexible scholarship? We have a lot to learn from water beyond where it appears and what it is conjoined with in study.

Water faces an important conceptual puzzle that those who study it must contend with. This puzzle is amplified in the context of the disciplines that make up medieval studies. Marcia Colish (1968: vii) once observed that symbolism has long been treated as a 'canon of explanation' by medievalists, i.e. if medieval people 'thought in terms of symbols' then mapping the symbols must explain medieval thought in itself. Since symbols were so prevalent in the literature and material culture of medieval Europe, for example, they must in themselves be a window into the medieval. The study of water has been caught up in this symbolist discourse, cataloguing the appearance of water in Scripture, art, stories and intellectual discourse. Symbols, however, like water itself, are more of a medium of meaning than a message. Thus studying water as an agent of communication tells us more than its instances of appearance, just as we can study the manner in which symbol enables other activities.

### **Towards a New Medieval Water Studies**

The notion of newness in water studies is difficult to define, since there are so many potential facets of water that it is possible to study. The key questions, as we see them, are threefold: first, how do we disentangle newness in terms of context – e.g., the formula of 'water and/in x' discussed above which has predominated in medieval studies thus far – from newness of application – e.g. the use of water as a lens for the study for other salient aspects of medieval studies; secondly, what is required,

methodologically speaking, for a study of water to be new?; and thirdly, should relevance to the twenty-first century, always a possibility in any study of water, be considered a prerequisite of 'new' medieval water studies?

The onus of newness outlined here need not dismiss certain themes and valorise others, but encourage scholars to frame their discourses in a manner that looks beyond a taxonomic or thematic approach to water, and imagines a critical medieval water studies that interrogates the boundaries of its own operation, frames itself as an intervention on twenty-first century waters, acknowledges the pluralities of water(s) and knowledge(s) and opens up the study of crucial intersectional issues and identities. In recent years, the study of medieval water has been growing and particularly promising projects, like the 'Women at Sea' initiative established by Rachel Moss, Roberta Magnani and Kristi Castleberry, are alert to these new demands on medieval water studies. The 'Women at Sea' project is still in its early stages, but a colloquium in 2016 and confirmed panels for this year's Leeds International Medieval Congress demonstrate a commitment to research that, like water, disrupts boundaries – traversing literature and history as it considers the sea as a generative, transformative and gender-inflected space, and travelling through time as it self-consciously draws on the past to shed light on the present, whether in regard to the experience of pregnancy or to the ongoing refugee crisis. Such research also reminds us to be mindful that water flows not only within but beyond our own purview: its ripples can be contained and site-specific, like the fenlands of East Anglia (Pinner, 2018), but they can also be global. One of water's most precious properties for the scholar is its ability to channel source material and ideas into new commentaries on timely meta-themes of medieval studies, and to draw these themes into productive conversations across the wider environmental humanities and across temporal scale. Projects like 'Women at Sea' are modelling new ways in which we can participate in such conversations.

Newness might also mean, in this context, a reframing of and a returning to existing research in light of more robust interdisciplinary conversations and collaborations. Writing in 2014, Richard Hoffman lamented the isolation amongst specialized disciplines and the 'collective habit of medieval studies to treat material

culture as an afterthought and the non-cultural as non-existent' (2014: 377). He refers here not only to the tendency to focus on water as a metaphorical or cultural symbol (the water and/in x formula referred to above), which conceives of nature as scenery and props on the human stage rather than matter worthy of investigation in its own right, but also to the lack of dialogue between humane and scientific investigators in the field. Whilst there have been encouraging steps in this direction since Hoffman's influential publication (Arnold, 2012; Arnold, 2017) there is still much work to be done here. Sources delineating the lived, everyday medieval experience of nature, beyond the cloistered walls of the *literati*, may be hard to come by. However, if we are attentive to the existing bodies of research by economic and social historians, historians of science, historical geographers and archaeologists, and open to more productive future conversations, then we can learn to read the water in those sources we *do* have access to more sensitively and productively.

In this current collection, Pinner, who encourages us to 'think wetly' reveals the fruitfulness of such an approach in her investigation of the fenlands and causeways of a famously soggy East Anglia. Where Hoffman notes a trend in medieval scholarship to prioritise the symbolic and cultural over the metaphorical, Pinner's article uncovers an inverse to this trend. Whilst a number of scholars from various disciplines have looked into the physical geography of the East Anglian region, a surprising few have paid attention to the symbolic importance of its wetness in medieval literature. Using existing research on the archaeological make-up of the region, Pinner begins to fill this gap, revealing how very particular local knowledge about the nature and conditions of East Anglia's fenlands and causeways can play a crucial role in how we understand and interpret references to them in medieval saints' lives. Whilst to outsiders these watery, in-between spaces might seem 'treacherous and unforgiving', such landscapes could offer 'prayer, safety and munificence' to those who were intimately acquainted with them, (Pinner, 2018: 11). Pinner may not have uncovered any of those new sources which environmental historians still desperately seek – sources in which medieval people self-consciously and explicitly reflect on the lived reality of their experience with nature. However, by thinking wetly, by reading the water within saints' lives in tandem with the archaeology of the region, she makes

old sources new; and, as she does so, she expands the vocabulary and scope of existing medieval water studies to include these spaces where land and water meet and intermingle.

The other articles in this Special Collection demonstrate an equal concern with reading water anew, in a wide range of sources. Harwood seeks to untangle the very particular relationship between women, water and warfare, using the medium of water to reflect on both the material realities of women's involvement in the crusades and their literary representation. Through her comparison of historical and fictional sources she not only reveals the potential for water to mirror misogynistic tropes, but also sheds light on crusade history as a masculine space which water can, aptly, disrupt. Richmond, who focuses on Arthurian romance, reveals how water in the medieval landscape actually shapes the narrative of his source texts. Rather than existing as a backdrop to human agency, the rivers, tarns and seas in *Sir Isumbras* and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* act as the nexus between a number of different Arthurian romances as they lay claim to human bodies as well as to the structural composition of the tales themselves.

Bodies and water and their interactions with one another loom large in Kaempfer's article, too, where water is used as a tool to read the most canonical of medieval authors, Geoffrey Chaucer, with fresh eyes. Kaempfer uses humoural theory to show how liquid metaphors can offer a pre-eminently material conceptualisation of emotion in Chaucer's writing: sorrow flows in and out of bodies, in and out of texts and, in the form of baths, can suspend time and movement, acting as a space of transition that can work on the reader and their body just as it does on the bodies of the fictional characters. One of the most mundane of material experiences of water – bathing – therefore becomes a site of transformation within and without the text. In Smith's article, bodies and networks merge into flows of energy, as he interrogates the tendency to think about water in terms of 'power' and, instead, argues for an energy-based humanities model in the study of water in the Middle Ages. He identifies the conception of water in medieval thought as a dominant energy-carrier with unique affordances, one expression of a singular energetic whole derived from God, who is Himself conceived of in liquid terms as the *fons vitae*, the fountain and source of life.

The word 'act' recurs in this summary of this Special Collection's articles, and so it must. Any 'new' approach to medieval water studies must recognise water's ability *to act* – not only as a metaphor but as an intellectual framework, a nexus, a mode of meaning. To read water anew we need to be as attentive to *its* agency as we are to our own.

### **A mini-manifesto for research design**

In his translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, John Trevisa remarks on the *ableness* of water, its unique ability to take on the properties of everything that surrounds it. 'For watir hath no determinate qualite' (For water has no determinate quality), he writes, 'noyþer colour noiþer sauour, and þat for he shulde be able to fonge eseliche alle colours and sauours' (neither colour, nor taste, and for that reason should be able to easily pick up all colours and tastes). Because water is not a stable entity in and of itself, it can more easily soak up and reflect its immediate environment, constantly shifting and transforming, acting as a mirror for a cultural moment when it is employed by writers, either as an individual metaphor or as a wider intellectual framework. It is this ableness of water that makes it particularly attractive as metaphorical material – water is the river of scripture, the flood of sin, the agent of baptism, the wellspring of Christ and countless other things in between. However, this conception of water as indeterminate – everything and nothing at once – can also be a trap for scholars of medieval studies, if it means that we perceive the element only as literary fodder, a catalogue of potential representations, and neglect to consider it on its own terms.

The articles in this Special Collection engage directly with the realities of water as they simultaneously explore its intellectual potential in various genres of medieval writing, from crusade chronicles to medieval romance. In this way they shed new light not only on the literature and history they explore but also on medieval conceptions of water more generally, paving the way for a new approach to medieval water studies. In assembling this Special Collection, it was our intention to reflect on the best next steps for the study of water in the Middle Ages. A new medieval water studies should be novel, critical, self-aware, global and above all inclusive. In pursuit of this, and inspired by the articles themselves, we conclude this introduction by offering our fellow and future aqueous explorers a mini manifesto:

1. A new medieval water studies requires disciplinary agility
2. A novel medieval water studies eschews content and symbol for context and intervention
3. A critical medieval water studies seeks to apply medieval hydro-social insights to twenty-first century problems
4. A self-aware medieval water studies needs its own methodological discourse
5. A global medieval water studies is mindful of a wider Middle Ages and its transactions
6. An inclusive medieval water studies acknowledges its power to make critical interventions through a literacy in the scholarship of gender, comparative cultural studies, and a diverse and multi-lingual medieval world of water

In this Special Collection, water acts a dominant energy carrier (Smith, 2018a) and becomes the domain of women (Harwood, 2018), disrupts familial bonds (Richmond, 2018), is the material embodiment of emotions (Kaempfer, 2018) and creates a solitary retreat (Pinner, 2018). However, it is also, more broadly and conceptually, an intellectual framework, a mode of meaning, an independent agent which disrupts and resists our analytical attempts to categorise or even articulate it. In the recent *Veer Ecology*, the editors vow to pay attention to 'a world of inhuman voices, dynamic matter and story-filled life that inevitably go off course. They act, they drift, they swerve and resist' (Cohen and Duckert, 2017). With this Special Collection we invite you to listen to the inhuman voice of an element which continues to capture scholarly attention; to delight in its drifts and its swerves; and to pay attention to, rather than gloss over, its acts of resistance.

### **Competing Interests**

James L. Smith is the advocacy coordinator of the Open Library of Humanities.

## References

- Arnold, E** 2012 *Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812207521>
- Arnold, E** 2017 Rivers of Risk and Redemption in Gregory of Tours' Writings. *Speculum*, 92(1): 117–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/689460>
- Castells, M** 1989 *The informational city: information technology, economic restructuring, and the urban-regional process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chen, C, MacLeod, J and Neimanis, A** (Eds.) 2013 *Thinking with Water*. Québec: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Classen, A** 2017 *Water in Medieval Literature: An Ecocritical Reading*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Clegg Hyer, M and Hooke, D** 2017 *Water and the Environment in the Anglo-Saxon World*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ps31q2>
- Cohen, J J and Duckert, L** 2017 *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt70r>
- Colish, M L** 1968 *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Duckert, L** 2017 *For All Waters: Finding Ourselves in Early Modern Wetscapes*. Minnesota: Minnesota University Press.
- Harwood, S** 2018 'I Will Lead You to the River': Women, Water, and Warfare in the Roman de Thèbes, *Roman de Troie*, and Early Chronicles of the First Crusade. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 15 1–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.224>
- Hoffman, R** 2014 *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Howes, H E** 2016 *In Search Of Clearer Water: An Exploration Of Water Imagery In Late Medieval Devotional Prose Addressed To Women*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Queen Mary University of London.

- Kaempfer, L** 2018 Drinking Sorrow and Bathing in Bliss: Liquid Emotions in Chaucer. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 29 1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.227>
- Morgan, R** and **Smith, J L** 2013 Pre-Modern Streams of Thought in Twenty-First Century Water Management. *Radical History Review*, 116: 105–129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1965748>
- Neimanis, A** 2017 *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Oestigaard, T** 2013 *Water, Christianity and the Rise of Capitalism*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Pinner, R** 2018 Thinking Wetly: Causeways and Communities in East Anglian Hagiography. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 3 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.229>
- Richmond, M A** 2018 Fluid Boundaries in *The Awntyrs off Arthure and Sir Isumbras*. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(1): 24 1–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.225>
- Smith, J L** 2018a Medieval Water Energies: Philosophical, Hydro-Social, and Intellectual. *Open Library of Humanities*, 4(2): 28 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.228>
- Smith, J L** 2018b *Water in Medieval Intellectual Culture: Case-Studies from Twelfth-Century Monasticism*. *Cursor Mundi* 30, Turnhout: Brepols. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.CURS-EB.5.112274>
- Strang, V J** 2014 Lording It over the Goddess: Water, Gender and Human-Environmental Relations. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 30: 85–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.30.1.85>
- Trevisa, J** 1975–8 *'On the Properties of Things': John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, 'De Proprietatibus Rerum'*, Seymour, M C (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Twomey, C** and **Anlezark, D** 2020 (forthcoming) *The Meaning of Water in Early Medieval England*.
- Workman, L J** 1997 Medievalism Today. *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, 23: 29–33. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17077/1054-1004.1380>

**How to cite this article:** Smith, J L and Howes, H 2019 Medieval Water Studies: Past, Present and Promise. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 35, pp.1-13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.443>

**Published:** 06 May 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Open Library of Humanities* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access logo, which is a stylized 'A' inside a circle.