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Deliveries *extra urbem*: aqueducts and the countryside

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Introduction

Roman aqueducts have long been seen as the quintessentially Roman engineering achievement. Recent scholarship has emphasized the monumental function of aqueducts and has raised serious questions which go beyond the issue of water supply: how useful were Roman aqueducts, and what rôle did they play in Romanisation? P. Leveau argued that they were built for reasons of prestige and ostentation, to supply water primarily for public baths rather than for drinking, and to act as a vehicle for euergetic display, and that they were therefore “une luxe inutile et coûteux” and “un monument de l’orgueil romain”.¹ Leveau derived this idea from his work around Cherchel (Caesarea), a part of N Africa which he saw as comprising two countrysides, one Roman, organised around villas and towns, the other indigenous and rural, organised around alternative economic structures.² In a study of the Cherchel aqueduct Leveau and Paillet related water supply directly to a view of urban colonialist exploitation; the aqueduct itself was seen as “l’expression matérielle de la domination urbaine sur la campagne”, and they asserted that their study of it “nous a aidés à prendre conscience de la réalité matérielle de l’exploitation d’une société (rurale et africaine) par une autre (urbaine et romaine), c’est-à-dire du fait colonial romain”.³

Leveau later developed the idea of the aqueduct as a feature of urban conspicuous consumption to view it as a potential source of antagonism between city-dweller and country-dweller in the empire as a whole:

It is certain that the Mediterranean peasants who, in summer, were short of water, cannot have looked very happily on the great quantities of water diverted from the country and agricultural use simply to maintain the standards of comfort in the city, and the treatise of Frontinus brings us to the heart of a judicial and political reality where the dice were loaded in favour of the town. No doubt the peasants did not look at the question of urban health through the same eyes as the municipal aediles, and would sooner have had the citizens wash less so as to leave more water for the crops!⁴

Or, as A. T. Hodge restates it in the same volume:

How did the Bedouin peasants feel about it when the Roman colonists took the water they desperately needed for the crops on which they depended for their very life, channeled it off in aqueducts to the new regional city nearby, and there used it for splashing about in at the baths? Were the Roman cities of the Maghrib monuments to Roman prosperity and civilisation, or to Roman exploitation and ecological myopia?⁵

The Roman aqueduct becomes, then, not only a symbol of Romanisation and a paradigm of Roman colonisation, but also a symbol of the consumer city at its most extreme. In more recent work Leveau has come round to the idea that aqueducts also fulfilled a utilitarian function, but his earlier statements on the ideological rôle of aqueducts have had a considerable impact. M. Corbier used the aqueduct as an image “evoking the way cities siphoned off resources from their territory”.⁶ B. Shaw went further, adopting L. Carton’s distinction between productive and consumptive hydraulic schemes: rural ones are productive (irrigation schemes) and urban ones are consumptive (aqueducts);⁷ he is followed in this by S. Ellis.⁸ But is it really true that

1 Leveau 1987a, 96, 98, 104; cf. Hodge 1992, 5-11.

2 Leveau 1988, 187; Leveau 1984, 483-85; Leveau 1983; 1990b, cited in Hitchner 1989, 402.

3 Leveau and Paillet 1976, 167, 181. See Hodge 1992, 50-51 and 400 n.8.

4 Leveau 1991, 159. See also Eck 1987, 84.

5 Hodge 1991, 166.

6 Corbier 1991, 222.

7 Carton 1912; Shaw 1984; id. 1991.

8 Ellis 1997.