

IRRIGATION IN EARLY STATES: NEW DIRECTIONS

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The organization of ancient irrigation has been of considerable interest in the field of archaeology and anthropology because many early civilizations developed in large river valleys, such as in ancient Egypt, China, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley. Earlier approaches argued the civilizations that emerged in large river valleys followed a similar trajectory in their evolutionary history owing to their dependency on irrigation. Many scholars at the time assumed the organization of irrigation required centralized control, which had socio-political as well as economic consequences of a magnitude that led to the development of social and political complexity and eventually to the formation of the state. Scholars have tested this assumption and shown, based on the results of later studies, that centralized control is a choice rather than a necessity. Once the evolutionary perspective was taken out of the investigation of ancient irrigation, space was created for a renewed investigation of the multiple functions irrigation might have in the development and functioning of early states.

The conference made use of this space in conducting once more a cross-cultural study of ancient irrigation, with a larger quantity of data but, more importantly, with the goal of highlighting the diversity of functions that irrigation had in early states and the variety of conditions under which it developed. The examples presented at this conference took us around the globe, from South to North America, to Africa, to West, Central and Southeast Asia, and highlighted the diversity of how ancient irrigation was organized in various historical and cultural contexts. The papers were presented in four sessions, with the first session investigating the “Features of Irrigation,” highlighting the diversity of how irrigation systems are constructed and managed. The second session provided an overview of the data and methods used in the “Empirical Investigations of Ancient Irrigation.” The third session investigated the “Economic and the Socio-Political Function of Irrigation,” and the last session, the “Cosmological and Cognitive Dimension of Irrigation” in ancient states. The conference showed that irrigation systems are exceedingly well suited for a cross-cultural comparison, as they are both social and physical systems whose boundaries can be clearly delineated. Both water control technology and the managerial requirements are well understood, and when compared systematically, similarities and difference do become very apparent. Explanatory models on the differences and similarities between cases has the potential to shed light on many aspects of early states, far beyond the organization of irrigation. The conference is discussed in greater detail in “Irrigation in Early States: New Directions,” by S. Rost, *Oriental Institute News & Notes* 230 (Summer 2016): 16–19.
