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PhD project: outline

Practices and paradigms of flood management in the Roman Empire

In my PhD project I investigate flood prevention and flood management in the Roman Empire. My main written sources are inscriptions, legal texts and the writings of the roman land surveyors (*Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum*). The former inform us about otherwise unknown floods, reconstruction works and additional preventive measures, whereas the two latter both discuss primarily boundary disputes caused by disruptive river action and different options for their resolution, but also give advice how to prevent flood damages in the first place. The scope of their application as well as the underlying ideas, ideological prefiguration and technical skills are to be studied.

Since flood management has only been discussed in a quite dispersed manner in other works of ancient literature, I will further concentrate on the role and development of human agency and on material evidence. Besides, a focus on practical measures of Roman flood control can help to detect prevailing misinterpretations of ancient religious thought by scholars of western modernity: The presence of divine concepts closely intertwined with political issues does not imply a complete inertia in case of potential high risk situations. Even though floods could – but not necessarily had to – be interpreted as a bad omen sent by the gods, the Romans had developed a range of precautious measures perfectly adapted to the needs of the different kinds of flood-prone areas (urban centres, agriculturally exploited lands, roads / waterways). In addition, roman dam constructions, canal buildings and drainage projects indicate clearly to what actions they saw themselves fit. Nevertheless, roman intervention in water cycles could be such, that it profoundly changed natural environments on a local scale and sometimes caused unexpected side effects which had to be managed for their part. To study the management of such anthropogenic hazards is another aim of this project.

On the whole, the following questions are to be investigated: How did political actors cope with flood hazards? Which explicit and implicit factors influenced their decisions and where did they take their knowledge from? Which authorities (emperor / senate, provincial governor, local community) got involved in what kind of decisions? Did the management of flood hazards broaden the scope of action of ancient political actors and did they seize the opportunity to establish new scales and perspectives for future actions?