

'It's all Water over the Bridge': Maintaining the flow on aqueducts as bridges

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Abstract

This presentation is based on my archaeological work on aqueducts and ten years of experience at UNESCO. The symbolic and structural settings of aqueducts can help in understanding bridges. They are both symbols for the need to share vital resources, to create intercultural dialogue, and to achieve sustainable development.

Aqueducts and bridges are similar arched structures, they are 'icons' in the landscape (eg Pont du Gard). Roads are two way, but aqueducts bring water one way, from the spring to the city. Both create links between town and country that have been the source of conflict since ancient times.

Both bridges and aqueducts are vital points of control. Bridges often have 'gatekeepers' or toll houses. Since water is so essential for life, aqueducts can determine the fate of a community. For Angkor (and the Maya?) the loss of the water supply contributed to the collapse of the civilization. When the aqueducts no longer functioned at Constantinople from AD600-900, scholars doubt whether it can still be called a city since the population must have been so small. But at Rome though the aqueducts were cut at the same period by invaders to force a surrender of the city the channels still function today.

Highwaymen plagued roads and aqueducts are plagued by illicit 'tapping', or disputed 'water rights'. Today with global warming, the need for intercultural dialogue and water rights are moving to the front of the international agenda, even touching the River Severn through water control policies and flooding. The story of aqueducts as bridges emphasises that we must 'keep the water flowing',¹ maintaining the dialogue between those at the spring and those at the fountain, the producers and the consumers.

¹ Indeed aqueducts cannot be simply 'turned off' as water pressure builds and must be released. Water must always flow somewhere.