

FOUR

RIVERS IN LITERATURE, RELIGION, AND ART

In A.D. 15 the consuls Lucius Arruntius and Gaius Ateius Capito initiated a discussion in the senate about whether the problem of the Tiber flooding the center of Rome should be addressed by diverting the rivers and lakes that fed it. Deputations from the municipalities and colonies in the Tiber valley argued passionately against the proposal. The people of Florentia did not want the Clanis to be diverted from its usual course into the Arnus since this might bring destruction to their community. The inhabitants of Interamna had the same view about their own river Nar; if it were diverted into smaller channels, it would flood and destroy some of the best farming land in Italy. In Reate, they objected to the damming of the Velina Lake where it flowed out into the Nar because it would flood the surrounding land. The spokesmen of the rural communities then moved the argument onto a higher plane: "Nature had looked after mortals very well by giving every river its own source, course, outlet, and limits. They should take account of the religious views of local people, who had honored the rivers close to their homes with sacred rites, groves, and altars. Even Tiber himself would not take kindly to flowing with his majesty diminished if he were deprived of the tributary rivers." The senate finally decided to preserve the status quo.¹

Tacitus was presumably using the record of senatorial business, and this incident shows the commitment of local riverine communities, which had undertaken the expense of sending a deputation to Rome to plead their case. We can only guess that there will have been many other instances, about which we hear nothing, where communities fought for their rivers. The spokesmen for the rural communities show an impressive grasp of river dynamics, lakes, and water systems. The psychology encouraged by the watery environment was that rivers brought many benefits but also potential dangers if their systems were disrupted. Communities were built around the ancestral rivers (*amnes*

patrii), which in tradition and emotion became the center of local life, receiving regular offerings, groves, and altars. Rivers enhanced the status and dignity of a small community, and traditional, long-standing respect for rivers was based on the belief that nature was beyond human control and that the entire course of the river was best left to its own devices. There is an interesting contrast here with surveyors and engineers, who took the scientific and technical view that they should control, manage, and manipulate rivers to suit the government's requirements. Finally, the delegates cleverly invoked the river Tiber, personified in all his majesty, whose mighty flow depended on the tributary rivers, a view that frequently appears elsewhere.² They hint that the Tiber's status in the riverine world reflects the imperial grandeur of Rome.

In Tacitus's cool analysis, the senate's vote to do nothing could have been based on religious scruples, respect for local views, or technical difficulties. But he grants the story a reasonable amount of space and gives due weight to the feelings and beliefs of small-town riverine communities in Italy. This is invaluable for anyone trying to recover what the ancients, and particularly perhaps those outside the articulate upper classes, thought about rivers. His account also provides an introduction to important, wider themes of rivers and people, and the significance of rivers and springs in religious observances.

In this chapter, I discuss how different people observed and wrote about rivers. Such descriptions with their watery stories and themes, whether or not enhanced by poetic imagination, reflect psychological responses to the riverine environment. They therefore tell us why rivers were important in the ancient world, in a way perhaps not clearly recognized or expressed by geographers, land surveyors, and other specialists, who tended to emphasize the prosaic geographical and topographical setting. Furthermore, in common belief, rivers were divine, often possessing special powers, and had participated in the legends associated with many rural communities. From an early stage, river dwellers supplicated local rivers because of their crucial place in the natural world, and some rivers such as the Tiber and the Nile became objects of particular attention or reverence. The religious aura of the watery environment assisted the anthropomorphic characterization of rivers and the whole nexus of mythology and legend that arose from but also sustained their divine status. Finally, observation of water sources, legendary stories, imagination, and reverence were translated into a series of representations of rivers in sculpture and mosaics and on coinage. The many artistic images of rivers indicate not just their ubiquity in the landscape but also their place in the thinking of individuals and of the Roman government.

The response to the riverine environment has been of great cultural significance in many societies in different ages. Naturally, rivers meant different things to different groups in different places. In many areas they offered clean drinking water for people and their animals, irrigation for crops, an avenue of trade and the movement of goods, commercial opportunities, boundary demarcation, and often a quasi-mystical inspiration.³ The Persians, for example, had an enormous reverence for rivers, which they refused to pollute by spitting or urinating or even washing their hands. The king drank the water of only one river, the Choaspes, which flowed past Susa.⁴ On the other hand, the nomadic tribes in Mesopotamia in Roman times found their physical world entirely defined by the Tigris and Euphrates, which enclosed the land. They were so convinced that they were islanders that “when they are journeying to the rivers they talk about going down to the sea, thinking that the circle made by the rivers marks the land’s boundary.”⁵ Here rivers were integral to the way of life that they circumscribed.

It needs no lengthy demonstration that rivers were an important theme in ancient writers of the Roman period. Suetonius wrote about weather signs, the names of seas and rivers, and the names of winds.⁶ Among the collection of the minor Greek geographers, the so-called Pseudo-Plutarch wrote on the names of rivers and mountains and refers to several other writers on rivers.⁷ Writers make many passing references and often use rivers in comparisons, illustrations, and analogies. Running water was a very useful metaphor for violent or serene movement, conflict or peace. Writers, by emphasizing a river’s qualities and characteristics and by evoking the sight and sound of its many changing moods, could create a pleasant, stimulating picture of the natural world. It is striking that they so often express respect and even reverence for rivers as beneficiaries of mankind and local communities. Therefore, riverine themes cover a wide spectrum, ranging from the replenishment of the seas in the hydrological cycle and the mystery of rivers’ ever-changing apparent immutability, to impressions of river appearance and characteristics and related curiosities and legends.

Lucretius perhaps has the most eloquent if rather vague account of how sea, rivers, and springs are eternally replenished; one way was the seeping of seawater underground, whence, with the salt filtered out, it entered underground aquifers before welling up again: “Hence it flows above ground, a steady column of sweet fluid marching down the highway already hewn with liquid foot for the guidance of waves.”⁸ Vitruvius, in his handbook on architecture knows about the pluvial aspects of the hydrological cycle, arguing that valleys with

their dense forests collect snow, which eventually melts, percolates through the earth, and becomes the source of mountain springs. But he also indulges in quasi-romantic speculation, emphasizing the importance of rainfall brought by the moist winds from the south and deposited in the north; therefore he believed the largest rivers had their sources in the northern area, citing the map of Agrippa as evidence.⁹

Many commentators were impressed by rivers as an awe-inspiring elemental power of nature with qualities of constant movement yet enigmatic timelessness that allowed a quasi-philosophical comparison with human life. Marcus Aurelius expresses this most vividly, singling out the ceaseless flow of rivers. Time is like a river, a rushing torrent; no sooner do you see something than it is swept past; then another object is passing, but it too will be carried away.¹⁰ So, all being is like a river in endless flow, and the body of man is as a river, and the life of man is only a point.¹¹ Again, the changing pattern of life resembles a river where it is difficult to get a foothold.¹²

Seneca also thought that rivers, ever-changing but retaining the same outward appearance, resembled the human body. Heraclitus had already taken up the philosophical implications of this great enigma. He noted that we may seem to descend into the same river twice, but in fact we cannot because the water has moved past.¹³ Furthermore, in Seneca's view the natural force of rivers had religious significance. "We venerate the sources of great rivers; we erect altars where a mighty river bursts forth unexpectedly from its subterranean hiding place; we pay our respects at the source of hot springs."¹⁴

Similarly, the Greek philosopher Epictetus compared the varied life of man to rivers. A life touched by ill fortune was like a winter torrent—rough, full of debris, hard to access, tyrannical, noisy, and short-lived; a life lived with virtue resembled an ever-flowing spring—pure, clear, drinkable, palatable, enjoyed in common, rich, harmless, and bringing no ruin.¹⁵ Of course, from the Christian standpoint rivers had a fundamental place in the world alongside seas and mountains as God's creations, and the divinity would set rivers where there was no water. God's control over the natural world was complete.¹⁶ The great, eternal flow of a river could be seen as taking man back to the beginning not only of his own existence but of time itself.¹⁷ Rivers might contain or represent the vitality of men and of empires. By contrast, when rivers dried up, it was a sign of the end of days or destruction of societies, in the reversal of such a vital natural process.

The quasi-mystical, philosophical view of rivers in some writers as a commentary on life certainly does not mean that they regarded rivers as remote from the real world. In fact, the comments noted above reveal an acute observation of the nature and characteristics of rivers as an integral part of society and community life. This is the key to understanding the way in which most writers described rivers. They wrote about what they saw and heard, which often involved an emotional or intellectual response, overlaid at times with elements of literary tradition. All this, so it might be argued, is the view of the articulate thinking classes. Nevertheless, ordinary people would surely have recognized the essential features of rivers. It is another difficulty that such themes may contain an element of a literary commonplace or *topos*, emphasizing riverine and sylvan pleasures such as splashing water, beautiful scenery, and birdsong. But the very fact that riverine material does appear so frequently indicates in my view that authors were writing about immediately recognizable features of the watery environment, even if they expressed this in a traditional way.

Although writers in the Roman world express appreciation, even love, and respect for the benefits the riverine environment, they do not trouble to give a detailed discussion of river action. Instead they make passing comments, using adjectives (ranging from the physical to personified human attributes) to characterize individual rivers; for example, the Eurotas is "cold," the Padus is "rich in poplars," the Tagus "gold-bearing," the Maeander "exceedingly winding," the Anio where it joined the Tiber was "good to look at and sweet to drink," the Marsyas "exceptionally clear," the Baetis "most remote," the Nar at Narnia "white with a sulfurous surge," the Tiber "tawny" or sometimes "blue."¹⁸

Many writers were fascinated by the changing face of the watery environment. So Horace memorably spoke of how winter's bitter frost paralyzed rivers, while in the spring they were able to flow quietly again when the melting snow had gone.¹⁹ A river in full spate was an awesome sight, just like Pindar's style, as Horace put it.²⁰ Lucretius's description of a fast-flowing river may owe much to personal observation: "In the way they (particles of air) flow and the havoc they spread they are no different from a torrential flood of water when it rushes down in a sudden spate from the mountain heights, swollen by heavy rains, and heaps together wreckage from the forest and entire trees." The roaring, surging river rolls along huge rocks and flattens bridges.²¹ At all times, variation in river flow was important, especially for rural communities, and Seneca and others devoted learned discussion to the reasons for seasonal changes.²²

Those writers who had the leisure to celebrate the pleasure given by their

favorite river or spring, or who treated rivers as a recreation or a plaything, sometimes offer an interesting discussion of the riverine environment and its relation to people. The Younger Pliny famously celebrated the source of the river Clitumnus, between Spoletium and Trebiae, which flowed into the Tinea, a tributary of the Tiber.²³ The source had a solemn, almost religious aura as people threw offerings of coins into the spreading pool of water. The water itself was as clear as glass and, with a strong flow, soon became a river that was as cold and sparkling as snow. It was navigable, allowing two boats to pass, although its current was so strong that boats going upstream had to use oars and poles. The riverine environment was delightful, with the green ash and poplar trees mirrored in the stream where the locals went boating for pleasure. There were strong religious associations, and a statue of Clitumnus himself had pride of place. Pliny probably did not deliberately make a detour to see the Clitumnus. His careful and vivid description, however, is no literary commonplace but shows genuine interest and originality and awareness of the varied role of rivers. Other writers, while noting the beauty of the Clitumnus, concentrate on its famous white oxen.²⁴

Horace addressed one of his most famous Odes to the spring of Bandusia, which he presents as a deity receiving offerings. He highlights the appearance (“more shining than glass”), feel (“cold stream”), and sound (“chattering waters leap down”) of the spring. Bandusia retained good flow even in the hottest weather and provided cool drinking water for tired flocks. In an interesting comment on the status of water sources, Horace claims that his poetry will add Bandusia to the list of famous springs.²⁵ Here the physical appearance of the spring and the real benefits it offered shade into a spiritual dimension. Similarly, in a splendid descriptive passage in Aelian we hear that the Peneios flows gently and leisurely like olive oil, shaded from the sun by trees, with a pleasant environment for sailing and religious observances on the banks.²⁶

There was a widespread recognition among ancient writers not only of the physical assistance offered by rivers (cool water and shade) but also of the potential for restoring the spirits and intellectual peace through enjoyment of this environment. In this case the *topos* may genuinely reflect real life. Lucretius expressed the idea in a moralizing commonplace: men do not need a lavish banquet to find enjoyment; it is sufficient to lie in good company on soft grass by a running stream under the shade of a tall tree and refresh their bodies at small expense.²⁷ Catullus in a striking simile creates a similar picture of a mountain stream tumbling down a sloping valley beside a busy road and bringing sweet relief to the exhausted traveler in blazing hot weather.²⁸ Cicero, struggling to accept the realities of politics under Caesar’s sole rule, wrote from

Arpinum in 45 B.C. that he was seeking rivers and solitude to make life more endurable.²⁹ These watery delights were available to all country dwellers and travelers. On the other hand, in Statius's description of the villa of Manilius Vopiscus at Tibur, which straddled the river Anio, the river is now a plaything of the rich.³⁰ At the villa, the river's turbulent flow became gentle, serving its master and the layout of the buildings amid pleasant sylvan surroundings.

An imaginative poetic context also helps us to see how contemporaries perceived riverine status, identity, and character. Silius Italicus imagines a confrontation between the river Trebia and the advancing Carthaginians led by Hannibal, in which he threatens the river with disgrace in rather interesting terms. Its stream will be dispersed through the countryside, its sources will be blocked up, and its name will be taken away; it will no longer serve as a tributary of the Padus and will lose the status inherent in that.³¹ So apparently the ancients saw the importance of rivers as coming partly from their volume of water, their established bed, and their association with other famous rivers. Furthermore, riverine names were important.

Some similar ideas appear in Ovid's *Amores* in the long address of a lover to a river, which incidentally gives an excellent picture of how people viewed rivers in their local context. The lover is eager to get to his girlfriend, but the swollen river is in the way.³² There was no bridge or chain ferry close by, and it was difficult to ford the river without a boat, since it was now in full spate because of melting snow and had turned into a muddy torrent. Ovid, doubtless echoing the sentiments of many country folk, wishes that the river would stay within its banks. Under the guise of arguing that rivers should help young lovers, Ovid gives a lengthy survey of the legendary amorous activities of famous rivers. But as the stream spreads further beyond its banks, Ovid becomes abusive—it is not a proper river at all, famous with a name renowned throughout the world; it has no proper source and no home; it depends on the accident of melting snows—a mud bath in winter and a dusty desert in summer. It is no use to travelers, cattle, or crops and is just a nondescript trickle. These insults further illustrate the roll call of river qualities and attributes in popular emotion and sentiment.

We can see this too in Statius's poem celebrating the construction of Domitian's road from Sinuessa to Naples. He strikingly personifies the river Volturnus, which the road crossed on a bridge.³³ Volturnus appears as a man with long, flowing yellow tresses, leaning against the new bridge and addressing the emperor. He had once been a threatening river, accustomed to flood and create mayhem in the fields, having no set channel and being difficult to navigate. The emperor has given him firm banks and a bridge for people to cross. "I who

to my shame used to snatch up and whirl away land and trees am now starting to be a river.” The emperor is the master of the riverbank and has cleaned up the river, which used to carry much detritus and stain the waters of the Gulf of Naples, like the awful Bagrada in Africa. Now the Volturnus promises to flow with a sparkling stream that will challenge the neighboring Liris. This riverine monologue gives a fascinating summary of the good and bad impact of rivers on the environment, local and international riverine competition, and also imperial control over the natural world.

In the fourth century A.D., Ausonius’s poem addressed to the Mosella (Moselle) stands out among river encomia as the longest and most emotionally charged, and it is worthy of extended treatment.³⁴ Ausonius came from Bordeaux and was praising a famous even if rather distant Gallic river, and so we must expect some conventional enthusiasm. Yet he strikes a fresh note with his vigorous and imaginative approach. The poet greets the river (lines 23–32), which is praised by the surrounding fields and by the farmers, and treats it as a person with human characteristics; at the confluence with the Rhine there will be no jealousy since the rivers are brothers and the Rhine is a generous host (417–37). The rivers once joined together will be powerful enough to make hostile peoples quake. But in its own right the Moselle had typical watery qualities in abundance; it was deep as a lake but matched smaller rivers with its lively flow, and surpassed cool springs with its crystal-clear drinking water; its glass-like surface (55–61) showed the pebbles and gravel on its bed and various types of underwater plants and grasses. The visual impact of the river was very important to Ausonius, and he dwells on its beauty as it reflected and mirrored the surrounding greenery, which was particularly impressive in the glow of the setting sun (189–95). The Moselle managed to avoid the problems that afflicted many rivers, such as shallows, rocks and rapids, muddy banks, and islands in midstream, and was not a threatening river, but flowed gently with a subdued murmuring (33–47).

The Moselle encouraged a vibrant riverine life: the many great estates along its banks, the rich farmland, the extensive vines, and the numerous fish nurtured in its waters (75–81), which gave rise to a fishing industry (240–82). Yet the Moselle was also a working river since it was navigable for large ships for part of its course and bargemen plied their trade, either using the current or pulling their craft by a rope (36–42). In Ausonius’s view the surrounding estates were an adornment to the river (318–20), which also enhanced its majestic aura and reputation through its mighty tributaries; they sacrificed their own names to enhance its volume and power, but also gained from merging with the powerful Moselle (349–58). Finally, the river was the outstanding centerpiece

of a fruitful land, with many fine young men and a splendid culture (381–88). Ausonius boasts of the roll call of watery elements that will do reverence to the Moselle, whose fame will spread though many lands, even though it had to concede preeminence to the Tiber, which guarded the seat of empire and the homes of the Romans (374–81, 469–83). This is a striking reversal of the usual status of the Rhône as the preeminent Gallic river, along with the Rhine. It is important that the idea of a river where satyrs and nymphs sport on the banks (169–88) does not take center stage, since Ausonius wants us to share his appreciation of the Moselle through its genuinely admired visual delights and splendid riverine environment, rather than through conventional legends and supernatural elements.

These sentiments are echoed in the sixth century by Venantius Fortunatus, who was well aware of literary precedents when he described a voyage in an oared boat along the “fertile” Moselle from Metz (Divodurum) to Trier (Colonia Augusta Treverorum) and on to the “foaming” Rhine. Elsewhere he celebrates the river, which “softly rolls along its great waters; it laps the banks, scented with the verdant sward, and the wave gently washes the grassy blades”; at Metz, “besieged by fish,” its course is swelled by the gentler waters of a tributary, the Seille.³⁵

3 STATUS, CHARACTER, AND IDENTITY

Respect for the natural environment combined with love and thoughtful veneration for, and identification with, a homeland at the local or national level have been defined in theoretical terms by scholars of human geography as *geopiety* and *topophilia*.³⁶ Dio Chrysostomos put it in simpler terms when he came to address the people of Tarsus. He wondered what they expected to hear from him—perhaps praise of their country and the river Cydnus, how it was the most splendid and beautiful of all rivers, and that those who drank from it were “rich and blessed.”³⁷ As we have seen in the geographical writers, rivers were of immense importance in establishing not only direction, distance, and place but also identity.³⁸ Precisely because rivers had their own status, which they could win, increase, or forfeit to another river, they could confer fame and a tag of identity on peoples associated with them. Lucan memorably described the course of the Isara (Isère), which traveled a long distance with its own waters but then slipped into the stream of a river of greater fame (Rhône) “and lost its name before it reached the sea.”³⁹ The Rhône then assumed the role of dominant regional river. There was usually a competitive edge to river comparisons. When King Darius during the invasion of Europe came to the river Tearos in Thrace, which the locals claimed was the best in the world for

its curative properties, he was so impressed that he erected an inscribed pillar at its source noting that the Great King had visited the Tearos, “the best and most beautiful of all rivers.”⁴⁰

In the context of ownership of rivers and territoriality, it is easy to understand how mighty rivers came to represent their lands and peoples and how a bond of affection was established. Rivers are often used to represent cultures, peoples, or regions. Virgil, describing threats to Roman peace, treats the Euphrates as a Parthian warlord — “from one side the Euphrates starts a war, from the other Germany.”⁴¹ Propertius admits that he is a poet of soft themes and not of war, and will not describe how Rome drives back the German hordes, while the barbaric river Rhine stained with German blood carries the mangled bodies in its sad waters.⁴² Virgil, emphasizing the stability of customs, says that change will happen sooner than the Parthian will drink the Arar or the German the Tigris, while Horace speaks of how his poetry will eventually be known in the provinces, including by the Gauls who drink the Rhône.⁴³ In a different vein, the satirist Juvenal sneers that “for a long time now the Syrian Orontes has been pouring its filth into our native Tiber,” symbolizing the home-grown, decent Romans submerged beneath a tide of decadent easterners represented by their famous river.⁴⁴

Therefore, rivers can represent nations, peoples and even ideologies, and they appear with affection and pride in Virgil’s famous description of the typical landscape of the Italian hill towns: “See our noble cities, labor’s crown, / built breathlessly upon steep mountainsides, / deep rivers flowing under ancient walls,” where the calm majesty of the rivers is contrasted with the precipitous towns.⁴⁵ Virgil has a particular affinity for the lakes and rivers near his native Mantua. He emphasizes the preeminent role of water in the local landscapes of northern Italy, especially the Po valley. This large, impressive river was subject to seasonal flooding, partly inspired by torrential Alpine rivers, but was nevertheless navigable, offering pleasant surroundings with oaks and its famous poplar trees. Virgil also speaks warmly of the river Mella and, of course, the Mincius, which flowed languidly past Mantua with its banks festooned with reeds.⁴⁶

Lucan expresses a similar pride in the geography of Italy based on a framework of rivers. He wonders where Pompey and Caesar will fight the civil war. Perhaps it would be near the mighty Apennines, which divide sea from sea and whose watershed sends rivers flowing to the east and west: “Toward the east flow the swift Metaurus and the tumultuous Crustumius, the Sapis along with the Isaurus, the Sena and the Aufidus, which strikes the waters of the Adriatic. There is also the Eridanus (Po), as large as any river produced by earth,

which whirls uprooted trees down to the sea and drains Italy.” This river could match the Nile and the Danube, at least in a Roman’s imagination.⁴⁷ Toward the west the Apennines ushered forth the Tiber; the deep Rutuba; the swift Volturnus; the Sarnus, which produced nocturnal breezes; the Liris, which from Mount Vestinus passed through the sylvan domain of the nymph Marica; the Siler in its rugged terrain; and the Macra, which allowed no navigation in its stream.⁴⁸ In this passage, geography, hydrology, legend, and a series of pithy adjectives come together in the affectionate characterization of these well-known rivers in the heartland of Italy.⁴⁹

Augustus too in his own way exploited the reputation, romance, and powerful geographical associations of mighty rivers. In the *Res Gestae* he mentions four of the great rivers of Europe: the Elbe, Rhine, Danube, and Don. The remote Elbe marks the furthest extent of Augustus’s pacification of northern Europe “from Cadiz to the mouth of the Elbe.” The mouth of the Rhine launched the Roman fleet on its eastward exploration, and the Danube briefly marked the limit of Roman military activity before, on the emperor’s orders, the army crossed the river in order to chastise the Dacians. Distant peoples dwelling on both sides of the river Don sent embassies seeking friendship with Rome.⁵⁰ The emperor displays knowledge and respect, though in the context of Roman power and mastery of all elements of the environment, no matter how remote. These ideas were also expressed in Agrippa’s world map, which was on display in the *porticus Vipsaniae* in Rome and seems to have included the main rivers. This was a superb demonstration of the prestige and status of Rome, whose great men had the knowledge and power to construct such a map and launch campaigns of conquest to bring these mighty rivers and their peoples within the Roman orbit.⁵¹

4 DIVINE RIVERS AND SPRINGS

Servius observed that “there is no spring that is not sacred.”⁵² Rivers, springs, and water sources received worship in various forms. What was the basis of this, and how important were water sources in popular feeling toward sacred rites? Even if it is true that the animistic element of early Roman religion has been exaggerated, we can recognize that people had genuine respect for the power of nature and the awe-inspiring appearance and strength of rivers and welling sources of water.⁵³ Spatial relationships, landscapes, and places of sacred phenomena and religious practices were part of the complex pattern of the geography of religion. The connection between the clearly perceived, everyday characteristics of rivers and divine intervention in human affairs appears in the work of Artemidorus of Ephesus, who in late second century A.D. wrote

a work on dreams that predicted the future. Rivers appear in these dreams and show us how people identified riverine behavior with the course of life itself; rivers are good when they are clear, transparent, and flowing gently; but they can also be muddied and troubled, violent, noisy, and swollen; they can take away pieces of land, and they can sweep people out to sea. In general they were like judges because “they do what they want with impunity and in accord with their own inclination.” They are like trips abroad because the water does not stand still but flows on. He also says that all men need a river and that there is nothing so nourishing as water.⁵⁴

Ordinary people would directly see a divine element in rivers because of their protean qualities, by which they were potentially lethal (through violent floods) or, by contrast, bringers of fertility and prosperity. They were literally the water of life, vital for human existence and for the success of the surrounding area. In this context we can understand why rivers are often portrayed with the horn of plenty.⁵⁵ They not only supported life in rural communities but also provided the pure water so prized in big cities, which depended on water distribution by aqueducts.⁵⁶ Ovid, through the medium of the goddess Leto, gives a powerful statement of the value of water. Leto upbraids local people who tried to prevent her from drinking the cool waters of a lake. “Why do you keep me away from the water? Water is for everybody to use. Nature did not make gentle streams, any more than air and sunlight, for the benefit of individuals. I come for something to which all people have a right.”⁵⁷

The religious aura of water therefore derived from a variety of factors but undoubtedly owed much to its appearance. It often seems sparkling and vibrant, especially in sunlight; it can be deep yet transparent, almost as if it has nothing to hide, yet at times dark and gloomy. By its very movement, the running water of a river suggests a cleansing quality, in both the literal and metaphorical sense; as such it had an important role in religious ritual.⁵⁸ Then, the traditional beauty of the watery environment evoked reverence and awe; rivers and pools were often surrounded by shady and cool trees and peaceful groves with grassy banks, as idyllically described by Ovid.⁵⁹ The noise of river water had its own attraction and mystery, moving from sonorous plashing to insistent roaring, announcing the river’s presence even if the river itself could not be seen. The enormous influence of rivers on the lives of rural communities reminded men of the divine power to intervene in human affairs and the mutability of human fortune. What is more, some rivers shocked local people by disappearing into a chasm, drying up, or reappearing.⁶⁰ In addition, traditional stories insisted that many rivers had supernatural or magical qualities and could bring about dramatic changes in those who quaffed them.⁶¹ Many

local communities were more exposed to, or dependent on, rivers than others, and so the nature of a river and its power to influence events might determine the kind of worship it received. Where there was a close bond between the rural riverine communities and their rivers, we might expect to find a close connection between religious veneration of rivers and traditional legends. The divine element would then be fostered by the whole complex of local conditions and emotions. It is worth noting that in areas of mainland Greece and particularly among the Greek communities of Asia Minor, potamophoric names are common, and although diluted by time and convention, these are a guide to local feelings and traditions and the original connection to river spirits. This nomenclature derived from rivers indirectly associated its bearer with the divine aspect of the riverine environment.⁶²

Finally, rivers were linked to cult and religious observances (not necessarily directly associated with watery things) by geographical location, because rural shrines tended to be placed close to the site of springs for refreshment or bathing or cleansing, or along river valleys in the interests of easier communications, or at river crossing points. In the history of Greek colonies in Italy, rivers served as territorial boundaries and also offered protection; sanctuaries were sometimes placed at the mouths of rivers.⁶³ River water may have had an indirect importance in religious observances; for example, Demeter was associated with agriculture, which used water extensively.⁶⁴

Ancient writers routinely attribute divine powers to rivers and treat them as objects of veneration. To some extent, this is literary convention linked to mythological tales that provided such good material for writing. Therefore, for Ovid it was virtually commonplace to set a sacred spring in a cavern in a verdant wood.⁶⁵ Or when Poseidon wants to cause a flood, he summons all the rivers to a council meeting and orders them to flow with uninhibited force to the sea.⁶⁶ After noting the sacred source of the Peneios, Virgil adopts a tone closer to the beliefs of the rural communities of Italy when he has Aeneas on first arriving in Latium pray to the spirit of the place, the earth, the nymphs, and the rivers as yet unknown to him.⁶⁷ This reminds us of the importance of locality and the mysterious natural forces in the countryside. The deputation from the rural communities of Italy in A.D. 15 had voiced the simple piety of country folk; rivers were part of nature's grand plan; local people observed sacred rites, with groves and altars for their ancestral rivers, which had a more immediate relevance than the lordly Tiber.⁶⁸ Similarly, Pliny's description of the Clitumnus shows an active riverine cult in the second century A.D. The site contained an ancient, hallowed temple and a statue of Clitumnus in human form with the adornment of a real toga. The presence of his divinity produced

prophecies. There were other small shrines of lesser deities dotted around, with their own name and rites, which were often associated with springs, for the river had many small tributaries. A bridge marked the dividing point between the water held to be sacred and the ordinary river, and in the sacred area, sailing only (not swimming) was permitted.⁶⁹ The many votive inscriptions that Pliny mentions celebrating the god indicate that this shrine was very much in business and that people continued to approach the god. Of course, there was an element of commercialism in that the neighboring town of Hispellum, by gift of Augustus, organized bathing in the river.⁷⁰

Vitruvius confirms the general significance of rivers in the planning of temples. In his view the temple and statue should normally look toward the western part of the sky. But if a temple were built on the banks of a river, it ought to appear to look toward the river, as on the banks of the Nile.⁷¹ The purpose of this may have been a mark of respect to the divine spirit of the river, or perhaps to allow river travelers to observe the temple, in the same way that if temples were near public roads they should be located so that travelers could take note of them. But river crossing was also a crucial and perhaps dangerous moment for someone moving from one place to another across the watery barrier. It was therefore entirely in keeping with contemporary respect for the special position of rivers for Arrian to relate without comment that Alexander the Great sacrificed and prayed to the Danube for permitting his crossing.⁷²

Pausanias certainly conveys the idea that springs and rivers with special qualities assisted life and work in the Greek communities he describes. The greater the perceived boon from the river the greater the divine power must be. The relevance of rivers and springs to local life and culture helps to explain why they continued to receive offerings and ceremonial observances from antiquity to Pausanias's day. In Attica there was an altar to Acheloüs, who was conventionally represented with a bull's head.⁷³ At Olympia the Alpheios had two altars, one shared with Artemis,⁷⁴ and the river was also associated with the altar of Zeus. Every year in March the priest brought ash soaked with river water from the council house, and plastered it over the altar. No other water could be used — "that is why they believe that Alpheios is the most pleasant of all rivers to Olympian Zeus."⁷⁵ Apart from the Alpheios, the Kladeos had more honors in Elis than any other river, and an altar at Olympia.⁷⁶ At Psophis in Arcadia, the Erymanthos had a riverside temple with a statue of white marble. According to Pausanias, riverine images were always of white marble except the Nile, which had images of black stone.⁷⁷ Statues were also set up in rivers as a mark of honor.⁷⁸

Many observances in honor of rivers were probably at a very personal level.

It was, for example, a long-standing Greek tradition for boys to cut their hair in honor of rivers, and Pausanias had observed individual commemorations of this. In Arcadia the boys cut their hair in honor of the river Neda at the point where it came closest to the town of Phigaleia, neatly tying the observance in with the local community.⁷⁹ By the river Kephisos was a statue showing a boy cutting his hair for the river.⁸⁰ Garlands too were offered in worship,⁸¹ and at the temple of the river Pamisos in Messenia annual offerings were made.⁸² Cakes were presented to the Kephisos on certain special days by local people, who believed they appeared at the Kastalian spring.⁸³ The importance of rivers in local life can be seen in offerings made to mark where a water source burst out of the ground or an underground river reappeared, and also to appease the river after flooding. Springs too were closely associated with the local community, and their importance can be seen from the association with major deities, such as the sanctuary of Athene of the Springhead near Elateia.⁸⁴ In Italy, the river Numicus, which flowed past Lavinium into the Tyrrhenian Sea, received offerings from the consuls.⁸⁵

In terms of the divine element of watery sources, the evidence of inscriptions offers a fresh outlook and a different dimension. Inscriptions are particularly valuable since they have no literary affectation and are not normally conditioned by traditional literary themes. Most were set up by people who were not necessarily part of the highly literate elite, though they were probably well-off because of the expense involved. Inscriptions provide a random selection of material, which is not contaminated by a tendency to concentrate on major rivers. Precisely because the erection of an inscription was relatively expensive, dedications to rivers and springs should indicate real interest and commitment, and perhaps also an expectation that something could be gained from it. This kind of evidence might indicate that it is unwise to argue that Romans did not give great weight to the divine element of water, even though running water was important for purposes of purification and *fontes* were sacred.⁸⁶

On the other hand, although many inscriptions refer to dedications or the honoring of vows to springs (*fontes*), waters (*aquae*), nymphs (*nymphae* or *nimphae*), or, in fewer cases, named rivers, there are problems in trying to assess their significance. We have no idea how many similar inscriptions have been lost. And, of course, not all nymphs were connected to the watery environment of pools, springs, and rivers. They inhabited many different parts of the natural world, including mountains, trees, groves, and rural places in general. Most inscriptions are very brief and provide few helpful details. Therefore, it is difficult to establish the context of the occasion and to assess the feelings of the dedicant and the degree of convention in conforming to social and cul-

tural pressures in commemorative expenditure. Furthermore, the status of the person setting up the inscription is not always clear. Since the date is often unknown, it is impossible to trace any trends or developments in the honoring of watery sources. Whereas some inscriptions can be linked to certain thermal sites, in many other cases the original location is unclear. Nevertheless, evidence of this kind by its very repetition does have some cumulative force. It shows a prevailing concern with water sources, the regular availability of running water, the purificatory role of water in religious ritual, and also the curative properties of hot and cold waters.⁸⁷ It is clear that some springs and rivers acquired attention and reverence because of their location and their inherent value and cultural significance in a local context that was too parochial to attract the attention of our usual literary sources.

Dedications that imply some form of religious engagement with the watery environment are found in most parts of Italy from *lacus Benacus* (Lake Como) and the Padus (Po) to Naples and Campania.⁸⁸ Offerings and vows in many provinces, including the three Spanish provinces (Lusitania, Baetica, Tarracensis), Gaul, Germany, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Moesia, Dacia, Asia, and Africa suggest that in rural communities throughout the empire water sources and springs were revered and venerated in a traditional way, at least by Romans or Romanized individuals who set up most of the inscriptions. An inscription from near Verona refers to the Augustan nymphs and the *genius* of the *pagus Arusnatium*, suggesting a close association between the watery environment and rural life.⁸⁹ From Gaul there is a rare combination of Silvanus and the “nymphs of the place.”⁹⁰ Although many dedications refer vaguely to “nymphs,” leaving it to the reader to associate the spirits with the locality, sometimes the nymphs are linked to a named spring.⁹¹

Virtually all elements of the population are found to have erected dedications to springs, nymphs, or rivers. We find slaves, slaves of the emperor, imperial freedmen, freedmen, soldiers, legions, and women and men up to senatorial rank. Many set up a dedication when they were holding office, though not usually as a function of that office. At Caere, Lucius Pontilius Duurus, a standard-bearer, set up a dedication to the “Spring of the Waters of Caere.” Claudius Marcellinus, a *beneficiarius consularis*, at Rigomagus (Remagen) in A.D. 190 fulfilled his vow to “Jupiter Best and Greatest, and the Spirit of the Place and the Rhine”; a *speculator* Cassius Severus paid his respects to Aquae Aponi near Patavium; a *dispensator* in Sabine country welcomed the restoration of a spring, Granius Priscus; a *sevir Augustalis* and *praefectus iure dicundo* dedicated his building of a fountainhead to the nymphs and the *Vires Augusti* at Veleia; and at Aquae Flavianae in Numidia, Abidius Bassus, curator, paid his

vow to the “spirit of the nymphs and Draco.”⁹² The entire legion XX Valeria Victrix made a dedication “Nymphis et fontibus” at Deva (Chester).⁹³

At a higher social level, we find legionary commanders and provincial governors making offerings. At Legio (León), Terentius Homullus Junior, legate of legion VII Gemina, “willingly and properly fulfilled his vow to the nymphs of the spring Amevus.” A *legatus Augusti* in Numidia commemorated the springs at Sinuessa in Campania on behalf of himself, his wife, and his two children, while in Dacia the governor of Lower Moesia paid his vow to Hercules, the spirit of the place, and the hot springs.⁹⁴ The prefect of Egypt, Sulpicius Similis, named a spring at *mons Claudianus* after Trajan—*fons Felicissimus Traianus Dacicus*.⁹⁵ Two brothers who were *curatores aquarum* made an offering to Fons and Tellus at Volsinii (Bolsena).⁹⁶

There were also local officials such as Arruntius Faustus, *magister pagi* at Cirta, who set up with his own money a memorial to the spirit of the local river Ampsaga.⁹⁷ At Formiae, Fufius Alexander, master of a *collegium*, erected an altar at his own expense on behalf of the *collegium*, dedicated to Fontanus.⁹⁸ Rather mysteriously, a group of five delegates who came to Rome from Dacia on official business made a dedication on their safe return to “the gods and spirits of the waters.”⁹⁹ Perhaps they had sailed along or crossed the Danube. At Nemausus in Gaul, we get a glimpse of enthusiastic local religious practice when the worshipers of the spring Ura (river Eure) combined to make a dedication.¹⁰⁰ Most of those making dedications were men, but women and freedwomen and slaves also made offerings.¹⁰¹ In the main, the form and content of these vows and dedications were simple and straightforward, perhaps suggesting a degree of convention, though that does not preclude sincere belief and respect.

This is an important point, because it is often difficult to see why a spring or river is celebrated. However, many inscriptions remind us of the importance of the water supply. In the Mediterranean area, despite water’s importance in divine rituals and purification, it was often a rare commodity and existing springs could dry up in the summer months. Inscriptions celebrating a perennial water source, or a more generous flow, or the reappearance of a river or spring, or a new source that had never been seen before tell us something about the importance of water in life and society and can help explain the apparent enthusiasm for venerating watery things.¹⁰² For example, Antonius Victorinus, town councilor of Aquincum, celebrated the local “perennial spring,” while Pomponius Cornelianus, a young man from a senatorial family, celebrated the return of the water at Vicetia (Vicenza) with a dedication to the Augustan nymphs and waters. On the island of Arba off the coast of Dalmatia

in A.D. 173, Raecius Leo celebrated the provision for the town of a supply of water that “none of the old people remembered to have existed in the community,” at the expense and wish of his senatorial patron. Sometimes the restoration of a water source might have involved digging or the building of a suitable outlet. An intriguing inscription from Rome dated to A.D. 123 mentions a group of people called masters and servants of the *fons*.¹⁰³ The significance of this is unclear, but we might have here a private society in honor of one water source, rather than some state-sponsored officials to supervise fountains.¹⁰⁴

Normally the spirit (*genius* or *numen*) of a watery source is vaguely addressed, and divinity is implied rather than stated. However, several dedications are more specific (such as “Fonti Divino” or “*dea*” or “*sacer*”), and a spring or nymph is sometimes associated with other spirits and gods including Apollo and Jupiter.¹⁰⁵ A nymph too is sometimes called “divine,” or “most holy” (*sanctissima*), and there was also a temple of the nymphs at civitas (S)edetanorum in Spain.¹⁰⁶ This scattered evidence confirms the importance of the sanctity of water in its various manifestations. The personal response of individuals sometimes provides sharper illumination, as in the case of one Laetus at Lambaesis, who burst into poetry in honor of the spirit of the “Aqua Alexandriana.” He set up an altar when he was holding office in his community, and what pleased him most about his year of office was that during it the water flowed with a particularly generous stream.¹⁰⁷ The same kind of emotion for a less benevolent purpose appears in a curse tablet from Arretium, in which Letinius Lupus seeks to encompass the death of someone within the year through “you surging waters or you nymphs, or by whatever name you want to be called.”¹⁰⁸

Reverence and respect for water spirits and a belief in their capacity to intervene in human affairs illustrate many aspects of local life. At Ostia, a well was built at the expense of three officials in local *collegia* “on the advice of Ceres and the Nymphs.”¹⁰⁹ At Aquae Sulis (Bath), a family swore an oath at the spring of the goddess Sulis, invoking retribution on anyone who broke the oath.¹¹⁰ On a sadder note, a funeral monument from Rome speaks of a young boy who had presumably drowned. “Here lies M. Ulpius Firmus, whose good spirit has returned to heaven, snatched away by the nymphs; he lived nine years and six months, betrayer of his parents. Ulpius Nymphicus to his dearest son.”¹¹¹

Official, state-sponsored offerings to the tutelary deities of springs to a limited extent directed worship of watery sources. Each year on 13 October the Romans celebrated the *Fontinalia* in honor of Fons and natural water sources. “They throw wreaths into springs and place crowns on wells.”¹¹² Fons had an altar on the Janiculum near the alleged burial place of Numa,¹¹³ and outside

the Porta Capena was a grove with a spring of the Camenae from which the Vestals drew water daily by hand to sprinkle in the temple.¹¹⁴ There was also a god Fontanus and a goddess Fontana, associated with springs. At Villaviçosa in Lusitania we find a dedication “pro salute” to Fontanus and Fontana.¹¹⁵ Formal offerings by individuals to springs and water sources will also have consisted of flowers and garlands accompanied by libations of wine. Horace, however, in addressing the Fons Bandusiae, speaks of the sacrifice of a kid whose red blood will stain the gelid water of the spring.¹¹⁶

By contrast with nymphs and springs, rivers come to our attention much less often and are comparatively rarely mentioned in inscriptions. However, they are usually explicitly named and dedications appear in Italy and in many provinces, including Spain, Gaul, Germany, Pannonia, Moesia, Greece, Asia, and Numidia.¹¹⁷ Of course, many rivers will have been worshiped by the local population without leaving any trace for the historian. It is only by chance that we hear how at Nuceria the river Sarnus was specially favored and had a cult; similarly, at Naples the river Sebethus was worshiped as a god.¹¹⁸ The immediate background to the popular veneration of rivers lies first in the respect in which they were held. Consequently, rivers are usually mentioned in terms of honor, such as “Father Padus,”¹¹⁹ or “Father Rhine.”¹²⁰ Second, there was often an emotional identification with them as markers of domicile or birthplace. An inscribed poem from Moesia shows how a river served as a means of identity: “son of Postumus, prefect of the fleet, I was a Roman child brought up by the Iberian river.”¹²¹ Similarly, the funeral monument of Julia Secunda in Rome celebrates her birthplace, “where the Tagus and the noble river Hiberus arise and flow in different directions, one toward the east and one toward the west.”¹²² From this it was a short step to seeing the local river as a quasi-divine presence.

Few rivers, however, had a bigger or more dramatic economic impact than the Nile. The most important aspect was the annual inundation, lasting generally from June or July to September, which sustained agriculture, fertility, and abundance, all concepts normally associated with rivers.¹²³ The unique position of the Nile in the pattern and rhythm of life in the Nile valley meant that it was closely bound up with the emotions and psychology of the population. The Nile’s gradual inundation was in contrast to the torrential characteristics of many other Mediterranean rivers and produced an enormous amount of interested debate in ancient writers.¹²⁴ The Egyptian god Ha’py was originally associated with the river’s inundation, which was also linked to the legend of Isis and Osiris, and Nile water was used to purify and invigorate.¹²⁵ It is in some respects unclear if devotions were addressed to the river itself or to the inunda-

tion. However, a long time before the conquest of Alexander there was a Greek divinization of the Nile, and in the Ptolemaic and Roman period Nilos received worship in the form of a Greek river-god and was represented in the way that rivers normally were in Greco-Roman art: a male, bearded figure generally reclining.¹²⁶ The Nile was also associated with Greek mythology, with strong emphasis on his amorous exploits and fecundity; in this way the Ptolemies imparted a Greek ambience to the cult of the Nile.

In the Roman Empire, the Nile was treated with respect, for example, appearing as Nilus Pater in the time of Augustus.¹²⁷ Within Egypt, worship concentrated on the river's fertilizing qualities, and the Nile, though lacking a distinctive personality, was associated with Euthenia, that is, the prosperity and plenty brought by its waters. An incantation to Isis in the early second century addresses her as "Ruler of the world, protector and guide, lady of the mouths of seas and rivers. . . . who also bring back the Nile over all the land."¹²⁸ Therefore, in Egypt the Nile, through its annual inundation, remained the power that sustained and enriched the country, also enhancing navigability with its generous flow and canals. Outside Egypt, in the imperial period the Nile lost this personality and became the traditional river of Egypt with its trademark crocodile or hippopotamus.¹²⁹ It is in this context that we can place the prayer that Pliny offers to the Nile in his Panegyric to Trajan: "If there is any divinity in the land or any spirit in rivers, I invoke that land and the very river."¹³⁰ There were important festivals in honor of the Nile in late June or early July when the waters rose, involving offerings of various kinds and prayers; there was also a priest of the Nile. A papyrus of the second century A.D. lists articles for a sacrifice in June to a "most sacred Nile, 1 calf, 2 jars of sweet wine, 16 wafers, 16 garlands, 16 pine cones, 16 cakes, 16 green palm branches, similarly 16 reeds, oil, honey, milk, every spice except frankincense."¹³¹ Official recognition came in the annual sacrifice to the Nile by the Roman prefect of Egypt, continuing the tradition of the Pharaohs. It was also considered improper for the prefect to sail on the river when it was rising.¹³² Veneration of the Nile's regenerative qualities was important and notably long-lived, since the Christian religion assimilated some of the features of the worship of the Nile inundation to Christian practice.¹³³ By the sixth century, the fertilizing river was sustained by "the power of Christ."¹³⁴

Among European rivers, the Rhine and the Danube received many dedications, presumably partly because of their size and length, and the Rhine was particularly popular in the military environment around Argentorate (Strasbourg). As fully fledged gods, rivers were part of the anthropomorphic view of the divine and were represented as men; for example, the river-god Hiberus at

Tarraco received a statue.¹³⁵ The city of Tymhiada(?) in Pisidia described the Eurymedon River as a “manifest god.”¹³⁶ At Aquincum, a legionary legate set up a dedication to Danuvius, while on the bank of the river Q. Veranius(?) had dedicated an altar to the same deity.¹³⁷ Elsewhere, the spirit residing within the river received observances as in a dedication in Spain to “genius Baetis.”¹³⁸ An inscription records how P. Sempronius Tuditanus, consul in 129 B.C. who defeated the Histrians and Iapudians, made some kind of offering to the river Timavus, perhaps for his successful crossing.¹³⁹

Rivers, like springs, were regularly associated with other, more important gods. In an inscription on an altar from Dorylaion dating to the second or third century A.D., the Sangarius River is identified with Poseidon.¹⁴⁰ The Danube and the Rhine are coupled with Jupiter, which will greatly have enhanced their status.¹⁴¹ A legionary legate, of legion XXX Ulpia, offering a vow for his own safety and that of his family, took no chances by including “Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the ancestral gods, and the protectors of this place, and Ocean and the Rhine.”¹⁴² The great rivers of Greece, as Pausanias makes clear, had from early times been treated as divinities in local tradition and worship, as well as in famous mythological stories.

The Romans in common with other peoples apparently attached special significance to the confluence of rivers. A dedication from Croatia on the river Sava near its confluence with the Sann, “Sacred to the Savus and the Adsalluta, P. Ant(onium) Secundus willingly and properly paid his vow,” suggests that the meeting of great rivers was a special place.¹⁴³ The temple of Augustus at Lugdunum was positioned opposite the confluence of the Rhône and Saône, and it is notable that priests specifically mention this fact—“priest of Rome and Augustus at the altar and temple at the confluence of the Arar and the Rhodanus.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, among the honors granted outside Italy to Germanicus, who died in A.D. 19, there was to be a commemorative site on the bank of the Rhine near Mogontiacum (Mainz) at the confluence of the Rhine and the Main, close to the monument for Drusus, who had died in 9 B.C. Mogontiacum was an important road junction, the site of a Rhine bridge, and eventually the seat of the governor of Upper Germany. Rites were to be observed on the day of Germanicus’s death by the Gallic and German communities living on the left bank of the Rhine, just as they had been ordered to carry out annual observances for Drusus.¹⁴⁵ Mogontiacum was a crucial location both emotionally and topographically at the river confluence and as a place of easy access. We must look here to the psychological importance, to Romans, Gauls, and Germans, of this location amid the rivers, where, as Cassius Dio says, the initial honoring of Drusus consisted of statues and a cenotaph “beside the Rhine

itself.”¹⁴⁶ What we have is a Roman viewpoint, but I wonder if the Romans were not also exploiting German respect for this confluence (river spirits were worshiped by the German and Gallic peoples). The local people dwelling on the riverbank are involved in the ceremony and in a complex web of cultural and religious beliefs, all brought within the Roman orbit.

It is certainly the case that many peoples with whom the Romans came in contact in the Celtic world had a long tradition of venerating rivers and springs. For example, Nemausus (Nîmes) was named after the sacred spring, which had a sanctuary predating the Roman occupation, and hosted a spirit that acted as patron of the community.¹⁴⁷ The Romans were not imposing an alien idea on indigenous Celtic communities but rather responding to and assimilating local religious practice.¹⁴⁸ In Gaul there was a cult of the river Marne and the Saône, and at Chalon to *dea Souconna*. Similarly, the Meuse and Rhine and many smaller water sources were venerated by the local riverine populations.¹⁴⁹ In Gaul, worship was largely aniconic, and temples to river-divinities were rare, but at the source of the river Seine (Sequana) there was a temple and at the site was discovered an *ex voto* figurine of a riverboat supporting the goddess. It may have been an offering from a river sailor to the goddess for rescue from some danger. Other offerings relate to cures from illnesses. The site was both a sanctuary and a thermal spa. Consequently, one could pray to the goddess for prosperity in trade, a cure from illness, and security from danger.¹⁵⁰ A traditional deity had been partly assimilated to Roman practice. North of Lugdunum too at the sacred springs near Mavilly, local sculptors had carved Roman deities including Jupiter and Neptune, but in a distinctly native style.¹⁵¹ In another important example from Pouillé in Gaul, a man gratefully fulfills his vow to a river because he had been rescued from some kind of life-threatening danger; although he has a Celtic name, Virtigombo, he has adopted Roman religious practice.¹⁵²

In Britain, Coventina was a water-goddess of Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall. Although originally a native goddess, she became assimilated to the Roman ideology of nymphs, and appears as *Dea nimfa Coventina* in a dedication erected by Mahudus, a German probably serving in the auxiliaries.¹⁵³ She had a small shrine in which a well replaced the usual central chamber. In the well were found more than 13,000 Roman coins, with many pots, carved stones, incense burners, and other objects. These votive offerings had continued for centuries, and soldiers, officers, and civilians participated in the worship of Coventina.¹⁵⁴ Africa was also outside the Greco-Roman tradition, and here a consistent water supply was very important, with the veneration of many local water sources.¹⁵⁵ These local cults were eventually largely replaced by Neptune

(representing fresh water) and the nymphs, both for normal water sources and for thermal or medicinal springs, since healing waters were important in Africa. In the case of rivers, dedications tend to be addressed to their *genius*.¹⁵⁶ Many of those making dedications were Romanized Africans perhaps recalling earlier Libyan traditions, and it is possible that in rural shrines earlier forms of worship continued. Some local water-divinities did survive, like the mysterious Draco, and Lilleus, who received a dedication at Madaura.¹⁵⁷

The many small sanctuaries associated with water sources not only confirm the religious feeling generated by the qualities of running water but also contribute to regional history; worship of rivers and springs, often facilitated by the Romans, was consequently part of the history of the Roman Empire.¹⁵⁸ The evidence considered in this section suggests that veneration of rivers and watery sources continued at many levels of society in the Roman world and was not undermined by the increasingly scientific analysis of rivers in terms of their types of fish and purity of water or the increasing ability of Roman engineering to control and channel rivers for the benefit of the state.

One river deserves special mention because of its unique position in the Roman world: the Tiber.

5 THE TIBER

Among the watery divinities of Italy, the Tiber was supreme and had a special place in Roman affections, combining three important elements in Roman life by serving as a divinity, a legend, and a national symbol. There was a truly Roman cult present from early times in which the river itself was the object of worship. The river was a dynamic force, with the power to sustain life in its fertile valley, provide drinking water, bring trade and prosperity on its navigable waters, remove the detritus of the city of Rome, but also bring destruction with its surging floods. Therefore, ordinary people needed the river's help and approval through its 199-mile course and across its great basin stretching for 6,847 square miles through north-central Italy. From an early period, the Tiber was seen as a healing river, because many votive dedications have been discovered in numerous places in the riverbed indicating attempts to find relief from various types of illnesses.¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, numerous riverine dwellers, such as boatmen and fishermen, who made a living from the Tiber, made offerings to it. On 8 June each year the *Ludi Piscatorii* were held by the urban praetor across the Tiber opposite the Forum Boarium on behalf of the fishermen of the Tiber, "whose catch does not go to market but to a large extent to the area of Vulcan, for this kind of small fish is given to this god on behalf of humankind." These fishermen through

their homage showed their gratitude to the river, and they formed a *collegium* in imperial times.¹⁶⁰ Although part of the catch was destined for Vulcan, the festival was based around the river, and Vulcan had no role as a god of the Tiber.¹⁶¹ There was also a festival on 27 August in honor of Volturnus, who, according to the *Fasti Vallenses* in Rome, was a river-god. He may have been regarded as a god of all rivers.¹⁶²

The Tiber could bring literal as well as metaphorical cleanliness, though the role of the river as a purificatory agent is controversial since the ancient sources are not clear.¹⁶³ The sacred waters of the river flowed down to the sea, conveying away from the city anything that was held to be a stain or contamination. This seems to be the point of the obscure festival of the *Argea* on 15 and 16 March when human effigies were thrown into the Tiber from the *pons Sublicius*, representing the purification of the citizens from each part of the city.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, at the end of the Vestalia festival in June, the accumulated refuse from the temple of Vesta was ceremonially deposited in the Tiber and so conveyed away to the sea.¹⁶⁵ Unwelcome prodigies and anything out of the ordinary could be speedily disposed of with the benefit of a purifying rite. State priests organized all these activities, showing official involvement in dealing with the divine element of the river. However, the practice of throwing bodies into the river, such as those of Tiberius Gracchus and his supporters, and of various emperors who had been murdered, was probably a spontaneous act by political enemies. It was an expression of contempt and an attempt to humiliate and deny burial rather than any act of purification.¹⁶⁶

State involvement in riverine religious observances can be seen elsewhere in Rome, and worship may have been concentrated in certain areas of the city. There were three areas where the Tiber name was attached—the Campus Tiberinus, that is, part of the Campus Martius at the sacred precinct Tarentum; the Forum Boarium, where the *vicus Tiberini* may have been situated; and the *insula Tiberina*.¹⁶⁷ Traces of the river cult in the Campus Martius appear in the Ludi Saeculares, since some of the rites were conducted specifically on the riverbank. It may be that worship was originally conducted on the alluvial plain at low water because this allowed people to penetrate the sacred watery domain from which they were normally excluded. The likely site of the Ludi Piscatores was at the river bend opposite the Forum Boarium and Cloaca Maxima, where the *vicus Tiberini* was probably located.¹⁶⁸ The Tiber island (*insula Tiberina*), which because of alluvial action at the bend in the river seemed to emerge directly from riverine activity, was sacred because of the old cult of the Tiber and was particularly associated with healing processes, becoming the site of the temple of the god of healing Asclepius, which was erected circa 291 B.C.¹⁶⁹

There are many grateful dedications to the god, and later there was a shrine to Tiberinus on the island with a festival on 8 December.¹⁷⁰ Numerous *ex voto* finds have been discovered opposite it.

Despite elements of state intervention, it was probably ordinary people living in close proximity to the river who carried out most acts of homage to the Tiber, not just in Rome, as the finds of coins in the river testify, but also throughout the Tiber valley.¹⁷¹ Doubtless many nameless people threw cups, coins, and other small offerings into the river. They did not have the resources for expensive memorials, and there are very few examples of dedications in honor of the Tiber. When we do have one example from Horta (Orte) on the Tiber, it belonged to a man of status, a veteran soldier and imperial reservist, Sex. Atusius Priscus, who claims that he “was first of all to set up to Tiberinus the altar that he had vowed as a soldier.”¹⁷² Furthermore, there is little evidence that the Tiber was associated with other gods; no temple or *cella* was provided for Tiberinus at least until the second century A.D., and there was no formal cult statue, though of course the river appears as a sturdy, mature man in artistic representations. There may even be a hint of cynicism in the upper classes about Tiberinus in the story about how the hated emperor Elagabalus was nicknamed Tiberinus after his body had been thrown in the river.¹⁷³

The name “Tiberis” or “Tiberinus” was certainly ancient, since it appears in the augural prayer cited by Cicero.¹⁷⁴ Other forms, Thybris or Tybris, also appear, and Roman writers were unsure about the history of the name, explaining that an original name, Albula, had been changed on the hypothesis that a Tiberinus, a king of Alba, had drowned while crossing the river.¹⁷⁵ Eventually, while *Tiberis* was normally used to describe the river, Tiberinus, or Pater Tiberinus particularly served to identify the god, as the original worship of the river itself was overlaid at least by the second century B.C. by developed Greek anthropomorphic concepts of the river-god, through which people worshiped a god dwelling in the river rather than the river.¹⁷⁶

The Tiber was also linked to the numerous foundation myths of Rome and traditional fables of Romulus and Remus; the river and the characteristics of its course played its part in what Livy described as the fateful founding of a mighty city and the beginning of the greatest empire next to heaven itself, and fresh water was integral to the traditions of Rome.¹⁷⁷ The river Tiber in the works of Roman writers is either specifically or by implication a god. So, Martial refers to “sacred Tiber.”¹⁷⁸ In the *Aeneid* the Tiber, as the god of the place, appears to Aeneas, wearing a gray linen cloak and with reeds in his hair.¹⁷⁹ He promises Aeneas ultimate victory and the founding of a mighty realm. In return,

the Tiber will receive great honors from the Romans; most loved by heaven of all rivers, he flows through the rich farmland and sustains the life of powerful cities. Aeneas, taking water from the river in his hands, accepts the prophecy and greets Father Tiber as the ruler of all the western waters.¹⁸⁰ As we have already seen, it could be argued that the venerable Tiber was enhanced by the waters of other rivers in central Italy.¹⁸¹

The Tiber, with its status as an object of religious homage, its place in the foundation myth of Rome, and its impact on the lives of many people, was a ready-made national symbol. In human form, the Tiber appeared on imperial coins and was represented on important temples such as Mars Ultor, where he emerges as a strong mentor and guardian of the Roman state and a symbol and guarantor of Rome's prosperity and success.¹⁸² Of course, a river with these powerful qualities, which flowed through a mighty city, could be seen as demonstrating the superiority of the dominant imperial power. Even a simple poetic phrase, as when Statius speaks of the "Thybris lord of rivers" (*ductor aquarum*), could contain the idea of Rome's imperial domination with implications of cultural and environmental imperialism.¹⁸³

The sanctity of the Tiber usefully gives us a perspective on Roman society and beliefs. Overall, it seems that the upper classes and emperors viewed the river as a great national symbol, where it could acquire a personality in the Greek style. It was not of enormous significance in the religious practice of the Roman state, since it had no temple and no cult statue. It was ordinary people who lived in the Tiber valley or in the riverine districts in Rome who had real psychological and emotional connection with the river, a river that they both needed and feared. And they have left few memorials. It is a reasonable point that throughout the empire particular interest and religious significance lay with the local rivers and springs, which had a more direct bearing on life in rural communities and on the water supply of towns and cities.

6 RIVERINE LEGENDS

Myths help to define and interpret human experience of the environment, however exaggerated the stories may be. Rivers were ubiquitous, highly visible, and sometimes dangerous, and local communities wanted to claim ownership of them, assert territoriality, magnify their river's identity, and rationalize their relationship with running water. Therefore, they gave rivers human form and, where possible, associated them with legendary stories, which enhanced not only the river's status but also the community's individual identity. Colorful stories of riverine mythology and the exploits of rivers that had as-

sumed anthropomorphic form, historical associations, and a complex cultural and intellectual process sustained the visual and spiritual image of rivers that was so common to many.

Writers routinely make rivers men, suggesting that they live in caverns and have families. They are often addressed directly with questions or appeals and, in turn, can speak to others. They can have debates and arguments with outsiders and one another.¹⁸⁴ They witness historical events, such as invasions and battles, and can at times intervene.¹⁸⁵ They can express and represent patriotic sentiments, as does the Trebia in argument with Hannibal in Silius Italicus's epic of the Punic Wars.¹⁸⁶ They can even address an emperor, as does the Volturnus with his long tawny locks while leaning on the bridge built by Domitian over his stream.¹⁸⁷ They can act as an ally of emperors and take part in major historical events. So, in traditional panegyric the Tiber acted as Constantine's ally at the battle of the Milvian Bridge.¹⁸⁸ They are therefore potentially powerful agents for good or ill and, like other deities, could benefit a local community. They might pay tribute,¹⁸⁹ watch the military situation, or even ferry extraneous rubbish and corruption, as Juvenal imagines the Orontes emptying its filthy contents into the pure Tiber.¹⁹⁰

The idea of a river in human form was of course a literary device in order to enliven a narrative or add poetic color. But the fact that writers had their own agenda does not rob the concept of wider significance. For the idea of rivers in the shape of a man was deep-seated in popular consciousness and fitted easily into the existing ideology of deities intervening in human affairs. Personification was also part of an intellectual process in illustrating or reinforcing a historical point or judgment, which was often bound up with local life and culture. Therefore, personification blended with the divine spirit of the watery environment and linked directly to river legends, in which well-known rivers were portrayed as forceful agents in either the local or the international arena.

In the colorful riverine legends, anthropomorphic rivers generally mimic the behavior of men, appearing as lovers, rapists, and pursuers of women, as warriors, healers, prophecy makers, state builders, and protectors of local communities; in this way they could ensure the status and even survival of people who identified with the local river and who might owe their livelihood to it. In this fantasy world, there was a deep yearning in local communities for strong protectors and people who could intercede with the deities who might intervene in human life at any time. Riverine mythology has much to tell us about the sincere veneration of rivers by local people, which was then greatly elaborated by sophisticated writers. The stories confirm the special element in rivers that will also have been an object of reverence in smaller rivers and springs that

we do not often hear about in ancient writers, though we have seen some sign of this in the inscriptions noted previously and the numerous dedications to nymphs and springs unacknowledged in literature.

It is in this context that we need to understand the importance in Pausanias's work of the theme of rivers and legends and divine intervention.¹⁹¹ Pausanias's survey of Greek communities is woven around topography and surviving monuments, which were often associated with legendary events and could then be linked to local history and tradition, producing a coherent and self-contained topographical description and cultural analysis based on the local river and the known landscape. As Pausanias points out, all rivers are different, and the many stories about them reflect different regional traditions. However, we need to identify the common themes in these stories, and assess the importance of Greek riverine mythology that persisted to the imperial period.

Pausanias's description of the river Alpheios sums up many of the characteristics and qualities traditionally associated with rivers. "As you arrive at Olympia you are already at the water of the Alpheios, the greatest of rivers in its volume of water, and the most pleasure-giving to the sight, because there are seven important rivers among the streams that run into it." His account encompasses the river's size, appearance, sources, and tributaries, which help establish the geographical framework of the entire local area and the position of nearby cities and sanctuaries.¹⁹² From this emerge the many associated popular legends that underpin Pausanias's narrative.

The role of the rivers in these legends takes several forms. In some cases, the river itself in the shape of a man is a leading player. The river then performed actions that affected the surrounding area or fathered children who subsequently participated in important events. Therefore, the river, directly or indirectly, actually made the legend, and more important rivers, such as the Asopos and Alpheios, were particularly active. Children of rivers were autochthonous and could claim rights over the land in question. Asopos, a legendary son of Poseidon, discovered in the Corinthia the river that was then named after him and bore several local nymphs, who were later abducted by Zeus. The spring on the Acrocorinth was allegedly a bribe to Sisypheos for information about the episode.¹⁹³ Alpheios, a huntsman, had a dalliance with Arethusa, but she did not want to marry and crossed over to the island of Ortygia opposite Syracuse, where she turned into a water spring. In pursuit, Alpheios turned into a river, and Pausanias notes with approval the story that the Alpheios flowed uncontaminated through the sea to mingle its waters with the spring of Arethusa.¹⁹⁴

Many other rivers fathered children—the Asterion, the Inachos, the Kaikinos (who bore a famous boxer), the Kephisos, the Maeander (in Asia), and the

Peneios.¹⁹⁵ These stories included the idea of propagation and renewal, associated with the fertility of river valleys. Great rivers by their activities enhanced the fame of the areas through which they flowed and made sure that they were thoroughly integrated in Greek cultural tradition. On other occasions, the river was a witness to supernatural events or accidentally provided the location as the story was played out—for example, the hunt of the Erymanthean Boar beside the river Erymanthos.¹⁹⁶

Common legendary riverine themes involve love, pursuit, and abduction, in many cases because rivers seemed to offer an escape route or a means of rapid travel, either along them or through their depths. In one story Pluto carried Persephone off beside the Kephisos to his subterranean kingdom.¹⁹⁷ We also find stories of overwhelming grief, where a weeping person could even be changed into a spring or river. The legend of the spring Peirene was that as she wept for her son Kenchrias, who had been accidentally killed by Artemis, she turned into a spring.¹⁹⁸ This may be related to the importance of a water provider in a country usually short of water. The love stories involving ill-starred or unrequited love and dramatic change convey in exciting terms the story of everyday emotional life connected with the watery environment, in which there was eternal movement over the same course. For example, in Achaea the spring of Argyra and the river Selemnos gave rise to the legend that Selemnos, a shepherd, had been in love with the nymph Argyra but died when she eventually rejected him. Aphrodite turned him into a river and granted forgetfulness.¹⁹⁹ A splendid story combines the important notion of the mingling of sources of running water and water as a kind of deliverance.

Some legends explained the characteristics of a river, its flow, course, and direction, or even its color. So, the river Po's trademark poplar trees were associated with the lament of the daughters of the Sun for their dead brother Phaethon. The fact that the Inachos, Kephisos, and Asterion dried up in summer was ascribed to the anger of Poseidon because they had helped to grant Hera suzerainty over the Argolid. A spring near Ioppe in Judaea flowed red allegedly because Perseus had washed off the blood of the sea monster there. The very direction of the course of the Kephisos was said to be the work of Herakles.²⁰⁰ This kind of story might have some root in a rational effort to explain local riverine phenomena. Similarly, legends of river monsters might owe something to popular ideas about enormous fish that lurked in the depths.²⁰¹

Sometimes an interesting tension appears between local willingness to accept a distinguished legend and a less dramatic explanation, which of course would not bring such honor and possibly extra visitor revenue to an area. Lucian tells us about one local phenomenon; the river Adonis, which flowed

from Mount Libanus and into which Adonis had allegedly fallen and stained with his blood, was said on certain days to flow blood red into the sea in memory of him. But Lucian discovered another account from a local man from the town of Byblos, who said that the river flowed from the mountain, which had tawny red soil and that on these days the winds blew strongly and churned up the water so that the soil came to the surface making it seem like blood.²⁰²

We also find that a legendary character or event played a part in establishing a water source's name or nickname. For example, the story of Makaria, a daughter of Herakles, who killed herself so that Athens could win a victory, explains the name of the spring Makaria at Marathon and is also part of the early history and noble tradition of the Athenian state.²⁰³ On a lighter note, after Herakles had destroyed Elis, the women prayed to Athene to make them conceive as soon as they slept with their men, to repopulate the country. Their prayer was granted and "as both the women and the men experienced extreme pleasure in that first intercourse, they named the place Sweet and they called the river that flows past it in their dialect Sweetwater."²⁰⁴ Rivers brought authenticity and honor to local names.

Elsewhere, rivers were named directly after the action of some legendary figure, for example the Balyra (Lyrethrow) in Messenia got its name because Thamyras threw his harp into it when he was blinded.²⁰⁵ In some cases, a legend was woven into local customs and names. So, at the shrine of Triklarian Artemis, a strange custom had prevailed in antiquity. Two lovers Melanippos and Komaitho, forbidden to marry by their parents, met for secret sex in the sanctuary of Artemis. The goddess responded with plagues; the oracular response demanded the execution of the two lovers and the annual sacrifice of the boy and the virgin with the most beautiful bodies. Consequently, the nearby river was named Implacable. But later the city was rescued from the cruel obligation, and the river assumed its name Placation.²⁰⁶

The cleansing power of running water is conspicuous in many riverine legends. In a literal sense, Herakles famously diverted the waters of the Menios to clear away the dung of Augeas's animals.²⁰⁷ But in a supernatural sense, water brought invigorating purity and release from contamination. Two rivers in Arcadia contain the root of the verb "to wash" (*louein*): the Lymax, where Rhea washed herself after giving birth to Zeus, and the Lousios, where Zeus was washed at birth.²⁰⁸ Those who wished to consult the oracle of Trophonios, apart from other ritual observances, washed in the river Herkyna. Before entering the oracle they drank first the water of Forgetfulness to purify their minds, and then the water of Memory, so as to remember the entire experience.²⁰⁹ At the spring Kanathos in the Argolid, local legend had it that Hera washed

every year to renew her virginity. Ritual purification in the Anigros caused the river's unpleasant smell, as it took onto itself infected material.²¹⁰ The strong belief in the purifying power of water can also be seen in the story explaining the course of the river Helikon, which flowed underground for a distance. The women who had murdered Orpheus tried to wash away his blood in the river, which dived underground "in case its water should purify murderers."²¹¹ The mystical, elevating power of rivers or welling springs appears too in the belief that water contributed to or at least accompanied prophetic powers.²¹² In day-to-day life, the special status of running water and ritual washing is illustrated by an inscription from Keos setting out rules to stop people from misusing a spring on the way to the temple of Demeter.²¹³

The cleansing effect of rivers was, of course, also part of Roman ideology. Therefore, Aeneas could not touch religious objects until he had washed away the blood of battle with running water.²¹⁴ Purificatory rites normally were to be carried out with river water.²¹⁵ In this way, we can make sense of the legend in which a Sabine, receiving a prophecy that the country of whoever sacrificed a white cow would establish a great empire, went to Rome to carry out the sacrifice at the altar of Diana. However, the temple doorkeeper deceived him by pointing out that he must first wash in river water and directed him to the Tiber. The doorkeeper then sacrificed the cow, so establishing Rome's domination of the world.²¹⁶ The cleansing power of water and ritual washing may have contributed to later Christian baptismal practice.²¹⁷

Why are so many legends associated with rivers? The answers must surely lie in the ubiquitous nature of rivers, which extended over long distances, were ever present, but also constantly changing; they were often considered divine, life enhancing with the power to effect recovery from disease; river names often had important local connections but carried within them the threat of destructive flooding and therefore needed to be supplicated; stories of immersion in rivers and metamorphosis through their agency may be related to more profound ideas of death and redemption. Many stories are clearly related to the appearance or disappearance of water sources, or the discovery of a new river, or a water source endlessly renewed. Linked to all this was the strong mythological tradition about the rivers of the underworld. In some ways, these behaved as normal rivers would, but they had special characteristics as suited their role and status in the realms of the dead. The river Styx (the only female river, though in part a spring), which was thought to flow in Arcadia, was a preeminent mythological location, with its water presumed to be fatal to both men and animals.²¹⁸ The Arcadians swore oaths by it. The Acheron in Thesprotia was also identified as one of the underground rivers, along with Lethe, the

river of forgetfulness. All the rivers of the underworld constituted an impenetrable barrier, often being seen as rivers of fire stoking up the flames of hell.²¹⁹

Despite occasional moments of skepticism, Pausanias clearly believed that riverine legends were a crucial part of the rhythms of Greek society, and continued to be relevant to any account of regional history in the imperial period, in which myth, legend, and heroic genealogies were used to provide a sense of identity and purpose.²²⁰ It is an intriguing question how the Romans reacted to such stories, which must have been prevalent when they occupied Greece. They seem to have left them undisturbed and did not attempt to claim them or give them a Roman dimension. In fact, their interests lay elsewhere, namely in the domination and exploitation of major rivers valuable to them in commercial or strategic terms, and through which they could exercise and assert their control.²²¹

Instead, Greek riverine legends passed into polite letters in Rome. Pliny shows only limited interest in the legendary associations of rivers, although he mentions a number of stories concerning important figures or incidents in mythology connected with rivers.²²² He is critical of the gullibility of the Greeks in terms of watery legends, referring to “the extravagant lies of Greece about these (legendary serpents) and the river Lixus,” and claiming that Greek myths often changed their location.²²³ Nevertheless, Pliny himself is quite capable of telling us that rivers flowed backward on Nero’s death.²²⁴

Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* used the traditional exploits of Greek river-gods to illustrate his topic.²²⁵ His main themes are familiar: love; pursuit; rivers with divine powers that can bring about transformations; according to Ovid, rivers have families and human emotions; other rivers share their feelings; they arrange weddings; rivers live under their streams in vast caverns from which many other rivers start to flow; nymphs actually live in the stream and wait upon the rivers in the same way that servants or young daughters would; the traditional sylvan setting for rivers and pools inspires veneration and awe. For Ovid, rivers usually appear in the shape of a man, although Acheloüs has the horns of a bull. Despite his generally playful approach, Ovid vividly describes the potential destructive power of rivers when he depicts the Acheloüs in flood.²²⁶ In Ovid’s version of the story of Alpheios and Arethusa, the river falls in love with Arethusa as she swims naked in a romantic pool, which is silent, smooth, and clear, shady and cool, surrounded by pleasant foliage. But Alpheios murmurs from the depth and pursues Arethusa in the form of a man. When Arethusa becomes a spring, Alpheios threatens to catch her by turning back into a river, until she plunges into a separate cavern and eventually emerges in Sicily.²²⁷ This gave rise to a large group of stories about rivers and

springs flowing under the sea or through lakes, while maintaining their individual qualities uncontaminated. This kind of story was just as relevant in Italy as in Greece, because of the fear of local people that seasonal rivers that dried up during the hot summer months would not reappear.²²⁸

What place do riverine stories and legends like those related by Pausanias and Ovid have in a work of history? They seem to have little to do with a particular view of history, concerned with establishing facts and narrating events. Yet history is also about people and their thought world. In a recently discovered inscription, we find Hadrian writing in A.D. 137/8 to the small Greek community of Naryka asserting that no one will dispute its status as a *polis*. Among the supporting reasons, he cites the fact that “you have been mentioned by certain of the most celebrated poets, both Roman and Greek, as Narykians, and they also name certain of the heroes as having started from your *polis*.”²²⁹ In the cultural context of the ancient world, an appearance in literary works and links with legendary events or people often served as the early history of rural communities in Greece and Italy and a kind of proof of identity. And people never lost interest in watery sources, rivers, and springs. Pausanias chose to include many of these stories, and the prevalence of riverine legends shows a continuing fascination and a need to see rivers as quasi-human and approachable because they were so important in everyday life, even in cities distant from rivers but which perhaps received river water brought by aqueducts. Pausanias portrays a layer of Greek local life below the level normally noticed by the imperial administration. The point of connection is that communities had to compete as they strove to catch the emperor’s attention, receive benefactions, and move ahead of their rivals in civic status. Life-sustaining, conspicuous waterways, and the nexus of traditional stories attached to them, helped to establish identity and territory, enhance public standing, tourism, and revenue. Each local community had its own mythological tradition but would also want to claim a wider audience for its myths, which could serve to put it on the map. Riverine culture was the product of, and responded to, a variety of emotions, extending from simple respect and awe to the exploitation of business opportunities; but even those with a vested economic interest took the local traditions very seriously.

7 ART

One of the most common artistic forms in the ancient world is that of a reclining male figure representing a river or river-god.²³⁰ Numerous examples have survived in various media, though the most striking are figures carved in the round as individual statues or as part of a larger group. Such elaborate art-

work is comparatively rare, but there are also several important mosaics, some of which probably go back to original paintings. The painting of rivers in rural scenes was often part of private decoration in the villas of the rich. According to Vitruvius, among the styles of Pompeian painting in covered walkways “they use different landscapes, fitting the image to the appropriate characteristics of different places; for they paint harbors, promontories, shores, rivers, springs, straits, shrines, groves, mountains, cattle, and shepherds.”²³¹ However, the most common source of river illustrations in both quality and chronological spread is certainly the coinage, principally coins minted by Greek cities in the empire as well as those issued directly by the Roman government.

The depiction of rivers in the Greco-Roman world, though commonplace, inspired interest in contemporary observers. Dio Chrysostomos, commenting on the skill of artists, noted that not only did they represent gods in human shape but they also sometimes depicted rivers as men and springs as women, often with certain attributes that helped to identify them. Typically, a river had a beard and was crowned with reeds or tamarisks, since these plants enjoyed the watery environment.²³² In a very interesting passage, Aelian, writing in the late second or early third century A.D., discusses the nature of rivers and their streams and how communities took differing views when they made representations of them. It is a splendid evocation of the enthusiasm among Greek communities (and this was apparently still relevant toward the end of the second century A.D.) to depict their rivers while offering acts of homage:

For the Stemphalians depict as bulls the Erasinós and the Metopos, the Lacedaimonians the Eurotas, the Sicyonians and Phliasians the Asopos, and the Argives the Kephisos. The Psophidians (depict) the Eurymanthos in the shape of a man and the Heraeans the Alpheios. The Cheroneseans from Knidos treat the same river in the same way. The Athenians depict the Kephisos with the face of a man, with horns in the background. In Sicily, the Syracusans depict the Anapos as a man but worship the spring Kuane with the image of a woman. The Aegestaiói worship the Porpax, the Kremisos, and the Telmessos in the form of men. The people of Akragas sacrifice to the river that shares the city's name in the form of a beautiful youth. The same people set up a statue in Delphi carved in ivory and inscribed on it the name of the river. The statue is of a boy.²³³

It is unclear exactly how the portrayal of rivers by the Greeks and the Romans developed from zoomorphic, using bulls with a man's head, to full anthropomorphic images.²³⁴ Earliest representations in the seventh century B.C. are of the river Achelôios in bull form; bulls perhaps represented strength and un-

predictability.²³⁵ In the sixth century appeared an intermediate style depicting the river with human face or mask complemented with horns. The earliest fully anthropomorphic image (a bronze figurine from Euboea from the second quarter of the fifth century) shows the Acheloüs standing as a bearded figure with no horns, holding a cornucopia.²³⁶ His fruit and waters were particularly relevant to riverine communities and also to colonies in southern Italy and Sicily. Thereafter, not much change occurred in the iconography, and the Romans did not interfere. Probably in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, images of reclining rivers became established, and eventually these were to predominate throughout the Roman period, though they do not appear in the coinage of Hellenistic cities.²³⁷

In the anthropomorphic depiction of water sources in Greco-Roman art, there was a fundamental distinction between a river, which was almost always depicted as a man, and a spring, which was always feminine. Within the male river category, there was a further distinction between an older, corpulent, bearded man and a younger, slimmer man, sometimes (though rarely) without a beard. This distinction owed more to tradition and artistic variation than to any attempt to differentiate bigger and smaller rivers.²³⁸ In the case of springs, the representative nymph was usually portrayed standing or seated, often holding an urn from which came a flow of water. A billowing robe could also suggest watery movement. Hellenistic and Roman art confirmed the connection between nymphs and water.²³⁹ Roman artists normally portrayed rivers as men with no animal characteristics; the format was either a head or bust, or a figure standing, seated, or reclining; sometimes the figure floats, swims, or emerges from waves.²⁴⁰

Typical riverine characteristics come across most clearly in statues carved in the round.²⁴¹ The male figures are shown reclining or semireclining on one elbow, or sometimes supported on a rock, with both legs stretched out, or with one bent beneath them. They are usually naked, or seminaked, with the lower body covered by a cloak, which can help to suggest the undulating flow of water. These images convey the idea of the languid but potentially enormous power of rivers, and we are also reminded of their tremendous reputation in legend for procreation. The generally benevolent demeanor of the river as depicted may indicate an apotropaic element, as river dwellers would pray to the river to avoid flooding. Various attributes and symbols accompany the reclining figure and indicate the watery environment. Long, flowing locks of hair suggest water, while the scene sometimes contains rocks and an urn (as we saw before), which may have water flowing from it. Reeds and other aquatic plants adorn the god's head.

Artists also depict rivers with attributes showing the benefits they conferred on the riverine community or the whole country. So, we find the horn of plenty, symbolizing fertility and prosperity, and perhaps again suggesting rivers' traditional role in producing offspring. There was a link with myth since the origin of the association of rivers and the horn of plenty was the story that Hercules had torn off one of the horns of Achelöus when the river was in the form of a bull, and this was transformed into the horn of plenty.²⁴² More directly, grain and other crops were used to symbolize the fertilizing power of rivers. Rivercraft or a ship's oar symbolized the river's role in providing a thoroughfare for transport and the movement of goods. That these artistic forms and symbols in depicting rivers became a stereotype in the Roman Empire does not necessarily deprive them of significance.²⁴³

Only the Tiber and the Nile, and also Oceanos, which had riverine characteristics and in mythology was regarded as the father of all rivers, had specific attributes associated with them.²⁴⁴ The Tiber was marked out by a wolf and the twins Romulus and Remus, along with the usual reed crown, steering oar, and urn. Once established, the iconography and attributes of the river did not change much throughout the imperial period. The Tiber is represented by several full-size statues, the most famous of which is that now in the Louvre, probably of late-Hadrianic date (for a sixteenth-century representation by Baldassare Peruzzi, see figure 4).²⁴⁵ The by now traditional attributes of the Tiber appear on coins issued by Antoninus Pius; the river is an old man, half-draped and crowned with reeds, reclining either on an urn, from which water flows, or on a rock; he holds a reed in his left hand while the right rests on the prow of a ship (figure 5).²⁴⁶ The appearance of the Tiber in the pediment of the Augustan Temple of Mars Ultor and also in the forum of Nerva gives some idea of the importance of the Tiber's public perception in human form.²⁴⁷ Furthermore, the river's watchful role in Roman life can be seen on the arch of Constantine, where, after the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, the Tiber observes the drowning emperor.²⁴⁸

As we have seen, the representation of the Nile was directly created by the Greeks and did not correspond in any significant way with the religion of the Pharaonic age. The Romans took over his representation, although there are numerous variations. The earliest known Roman image dates from 25–19 B.C. The river appears as a male, bearded figure generally in a reclining pose on a rock or sometimes on a crocodile or a hippopotamus. However, some representations on coins show the Nile as a seated figure, which seems to be especially connected with the inundation.²⁴⁹ The famous statue of the Nile in the round at Rome probably dates from the first century A.D. The Nile occasionally



FIGURE 4. *Drawing of the Tiber river-god by Baldassare Peruzzi (1496–1536). The Tiber is depicted with the horn of plenty, Romulus and Remus, and a she-wolf. The model was probably the ancient statue of the Tiber now in the Louvre Museum. The drawing is held in the British Museum. Image copyright © Trustees of the British Museum, used by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.*

has reeds, a garland of roses or lotus, and sometimes leans on the sphinx; his favored attribute is the horn of plenty and the inundation of the river explains the concept of fruitful fertility (for the statue of the Nile from the Palazzo Senatorio in Rome, see figure 6).²⁵⁰ The annual inundation also came to have certain attributes, and from the reign of Vespasian sixteen small children are represented climbing over the river's recumbent form.²⁵¹ A famous mosaic from Praeneste shows not the Nile itself but the effects of the Nile inundation with scenes from the Nile valley; it perhaps dates from the second century B.C. and is likely to be based on an original painting.²⁵² Here the artist or artists set out to show the wide range of activities in the river valley and the surrounding hills and to exhibit the plants, animals, and geographical layout of Egypt. It offers a panorama with a bird's-eye view of the Nile from its source in Africa through Egypt to the Delta. In the lower part of its course, the river is in flood, indicating the annual inundation and the attendant activities and celebrations. Portions of dry land have various temples, priests, and, in one case, a nilometer. There are also dwellings for the rural population. Numerous boats appear on the water, including small papyrus craft for local trips and larger merchant



FIGURE 5. Sestertius of Antoninus Pius, A.D. 140–44, depicting the bearded figure of the Tiber reclining on an urn from which water flows; he places his right hand on a ship and holds a reed in his left. Reverse legend: TIBERIS SC (RIC III, p. 118, no. 706). Image reproduced by kind permission of Spink and Son, London.



FIGURE 6. Statue of the Nile river-god from the Palazzo Senatorio, Rome. The Nile is depicted leaning on a sphinx, with the horn of plenty. The statue, along with a matching statue of the Tiber, was originally part of the decoration of the baths of Constantine on the Quirinal Hill and was moved in 1518. By permission of iStockphoto.com.

ships. Ship-borne hunters pursue crocodiles and hippopotamus. At the bottom of the mosaic in the Delta area, a fully manned warship is depicted, and an alfresco party is in progress under a pergola, while nearby soldiers and priests assemble at a large temple. Throughout the mosaic, there are numerous local fauna. The river Nile is central in the artist's conception, since its annual inundation brought fertility and prosperity to the country and many activities took place around it—fishing, agriculture, hunting, and social and civic life, which were conditioned by the riverine characteristics and environment. Here, despite the flood the river is the friend of the people, and the temples suggest the religious context of the natural environment.²⁵³

Other major rivers assumed human form in the traditional Roman way. The Danube made a great impression on the ancients,²⁵⁴ and although it had not been represented before the Roman era, it came to be venerated in the empire as a bearded man with naked torso, accompanied by a cornucopia and aquatic plants, occasionally with his hand on the prow of a ship. Sometimes he leans on his arm, from which water flows. It is rare for a river figure to participate in the action, but on Trajan's Column the Danube rises from his stream and seems to usher the legionaries across the bridge.²⁵⁵ The Rhine in the few surviving representations of the Roman period appears with long beard and hair and horns, and sometimes also crab's claws. These depictions embrace two main themes: the Rhine as bringer of prosperity to riverine communities, and the reality of Roman control of the waterway, expressed especially in imperial coinage.²⁵⁶

The Euphrates had no specific attribute, but because of its majestic and tumultuous course had been from early antiquity an object of veneration to riverine communities. Anthropomorphic representations may be linked to the arrival of the Roman legions, and in Roman art the Euphrates was depicted as a bearded figure, seminude, often sitting on a rock, with an urn and flowing water. The Tigris is represented in much the same way.²⁵⁷ For other rivers we have less evidence,²⁵⁸ but the typical representation of the river-god spread quite widely in Gaul, modeled perhaps on representations of the Tiber.²⁵⁹ There are few representations of the Rhône, but the river seems to have gained human form without the usual nexus of myth and legend and appears in the traditional way as a bearded man holding a reed or urn. Lugdunum is closely linked to the river.²⁶⁰ Among the important rivers of Spain, the Hiberus is known as a river-divinity from only one inscription (with a fragment of a marble statue in human form) from Tarragona; the base was inscribed *flumen Hiberus* with water flowing from an urn.²⁶¹ In Italy the Eridanos (or Padus) in Roman ideology appears with Italia, and is sometimes characterized by a swan and an urn.²⁶²

Coins are the greatest source of evidence for the representation of rivers in human form and offered a significantly different medium.²⁶³ The designer had a smaller area in which to represent the river and ensure that it could be recognized, but possibly the opportunity to blend the river into a wider scene. Coin types, despite the traditional format, manage to retain vitality in the depiction of rivers. In those coins minted for the Roman government, the only river to appear consistently, from the Flavians onward, is the Tiber. Vespasian celebrated the river as one of the great symbols of Rome. Coins of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius show the Tiber with his hand on a ship, which might indicate the role of the river in bringing food to Rome.²⁶⁴ The general import is the fertility, prosperity, and wealth that come to Rome from the river. In one coin of Pius, the river appears in designs showing the arrival of the sacred snake of Asclepius, perhaps suggesting the river's association with healing.²⁶⁵ We also have a unique type showing the Tiber and Nile shaking hands, with the legend *homonoia*. This may symbolize imperial concord in the cooperation between Egypt as a supplier of grain and the Tiber as the waterway that brought it to Rome (figure 7).²⁶⁶ The Nile appears in its own right in a coin of Hadrian showing its famous attributes associated with fertility.²⁶⁷ Other coins depicting rivers have a more grandiose style, and there is a strong military and imperialistic element since a river could signify a defeated country, and mastery over the river demonstrated Roman territorial control.

The coins struck by Greek cities under the empire were an expression not of autonomy from Rome but of local identity and tradition, in which a river was often a city's emblem. A large number of these coins celebrated local water sources in one way or another, either with horned animal representations or in human form, generally as bearded men. This tradition was maintained throughout the Roman period.²⁶⁸ For example, we have a notable coin of Istros in the Roman period with the bearded river Istros reclining.²⁶⁹ Many coins have a legend specifically linking the river to the town, for example, Prusias on Hypios (the bearded river holds a horn of plenty and leans on a rock), Imbrasos at Samos (the river-god has a reed and horn of plenty), Stratonicea/Hadrianopolis (the river-god Caicus has a reed and water container), Antioch and the river Anthios (the young river-god has a horn of plenty and a water jug, and behind is a reed).²⁷⁰ At Antioch on the Orontes, a completely new dimension of river representation was introduced, in which the river was closely associated with Tyche (Fortune) of Antioch. There is a statue of Tyche as the city's protecting goddess with the Orontes swimming beneath her feet. So the city dominates the river but seems to gain strength from it.²⁷¹ The Maeander was particularly important and was associated with many cities throughout its



FIGURE 7. *Bronze coin of Antoninus Pius, A.D. 154, minted in Alexandria, depicting the Tiber standing, holding a reed and clasping the right hand of the Nile, who stands opposite holding ears of corn and the horn of plenty. Reverse legend: TIBERIS OMONOIA (J. M. C. Toynbee, *The Hadrianic School: A Chapter in the History of Art* (Cambridge, 1934), plate XVI.6 = *Catalogue of Greek Coins in the British Museum: Alexandria*, p. 138, no. 1167). Copyright © 1934 Cambridge University Press. Image reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.*

valley; with only minor variations, it appears bearded, recumbent, with reeds and a horn of plenty. It was most notably honored by Antioch, and the identification of the city through its river comes out clearly in an inscription offering thanks to a high priest of Asia who came from Antioch “from the Maeander.”²⁷² In Sicily river images on coin types are particularly frequent, though this may be largely due to the eponymous character of most rivers, since many cities were named after them. Such coin types may not have a great religious significance, but they do show how rivers were thought to represent a city, to the extent that a community might resent an outsider bearing a name associated with “their” river.²⁷³ Elsewhere in the western part of the empire, clearly identified river coins are quite rare. In the Spanish provinces, the river Hiberus appears as a young bearded figure with water flowing from his mouth.²⁷⁴ The river Baetis, so important to the province of Baetica, and the Danube also appear.²⁷⁵ In many examples there is no strong impression of devotion or veneration of watery sources, and some issues seem rather to celebrate the generally

benevolent role of rivers in contributing to commerce and prosperity and providing water.²⁷⁶

8 CONCLUSION: "A STEADY COLUMN OF SWEET FLUID"

Rivers were a fruitful source of imagery and literary description, not least in Lucretius's splendid depiction of riverine movement. They were also a kind of metaphor for life itself, but despite elements of the conventional *topos*, writers present an array of recognizable characteristics that seem to derive from genuine interest and observation. A common theme in writing was the river as a living being with a personality, who acted as an agent and intervened in the world. Water was a dangerous factor that could affect natural processes and benefit or disrupt mankind. It could readily be accepted that a spirit was inherent in this great power of nature, and thus it received worship in various degrees of sincerity and enthusiasm. Though big rivers receive most attention, it is likely that religious observances were most sincerely carried out in local riverine communities. The divinity of the river spirit was bound up with the framework of legends about rivers or river-gods in the form of men. Such stories sustained the divine aura of rivers but also took strength from the supernatural power of rivers and, through anthropomorphic presentation, emphasized the ability of rivers to intervene directly in human affairs. The combination of literary descriptions, legendary tales, and divine attributes contributed to riverine status and the identity of local peoples in a complex cultural nexus. The depiction of rivers in art is an expression of all these aspects. It was partly an act of veneration of the mysterious qualities of rivers but also purely artistic in conveying what had come to be the accepted attributes of rivers. So, although statues could be part of the process of the worship of watery sources, it is difficult to see many of the surviving sculptures of rivers in the round as cult statues. The religious elements should not be exaggerated, and the Tiber, for example, was probably much more of a cultural and emotional symbol of the Roman state than a present divinity. Like much other artistic work, river statues also served as a decoration and adornment of public places, a channel of benefaction, and a reinforcement of the common and legendary tradition about riverine prowess. Furthermore, there was also a commercial angle in that in some cases statues were probably set up by merchants who used the waterways, which points to the theme of the exploitation of rivers as routes of communication and sources of prosperity. Finally, in literature and art representations of mighty foreign rivers also demonstrated Rome's imperial splendor through the extent of its geographical domain, and propagated the ruling power's ideology. The military exploitation of rivers was a further aspect of this.