



Elixir: A History of Water and Humankind

Brian Fagan

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Elixir spans five millennia, from ancient Mesopotamia to the parched present of the Sun Belt. As Brian Fagan shows, every human society has been shaped by its relationship to our most essential resource. Fagan's sweeping narrative moves across the world, from ancient Greece and Rome, whose mighty aqueducts still supply modern cities, to China, where emperors marshaled armies of laborers in a centuries-long struggle to tame powerful rivers. He sets out three ages of water: In the first age, lasting thousands of years, water was scarce or at best unpredictable—so precious that it became sacred in almost every culture.

By the time of the Industrial Revolution, human ingenuity had made water flow even in the most arid landscapes. This was the second age: water was no longer a mystical force to be worshipped and husbanded, but a commodity to be exploited. The American desert glittered with swimming pools— with little regard for sustainability. Today, we are entering a third age of water: As the earth's population approaches nine billion and ancient aquifers run dry, we will have to learn once again to show humility, even reverence, for this vital liquid. To solve the water crises of the future, we may need to adapt the water ethos of our ancestors.

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