# 1 Where do we go now? The archaeology of monumental fountains in the Roman and early Byzantine East

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My lecture presented at the conference, titled 'What to Expect? The Archaeology of Monumental Fountains in the Roman and early Byzantine Periods', was intended as a general introduction to the theme of the conference, and summarised the current archaeological approaches to the study of Roman and early Byzantine public fountains. The aim was to propose tracks of reflection for future studies that draw on ongoing debates, as well as to point out a few important material and methodological aspects hitherto neglected in the study of so-called 'nymphaea'. In this chapter, I have extended the original scope of the lecture to include a short historiographic overview of the field, in order to identify the origins of current research trends on monumental fountains and their numerous shortcomings. The overview will not be limited to a strict archaeological or technical perspective on the topic: I will also examine a few recent studies addressing the social, political and cultural context of which these lavish water structures ubiquitous in ancient urban centres were the material expression. To provide context for the focus of this volume on Constantinople, I shall concentrate on studies addressing the eastern Mediterranean at large. It is worth considering the rich archaeological evidence from the wider region, not only because it has been abundantly studied, but also because a critical examination of past and current studies of fountains in Greece, Asia Minor and the Levant may provide a good methodological basis for further study of the sparse architectural, technical, decorative and epigraphic evidence associated with ancient monumental fountains in Byzantion–Constantinople. Due to their poor state of preservation, fountains in Byzantion–Constantinople are indeed less well-known than the aqueducts, cisterns and other types of waterworks in the same city.

## Monumental fountains in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond: a brief historiographic overview

The first signs of a modern interest in ancient monumental fountains are not found in the eastern Mediterranean but, quite logically, in western

Europe during the Italian Renaissance. The imposing remains of these rich, multi-storied columnar façades originally filled with statues quickly attracted the eye of contemporary artists. Only the most conspicuous of these monuments were recorded, such as the Severan Septizodium (fig. 1.1) or the so-called *Trofei di Mario* in Rome,[1] whereas plainer water distribution structures not deemed worthy of artistic interest were ignored. Nevertheless, ruined monumental fountains remain scarce amongst the recorded waterworks, especially compared to the endless sequences of aqueduct arches or the overwhelming ruins of ancient baths. It was the artistic and intellectual value of these façades, with their coloured marbles, statues and inscriptions, that triggered the interest of contemporaries. The possibility that they might have fulfilled utilitarian functions was clearly secondary.[2] The traditional opposition between a perception of monumental fountains as mere decorative water displays and the more technical or

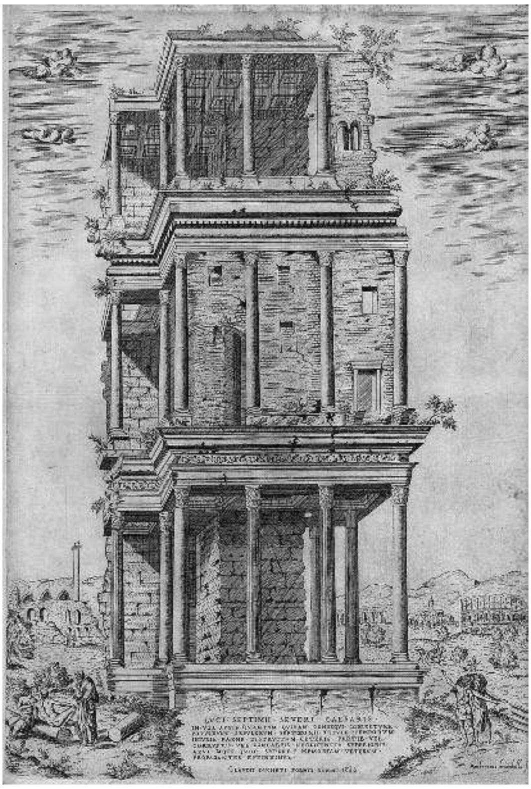

**Fig 1.1.** The Septizodium in Rome by Antonio Lafreri.
Courtesy University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center.

engineering-oriented surveys of other types of waterworks somehow finds its origin in that period, and would remain an important point of discussion.

From the nineteenth century onward, western explorers strolling through the eastern Mediterranean noted the presence of ruined *nymphaea* that were still standing at the most conspicuous locations of ancient cities. During his expedition to Pisidia and Pamphylia in 1884 and 1885, the Polish aristocrat K. G. Lanckoroǹski and his team of cartographers, epigraphers, photographers and architects, recorded the remains of *nymphaea* at Aspendos, Side and Sagalassos.[3] They collected detailed measurements of the standing structures (fig. 1.2), and made extremely accurate drawings of the architectural members and their ornamentation. At Sagalassos and Side, reliefs depicting aquatic motifs found respectively on the lower podium and on the frontal parapet of the two fountains were drawn and their mythological contents commented upon. In these reports, monumental fountains were treated as static visual objects, with a marked interest for building ornaments and statuary decoration, whereas the chronology and hydro-technical details were neglected. By contrast, aqueducts and plainer types of fountains were looked at from a more technical viewpoint, such as the impressive siphon of Aspendos and the cisterns of Termessos, described and drawn by Lanckoroǹski's team.[4] In 1904–5, the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria under the direction of Howard Crosby Butler similarly recorded a large amount of buildings from all periods – including *nymphaea* – with a specific focus on the restitution of ground plans and elevations, leaving aside any technical consideration other than the structural properties of the recorded buildings or the materials of which they were made.[5] Despite their irreplaceable documentary value,[6] these early accounts also originated enduring false identifications, such as the so-called 'nymphaea' of Amman and Bosra, which later proved to be 'dry' exedra-shaped monuments designed to display statues.[7]

With the German scholar Ernst Curtius (1814–96), the artistic study of monumental fountains and their decoration became a popular subject of scholarly connoisseurship. His works *Die städtischen Wasserbauten der Hellenen* (1847), *Griechische Quell- und Brunneninschriften* (1859) and

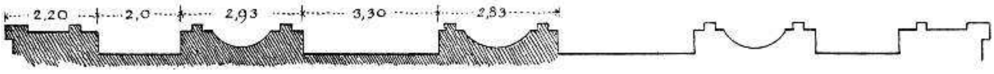


**Fig 1.2.** Ground plan of the late Hadrianic Nymphaeum at Sagalassos drawn by the team of K.G. Lanckoroǹski, after Lanckoroǹski 1892, Abb. 104.

*Die Plastik der Hellenen an Quellen und Brunnen* (1876)[8] count amongst the earliest attempts to synthesise the existing knowledge on the subject, despite a strictly philological and art historical perspective. Although Curtius focused exclusively on the fountains of Greece – he initiated the German excavations in Olympia, where the so-called 'Exedra of Herodes Atticus' was found – his approach would remain the classical way to study monumental fountains across the eastern Mediterranean for a large part of the twentieth century.

The second half of the nineteenth century indeed saw the expansion of large-scale excavations in the eastern Mediterranean, the so-called 'big digs' popular during that heyday of classical archaeology. Huge amounts of architectural data were generated and compiled in numerous detailed publications. Despite their limited scope – usually the recording and lengthy description of architectural remains, statues and inscriptions – the mass of information they contain gives them a unique value, if sometimes only because the buildings or their decoration have disappeared since then or were deliberately cleared. For example, in Olympia, the accounts on the excavations undertaken at the so-called 'Exedra of Herodes Atticus' in 1877 record the clearance of a large Roman brick structure and the discovery of statues.[9] The recognisable character of the different components of the hydraulic apparatus quickly supported the identification of these ruins as a fountain. The remains were published in three separate sections between 1892 and 1896, which presented respectively the architecture, the statues and the inscriptions.[10] The architectural study of the remains continued episodically during the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars produced fanciful restitutions of the demolished superstructure (fig. 1.3) and speculated on the original location of the numerous statues collected in the ruins. In contrast, the way the hydraulic installation could function was widely neglected, except for brief observations on the general layout of the cistern, basins and water inlets. In Corinth, the identification of the Peirene in 1898, based on ancient written accounts, remains a landmark in early field research on public fountains.[11] Fieldwork mainly consisted of clearing the ruins, a difficult task hampered by the flowing spring and modern waterworks still functioning on the spot. In the early twentieth century, the careful recording of the hydraulic installations – not limited in this case to a façade and a basin, but also including the complex supply installation behind it – was done with a certain awareness of hydraulic technology, and resulted in the exhaustive architectural and functional study of the complex by Bert Hodge Hill published in 1964.[12] In 1919, the publication of the *nymphaeum* of Miletos by Julius Hülsen was another major step towards a

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study of public fountains alongside the technical details of their hydraulic supply. Hülsen described extensively the complex terminal installations of the aqueduct located behind the three-storied façade, as well as the two draw basins in front of it, although the largest part of the monograph still consisted in the detailed documentation of the many architectural members found scattered amongst the ruins, followed by the restitution of the façade. The abundant statuary decoration, which has disappeared since then except for three statues preserved in Istanbul and Berlin,[13] is described extensively. The description of the remains is followed by a lengthy attempt to reconstruct the original statuary display in the niches and tabernacles of the façade, mainly based on basic modern assumptions of the iconographic hierarchy amongst the deities and individuals depicted, with gods assigned a central place and half-gods or secondary figures in the upper storeys. The greatest contribution of Hülsen remains the short account of the development of antique fountain architecture at the end of the volume. Mainly concentrated on Greece and drawn from epigraphy and vase paintings, Hülsen's overview also includes the few Roman *nymphaea* known at that time in Rome, the Levant, Asia Minor and North Africa. Once more,

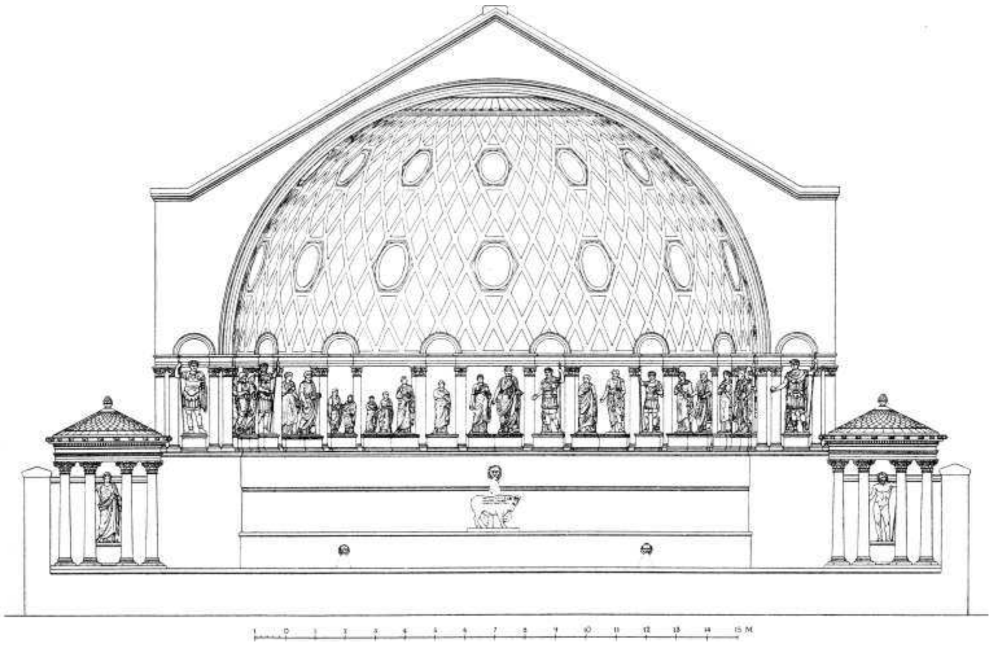

**Fig 1.3.** Olympia, Exedra of Herodes Atticus. Tentative reconstitution of the elevation by F. Adler, after Treu 1897, Abb. 294.

these are envisioned as static architectural entities classified according to their ground plan and elevation.

The canonical separation between the descriptive or art-historical study of fountains and the more technical perception of aqueducts, water pipelines and bathing establishments became standard in early encyclopedias and handbooks of Greco-Roman art and archaeology. In the *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* published between 1877 and 1919, grand monumental fountains are grouped under the heading 'nymphaeum', whereas plainer water installations are described under the entry 'fons'.[14] In these works, the ancient terminology applied to the different categories of fountains is used as the main classification criterion, which not only gave a special status to every structure called 'nymphaeum', but also implied a direct architectural link between all Greek and Roman waterworks associated with this term. The few known monumental fountains of Rome and North Africa are treated in greater detail than those in the eastern Mediterranean, with descriptions focused on ground plans and basic architectural properties. In another handbook, the *Manuel d'Archéologie Romaine* published in 1916 by the French scholars René Cagnat and Victor Chapot, all sorts of Roman public fountains, classified by size from the modest *lacus* lining the streets of Pompeii to a few grander realisations of North Africa and the East, are envisioned as functional installations that are part of a distribution network, although this link seems more evident for plainer waterworks than for *nymphaea*.[15]

Until the 1980s, the corpus of excavated monumental fountains grew significantly. During that period, the now traditional tripartite division architecture/sculpture/inscriptions structured the majority of publications. The excavations reports on the Roman fountains lining the streets of cities like Ephesos[16] or Perge[17] illustrate this trend. Particularly striking is, once more, the attention given to the description of architectural members and to the restitution of the original location of statues in the façades. By contrast, the hydraulic apparatus only receives short comments, making very difficult any attempt of functional contextualisation of these fountains within the water distribution system of each city. Aqueducts and other supply installations were generally published separately, as if fountains were minimally involved in water distribution. It is obvious that the specific focus of scholarship on the *display* of water – which remains a fact, given the open architectural configuration of these fountains and the interplay between their decorative façades and the large reflecting basins – overshadowed the wide spectrum of utilitarian functions these fountains also fulfilled. This one-sided view can certainly be explained – at least in part – by the typical structure and scope of these publications. Another point to note is the lack of interest in tracing the later construction phases of fountains. The frequent alterations made to architectural features, to the hydro-technical elements or to the statuary programmes are only mentioned briefly – if mentioned at all – without envisioning them in terms of building phases. At best, these later alterations are simply gathered as a hypothetical 'late-antique' or 'Byzantine phase' not deemed worthy of interest.[18]

By the late 1950s, the quantity of available architectural data allowed the development of the first broad-ranging architectural typologies. Reflecting on their purpose and value is essential, since these studies are still frequently quoted or used as a quick way to gain access to published material. Typological classifications of fountains are invariably based on visual and formal properties, and rarely reach beyond a strictly descriptive level. They are mainly intended to classify rather than to explain the material. Three criteria were used to structure these classifications: the ground plan, the layout of the façade or the stylistic properties of the building ornamentation. Most early typologies of Roman monumental fountains made a distinction between flat or pi-shaped façades, sigma-shaped (or apsidal) façades, and façades articulated around three monumental apses. The presence of apses, in general, was thought to reflect the primitive shape of the cultic grotto devoted to the Nymphs, from which Roman *nymphaea* were supposed to derive.[19] Formal comparisons between *nymphaea* and theatres were at some points in time very popular.[20] The two classes of buildings indeed shared many similarities: long columnar façades with quantifiable variables (e.g. number of storeys, niches, tabernacles or *aediculae*), complex statuary programmes and written documents. At the same time, broad regional groupings of different types of theatres and fountains – usually according to a traditional East–West divide[21] – imposed a certain degree of heterogeneity upon which comparisons between the provinces and Rome could be based. These chronological-geographical comparisons became the most frequent expression of what can be qualified as a 'decontextualised typology' of Roman monumental fountains. The main risk of this approach is to create improbable formal parallels over large distances, which are not only inexact in many cases, but also tend to blur the historical contingency proper to each region or building. The Antonine/Severan (?) *nymphaeum* at Side, for instance, has frequently been compared to the Septizodium in Rome, mainly because their façades were both articulated around three apses and because their date of construction was thought to be close.[22] This hypothesis, rooted in formal similarities, presupposes the influence of one building upon the other. The main problem is that, if most authors postulate an influence directed from Rome to Side, at least one implies the opposite![23] The lack of tangible dating evidence in the case of Side and the poor state of preservation of the Septizodium cast even more doubt on such formal parallels.[24] The main asset of such typological catalogues, however, remains the richness of the material they contain. In that respect, the publication of the Severan *nymphaeum* at Laodikeia in Phrygia by René Ginouvès in 1969 can be considered another landmark of fountain research for the sum of details it contains.[25] The narrative underlying this vast collection of fountains from all regions of the Roman world is still directed by terminology and architectural typology. Like the *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, these catalogues take the term 'nymphaeum' as a leitmotif to compile an accumulative description of fountains, regardless of their local context. Another common structuring narrative of these catalogues is the examination of Greek and Roman waterworks in a linear typological-chronological sequence,[26] a sort of storytelling typical of a certain idea of classical archaeology, the validity of which is never really justified by scholars themselves, as if the continuity between the two groups of fountains obeyed a self-fulfilling logic.

At the beginning of the 1980s, any researcher willing to work on Roman monumental fountains had at his disposal catalogues featuring in the best cases an extensive description of each fountain's architectural and decorative properties, as well as the relevant chronological data and bibliography. As a matter of fact, the scope and methodology characterising each of the publications reviewed here is typical of the period when it was written. Nevertheless, three recurring shortcomings can be pointed out. The first element is the lack of contextualisation of the evidence: fountains were treated as mere visual objects seen as an accumulation of quantifiable constitutive parts. This decontextualisation of the architectural object hampers any understanding of the motives behind its construction, of its practical use, of its integration within large urban dynamics or of its perception by contemporaries. Architectural typology tends to become an independent entity existing alongside the material it originally intended to explain, and it creates categories that did not exist or were not perceived as such in antiquity. A second recurring element is the creation of historical narratives rooted in ancient terminology or in a certain idea of Greco-Roman fountain architecture, presented as linear and accumulative storytelling. Finally – and this is linked to the first two shortcomings – fountains are envisaged in the 'architectural climax' constituted by the moment of their construction, and are often denied a historical existence. From a strict archaeological perspective, this distance could not be greater from fountains as excavated objects, which comprise a mixed compound of original building elements, decorative, structural or functional alterations, incomplete, damaged or repaired parts.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the study of Roman monumental fountains has undergone a widening in scope, methodology and recording practices. The decontextualised evidence inherited from past scholarship is increasingly explored historically and dynamically, whereby the specificities of 'Roman' fountains – understood here in strict chronological terms – are examined within regional, historical, social and political contexts, rather than as elements in architectural or classical narratives.

Concerning Greece, the doctoral dissertation of Susan Walker on Roman fountains,[27] followed two decades later by a detailed article by the French scholar Sandrine Agusta-Boularot on the construction and maintenance of fountains during the first centuries of Roman rule in the region,[28] represented major steps towards a deeper historical contextualisation of Roman fountains. Through a detailed study of the architecture and decoration of the monumental fountains built in Greece during the High Imperial period, Walker was able to investigate the meaning of these monuments within the wider social-political context of the time, including themes such as the funding of fountains by imperial and private benefactors and the meaning of these monuments' architectural and decorative opulence. The study of Agusta-Boularot focused on the long-term presence of public fountains in Greek public and religious spaces from the archaic and classical periods onward. She established a catalogue of pre-Roman and Roman fountains that not only focused on their first building phase, but also took into account their subsequent evolution and period of use. She then noticed the apparent scarcity of newly built 'Roman' fountains between the second century BC and the late first century AD, and she explained this fact by the active maintenance of the existing apparatus of older fountains. This emphasis on urban continuity, moving away from a simplistic list of dated buildings that articulated a linear architectural narrative, marked a major breakthrough towards the long-term examination of public fountains within regional and urban dynamics. Regrettably, this study makes a wide use of cultural-political labels, with statements such as 'the Romans' or 'the Roman power' as initiative taker in the construction of some of the fountains discussed in the article. This emphasis on the structures of power to the detriment of the local level of initiative potentially active in the process would later become an important element of debate, as stated below.

The 2001 monograph by Claudia Dorl-Klingenschmid, *Prunkbrunnen in kleinasiatischen Städten: Funktion im Kontext*, can be considered another major breakthrough in the field, although it did not go as far as implied by its title and indicated aims.[29] Considering fountain architecture through the prism of regional continuity, Dorl-Klingenschmid explored in detail the formal, decorative and functional components of every type of fountain found in Asia Minor from the origin of fountain architecture in archaic times until late antiquity. With the exception of a few buildings recently (re) studied, her gazetteer remains the most comprehensive overview of fountain architecture in the region to this day. Through the analysis of architectural, decorative and hydro-technical details, Dorl-Klingenschmid not only envisioned fountains as an architectural shape and as a form of urbanistic expression, but also investigated for the first time the layout and meaning of their most mundane constitutive parts, such as draw basins and vessels, parapets, inlets and drainage facilities. Beyond utilitarian aspects, she put a strong emphasis on the meaning of monumental fountains as a tool of ideology and representation, whereby not only the imagery of power, but also the expression of urban and individual identities through architecture, sculpture and text are explored. Unfortunately, the importance given to architectural classifications is a major point of criticism. Dorl-Klingenschmid's study never really reaches beyond a strict examination of the meaning of architectural and decorative syntax, to the detriment of the contextual and functional issues presented as the primary aim of the book, and somehow it fails both to locate fountains within the socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics of each city and within the local contexts of water distribution. Despite these shortcomings, Dorl-Klingenschmid opened the way towards a context-minded examination of *all* structural parts of fountains, in contrast with the study of their architecture, decoration and epigraphic apparatus in a stylistic or classificatory manner.

## Ongoing debates: addressing the entire functional spectrum of monumental fountains

In view of this brief survey of historiography, it seems clear that the main challenge posed to the current study of Roman monumental fountains is our ability to examine the entire extent of their functional spectrum (fig. 1.4). This spectrum oscillates between two poles: decorative and representative functions on the one hand, and a rich yet understudied utilitarian dimension on the other. The interplay between these two facets was the very *raison d'être* of Roman monumental fountains, and was maximised through their striking exposure at the most conspicuous locations of ancient cityscapes,