

À ciel ouvert: Les canaux d'irrigation en pays de Vanoise

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À ciel ouvert: Les canaux d'irrigation en pays de Vanoise

By Brien A. Meilleur, Fabrice Mouthon, and Anne-Marie Bimet.
Paris, France: L'Harmattan, 2017.
305 pp. € 32.00. ISBN 978-2-343-12063-8.

À ciel ouvert: Les canaux d'irrigation en pays de Vanoise, written by ethnologist Brien A. Meilleur, historian Fabrice Mouthon, and linguist Anne-Marie Bimet, should be in the library of anyone interested in the history of populations in the European Alps. Very richly documented, pleasant to read, and well illustrated, this book is part of the tradition of studies that have, over the last 40 years, renewed our knowledge of the history of the Alpine valleys—in particular the functioning of societies and local economies, which have not been as closed and self-sufficient as was thought in the past. In addition, it complements research conducted in Valais (Switzerland), in the Aosta Valley and South Tyrol (Italy), and in the Briançonnais (France), providing a better understanding of irrigation in the dry valleys of the European Alps.

The book is an extension of a report commissioned by the Vanoise National Park with the aim of inventorying and documenting irrigation channels within the park. Monographic in character, it reviews various characteristics of irrigation in Vanoise. Its 14 chapters are complemented by an introduction, a brief conclusion, and a lexicon of terms associated with water and irrigation in Vanoise in both French and the Franco-Provençal dialect. The first chapter deals with methodology and sources. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview, with a particular focus on the origins of the channels. Chapters 3 to 6 give detailed descriptions of the channels' technical characteristics and uses.

Chapters 7 to 9 focus on the actors involved in irrigation: water users and organizational structures (communities and syndicates of users, called *consortages*), as well as their relations with authorities. Chapters 10 to 12 address the issues of property, common goods, and use conflicts. The last 2 chapters expand the analytical framework by proposing an ethnoecological reading of irrigation (Chapter 13) and presenting a comparison of irrigation in the Vanoise massif and in other regions, particularly in the European Alps (Chapter 14).

The study is extremely detailed, and it effectively combines the disciplinary skills of the 3 authors. It identifies, maps, and documents at least 550 channels, mostly abandoned, of which 350 were used for irrigation. This is an exceptional work of documentation that will be useful to the region and particularly to the National Park. The authors have very successfully combined historical and archival research with interviews of older people who participated in the irrigation process in their youth. This dual approach has made it possible to both multiply the documentary sources and highlight the importance of actors' perceptions of all aspects of water and its management at the local level.

Beyond its function of documenting a world that has disappeared today, this book is also an essential contribution to the scientific literature on mountain irrigation. As the authors point out, their research complements previous knowledge on irrigation in the European Alps, which has hitherto focused largely on the 3 regions of Valais (Switzerland) and the Aosta Valley and South Tyrol (Italy), and to a lesser extent the southern French Alps and the Grisons (Switzerland). Through multiple comparisons with cases in the Valais and the Aosta Valley, which testify to their thorough knowledge of the scientific literature, the authors demonstrate that the Maurienne and Tarentaise irrigation

systems in Vanoise are in many aspects similar to other mountain irrigation networks, whether in terms of techniques, irrigation works, rules of organization, or conflicts and their management. As the authors point out in the last chapter, there is clearly a kind of community of irrigation, at least between the valleys of Aosta, Upper Rhone, Maurienne, and Tarentaise.

The authors also succeed in highlighting differences, especially in the relationship of the local irrigation communities with higher administrative authorities. The 3 regions of Aosta, Valais, and Vanoise partly have a common history, due in particular to the role of the House of Savoy. The authors demonstrate that especially since Savoy joined France in 1860, the French state administration has shown a clear desire to control mountain irrigation, among other ways by exerting strong pressure through standards on maintenance or rehabilitation work. Thus, many local actors in Vanoise complain that there was a sharp increase in bureaucracy in the second half of the 19th century. This clearly distinguishes the Vanoise from Valais, for example.

Finally, any reader interested in issues related to water governance will appreciate the authors' analysis of aspects such as property rights, common water management, and relations between local self-organized communities and central states. The authors not only compare the technical and institutional characteristics of irrigation in Vanoise with those in other Alpine regions that have so far been better documented, they also analyze irrigation in Vanoise using theoretical models of resource economics. They refer both to Marxist economists and historians (Marx himself and his Asian mode of production, Waltvogel and his Oriental despotism) and to analysts of the management of common resources, organized around Elinor Ostrom. Consequently, this book is

much more than just a monograph on the ancient irrigation networks of the Vanoise massif—which will undoubtedly interest the region's inhabitants and the managers and visitors of the National Park. The book is recommended for anyone interested in the history of social and economic organization in the mountains.

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