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# Starkey, Lindsay. Encountering Water in Early Modern Europe and Beyond: Redefining the Universe through Natural Philosophy, Religious Reformations, and Sea Voyaging

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**Starkey, Lindsay.**

***Encountering Water in Early Modern Europe and Beyond: Redefining the Universe through Natural Philosophy, Religious Reformations, and Sea Voyaging.***

Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2020. Pp. 274. ISBN 978-9-4629-8873-6 (hardcover) €99.

Of the four elements that classical philosophy—and subsequently the hermeneutics of the Judaeo-Christian tradition—saw as forming the essence of life on Earth, water has undoubtedly received the greatest attention in both scientific and religious-philosophical writings. This fact is clearly demonstrated by Lindsay Starkey in *Encountering Water in Early Modern Europe and Beyond*, even if many aspects of the relationship between humankind and water (philosophical, religious and, even more wide-ranging, socio-economic) are not discussed by the author. This latter observation is not meant as a criticism but rather as a reminder of how much remains to be explored in the ways different cultures—in Europe and beyond—viewed and used this natural resource. Since the dawn of human existence, water has had a profound importance, enabling survival and human endeavour and raising issues with regard to Creation itself. Humans have therefore been obliged to try and understand water and our relationship with it. Two approaches stand out: magical-naturalistic and philosophical-religious. Adopting a convincing line of argument, Starkey says that from the sixteenth century onwards there has been a shift away from a philosophical-religious approach to one that is more practical, discussing water more in terms of human activities (in particular, voyages of geographical discovery). This change undoubtedly coincided with what one might regard as the beginning of modernity, allowing for all the theoretical risks and ambiguities implicit in this historical categorization.

At the same time, other aspects of water, which were not related to maritime travel and the oceans, undoubtedly played a part in this “paradigm shift” (to quote Thomas Kuhn, even if Starkey does not cite his work). Starkey points out that from Ptolemy to the end of the Middle Ages, people questioned whether there was more water or dry land in the two hemispheres (north and south); yet the issue of the very origin of water, intimately linked to questions of geo-morphology, was no less important a chapter in the history of the relation between humankind and water. Upheld by both Aristotle and Plato, the theory

of the formation of water within a subterranean cycle was long linked with the belief that the biblical Flood was the basic cause of the formation of oceans and the subsequent availability of currents within water masses (those currents originating in subterranean caverns and carrying water to the surface, where it evaporated). Such theories were at the basis of intense debate between such important thinkers and scientists as Denis Papin and Descartes, and discussion of them would continue throughout the seventeenth century up to the dawn of the so-called Scientific Revolution. Undoubtedly, as the author's analysis shows, the increase in naval voyages—the result of a process that appeared at the time as expressing a new openness to the world; a felt need to know and understand that world in depth—resulted in a break with a paradigm that was exclusively religious-philosophical. That process coevolved with the need to describe continents; to estimate their size and understand the interaction between oceans, rivers, and physical variations in coastline; to apply physical-mathematical models to measurement of the quantity and flow of water in inland waterways—all goals that had little to do with the philosophical-religious approach that had prevailed over previous centuries.

Cartography and the description of continents were certainly not secondary aspects of this process. And in her discussion of these issues, the author draws upon her deep knowledge and analytical skill to explore an approach whose roots lay in the philosophy, geography, and cosmography of the ancient world, and which, during the Middle Ages, was reinterpreted in line with the Judaic-Christian tradition. The basic trend here, which would prevail up to the advent of modern-era atlases (including those fundamental works by the great Flemish-Dutch cartographers that played an essential role in navigation of distant oceans), was to see a concentration of continental landmasses in the northern hemisphere, with the vast extent of the southern hemisphere being largely occupied by oceans. The interpretation of this hydro-geological "reality" was provided above all by the Judaic tradition, which explained this distribution by saying that God himself had, at the moment of Creation, wished to protect the continents of the northern hemisphere from possible flooding by the southern oceans. While Ptolemy had held that the surface area of the continents exceeded that of the oceans, medieval traditions (both Judaic and Christian) argued the opposite; though the Judaic tradition was much more insistent than the Christian upon the fact of divine intervention to protect land masses from the surging waters, in both traditions the oceans were substantially larger than

land masses. In all medieval cartography, both continents and oceans were depicted as large, oblong forms that extended eastwards, all enclosed within a circular frame whose form was dictated by religious beliefs. Of course, it would be the need for ships to sail the Pacific that would lead to developments in this vision of the earth's hydro-geology, as the inadequacies of the philosophical-religious model became apparent and knowledge was no longer bound by such premises. The final chapter aims to link the range of knowledge that emerged thenceforth with the very contemporary crisis of water shortages, arguing a link between present and past. This interpretative juxtaposition, however, seems rather forced when compared to the very detailed and convincing argument developed in the preceding chapters of the book.

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### **Steinberg, Leo.**

***Michelangelo's Painting: Selected Essays.* Ed. Sheila Schwartz.**

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. xiv, 382 + 246 ill. ISBN 978-0-226-48226-2 (hardcover) US\$65.

Sheila Schwartz has done a service not just to Leo Sternberg but to us all in bringing out volumes of his works, including this beautiful one. In the Preface and Acknowledgements, Schwartz describes the genesis of the project: Leo Steinberg thought about "the republication of about a dozen of his most important Old Master essays in a single volume, a companion to *Other Criteria*, his 1972 compendium on modern art," and as he grew older, he also gathered unpublished work and hoped to write new material. In 2011, two years before he died, a new project emerged: the posthumous publication of his essays and unpublished lectures, which he hoped Schwartz would edit (vii). As I have already reviewed the first volume, *Michelangelo's Sculpture: Selected Essays*, in this journal, I will try to emphasize different elements here. Schwartz says, "I leave to Alexander Nagel an *explication de texte*, addressing instead the biographical origins of Steinberg's art-historical method" (vii). Nagel's Introduction specifies Steinberg's contribution.